"THEY THINK KIDS ARE STUPID": yPAR AND CONFRONTATIONS WITH INSTITUTIONALIZED POWER AS CONTEXTS FOR CHILDREN'S IDENTITY WORK*

"CREEN QUE LOS NIÑOS SON ESTÚPIDOS": LA INVESTIGACIÓN-ACCIÓN PARTICIPATIVA CON JÓVENES Y LOS ENFRENTAMIENTOS CON EL PODER INSTITUCIONALIZADO COMO CONTEXTO PARA LA IDENTIDAD DE LOS NIÑOS

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ABSTRACT

Through bringing together literature on identity work, participatory action research, and critical literacy, the current study examines the identity work of low-income and working class youth of color (predominantly Latinx) as they confronted obstacles in their efforts to enact school change. Within a youth participatory action research (yPAR) program, youth created a mural to represent community members' stories about times they felt they did or did not have the power to change something in their community. Research questions were: (1) How might yPAR serve as a context for children's identity work? And (2), how do children in a yPAR program respond to obstacles in their efforts to perform identities as social change agents? Results examine the process of mural symbol creation and are based on analyses of ethnographic field notes from 13 program meetings. Through encounters, youth engage with power as it relates to their social identities in the following: yPAR serves as a context for children's identity work by providing them a space where they can co-construct critical engagement, and read identity and power in text and images. They respond to obstacles by critically engaging with conflict, and performing change agent identities.
KEY WORDS: Childhood, critical literacy, identity work, participatory action research, power.

RESUMEN

A través de reunir la literatura sobre el trabajo de identidad, la investigación-acción participativa, y la educación crítica, el estudio actual examina el trabajo de la identidad de jóvenes bajos ingresos y de clase trabajadora de color (predominantemente Latina), ya que enfrentan obstáculos en sus esfuerzos para propromover el cambio escolar. Dentro de un programa de investigación sobre la juventud en acción participativa (yPAR), la juventud creó un mural para representar historias de los miembros de la comunidad acerca de los tiempos que sintieron que tenían o no el poder de cambiar algo en su comunidad. Las preguntas de investigación fueron: (1) ¿Cómo podría yPAR servir como marco para el trabajo de la identidad de los niños? y (2), ¿Cómo los niños en un programa yPAR responden a los obstáculos en sus esfuerzos para llevar a cabo las identidades como agentes de cambio social? Los resultados examinan el proceso de la creación del mural símbolo y se basan en el análisis de las notas de campo etnográficas de 13 sesiones del programa. A través de encuentros, los jóvenes se acoplan con la energía que se refiere a sus identidades sociales en lo siguiente: yPAR sirve como marco para el trabajo de la identidad de los niños, proporcionándoles un espacio en el que puedan co-construir un compromiso crítico, leer la identidad y el poder en texto e imágenes. Responden a los obstáculos mediante la participación de forma crítica con el conflicto, y el desarrollo de las identidades de agente de cambio.
PALABRAS CLAVE: Niñez, alfabetización crítica, identidad, investigación-acción participativa, poder.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" is a common question adults in the U.S. ask children. Questions that revolve around children's future roles reveal how, as occupants of the socially constructed period of life called "childhood," children's capacity to contribute to their community in the present is often disregarded (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). A concern with children's futurity also exposes how dominant cultural narratives – overlearned stories that circulate through the mass media, institutions, or networks (Rappaport, 1995) – conceal power structures that enable and restrict children's identities, or who they can be (Duane, 2013). Yet, critical literacy, or the ability to detect, question, and deconstruct systems of power within conventional knowledge, enables children to question dominant cultural narratives by connecting their personal experiences (and those of their community) to collective struggle (Comber, 2001).

In this study, we examine how children in a youth participatory action research (yPAR) project construct a critical analysis of community issues and navigate tensions as change makers within an institutional setting. This study asserts that as a process that positions children to re-vision more socially just narratives about themselves and their communities, yPAR can support working class and working poor children of color as they develop identities as social change agents. We focus on middle childhood and their emerging identities as social change agents because this is an underdeveloped area (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). First, we present a brief overview of the definition and implications of intersectional identity work for children, and argue that identity is fundamentally an experience connected to power. We then discuss our conceptualization of children's identity work. Next, we examine how children enact and perform identities in a youth participatory action research after-school program, which is housed in a public school. Finally, we detail how critical literacy practice and a youth participatory action research

epistemology might create opportunities for children to construct identities as change agents. We then turn to addressing our area of inquiry: How might yPAR serve as a context for children's identity work? And, secondarily, how do children in a yPAR program respond to obstacles in their efforts to perform identities as social change agents?

