

Critical Participatory Action Research and the Literacy Achievement of Ethnic Minority Groups

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THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN K-12 SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

According to National Assessment of Educational Progress's (NAEP) "The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005," at grades 4 and 8 White students scored higher, on average, than African-American and Latino students. Furthermore, the report concluded that at both grades 4 and 8, the narrowing in the score gap between 1992 and 2005 was "not statistically significant." Along the same lines, according to the 2005 College Board Report for College-Bound Seniors, African-American, Latino, and Native American Students trailed their White peers on average between 50-100 points on the verbal portion of the SAT Reasoning test.

The NAEP and College Board reports are only two of many statistical databases that reveal the persistent and prevalent academic literacy achievement gap between ethnic minority students and their White counterparts. It is possible to minimize or complicate these results with talk about in-group variation and improvement over time. As researchers we can discuss the inaccuracy of measurements; we can reframe the discussion to focus on the opportunity gap (Hilliard, 2003), the growing literacy demands of a postindustrial society (Alvermann, 2001), or a whole host of intervening circumstances that problematize any data that we have available regarding race and literacy achievement. At the end of the day, however, ethnic minority students (particularly African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders) still consistently trail their White peers on measures of literacy achievement with severe academic, social, economic, and civic consequences. It is not overstating matters to claim that eliminating the academic literacy achievement gap is a core component of developing a vibrant and inclusive multicultural democracy. Only an empowered, engaged and literate citizenry can form the foundation of an equitable and inclusive society.

It is also significant to note that the gap has not significantly narrowed in 13 years; during this era an entire generation of students (over 50 million) has matriculated through America's public schools and into the world at large. It is staggering to imagine the number of research studies that have been conducted and research articles that have been written during those 13 years; it is staggering and it is humbling. Although we have made many significant strides in the field of literacy studies, much work remains on the horizon if we are to successfully confront our most pressing issues. As literacy researchers, we are particularly challenged to develop studies that will improve our understanding of the literacy achievement gap; we are further challenged to engage in scholarly work that informs approaches to literacy curricula and pedagogies that will ultimately eliminate the literacy achievement gap.

LIMITING DEFINITIONS OF WHAT “COUNTS” AS LEGITIMATE RESEARCH

In addition to the seemingly intractable literacy achievement gap, there is a second problem that we face in the field of literacy studies—the increasingly limiting definitions of what counts as legitimate literacy research. In the 2000 National Reading Panel Report, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction*, the authors only drew upon experimental and quasi-experimental research that included control groups to inform their findings. Along similar lines, in the National Research Council’s 2005 report *Advancing Scientific Research in Education*, the only methodological recommendation pertained to randomized field trials. While the report does not necessarily rule out the use of other methodologies, the focus is clearly placed on the randomized experiment.

Members of the National Reading Conference and literacy researchers as a community at large have spoken out against these limiting definitions of what should count as valid literacy research. For example, Pressley (2001) comments in his white paper on effective literacy instruction in the elementary grades that:

[T]he National Reading Panel was too narrow in its focus, failing to report a great deal of credible science that can and should inform policy debates about beginning literacy instruction. (p.3)

Similarly, Duke and Mallette (2004) contend that, “Many different research methodologies... have valuable contributions to make to the study of literacy” (p. 347). It is worth noting that the National Reading Conference, as a leading international organization of literacy researchers, has shown a general consensus in speaking out against the limiting of appropriate research methodologies. The aforementioned examples are only two of a much larger body of work that speaks to the dangers of limiting the ways that we have available to us to understand language and literacy. What we have not done as well, however, is to articulate, historicize, theorize, and fairly evaluate critical alternative approaches to literacy research. This review of research investigates one alternative approach, participatory action research, and its ability to help us understand the literacy achievement gap. Further, the review of research explores the potential of participatory action research studies to inform the development of practices and principles that will ultimately improve the literacy achievement of ethnic minority youth.

I begin with definitions; that is, I attempt to engage the terms that ultimately informed the review along with an explanation of my research questions. I then explain the methods employed for this review of research, particularly how I selected appropriate databases, how I narrowed the search fields, how I accessed literature, and how I developed the categories I used to code the literature I consulted. I then make general conclusions about the role participatory action research has played in social science literature at large before undertaking a more substantive analysis of participatory action research in literacy studies.

The discussion of findings is divided into two sections. In the first section, I discuss the impact of the youth participatory action research movement on the literacy practices of the youth of color who have been involved in these projects. The second section examines practitioner action research and its impact on the practitioners themselves, on their literacy curricula and pedagogy, and, ultimately, on the learning and achievement of their students. I then transition to a discussion

of the limitations of the study and conclude with a set of recommendations for the field of literacy studies in general and the National Reading Conference in particular.

