

What if Nobody's Listening?

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In reading A. Wendy Nastasi's very thoughtful call for Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a means for challenging hermeneutical injustice, I am struck by a nagging paradox centered on Kareem, the student involved in the Opportunity Gap project. One of Nastasi's most powerful claims is that the counter-narratives that come from YPAR have the potential to disrupt the hegemonic ideologies that sustain oppressive social relations. In so doing, they can help us to create more inclusive and empowering social and educational spaces. Here I am convinced that Nastasi is right, and that reframing how we understand the world is a critical element to any lasting social change effort. Yet I am also deeply troubled by Kareem's experience in attempting to share what he learned about structural inequities and the disproportionate suspension rates for Black boys in a forum for administrators and teachers. Simply put, they refused to hear him, resorting to all the dominant ideologies that are so commonly used to blame marginalized youth for their own struggles. Indeed, the more he and his co-researchers tried to share their insights, their alternative narratives, the more his mentors began to worry, particularly about "the limits of talk."¹ María Elena Torre et al. describe their exasperation at counter-stories offered and yet denied: "we grew weary of the volley of youth interruption followed by adult denial; critical research presented and refused."² Certainly these stories are doing some work, even as they are being refused. The seeds for alternative worldviews are circulating, and I am confident that some will eventually take root. Yet what about Kareem? What happens to his sense of himself, his efforts, and his faith that the research he is doing matters, when nobody seems to be listening? I am reminded of Langston Hughes's poem about a dream deferred.³ What happens to a counter-narrative ignored, silenced, and/or refused? Does it dry up, fester, or sag like a heavy load? When might it lead Kareem to explode?

I realize that I might be a bit overdramatic here, but like Torre et al., I too am worried about the limits of narrative, especially when the people who most need to hear research-based counter-stories have the privilege not to listen, and even worse, a learned and socially sanctioned inability to hear. Lisa Delpit writes thoughtfully about the special kind of listening required to hear non-dominant voices, which for those of us in positions of power entails putting common-sense belief systems on hold and being "vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness."⁴ Delpit argues compellingly that it is those with privilege who need to take the most responsibility in changing and learning to listen differently. When we repeatedly choose, however consciously, not to do so, I wonder when this begins to do irreparable damage to the Kareems of the world, who cry out to be heard but whose voices fall on deaf ears. I cannot help but think that while no doubt necessary,

counter-stories of the type that come out of YPAR are not sufficient to do the kind of transgressive work needed to usher in greater hermeneutical justice.

I recently reviewed the book in which Kareem's story was first shared, *Revolutionary Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*.⁵ Like Nastasi, I was drawn to the compelling insights of the YPAR participants, especially the ways in which they were able to see the systemic dimensions of their own personal struggles, and to work across lines of difference in order to speak back to the oppressive elements of their world. Yet ironically, I left the book feeling a little less hopeful than I would have liked, particularly about the revolutionary potential of counter-narratives. In part, I think this is because none of the participants or mentors in the YPAR projects talked much about the impact of those projects on the world around them. Rather, they talked mostly about how working in solidarity with other youth to name, critically analyze, and reflect and act upon their worlds transformed them as individuals. That is, they talked about becoming different people because of their research. They developed the habits necessary to engage the world around them actively, knowing how to ask questions, analyze information, voice contradictions, question authorities, and speak publically. Here I think Nastasi's argument about the democratic potential of YPAR to help students see themselves as civic agents in the world is one of her strongest claims. Indeed, the skills they learned while engaging in action research are absolutely essential to creating social change.

At the same time that I really value this work, I wonder about the insularity of YPAR, and academic research in general. Who reads about these projects? Do they make their way into any mainstream educational discourses? To what extent do they involve preaching to the already converted? How might we create the conditions so that more people learn to hear differently at least as much as we encourage people to voice different narratives grounded in actual research? As Nastasi notes, the social experiences of marginalized youth are "obscured from collective understanding" and thus these students are "excluded from participating in the spread of knowledge." It seems important to challenge the passive construction in statements like these and to identify exactly who is doing the obscuring and excluding, namely those who benefit from dominant epistemic assumptions. While I certainly do not want to discount the potential of YPAR, I am not convinced that simply having access to alternative narratives will lead to progressive social change, especially when it is so easy for those in power to confidently dismiss them, and to back up their dismissals with all-too-persuasive common-sense rhetoric. Perhaps the greatest hope and potential for YPAR lies in the experiences of the students who are involved in these projects, especially when they work across lines of difference. The students who took part in the research in this project were indeed transformed by these experiences, especially those from privileged backgrounds who were forced to explore deeply and unpack their own relationship to power and privilege. If we want to circulate non-dominant concepts and interpretive frameworks into the broad discourse around social justice, I would argue this deconstruction of privilege is an

essential complement to the work that Kareem and his colleagues do to speak back to power.

In the end, however, despite my own concerns about the limitations of YPAR and counter-narratives in general, I really appreciate the ways in which Nastasi reflects on their democratic potential. I also value the ways in which she bridges what is an all-too-common theory-practice divide in reflecting philosophically on empirical research. I think we need much more of this kind of philosophical reflection on research, both to contextualize and enhance the meaningfulness of research findings, and to ensure our own relevance as philosophers of education in an educational climate that is increasingly marked by very narrowly defined forms of "scientific" research. Nastasi nicely shows the ways in which educational philosophers can contribute to thinking more critically, and more ethically, about research, as well as why we ought to do so. She also deeply roots her work in a compelling vision of social justice that begins with taking young people and their experiences seriously, and entails supporting them as they become active agents in the world. Helping students to voice their experiences, and to use research to understand these experiences in relation to broader structural and systemic inequities, is an important starting place for uncovering and challenging dominant epistemic assumptions. While the process of changing how people see the world around them is undoubtedly slow, YPAR is a form of research with much untapped potential.

I do still worry about Kareem. I worry about the ways in which he is silenced by the very people who ought to be his role models, his teachers. The potential for him to become frustrated, jaded, and angry is strong. Yet he is lucky to have the support of a community of co-researchers. I am also heartened by the fact that his YPAR mentors found other forums for him and his cohorts to express themselves, including through performance and art. The work they are doing is invaluable and I love that Nastasi is sharing it with our community of philosophers. My hope is that while we work to find spaces for alternative voices, and consequently hermeneutical frameworks, we also recognize how essential it is to couple these with pedagogies for the privileged. We need to help them hear, understand, and act differently in the world. In her thoughtful essay, Nastasi shows us why this work is so important to our collective future, especially in nurturing youth so that they develop the habits and dispositions necessary to sustain and nourish our fragile democracy.

1. María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine, with Natasha Alexander, Amir Bilal Billups, Yasmine Blanding, Emily Genao, Elinor Marboe, Tahani Salah, and Kendra Urdang, "Participatory Action Research in the Contact Zone," in *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*, eds. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (New York: Routledge, 2008), 31.

2. Ibid.

3. Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (New York: Henry Holt, 1951).

4. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 2006), 47.

5. Paula Echeverri and Kathy Hytten, "Reflecting on Revolution," *Educational Researcher* 37, no 8 (2008): 515–519.