Identity

The identity literature is vast. For this paper, we draw upon the concepts of identity and identity work from social psychology, which encompasses personal and social aspects (Hurtado, 2003). We have made this decision because the social psychological literature on identity takes into account power, a central tenant of community psychology, in ways that mainstream developmental theories of identity often do not (Gjerde, 2014). Specifically, social identity models account for the impact of group membership in socially constructed categories (e.g. race, class, gender), along with their associated emotional significance (Hurtado, 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities carry social status, positioning members of dominant groups with greater access to institutional power and resources (Hurtado, 1997). Therefore, identity is profoundly linked to experiences of power, privilege, and oppression (Hurtado & Silva, 2008).

Because social group membership is not neutral, social identity can be conceptualized as one of many "boundaries of power" which "constrain and enable action for all actors" (Hayward, 2000, p. 11). As a boundary of power actively negotiated in various contexts, identities are not something people *have*, but rather something people *do* (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Indeed, the notion of "identity work" implies an active practice – often collective – of making meaning of the self and others. This work is often done through discussions where people construct stories to help them understand the world, their place in it, and how this relates to social,

economic, and cultural contexts (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). As such, this understanding of identity engages notions theorized by George Herbert Mead, who argued that identity was socially constructed through engagement in the social world (Hammack, 2015; Mead, 1934).

Social categorizations that constitute social identities (e.g., race, class) represent interlocking systems of power, so identity work involves negotiating privilege and oppression. Intersectionality captures how social identity and power are interwoven (Hill Collins, 2000; Hurtado, 2003). Pairing intersectionality and boundaries of power suggests that understanding the complexity of people's experiences with oppressive structures is central to effectively acting upon those structures. Investigation of one's and others' experiences of social identities and power provides a route to social action. Yet the ways that children experience and identify intersections of social identity and power are not well represented in the literature on children's identity work (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). In this study, therefore, we engage these ideas.

Children make bids to enact identities they perceive as recognizable to others (Van Sluys, 2010). Subordinated groups are less likely to have their identity bids acknowledged by dominant groups, partly because of how dominant narratives have constructed and constricted them (Rappaport, 1995). Subsequently, subordinated groups must engage in resistance and subvert systems of domination if they are to engage in self-definition (Hill Collins, 2000).

Childhood is one subordinated social identity. The construction of childhood in the U.S. as a time of innocence dictates the shielding of children from oppressive structures (Hurtado & Silva, 2008). In the U.S., children are widely considered not only in need of protection from such unpleasant experiences, but also sometimes assumed to

lack the cognitive skills necessary to comprehend abstract concepts like oppression and power (Burman, 1994). Indeed, many White mothers elect to use a color-blind model for teaching their children about racial differences, based on the presumption that children are unaffected by racist attitudes and messages (Pahlke, Bigler, & Suizzo, 2012). Qualities associated with childhood (e.g., innocence, incompetence) are presumed to be natural characteristics of children, rather than social constructions situated in particular institutions and contexts (James, 2011). Perhaps this is why identity work is most often examined during adolescence or later, and less so during middle childhood.

Others argue that during middle childhood, young people construct and/or resist narratives about social identities (Mahalingam, 2007). Some research supports this assertion. Specifically, children and toddlers in different cultural contexts contribute to their families and communities (Rogoff, 2003). School-aged children in the U.S. are able to understand race, class, and gender differences as well as embed them in a context of power (Bigler, Arthur, Hughes, & Patterson, 2008; Liben & Bigler, 2002; Ramsey, 1991a; 1991b). Moreover, first grade children take on the role of change agent in their school and families (Silva & Langhout, 2011). As a final example, one can look to the history of children in the U.S. labor movement; middle school children led strikes to increase their wages, fight for better working conditions, and more (Rodgers, 2005). Indeed, children grasp and shape their social worlds (Mahalingam, 2007).

The consequences of dominant cultural narratives for subordinated groups, particularly working class and poor children and children of color, are multifold. First, in racist educational contexts, children with subordinated social group memberships simultaneously learn what it means to be a member of a group (e.g., Latinx) and what it

means to be a student, such that their identities and experiences are derogated (Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009). Dominant cultural narratives shape the kinds of learners and selves children deem possible (Hall, 2006; Nasir, Snyder, Shah, & Ross, 2012). In essence, children are exposed to dominant narratives and ascribe meaning to their group memberships in ways that enable access to some identities while foreclosing others. Children's access to particular social identities therefore supports or restricts access to kinds of knowledge, participation, and power (Varelas et al., 2012), which is often raced, classed, and gendered, and thus has implications for social reproduction (Hall, 2006).