THE PROMISE OF CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN LITERACY EDUCATION

This article examines a critical movement, or, more accurately, a series of interrelated critical movements that have begun to capture the imagination of some in our field. At least three iterations of this emergent tradition are practitioner research, youth participatory action research, and research for social justice. Although I do not want to minimize the differences between these traditions, there are enough similarities in aim and focus to loosely associate them under the umbrella of critical participatory action research. Research that is “critical,” “participatory,” and “action-oriented” fundamentally questions *who* has the right to engage in research by positioning students, community members, and K-12 literacy teachers as legitimate and integral participants in the research process. It also fundamentally challenges the hierarchy of knowledge production and changes the relationship of knowledge producers to knowledge consumers; critical participatory action research opens up spaces for populations who were formally only regarded as the objects of research to act as the subjects and empowered participants in research that matters a great deal to them. These new relationships to the research process also fundamentally challenge the *how* of basic research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998). The critical research tradition also challenges the *why* of research. Proponents of critical participatory action research are interested in understanding phenomena, but they are also interested in research (and researchers) that promotes change, whether that change manifests itself in the form of innovative classroom curricula or more equitable educational resources for members of economically and ethnically marginalized groups (Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004). It is essential for the field of literacy studies to explore how these activist and practitioner-oriented methodologies might shed some light on the problem of literacy underachievement and how they might point toward potential solutions to eliminating the literacy achievement gap for ethnic minority students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To focus my analysis of the literature on participatory action research I developed a set of ten research questions (see Figure 1). The first sub-group of questions represents an attempt to understand how proponents of participatory action research had variously theorized the term. I also wanted a definition of participatory action research that I derived from conducting a meta-analysis of actual projects. I knew that there would be similarities; but I also felt that a functional definition of participatory action research could shed more light on the field of literacy studies, allowing us to understand the myriad ways in which participatory action research is practiced across the social sciences. Ultimately, I arrived at a set of research questions that would allow me to synthesize the conceptual and functional definitions of the term.

The second sub-group of questions guided the analysis of the literature from a lens of literacy studies. I wanted to understand what participatory action research could say about literacy practices,

literacy development, and the literacy achievement of ethnic minority students. For example, I wanted to understand the literacy practices associated with youth's involvement in participatory action research and I also wanted to understand the ways that practitioner action research shaped the social and intellectual identities and curricular and pedagogical choices of literacy practitioners. Finally, I wanted to understand how a meta-analysis of this growing field of research might inform literacy research and researchers as well as the practices of influential and widely recognized literacy organizations such as the National Reading Conference.

Figure 1 Research Questions

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1. What is participatory action research?
 2. How has action research been defined in literature?
 3. How has participatory action research been enacted?
 4. Where are participatory action research projects published?
 5. Who are its practitioners?
 6. What are the central issues in literacy that action research has addressed?
 7. What can these participatory action research pieces tell us about literacy education? Particularly, what can action research tell us about the literacy achievement of ethnic minority groups?
 8. What are some challenges to using action research in literacy research?
 9. What are recommendations for the National Reading Conference with respect to participatory action research and literacy education?
 10. What are some recommendations for the field of literacy studies with respect to participatory action research?
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METHOD

Criteria for Inclusion

Initially, I had intended to focus the meta-analysis solely on peer-reviewed articles. However, I expanded the search to include refereed conference proceedings, conference papers, chapters, and several key books. It was important to begin with the presumption that critical or participatory action research has been marginalized in (and largely absent from) traditional publication outlets. In the end, I could not justify only examining the outlets that have proven reticent to publish practitioner and activist research to evaluate the impact that these approaches to research have on knowledge in the field of literacy studies. With an expanded pool of potential sources, I devised the following criteria. Each study: (a) had to specifically address critical/action/participatory research; (b) had to specifically address literacy and/or achievement; (c) had to address ethnic minority groups; (d) had to include data in some form; (e) had to appear in a peer-reviewed journal, refereed conference proceedings, or book; and (f) had to deal with an educational context (schools, community centers, reservations).

During the accumulation and initial evaluation of abstracts and texts, I came across exceptional pieces that contained some, but not all, of the aforementioned characteristics. I did end up including some studies that contained only some of these criteria, but I retained the set as an ideal and as a standard by which I could evaluate the appropriateness of particular sources.

Identification of Studies

Several computer searches were employed to gather the best possible pool of studies on participatory action research and literacy achievement. Computerized searches were conducted using two major databases for educational articles—ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Education Full text. I included the various descriptors, Critical Research or Participatory Action Research AND Literacy, under the “key words” search function to yield the highest number of returns (operating under the guidance of a senior librarian at the university who claimed that the “key words” search function is the broadest of all the search functions, and more broad than the “subject” search function). Initially I included only peer-reviewed articles, but I broadened the search criteria to include conference proceedings and papers for reasons I have already discussed. I also sought additional studies by key authors whose names appeared repeatedly in the searches and bibliographies. I did this because the database seemed indiscriminate about which entries were classified as participatory action research since this was not common terminology used across the articles that ERIC and Education Full Text categorized under these descriptors. The ERIC and Education Full Text searches yielded 328 distinct entries for “practitioner action research” AND “literacy” and 127 distinct entries for “youth participatory action research.”

