

2018

The Impact and Radical Queer Possibility of Youth Participatory Action Research

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THE IMPACT AND RADICAL QUEER POSSIBILITY OF YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

by

ADRIENNE CARMACK

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars Program**

**COLBY COLLEGE
2018**

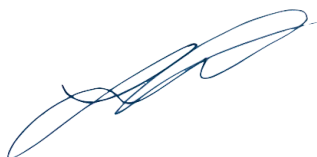
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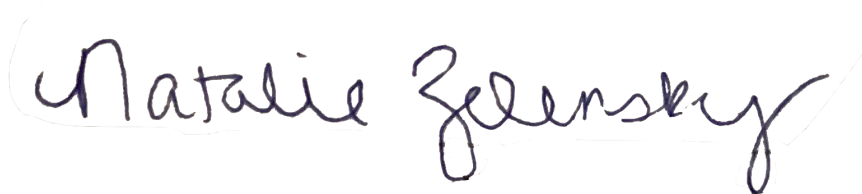
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
TEC Symbol	6
“Do You Even PAR, Bro?”	6
<i>The Road to Success Starts with Access</i>	7
<i>Theories of Research and Resistance</i>	13
<i>Youth Activism</i>	18
<i>Chapters Ahead</i>	21
The Equality Coalition: Research Project Overview	24
<i>Introduction</i>	25
<i>The Youth Researchers</i>	25
<i>Situating Ourselves at School</i>	28
<i>Foundations and Fall</i>	30
<i>Spring Semester</i>	36
PAR as a Practice in Feminist Education	40
<i>Feminist Classroom, Feminist Space</i>	41
<i>Research</i>	47
<i>Praxis</i>	50
<i>Reflexivity</i>	55
Queering PAR	60
<i>Let’s Queer the Air</i>	62
<i>PAR as a Queer Method</i>	65
<i>Queer Wednesday</i>	68
<i>Futurities, Queer and Now</i>	71
There Will Always Be Shoplifting At Macy’s: The Precarious Life of PAR	82
<i>Precarity of PAR</i>	83
<i>Do Some Good</i>	86
<i>Theory, Interrupted</i>	90
Student Reflections on PAR	95
Appendix	102
Activities	130
Works Cited	143

Acknowledgements

This project was possible because of the institutions and offices that granted me funding: the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs, the Office of the Provost, and the Richard Gilman Fund for Senior Scholars.

Thank you to these people who made the logistics of my time at Alt possible: Linda, Pam, and the admin team at the Maine Children's Home.

To the following people, endless gratitude for your constant support and love: Mom, Dad, Anna, Mary, David, Tommy, Allie, Emma, Angie, Abby, Katie, and countless others.

bell hooks calls education a “practice of freedom”; indeed, I finish this project and leave Colby with an intense sense of liberation. I share my freedom with the educators who made it possible for me.

Thank you, Mark, for being my first friend at Colby and for being there for me at every turn.

Lisa, thank you for holding me to the highest standard and for pushing the constraints of heteronormativity out of my life.

Lyn, you have taught me to fail beautifully, to write with the important people on my eyeballs, and to do some good. Thank you doesn't cover it.

Finally, thank you to the youth researchers, who let me into their lives, who were willing to let me ask hard questions and who answered with their own.



The TEC symbol, located throughout the pages ahead, indicates that the following text box is a section written directly to and for my co-researchers. In these text boxes, following theoretical analysis, I attempt to confront the inaccessibility that results from elevated language by using syntax and vocabulary that I would during a session of TEC. I invite all readers, particularly those who have not had access to higher education (because of systematic barriers and/or age), to engage with these sections.

“Do You Even PAR, Bro?”

By attaining knowledge for resistance and transformation, young people create their own sense of efficacy in the world and address the social conditions that impede liberation and positive, healthy development.

-Julio Cammarota & Michelle Fine¹

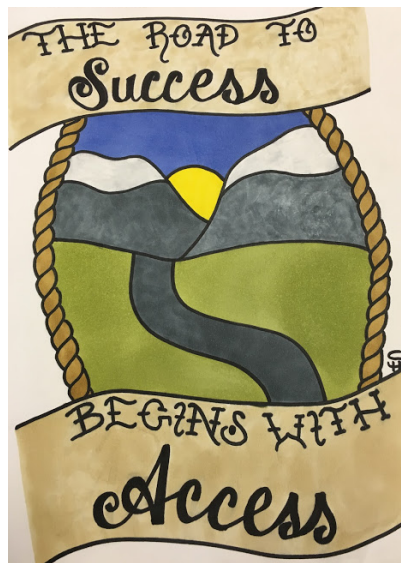


¹ Cammarota, J and Fine, M. Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion. New York: Routledge, 2008. Pages 9-10.