Second, dominant sociocultural constructions of childhood restrict opportunities for children to explore social identities as they relate to power, thus hindering the creation of counter-narratives (Nasir, et al., 2012; Pahlke et al., 2012). If children are to think of themselves as capable of resisting dominant cultural narratives to achieve a more socially just outcome, "then they will need tools for noticing and naming issues, tools for thinking about those issues, and tools for taking action, [as well as] sanctioned spaces for participation in this important work" (Van Sluys, 2010, p. 142). Therefore, in order to understand better how children claim and make sense of particular constellations of social identities, and how children act upon unjust dominant narratives about their social groups, we must examine contexts that support children's identity development as change agents. Participatory action research provides one such context.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a paradigm that seeks to create empowering spaces in which subordinated groups can gain access to and control over the psychological and material resources affecting them (Langhout & Thomas, 2010).

As members of a socially constructed demographic group who occupy a subordinate position relative to adults, children are one such group. Of course, childhood is just one of many subordinated groups in which working class and working poor children of color hold membership. The nascent attention to children (as opposed to teens and young adults) in the PAR literature is likely the result of dominant narratives that conceptualize them as less capable of individual or collective agency (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Consequently, they are not often positioned as stakeholders in their own communities.

yPAR, however, can create spaces where young people influence dialogues, institutions, and power structures that impact their lives (Durand & Lykes, 2006). With this knowledge and influence, children can take part in collectively re-visioning, re-constructing, and representing more holistic narratives about themselves (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Thus, yPAR brings experience and knowledge from different social worlds into conversation, fomenting new knowledge (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Yet, given the positionality of children, who often experience multiple interlocking forms of subordination, taking up identities as change agents beyond the boundaries of a yPAR program is shaped by systemic barriers. For example, although children have strong critiques of the institutions that serve them, adults often retain veto power over what children can do (Duckett, Kagan, & Sixsmith, 2010). This fact serves as a reminder that children's agency is relational (and often in relation to adults; Rodgers, 2005).

yPAR as a Context for Identity Work

A tenet of yPAR is knowledge development from experience. When children are positioned as change agents, and learning is geared toward their "activist pursuits," it is infused with identity development (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011, p. 319). This process is

best achieved through *critical* literacy practices that engage children to use language as they exercise power, question injustice, and create change in their communities and schools (Comber, 2001). Thus, when children partake in critical literacy practices, they can grasp that knowledge is constructed and can be re-constructed, by them, in more socially-just ways (Freire & Macedo, 1994).

yPAR spaces utilize Socratic questioning and dialogue to foster opportunities for children to take up a critical lens. Examples include, "Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for [whom]? What's missing from this account? How could it be told differently?" (Comber, 2001, p. 1). These questions facilitate discussions that enable children to situate knowledge within institutions, discourses, and pedagogies. Consequently, children decipher how contexts position knowledge, which may include and exclude specific roles for themselves and others.

Critical literacy practices used within participatory action research create important contexts for children's identity work. Specifically, children in these spaces learn to take intellectual risks as they try on and try out different identities (Van Sluys, 2010). For example, 8-10 year olds have engaged in analyses of the diverse identities youth enact through the production of text and film in a critical literacy classroom (Comber & Nixon, 2004). In another study, 9-11 year olds claimed agentic identities through participation in a "multiliteracies" classroom that brought their cultural lives, social concerns, and identities into daily activity (Van Sluys, 2004). These studies reflect a shift from youth engagement in critical practices to youth constructing themselves as critical people. Indeed, critical literacy spaces create a social context in which youth can reconstruct the self as agentic through social interaction (Van Sluys, 2010). In so doing, critical literacy contexts contest dominant narratives of children as less

capable of meaningful engagement. Furthermore, critical literacy spaces allow children to construct more socially just texts, images, and artifacts that better align with their lived experiences.

The Current Study

The context for this study, Change 4 Good, is an after-school yPAR program for 4th and 5th graders (ages 9-12). This study explores children's identity work within this program, which positioned children as change agents. Analyses address the research questions: How might yPAR serve as a context for children's identity work? And, how do children in a yPAR program respond to obstacles in their efforts to perform identities as social change agents?