I downloaded the long citations into separate Word documents, one for the ERIC search and one for the Education Full text. I then used the search function to identify the articles that were available electronically as PDF documents and downloaded each of those texts. I also followed leads from these articles and publishing series that had series which specialized in action research or teacher research to generate a separate section of books that addressed the topics of action research and literacy achievement. From the leads and the publishing series I identified an additional pool of possible books for analysis.

Coding Scheme

A formal coding template was developed for the current meta-analysis on the basis of Sirin’s (2005) categories, which address both substantive and methodological characteristics including: report identification, terminology, setting, subjects, methodology, and general claims or conclusions. The final coding template included the following components: a) the *identification* section coded basic study identifiers such as the year of publication, the publication type, and the authors; b) the *terminology* coded specifically for definitions of participatory action research and literacy under which the authors were operating for the study; c) the *setting* described the location from which the data were gathered; d) the *student characteristics* section coded demographic information about the study participants including grade, age, race, gender; e) the research methodology section coded *basic methodology* information including the design, sample, methods of inquiry, data collected, and methods of data analysis; and f) the *general claims* and conclusions coded for the main arguments that were supported by the researchers’ data and analysis. It was not my intent to judge the merit of any particular study, per se; my goal was only to document the authors’ reported findings as they related to the research questions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This discussion is divided into three sections. I will begin with a general discussion of participatory action research, which includes an overview of the multiple ways that participatory action research is identified in the social science literature along with some general observations of participatory action research projects. I then transition to a discussion of youth participatory action research and the literacy practices of members of ethnic minority groups. The final section discusses the relationship between practitioner action research, teacher identity, literacy curriculum development, and literacy achievement.

What is Participatory Action Research?

According to McIntyre (2000) there are three principles that guide most participatory action research projects: (a) the collective investigation of a problem; (b) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem; and (c) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem. Participants become researchers about their daily lives in hopes of developing realistic solutions for dealing with the problems that they believe need to be addressed. By assuming active and full participation in the research process, people themselves have the opportunity to mobilize, organize, and implement individual and/or collective action (Selener, 1997).

Participatory action research gained recognition in Latin America during the 1970s through the Symposium of Cartagena on Critical Social Science Research in April 1977 (Morrow & Torres, 1995) and the influence of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) who engaged marginalized populations of Brazilian peasants as collaborators, researchers, and activists. Freire fundamentally believed that any meaningful social transformation would only occur in conjunction with everyday people. Freire's revolutionary pedagogy intended to help ordinary people develop the critical literacy and inquiry skills that would allow them to more powerfully engage structures of power. While Freire's work is important to any discussion about critical inquiry and literacy development, there are those of us who argue that the antecedents of participatory action research go back much further than even the foundational work of Freire. The tradition of inquiry for advocacy is as old as the tradition of inquiry itself. This is important to keep in mind amid contemporary conversations about quality, validity, and rigor in social scientific research.

The National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research has proven itself a major institutional catalyst for participatory action research. This organization hosted a conference on participatory action research in 1989 (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1989) that yielded many important studies with significant substantive and methodological implications. A review of the research studies also shows that other social science fields, such as public health and psychology, have much longer traditions of participatory action research than literacy education and articles that draw upon this research methodology and appear in leading journals in the public health and psychology fields.

Participatory action research projects are often partnerships between sanctioned institutions (e.g., universities, Institutes of Health, Bureau of Indian Affairs) and local groups (e.g., teachers, adolescents, community residents, etc.). The research itself is part of the process of empowerment. The researchers are aware of themselves as implicated agents. Designating one's project as an action research project is to make a political statement. Participatory action projects have been popular

across academic disciplines, especially psychology, public health, environmental studies, women's studies, and Native American studies. Additionally, participatory action research projects are very likely to focus on issues of culture, gender, class, ethnicity, race, and power. Most participatory action research projects are conducted with or on behalf of marginalized populations with the goal of understanding and intervening in real social problems such as domestic violence, environmental pollution, or lack of access for people with physical disabilities (see Table 1).

Table 1 Populations Involved in Participatory Action Research

Populations	Problems/Goals
Immigrants	Domestic Violence
Refugee Women	Conditions of Refugees
Teachers	Educational Equity
Community Groups	Self-determination
Patients with mental illnesses	Reclamation of culture
Environmental Activists	Self expression
Urban Teens	Social Justice
Public Health Professionals	Access
Native American Indians	Environmental Justice
	Prevention of drug addiction

It is also significant to note that participatory action research is international in scope. The educational database searches yielded multiple entries from Anglophonic nations such as Australia, England, Kenya, United States, and Canada. Many of these studies involved indigenous populations within these countries. For example, Aboriginal Australians and Native Indian tribes in Canada used participatory action research to evaluate their conditions of incorporation within largely Eurocentric societies.