The Road to Success Starts with Access

During my sophomore spring at Colby, I enrolled in a senior seminar in the Education Program (subverting the linear progression of academic systems, of course) with Professor Lyn Mikel Brown. The class was called “Creating The World We Want: Reimagining Girls, Resistance, and Social Change,” and it was centered on the creation and implementation of a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project at the Alternative Education and Teen Parent School Programs (referred to as Alt and TPSP, respectively) in Waterville, Maine. Over the course of three months, our class of nine learned the theory and practice of YPAR as we worked with seven Alt students who self-identified as female. The students chose the lack of public transportation as an injustice worth investigating, and we worked collaboratively to produce our project, Activism for Access, which highlighted the differential effect of inadequate transportation on youth in Waterville and identified disparities in access between AHS students and the students at Waterville High School. Our group wrote a survey to collect the experiences of Waterville youth relating to transportation, or lack thereof, and distributed it to all high school students in the Waterville school system, both at Alt and at the traditional school (WSHS). We found that while 23% of WSHS respondents had missed an opportunity due to lack of public transportation options in the city, a massive 70% of Alt respondents had missed such an opportunity. Through collecting photo stories, the youth researchers found that Alt students missed employment and recreation opportunities and that teen parent students, in particular, missed opportunities to attend to their children’s health and well-being without access to transportation.

Moved by our results, the group presented our data at a symposium at Colby and displayed it on a website (activismforaccess.wordpress.com). One Alt student coined our slogan, “The road to success begins with access,” while another, a very talented aspiring tattoo artist, created our project’s logo. By the end of the semester, we had established a fund for drivers ed and car repairs at Alt, solutions identified through our data and conversations with students.



Logo designed by Alt student researcher

The perceived impact on our co-researchers of participating in this YPAR project and presenting the results was striking. Because of time constraints, we were not able to formally assess the impact of the project, but the changes in affect, confidence, and agency of the Alt students (many of whom were gender non-conforming) were significant. The youth researchers came to articulate both the injustices they experience as students pushed out of the traditional

high school and the gendered violence they had witnessed and survived. The project fostered a sense of acceptance and community within Alt, as well as the possibility of youth-powered change. While this semester-long project was compelling, in terms of both the product we produced and the impact the project had on the Alt students, it also uncovered the need for further exploration and implementation of more thorough YPAR projects with queer and/or gender non-conforming students in rural and small-town settings, such as Waterville.

When I met with former Alt co-researchers in March 2017, they all expressed a desire for continued and expanded YPAR opportunities in their school. As students at Alt, they recognized the challenges and inequities they faced because of their identities and circumstances: “[By sophomore or junior year,] you could get kicked out of your house; you know, you could have dropped out by then, or you could have had a kid by then. You come back. This is the school. You just have more experience with issues.” It was clear to me that there was space at the Alt for continued YPAR work. With the foundation our class had built with Lyn, I decided to launch another YPAR project at Alt, this time with a deep exploration of the theories that support its framework, as well as its intersections with queer and feminist theory.

Twelve months later... On a Friday morning in March, I sat with five high schoolers and their teachers as we read the results of a survey we had written for teachers in their school district. These students attend an alternative education program in the district, and we had spent the past six months researching how the Alt School program was perceived -- for the most part, negatively -- in the larger community and school system. I projected our Google Form document on the whiteboard, and we read in silence the adjectives survey respondents (in this case, local non-Alt teachers) had used to describe students in the program. “Fringe,” “aimless,”

“discouraged,” “unmotivated,” “round pegs in a square hole.” One student, reading “unmotivated,” reacted with, “are you friggin kidding me?! This pisses me off!” Pissed off was the general sentiment in the room, though there was also a sense of validation: “I’m pissed but happy to see these,” another student said. “I can point to this survey and know that these negative stereotypes are not all in my head.”

Indeed, this group of students had been working for months to narrow down our research questions, gather preliminary data, and build a strategy of research and action regarding the stigma and stereotypes that surround their alternative education program. For this academic year, these students were researchers in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) group that I facilitated at Alt and TPSP. Together, we had examined the youth researchers’ personal experiences of encountering negative and harmful stereotypes -- the stuff “in their heads” -- and researched how those individual experiences were actually part of a larger system of bias and discrimination.