METHODS

Context

Data were from Change 4 Good at Maplewood Elementary School (MES)[1]. The school serves primarily low-income students, with 78% qualifying for free/reduced price lunch. MES is along the California central coast, which is home to a growing Latinx immigrant population. This program met weekly for one hour per week during the academic year, and four days per week for four hours each day over five weeks during the summer. A faculty member, two graduate students, and eight undergraduate research assistants were the program facilitators. A 5th grade teacher was present at sessions, and had the opportunity to assist in planning lessons.

In the 2011-2012 cycle of the yPAR program, children collected stories from community members (mostly peers and parents, but also teens, teachers, and other adults) in response to their prompt, "Tell us about a time you felt you did or did not have the power to change something in your community." Stories served as the foundation

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[1.] All proper names have been changed.

for a mural (Figure 1). Children included these groups and asked this question because they wanted to reach into the broader community to hear about lived experiences. An earlier cohort of students in the yPAR program chose to create a school-based mural based in their own experiences. When conducting their evaluation of the impact of the mural, they learned that others did not feel especially connected to the mural. Because of these results and the children's interest in inclusiveness, they included more stories from different perspectives for creating a second mural (completed in summer 2012).

FIGURE 1.
Maplewood Stories Mural.

Children analyzed their collected stories to construct themes. This was followed by various activities (e.g., drawing, collage) to develop symbols for theme representation in the mural. They decided which symbols were representative of the community, and drafted two mural options. These drafts underwent approval processes with school administration. The children, with the help of community members, painted the mural in 2012. The program endeavored to create a process for children to: 1) critically engage with how power and identity intertwine in their lives and the lives of others, and 2) understand that stories are valuable resources for critiquing unjust power structures (Rappaport, 1995). Through this process of mural creation, children took part in discovering, creating, and making visible a collective counter-narrative. This collective counter-narrative contested dominant narratives of children as uncritical and non-agentic, and told a story about power and identity in the community (Rappaport, 1995). Although this is why children chose to create murals, school personnel sometimes had a different idea regarding the purpose of the murals. School staff were generally supportive of the murals because many viewed the school as ugly and impersonal, and saw the murals as beautifying the school.

Participants

Participants were recruited through student-led presentations. Twenty-one children attended the after-school program; 70% were Latinx, 9% were biracial, and 5% were white (14% did not disclose their ethnicity to us). Many children's families had immigrated from Mexico or Central America. Fifty seven percent were female. Around 75% attended an additional after-school program that

serves low-income children and those labeled as academically behind. This research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data include field notes and the products generated by participants (e.g., collages, the mural), over a two-month period. Field notes included 13 meetings and 37 total hours of contact with the youth. These two months began with the first art project and ended with the approval of the mural design. This portion of the program was chosen to capture the identity work and critical literacy practices participants engaged in as they translated community stories into symbols.

Data were qualitatively analyzed using both deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña, 2011). An initial codebook was constructed based on a literature review of children's identity development, social identity, and critical literacy. Under the supervision of the third author/PI, the initial codebook was revised over multiple iterations based on the first and second author's preliminary coding of field note data. The final codebook included multiple categories for various aspects of social identities, such as social class, race/ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, and immigration status. We also coded for who the identity belonged to or was ascribed to, and who brought up the identity[2]. The field notes were coded for all instances of social identity expression. In addition to the use of a codebook to systematically code for social identity expression, coders also engaged in inductive, open coding and memoing in order to generate additional themes not accounted for in the codebook (Saldaña, 2011).

Four researchers coded all data (three undergraduates and one graduate student) using a consensus approach. With consensus coding, several coders (both insiders and outsiders) code, then compare codes (Ahrens, 2006). When there is inconsistency, coders discuss their disagreement and come to consensus on how the data in question should be handled. If consensus cannot be reached, that piece of data is not coded. Consensus coding is a data analysis procedure that is especially relevant for research where at least one of the coders has direct, long-term involvement in the research as an insider, as this accords that coder with a deeper knowledge of the culture and norms of the setting than outsiders. It is important to include outsiders as data coders, as they can identify issues insiders may take for granted (Ahrens, 2006). In this study, two of the coders were "insiders" (direct involvement with the program) and two were "outsiders" (had no direct experience with the program). Additionally, a fifth researcher (the PI; also an insider) coded a random 15% of the field notes. The fifth researcher's codes were consistent with the codes derived via consensus coding from the four researchers. To support the credibility of our analyses, respondent validation was conducted via one-on-one semi-structured interviews with eight children and eight adults the summer following the mural completion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results focus on conversational encounters where children engage with their own or others' social identities as they relate to power, which is implicated in learning (Varelas et al., 2012). We categorize instances into 4 themes: 1) co-constructed critical engagement, 2) reading identity and power in texts and images, 3) critical engagement with conflict, and 4) performing change agent identities. Although learning and identity development occur simultaneously, themes highlight specific concepts to clarify processes for the reader. Within each theme, we delineate how particular encounters enable and restrict the kinds of social identities in which children engage.