The participatory action research in almost all cases intended to inspire multiple transformative outcomes including individual development and social action. This intention is important when considering its potential role in literacy education, particularly when students and teachers are positioned as researchers. One major goal of practitioner research is teacher development, but an equally important focus is the development of students' literacies through innovating and empowering classroom curricula and pedagogies. Similarly, youth participatory action research seeks to develop young people as empowered agents of change through a process that also addresses larger issues of social inequality.

Researchers also situated participatory action research in the context of democracy and the creation of a true public sphere. Both university and community-based participants were aware of who normally has the power to conduct research and the research itself was a conscious effort to disrupt or call into question this paradigm of knowledge production. Finally, participatory action researchers challenged the notion of any research being neutral or value free (Gardener, 2004). Recently, participatory action research, which in some ways exists in contrast to traditional research, has been attacked as involved, interested, engaged, and somehow less important and rigorous than research that is distanced, disinterested, and objective. Given its position on the periphery of many social science fields, researchers who engage in participatory action research have had to "defend"

the rationale of their studies. A review of the articles reveals that these researchers also engage in a critique of the disciplinary norms that have placed additional burdens on “engaged” researchers.

I will now transition to a specific discussion of youth participatory action research, practitioner action research, and the literacy achievement of ethnic minority groups. I begin each section with a description of the types of projects in which young people and classroom teachers were involved. I then shift the analysis to an explanation of the ways in which these processes illuminated innovative literacy practices or were themselves emblematic of the literacy learning practices that facilitate skill development and academic achievement.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Sample Topics of Inquiry In Youth Participatory Action Research. In my first pass at coding, I wanted to get a sense of the topics that youth investigated when they engaged in participatory action research. Many of the subjects youth chose to investigate paralleled those of adults in communities and the academy. It is significant that many of these projects were conducted in collaboration with adults from community-based organizations, mental health organizations, schools, and universities. All of the research projects dealt with issues of injustice, equity, access, or social change. Each of the projects also had an extremely personal dimension. The youth, in nearly every instance, were clearly implicated in the problems under study. This personal, invested stance added to the urgency and passion in the research, also a unique and important positionality. Some examples include young people investigating and working to resolve inequities in education, violence in the community, environmental injustice, and lack of access to social institutions for people possessing physical disabilities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Sample Topics of Investigation in Youth Participatory Action Research

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1. Urban youth in Los Angeles conducting critical research for literacy and social justice (Morrell, 2004)
 2. Youth with disabilities researched difficulties populations with disabilities have accessing the public transportation system and professional athletic facilities in their city (Sandoval, Bryan, & Burstein, 2002)
 3. Urban sixth graders make sense of violence in their communities (Morrell, 2004)
 4. Youth in NY-NJ Metro attend research camps where they learn the tools and methods of research that they will use to develop their own projects in their neighborhoods and communities (Fine, 2005)
 5. Parents and students in underserved communities help teachers understand how to provide quality instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse learners (Markey, Santelli, & Turnbull, 1998)
 6. Students conduct NSF-funded research on community land-use issues and organize activities that lead to positive change in their environments (Mordock & Krasny, 2001)
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Youth Participatory Action Research Involves Sophisticated Academic Literacy Practices. A review of the research studies showed that the participation in youth participatory action research itself existed as a sophisticated literacy practice. When looking at the various types of reading, writing, and speaking associated with the process of engaging in youth participatory action research, it becomes immediately obvious that the literacy practices parallel, or even exceed what would be considered as desirable literacy practices in a primary or secondary literacy curriculum. For example, when coding for the various forms of reading and writing that are associated with the youth participatory action research process, I found examples of students reading existing research studies, developing research questions and research designs, and designing and piloting instruments such as interview

protocols and surveys. During the data collecting phase, students recorded field notes, transcribed interview responses, and read through statistical databases and policy documents. During the data analysis phase students examined a number of print and new media texts ranging from transcribed interview data and survey results to videotapes and digital photographs. Students across the various projects also contributed significant intellectual energy and developed sophisticated literacy skills in the process of writing up data for publication and presentation.

Finished products took many forms including formal research reports (Mordock & Krasny, 2001), presentations to public officials (Sandoval, Tanis, & Burstein, 2002), letters to public officials (Borsheim & Petrone, 2006), curriculum and pedagogical plans for teachers (McIntyre, 2000), short films (Morrell, 2006), and published articles (Fine, et al., 2004). Consider the following example, which emerged from a project where urban adolescents investigated the multiple uses and academic potential of youth participation in hip-hop culture. The following passage is excerpted from a 15-page report that a group of urban adolescents produced for an audience of K-12 educators and academic researchers. Their action research project investigated the multiple impacts of hip-hop music and culture on urban youth and possible connections between hip-hop culture and traditional classroom curricula:

We also found that the average student owned 10-15 hip-hop compact discs, several students own more than 20 compact discs and some own 5-10 compact discs or less. The average student watches 3-5 hours of hip-hop videos a week on television and listening on the radio. Several students watch 10 hours of hip-hop videos a week and a few students watch an hour or an hour and a half. With this abundance of information, we found that the average student believes that hip-hop music has an extreme influence on teens.