[2]. Contact the first author for a copy of the codebook.

Themes 1 and 2 address the first research question: How might yPAR serve as a context for children's identity work? The themes support and expand research on youth engagement in critical literacy work, and youth identity work within a yPAR context (Van Sluys, 2004, 2010; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). The second research question (how do children in a yPAR program respond to obstacles in their efforts to perform identities as social change agents?) is examined in themes 3 and 4. Theme 3 explores children's identity work within the context of setting-level tensions. Finally, theme 4 responds to calls to examine children's development of change agent identities (Van Sluys, 2004, 2010; Varelas et al., 2012; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011).

Theme 1: Co-Constructed Critical Engagement

Child participants' critical practices emerged in the form of encounters with others rather than in the form of spontaneous isolated utterances. Conversations involved collectively co-constructing a critical perspective by building off of others' questions, prompts, and experiences. The interactive and personal nature with which these critical practices were taken up relied upon the relationships that researchers and participants developed within the program.

The following field note excerpt describes a day when children and researchers examined a draft of the mural and discussed the meaning of each symbol. In this field note, they consider the theme "struggle," which is represented by protest signs and a figure holding a megaphone (see Figure 2). One of the signs read, "No more pink slips!" and refers to students and teachers jointly protesting teacher lay-offs. The interaction between the researchers' (i.e., *Author 3* and *Author 1*) questions and the children's responses build the discussion toward a critical perspective on how students' experiences in school are directly related to student-teacher ratios.

FIGURE 2.
"We Struggle" Theme Symbol.

Jill explained that the image represents "teachers getting a notice that they're getting laid off." Regina then asked the students how pink slips would affect them. Jill mentioned that schools could be shut down. Another student explained that new teachers could be brought to teach in the schools. Benjamín and Daniel added that with fewer teachers there would be bigger classrooms. The students were then asked [about] the consequences of having bigger classrooms. Jill mentioned that there would not be enough desks or supplies for everyone. *Researcher Alexandra* asked if the teacher would be able to talk to every student in a bigger class. Benjamín then compared the classes to [our] after-school/summer program. Benjamín said that in the classrooms, there is only one teacher per class. However, in the program there are the "same amount of students and teachers." Because the ratio is equal, the students are provided more attention and better instructions. [Field Note - 06/26/12 – DY]

This discussion exemplifies how children and adult co-researchers collaboratively construct meaning during encounters. When Regina asked the children how the pink slips would affect them, she encouraged the children to be critical of how a socio-political issue can impact them. The students thought about possible consequences, like increased class sizes, and pressures on the school district, such as school closures or new (likely less experienced) teachers being hired. When asked to deliberate further, they considered the possibility of surpassing classroom capacities for resources needed for learning, like desks and supplies, and how the teacher-student ratio may impact teaching and learning. Although not explicitly stated, students' contributions demonstrated an analysis of economic structures. School conditions directly relate to the school's and, in turn, the children's economic class positioning.

Researchers have argued that adolescence is an appropriate age to study critical engagement and identity because youth at this age can act in their social worlds to promote their learning and identity development (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). We demonstrate this process is also salient for middle childhood. Indeed, this excerpt demonstrates how children critically engage with socio-political issues within the context of conversations that connect power to resources and social relations (Varelas et al., 2012). In this example, children examine how power affects access to resources and social capital, relative to their positioning as low-income students in an under-funded school. Furthermore, they juxtapose access to resources in school with their experience of the university-run after-school program, which has more human resources; they link this reality to social relations and instruction.

These results support the claim that youth engage in critical practices by participating in conversations connected to their experience (Van Sluys, 2004, 2010). Through participation in brainstorming possibilities as well as responding to each other's prompts, challenges, and questions, children collectively build toward a narrative based within the experiences of themselves and their community. In addition, their analysis relies on their developing understanding of their own identities as working-class and working-poor, thus making social class a more visible structure. This process is especially salient for subordinated groups because they tend to have fewer institutional opportunities to engage in analyses of social structures (Varelas et al., 2012). Indeed, the effects of budget cuts are experienced differently for low-income students compared to middle class students, and they should have a place to discuss these possibilities. Through this process, students connect their social identities to the social world.