The students we interviewed and surveyed in the Los Angeles area believe hip-hop is so widely listened to for a myriad of reasons. The most popular reason was that they like it. The second most noted reason was that the students could relate with the music. It has to do with everyday things they have to go through. Students gave responses such as: "Hip-Hop is an expression of the soul that everyone can relate to because it combines so many art forms," and "they talk about what teens are experiencing in life, so the teens feel a connection with the music."

The presentation of data reveals an in-depth understanding of the language of academic research. In just a short time these high school students have grasped the idea of research methodology and how to explain one's methodology to an academic audience. This "research literacy" is also complemented by basic literacy skills that are required to write and analyze research instruments such as interviews and surveys that the student research team administered.

Youth Participatory Action Research Increases Student Engagement In Academic-Intellectual Work. A close examination of the youth participatory action projects also revealed that students were motivated to put in great amounts of work to bring their research to fruition and to share the results of their research with key stakeholders and power brokers. Students volunteered their evenings, weekends, and summers to participate in participatory action research projects (Sandoval, Bryan, & Burstein, 2002). Students were also more willing to take writing to extra drafts before submitting to external audiences. Vasquez's (2004) research demonstrates that even very young students will embrace the spirit of revision when they produce texts that are socially meaningful. In her book *Negotiating Critical Literacies with Young Children*, she recounts an example where a kindergarten

class, feeling that they had been shut out of an important school event, created a survey that they took through multiple drafts to disseminate to various sectors of their school population to learn more about the event and who was able to participate.

Students made impassioned presentations of their work to school officials, elected officials, and other power brokers. For example, middle school students in Far Rockaway, New York learned to use digital video cameras, which they employed to document the serious environmental conditions in their neighborhood. After creating video documentaries, these young students then organized an all-day conference in which they invited environmentalists, legislators, educators, and community members. The students used the conference as an opportunity to share their research and to promote discussions about ways to address the community's environmental concerns (Mordock & Krasny, 2001).

Through their involvement in participatory action research, students have more power and voice. McIntyre (2000) reported on a research project where young people who live in communities facing tremendous violence were able to use research to share their experience with others as they also came to terms with their structural conditions. McIntyre offered that this "bearing witness" is important in that it allows important power brokers such as educators and researchers into the worlds of children in ways that will make them more empathetic and outraged. She also argued that the opportunities for testimony are important because they position youth as agents of inquiry and as "experts" about their own lives (McIntyre, 2000, p. 126).

Youth Participatory Action Research Projects Confront the Social and Cultural Barriers to Literacy Achievement and Educational Attainment. An analysis of the youth participatory action research literature also revealed that student research is legitimate research in its own right. Literacy educators and researchers should be concerned with how the process of action research impacts the literacy development of youth-researchers, but it is important to understand that the research products themselves have importance as well. If the youth become legitimate participants in the research community, then it follows that their research products are also legitimate and, for a variety of logistical and methodological reasons, these research documents may inform conversations regarding educational opportunities, literacy practice, and literacy achievement.

For example, Fine, Burns, Payne, and Torre (2004) and Fine et al. (2005) worked with a team of student-researchers to design and carry out a study on the inequitable conditions students face in America's urban schools. Findings were used in expert testimony and published in *Teachers College Record*. Student researchers from UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) have lobbied policymakers, informed literacy practitioners, published in peer-reviewed journals, lectured at major universities, and presented at national conferences such as the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Morrell, 2004).

Practitioner Action Research

Practitioner Action Research and the Literacy Achievement of Ethnic Minority Students. The data on the impacts of youth participatory action research on literacy activity and literacy development are powerful in their own right. For the purposes of this investigation, however, they tell only half of the story. In my initial coding of the research studies I noticed two distinct trends. Some studies focused on the youth themselves and their participation in participatory action research projects. A second set of studies focused more on the adults (in most cases classroom teachers) as

action researchers. There were numerous studies where literacy teachers also functioned as action researchers. It was clear that a separate analysis needed to focus on the impacts of practitioner action research on the development of literacy curricula and the literacy achievement of ethnic minority students. After performing an initial analysis of these studies, I realized that this process of engaging in action research also had a profound impact on the identities of the practitioners involved.

My first task, however, involved classifying the literacy practitioner action research studies. As with the general participatory action research studies and the youth projects, I wanted to get a sense of the range of topics of investigation (see Figure 3). While there was a wide range in the topics that literacy educators chose to investigate, a majority of the classroom-based projects were actually attempts by classroom teachers to “test-out” theories or assumptions derived from research. These practitioner action research projects functioned as translation studies conducted by (or in collaboration with) practicing teachers who were translating the conclusions of educational theory or the findings of basic research into their classroom practice. They also served to challenge, problematize, and refine basic educational research in important ways.

Figure 3 Sample Topics of Investigation in Practitioner Action Research

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1. Whether teaching literary theory impacts students reading and interpretation skills
 2. Whether teaching popular culture improves academic literacy development of urban teens
 3. The effects of drama on reading ability
 4. Whether using rhythm and rhyme improves the reading skills of working class first graders
 5. Improving reading achievement of poor children through the use of balanced literacy instruction
 6. Identifying standards-based, culturally sensitive practices for improving literacy achievement of Native American students
 7. Promoting emergent literacy through children's literature
 8. Strategies to improve vocabulary of English language learners
 9. Improving the computer literacy of elementary school girls
 10. Whole school reform approaches to increasing informational literacy
 11. Strategies educators can employ to improve home-school relationships concerning literacy development
 12. Improving reading comprehension through the use of technology
 13. Out-of-school support schemes that encouraged boys to read more
 14. Exploring the uses of reflective journal writing in secondary science classrooms
 15. Linking literacy and violence prevention in secondary education
 16. Collaborative development of hypermedia software programs to improve student literacy
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Practitioner Research Reveals How Teachers Come to Understand and Eliminate Barriers to Student Learning. There are a myriad of ways that practitioners use action research to learn about the lives of students as learners, as literate beings, and as members of multiple cultures and communities. For example, practitioner-researchers visit the homes of students (Porter & Johnson, 2004) and talk to parents about their experiences and their desires for their children. Practitioner-researchers also conduct literacy surveys and have students write literacy autobiographies to understand how students use language and literacy across multiple contexts. Practitioner-researchers interview students to learn about their strengths and anxieties. Wilhelm (1997) talked to students in his middle school classroom who were strong readers to understand the techniques they used to

comprehend text; but he also talked to students who were emergent readers to learn more about their anxieties about reading and to find out about strengths the students possessed that might contribute to the development of academic reading skills.

Practitioner-researchers observe students in non-school settings (Taylor & Lorimer, 2003). Practitioner-researchers consult existing research that discusses structural, cultural, and psychological barriers to student learning (Lee, 1993; Vasquez, 2004; Wilhelm, 1997). Ultimately, practitioner-researchers draw upon participatory action research to design and evaluate curricula and pedagogical practices that are engaging, that draw upon students' strengths and interests, that are culturally responsive, and that cater to multiple learning styles.

Many of the studies outline a problem of practice, identify an innovative approach to dealing with the problem or challenge, offer an explanation of the innovative practice, and/or introduce data to demonstrate that the practice was successful. As an example, Bintz and Shelton (2004) identified a lack of focus on middle school literacy strategies and lack of student motivation to engage in academic writing as their problem of practice. The authors, a university-based researcher and a seventh-grade language arts teacher, developed a collaborative action-research project to determine the effectiveness of using students' interest in written conversation (e.g., notes, etc.) to teach the skills of academic writing. The researchers developed a theoretically informed intervention that they piloted with two middle school classes, they collected student artifacts to analyze, and they solicited student feedback. They found that the approach increased students' ability to meaningfully engage with the academic texts that they were reading, and they also found that students were motivated to work with each other in this way.

Promises of Practitioner-Oriented Participatory Action Research. Practitioner research has promise for the literacy achievement of members of ethnic minority groups given its positive impact on K-12 literacy educators. The process of engaging in practitioner action research develops reflective practitioner-scholars who explore connections between theory, basic research, and classroom practice. Further, the practice engenders teachers who envision themselves as innovators and agents of change and teachers who see possibilities in urban youth and urban literacy classrooms. Literacy lead teachers in Albuquerque public schools, for instance, were able to develop study groups and action research projects with elementary teachers. Participation in these groups led to increased efficacy and more effective literacy practices (Raisch, 2005). In these ways, practitioner action research is consonant with the larger tradition of teacher research where systematic, self-critical inquiry has been articulated as a powerful way for teachers to continually generate new understandings about their students' learning as well as their own teaching (Stenhouse, 1983; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Additionally, practitioner action research holds promise for the literacy achievement of ethnic minority students given its translation of existing theory and basic research findings into multiple classroom contexts. Even when these studies are confirming the "findings" of basic research they add to and transform existing theory by their focus on context, curriculum development and pedagogy, and their unique position as classroom-insiders. The research is also important for its articulations and demonstrations of transformative classroom practice, its explicit focus on culture and power and its attention to the role of "context," its focus on curriculum and pedagogy, and its rich, thick descriptions of classroom life from the perspective of insiders. As an example, Lee (1993) translates

Vygotskian theories of sociocultural learning and sociolinguistic studies of African American language into a six-week intervention where South-side Chicago high school students drew upon indigenous discourse genres to develop their skills of academic literary interpretation.