Theme 2: Reading Identity and Power in Text and Images

As children selected symbols for the mural, they saw that texts and images have the power to include and exclude particular social identities, histories, and experiences with power. Children fashioned texts and images to convey meaning through mural symbols. The following excerpt describes an activity in which children created collages to represent themes. They shared their collages with the group, and described the rationale behind their artistic choices. Jill presented her collage, which represented the theme "struggle."

> Jill was next in line to present. Her theme was "struggle." She had an image of a female soldier, who "is struggling because she does not have the power to stop the war." Jill pasted a quote from the soldier on her collage [that said] "We walked into hell, basically. We lost a couple great guys, and I'm sad to say that, but they went out doing their job." Jill added, "The army people are fighting for peace." And like Bernadette, Jill also glued the word 'time' on her collage. But Jill interpreted this as people who do not have enough time. The people "can't stop working and do not have time to be with their families." [Field Note - 05/17/12 – DY]

Jill used the images of military personnel to describe struggles with power. The U.S. military is generally considered quite powerful, so it is notable that she described powerlessness from this perspective. During a discussion of her collage, she conveyed that soldiers do not set national policy and would prefer peace. This sophisticated analysis indicates that Jill distinguishes between how people feel and the expectations placed upon them by their careers. Additionally, Jill used the word "time" to convey the experience of military families, and perhaps many families, who must work rather than spend time together. It

is unclear whether the experience she described is her own, but she considered the collective experience of families living within similar conditions. When she said these laborers "can't stop working," she indicated that economic conditions directly affect the quality of their lives and hamper their availability for their families. Therefore, she speaks against a dominant cultural narrative that military personnel serve their country out of a desire to fight, and brings to light the economic conditions that underlie their enlistment, as well as their desire for peace.

Change 4 Good children constructed identities within text and images when in a space that encouraged the practice of grounding experience within socio-political contexts. Previous studies demonstrate grappling with their own identities (Van Sluys, 2004, 2010; Varelas et al., 2012), but children in Change 4 Good demonstrated engagement with identities (their own and others') in their non-school social worlds. Specifically, they refashion dominant narratives so that they are more reflective of their experiences and therefore represent counter-narratives. Put another way, they have a strong grasp of their social worlds and an analysis of the distribution of power.

Theme 3: Critical Engagement with Conflict

When children encountered administrative disapproval of the mural design, they became critical of what was expected of them outside of the context of the yPAR program. The approval process involved negotiations between adult co-researchers and school administrators, because one administrator requested to negotiate with the PI rather than the children. Certain symbols were considered controversial because administrators felt they might exclude or ostracize segments of the community by oversimplifying complex social, political, and economic issues. Administrative changes were therefore made to the mural design that adult co-researchers subsequently presented to child participants. The following field note

excerpts characterize the children's response to the proposed symbol changes.

> In an agitated voice, Celia said, "They're changing everything!" Lisa, who was huffing and puffing with anger, complained that they (i.e., the students) were supposedly in the program so that they can make changes and have their voices heard, but they [the administration] weren't letting them do this. (Field Note, 07/02/12, AN)

Children expressed frustration about the changes. They experienced the contrast between their control over decisions in the yPAR program versus what others thought should be painted on public school property. When Lisa said that the children are "supposedly in the program so that they can make changes and have their voices heard, but they [the administration] weren't letting them do this," she critiqued how the symbol changes contradicted children's roles in Change 4 Good. The distinction the children made between what was supposed to be happening (i.e., they decide mural symbols based on community stories) and what was happening (i.e., administrators requesting changes) can be understood from a critical literacy perspective. Children utilized their position within the yPAR program as a resource for responding to challenges to their identities as change agents. With this process comes changes in learning and identity and subsequently, changes in position and status (Varelas et al., 2012). The children had taken up this challenge and constructed new knowledge, which they viewed as under attack. Indeed, their symbols represented a counter-narrative that would make visible the struggles of subordinated groups, and as such, would resist dominant ideologies about them and their community. Their assertion of why they were in the program, "to make changes and have their voices heard," was a claim on their re-negotiated power and status to tell community narratives.

Subsequently, researcher Jesica tried to assuage some of the children's concerns by assuring them that they would have a space where their voices would be heard and their knowledge construction visible. The children made a documentary of their mural creation process, which included interviews with each other. They practiced how to ask and answer questions about the meaning behind the mural. Jesica explained how important this practice was for the children's voices to be heard and taken seriously. Angela, another researcher, reinforced the necessity of practice because, she explained, there were rumors that Change 4 Good adult co-researchers were producing the ideas and symbols, not the children. The following field note captures the children's response to this information.

> Flora then said, "Ohhhh," and asked why they [School Administration] don't think the students came up with the symbols and images in the mural. Lisa responded with, "'Cause they think kids are stupid." [Researcher] Alexandra then explained that some of the stories and issues are controversial, and so adults might not think that the students have a place to discuss those issues. Lisa, still flustered, ranted about how these were also their stories, and that they had also marched out there with the teachers when the rally against [teacher lay-offs] was going on. Both Lisa and Flora explained that when teachers get [laid off], it's not only the teachers that are being hurt, it's the students, too, because some students might like and be attached to the teachers, and so it makes them sad to see the teachers leave. (Field Note, 07/02/12, AN)

When Lisa responded to Flora's question with, "Because they think kids are stupid," she linked the doubts of the children's mural involvement to deeper doubts of children's cognitive capabilities. This connection

signifies Lisa's understanding of how children -- perhaps especially working class and working poor children of color -- are positioned in U.S. society. Researcher *Alexandra* explained that some might think children should not discuss controversial issues and produce provocative images. Lisa and Flora responded by claiming the stories and symbols as theirs, which became a way to claim authority and power related to the mural. Flora and Lisa drew power from the urgency to represent their individual and communal stories. They took up that power as a way of rebutting unjust assumptions that their age identity foreclosed their access to what might be considered "adult" experiences and ways of thinking.

Lisa and Flora engaged in the kind of knowledge creation that occurs when children occupy spaces that allow them to challenge tensions between their social worlds. They engaged the tension between their participation in Change 4 Good and the dominant narrative that children are not capable of grasping complex socio-political issues. They challenge this tension and suggest a new truth: children experience complex socio-political issues with and without adults, and they are capable of and driven to assert those experiences publically. They claim authorship of the narratives and the actions that produced the narratives (e.g., they marched with the teachers). Community narratives, especially about activism, shape developmental trajectories for a community (Rappaport, 1995). The children's desire to make these narratives visible may simultaneously stoke the hopes and dreams for their neighbors and families, and showcase the power of their community. For them, the identity of their community was at stake.

Theme 4: Performing Change Agent Identities

Change 4 Good children performed identities as change agents. The following vignette extends the previous discussion regarding administrative mural design approval.

Researchers Jesica and Angela continued to discuss the symbol changes with participants Lisa, Flora, and Celia. Lisa asked to set up a meeting with administrators to express the importance of the symbols to her and her peers in Change 4 Good. Jesica explained that the PI fought hard for the symbols. Eventually, the children, including Lisa, Flora, and Celia checked on the preparation of the mural wall. The following excerpt documents the dialogue that occurred when they returned.

Lisa, Celia, and Flora, in particular, ran back in and asked, "Can we go to the office and protest?!" Jesica and I blinked for a few seconds, trying to figure out what to say to the students, and I then told them that we should probably ask Regina [PI] first. Lisa then said, "ERRGG!! We asked [researchers] Alexandra and Diana and they told us to ask you, and now you're telling us to ask Regina and Regina's gonna tell us to ask [the muralist], and then we'll never be able to do it!" I assured her by saying, "No, no, Regina will be the last person we need permission from." I then said, "But you can see how there's a hierarchy here," and Jesica and I explained to them how that was the reason why things weren't as simple as they seemed and can actually be quite difficult. After the conversation, Lisa tensed up her body and raised her hands up exasperatedly as she said, "AR. WE—ARE SPEAKING— FOR—THE COMMUNITY" She started to pant angrily. Flora then started to speak: saying that this wasn't right, and that these were stories from the community and they want to communicate these stories in a meaningful way through the mural, not have it all separated (disjointed) like that, where all the meaning is gone. Lisa agreed with Flora by yelling, "EXACTLY. ERRGG." I then extended my arm out in front of Lisa

and waved it up and down as I said, "Okay, you calm down...." Lisa then breathed in and out deeply as she recited, "1....2....3....count to 10....actually I need to count to 100....." (Field Note, 07/02/12, AN)

When Lisa yelled, "WE ARE SPEAKING FOR THE COMMUNITY," she made a bid to be recognized for the role she and the other Change 4 Good participants had taken up as creators of the mural and spokespeople for the community. Lisa's reaction is a well-informed anger, a response not always validated for children. The participants' roles as active change agents in Change 4 Good are not only something they do, but also something with which they identify. Lisa's and Flora's responses illustrate Change 4 Good participants' commitment to advocate for the community, legitimizing the right for children to carry out their vision of the mural.