Finally, practitioner action research offers vivid examples of successful classroom practice with ethnic minority students. In the preceding example, for instance, Lee offers numerous examples of the ways in which African American students were able to come to complex interpretations of high-level literary texts. Ideally, though, the process develops habits of mind and practice in teachers that foster academic achievement in ALL students (Noffke, 1997). Educators and researchers can draw from practitioner action research in order to generate nuanced and sophisticated theories of practice. That is, these projects almost always involve the generation, analysis, or application of basic principles of pedagogy and practice; however, they are also applied in specific contexts that present their own unique challenges that need to be addressed. Practitioner action research by definition directly confronts the challenges of applying basic theory and pedagogical principles in practice. In this way it challenges and expands basic literacy research in important ways.

Areas of improvement for participatory action research in literacy studies. Participatory action research within literacy studies would be strengthened with more focus on definitions and demonstrations of academic achievement and academic literacy development. A present disconnect exists between the stated measures of literacy achievement in many of the studies reviewed and standardized measures of academic literacy achievement, especially at the secondary level. It is understandable that most of the studies focus on academic literacy development as opposed to academic literacy achievement. That is, the primary focus of the studies reviewed pertained to skills that participants developed as opposed to recognizable and statistically significant gains on standardized measures of literacy achievement. It is important to have research that shows the development of literacy skills, but it is also important that we recognize that there is not a simple and direct correlation between literacy development and standardized measures of literacy achievement.

Participatory action research would also benefit from more cross-case and multi-site analyses, which would strengthen research claims and facilitate the development of grounded theories of practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). It's important that these studies focus on local contexts and provide thick descriptions of the practices in these specific contexts; but it is also important for researchers to examine multiple cases across multiple contexts in order to be able to make broader claims about innovative literacy practices with youth of color and in classrooms where participatory action research projects take place.

Finally, the field would benefit from more explicit articulation of the principles of action research in literacy studies. Many of the pieces speak at length to the importance of participatory action research and several identified the tradition of participatory action research. Very few, however, spoke to the core principles of participatory action research as a specific research methodology. That is, there is little discussion of what makes a piece of participatory action research effective, of what constitutes quality within the research tradition. While there does not need to be a consensus, the explicit discussion within literacy studies would provide an explanation to critics as well as provide a starting point for novices who are attracted to the research methodology.

LIMITATIONS OF THE ANALYSIS

It is important to acknowledge that there are limitations to this analysis of participatory action research and its impact on the literacy achievement of members of ethnic minority groups. The first limitation concerns the inability to locate all examples of participatory action research. As this is not yet (and may never be) a generic term in critical, activist research, I was only able to access studies that explicitly referred to themselves as action research. Certainly there are other studies which draw upon these same principles, and who would have strengthened this analysis, that were unavailable to the ERIC and Education Full Text searches because they did not refer to themselves explicitly as participatory action research projects.

Although I would have liked to expand the scope of the studies I analyzed, I wanted to avoid the temptation to relativize the term to include too much. Some, for instance, might intimate from this analysis that all research conducted by students and teachers is participatory action research. While I do not believe this to be the case, I also recognize the difficulty in determining which studies actually “count” for analysis. The ERIC search engine, for example, seemed especially liberal in the nature of the studies it grouped in this tradition. As a researcher, I found myself “interpreting” ERIC results in two directions. I needed to examine the studies listed within the context of the articulations of participatory action research from its most articulate spokespersons. Therefore, while having more studies to analyze may have been a goal, I am fully aware that applying too liberal a definition of the term would allow me to say everything and nothing at all about participatory action research and its potential impact on literacy studies and literacy achievement.

The second limitation concerns the source of the studies themselves. Most examples of participatory action research do not make it into the publication outlets that are accessible via the ERIC and Education Full Text searches. Participatory action research still resides on the periphery of educational discourse, so it would be foolish to expect the mainstream document archives to have complete collections of existing youth and practitioner action research projects. As yet, however, more complete alternative archives to assist with a meta-analysis of critical research practices do not exist.

A third limitation concerns demographic reporting. The research reports were not always explicit in referring to the ethnic background of the target populations involved in the study. This is not always a result of faulty methodology or reporting however. In diverse classrooms, teachers are not at liberty to disaggregate their students the way that university-based researchers can. Their responsibility is to educate all of their students so the lack of explicit focus on racial/ethnic differences in achievement is understandable, but it still poses a limitation of the study. Nevertheless, despite these significant limitations, there is much to learn from this review of the research. Toward this end, I offer several recommendations for National Reading Conference and the field of literacy studies at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation #1: NRC Should Reach out to (and Advocate for) Students and Teachers Engaged in Participatory Action Research

Given its significance as a sophisticated literacy practice that promotes engagement and literacy development, the National Reading Conference, as an organization, should do what it can

to promote youth participatory action research as a literacy pedagogy across ALL levels for ALL students. Youth participatory action research as a classroom literacy practice taps into fundamental ideas about the nature of learning through doing that come from traditions such as those of Dewey and Vygotsky. Participatory action research is also consonant with notions of critical literacy such as reading the word and the world that comes from the Freirian tradition that I alluded to earlier.

National Reading Conference could employ a variety of strategies to promote the significance and legitimacy of participatory action research as an emergent methodology in our field. For example, the organization can make a statement about the importance of participatory action research and K-12 literacy teachers as legitimate participants in the research process. Further, the organization can find ways to locate and highlight students and teachers involved in participatory action research via featured sessions at annual meetings, interaction with local schools and districts, travel awards for preservice teachers and Masters level teachers, and featured articles in NRC publications.

Recommendation #2: More Focus on Participatory Action Research in Literacy Journals

Literacy journals could greatly facilitate the visibility and legitimacy of participatory action research by developing special issues that feature participatory action research both as a methodology and as a topic of inquiry. It is also possible to have special sections in the journals that feature participatory action research. An interesting model to note is the *Harvard Educational Review*, which features a special section in the journal entitled “Voices Inside Schools.” The purpose of the section, as the title suggests, is to listen to the voices of people who are working, teaching, and learning inside schools. The journal explicitly targets teachers, librarians, and other school-based practitioners who are investigating problems of practice. Through its special section, one of education’s major journals is taking great strides to generate connections and dialogue between practitioners and researchers both inside and outside of schools around critical issues in education.

Recommendation #3: More Coursework on Action Research at Preservice, Masters, and Doctoral Levels

Even though participatory action research is growing in acceptance, there are still relatively few places to encounter the research methodology in the postsecondary literacy curricula. There needs to be more focus on teacher research and youth participatory action research as literacy pedagogy in methods courses taught to preservice teachers at the undergraduate and post baccalaureate levels. Further, literacy educators at the postsecondary level are positioned to promote the encouragement of action research projects for theses in Masters degree programs designed for veteran teachers. Finally, there is a need for Ph.D. level courses in participatory action research or sections of methodology courses and literacy courses in doctoral programs that discuss its emergence and relevance. We need to make sure that not only our Ph.D. candidates who are interested in action research are grounded in this research tradition, but all doctoral candidates should be exposed to research traditions that may stretch and enhance their own thinking.

Recommendation #4: More Research and Advocacy on All Fronts to Eliminate Literacy Achievement Gap in U.S.

In light of the complex challenges we face and the external influences that seek to shape the scope of literacy research, our research community is charged with working to expand, not limit what counts as legitimate research. If these new approaches such as participatory action can

shed light on the barriers to achievement or innovative practices in literacy education, the literacy research community needs to argue for their existence and provide institutionally sanctioned spaces for this knowledge to be produced and disseminated. At the same time, there also needs to be continued scrutiny of the measures of academic literacy and continued advocacy of multiple measures of academic literacy. We do not have the leisure of waiting for literacy measures to become more responsive, but we also have a responsibility to continue to advocate for literacy curricula and assessment tools that adequately account for the multiple and valuable ways that our citizens use language and literacy in our world.

Additionally, literacy educators and researchers need to maintain a continued vigilance against the structural (Anyon, 1997; Oakes, 1985), cultural (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1992) and psychological (Steele, 1995) barriers to literacy achievement for members of ethnic minority groups. For example, educational sociologists contend that schools must be analyzed within the larger context of social structures including, but not limited to, the political economy. Another structural explanation concerns the types of courses that students are able to take at the secondary level. Oakes (1985) found that poor and non-White students were disproportionately placed into low-tracked classrooms where they received “dumbed-down” work and were made to feel inferior intellectually. Low-tracked students are likely to under perform on tests; they are more likely to drop out of school; and they are usually ineligible for admission to competitive colleges and universities.

Scholars of multicultural education have investigated the many ways that culturally alienating curricula can inhibit the ability or desire of students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups to engage their school coursework. Non-white students who rarely, if ever, see themselves portrayed positively in the school curriculum have little incentive to invest in that curriculum. Finally, Claude Steele (2003) has conducted research to show that, when students feel that their performance will allow others to negatively stereotype them, they generally under-perform on high stakes tests. Steele has conducted numerous experiments to show how the “Stereotype Threat” causes women to under-perform on tests of mathematics and non-White students to generally under-perform across the board on high stakes measures of aptitude or achievement.

NOTHING IS INEVITABLE

Media and cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan is credited with saying, “There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.” This statement is profound both for its substance and for its process. What does it mean for us to engage in contemplation; to literally think in this time about the prospects of our time? It is possible for us to both contemplate the challenges that we face as a community of literacy researchers and educators as well as the possibilities that are offered by an exciting area of scholarship such as participatory action research.

We know the stakes; we absolutely cannot allow another 50 million students to matriculate through our schools while the literacy achievement gap persists. There is good reason to believe that participatory action research, as a literacy pedagogy and as a process of teacher learning and development can help in confronting and eliminating this gap. We must ask ourselves what is more important to our field than this? What better time to act than now? Who better than us to take a leadership role in this endeavor?

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