Lisa and Flora challenged the limited roles they were allowed to take up in their social contexts. It would be inappropriate to conclude their program participation marks the first time they have struggled with power discrepancies, however their program participation may be their first exposure to these power relations from a formal role of stakeholder. With their assertion that they speak for the community, Lisa and Flora provide an example of how the children in Change 4 Good negotiate their identities in practice. They are situated in a broader social order that views children as people who are becoming and in need of protection from the harsh realities of the world (even as they experience these realities; James, 2011). What is brought to the fore are "issues of hierarchy, power, marginalization, inclusion, success, failure, agency, and structure" that are present in all learning contexts and identity work (Varelas et al., 2012, p. 334). Given the historic relationship between low-income Latinx children and schools, these identities are particularly challenging to negotiate. Nevertheless, Lisa and Flora assert their identities as activists,

community spokespersons, and scholars who care about their teachers and the community. Through the process of assertion, they further enact these identities. Moreover, this interaction provides an example of the link between knowing the world, being oneself, and working to change the world (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Indeed, their response indicates a strong identification with their role as leaders through Change 4 Good, a role they are unwilling to give up. Thus, the program is not a training ground for who the children will become; rather, these children embody meaningful identities as change agents in the present, with an energy for social action they may carry into their other social worlds.

Conclusion & Implications

The goal of this paper was to describe the identity work of low-income and working class youth of color (predominantly Latinx) in an after-school yPAR program as they responded to and confronted obstacles in their efforts to enact change. With respect to the first research question, which dealt with how yPAR served as a context for identity work, results suggest that the program, which involved critical literacy practices, was a context where children could critically engage in identity work. Specifically, through encounters, youth connected social identity to power by co-constructing critical engagement, and reading identity and power in text and images. Our second research question examined how children performed identities as social change agents when faced with obstacles. In this case, they critically engaged with conflict, and re-asserted their identities as agents of change. When adult administrators challenged symbols in the mural, youth had strong cases for their choices. They leveraged their first-hand experiences in the symbols, as well as their commitment to represent the community. In doing so, youth made bids that the change-agent identities they had taken up in Change 4 Good be recognized in other social worlds.

As with any study, this examination has limitations. First, data come from field notes only. Yet, member checks corroborated our analysis. Also, analyzing field notes is sufficient because they capture conversational spaces, and these encounters are essential to identity work (Varelas et al., 2012; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). An additional indicator of rigor was that coders agreed upon the analysis. Future research, however, should include more than one type of data, but data should document embodied practices. Second, field notes included 13 sessions only. Some may argue that it would have been preferable to include a larger corpus of data. This timeframe was chosen because this was when students were engaged in translating community stories into symbols, which is a time when critical literacy and identity work have a great deal of overlap (Dewhurst, 2011). There was, therefore, great depth within these 37 hours of data collection, and depth is an important way to assess the credibility of ethnographic accounts. Although 37 hours is quite a bit of time in an after-school program to commit to symbol selection, it would have been desirable to spend even more time deliberating on symbols. Because of the time frame for mural completion, however, we could not spend more time on this step. Future research should spend more time on this process, which might allow a more longitudinal examination of how identity work shifts and how power is deconstructed and reconstructed over time.

Despite these limitations, there are practice and theory implications. Considering practice, people involved with creating, shaping, and evaluating spaces that children (do not) occupy should evaluate how characteristics of that space (do not) create opportunities for children to be informed, critical, agentic citizens. Youth workers should also engage in processes to prepare children for challenges. As a research team, we could have better prepared children to receive feedback about the mural symbols. Preparing them for changes might have

reduced their feelings of frustration. Considering theory, in contemporary Western thought, being a change agent is often inaccessible to children due to socio-cultural constructions of childhood. Yet, children's ways of being are related to how they are constructed and how they construct themselves. When considered with other studies (Ramsey, 1991a; 1991b), a picture emerges that indicates children understand and co-create their social worlds.

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