In this thesis, I document our group’s experience developing and implementing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. In addition, I provide my analysis of PAR as a praxis of feminist and queer theory. Before diving into our experiences, though, we must have an understanding of PAR, specifically Youth PAR (YPAR), and the theories that undergird this framework of research practice. Upon hearing the term, one of the Alt students laughed and jokingly asked his friend, “Do you even PAR, bro??” This was my first time hearing PAR used as a verb, and while grammatically questionable, it captured the essence of our work together.

In its very construction, PAR questions the meaning of research -- of what doing research means, of who does research, and what research does. Research, devoid of any political context, is the production of knowledge, and that production is located somewhere in “relations of power

and privilege that structure the social world.”² PAR attends to these relations, particularly the ways that they have shaped research done on and around communities lacking power and privilege. The research is centered within these communities, is done by community members, and is used to inform social change within these communities.

Cammarota and Fine lay out five principles of participatory action research that separate it from other forms of social science research³:

1. The research is collective, conducted not by an individual but by a group of researchers with multiple perspectives.
2. The group of researchers are stakeholders and insiders within the site of their research. Researchers may carry various amounts of power within the site, and may be facilitated by “outsiders,” but the voices of the insiders are centered in the research design, questions, and results.
3. The researchers are practitioners of Critical Race Theory, meaning they “analyze power relations through multiple axes,” including race, sexuality, gender, and class.
4. The knowledge produced through research should be critical and oriented toward social changes.
5. PAR is an active process where the “research findings become launching pads for ideas, actions, plans, and strategies to initiate social change.”

² Frisby, W and Creese, G. "Unpacking Relationships in Feminist Community Research: Crosscutting Themes." In *Feminist Community Research: Case Studies and Methodologies*, edited by Creese, G and Frisby, W, 1-15. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. Page 1.

³ Cammarota, J and Fine, M. *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Pages 5-6.

Critical race theorist Eve Tuck, in her work with a New York City research collective outlined in “Theorizing Back: an Approach to Participatory Policy Analysis,” understands PAR as a “politic,” not a defined set of methods.⁴ That politic, which is a loud and constant critique of structures of oppression at both macro- and micro-scales, contains elements that inform the methodology and research process chosen:

1. Questions are co-constructed.
2. The design is collaboratively theorized, negotiated, and co-constructed.
3. There is transparency on all matters of the research.
4. Analysis is co-constructed.
5. The products of the research are dynamic, interactive, and are prepared and disseminated in collaboration.⁵

Cammarota, Fine, and Tuck place value on collaboration, action, and critical analysis. They build a feminist politic in the spaces PAR opens up -- PAR spaces are liberating spaces, which I argue further in Chapter 3: PAR as a Feminist Practice.

The research methods employed in a PAR project can take the shape of surveys, interviews, photo-stories, focus groups, mapping, oral histories, opinion polls, cold calls, memoirs, and archival research. Tuck and fellow researchers in the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD), studying the use of the GED credential in school push-out practices in New York City, use the metaphor of watercolors to describe their

⁴ Tuck, E et al. "PAR Praxes for Now and Future Change: The Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire." In *Revolutionizing Education*, edited by Cammarota, J. and Fine, M., 49-83. New York: Routledge, 2008. Page 51.

⁵ Tuck, Eve. "Theorizing Back: An Approach to Participatory Policy Analysis." In *Theory and Educational Research: Toward Critical Social Explanation*, edited by Jean Anyon, 111-130. New York: Routledge, 2009. Page 114.

research methodology;⁶ their main research methods are the primary colors, and their auxiliary methods are their secondary colors. They extend the metaphor as they “mix colors,” creating new research methods. Finally, they stress the importance of using the colors in harmony and not using too many colors at once. Youth researchers at Alt employed surveys as their primary colors and interviews with school administrators as their secondary colors.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is the fancy name for the type of research we did this past year. The important things to know about PAR are that it is collaborative, centered on YOU (you make the decisions about what we research, how we research it, and what we do with that research), and that we are critical thinkers throughout it, meaning that we’re talking about things like race and gender in our research. I thought it was funny that when I told you about PAR, one of you jokingly said, “do you even PAR, bro??”

Theories of Research and Resistance

Indigenous scholars Linda Smith and Eve Tuck interrogate the history of research in the context of their experiences. Smith links research to imperialism and colonialism.⁷ A researcher’s belief that their work is doing good may be merely self-serving; speaking in light of settler colonialism, Smith suggests there is often no difference between what the academy may

⁶ Tuck et al., 2008.

⁷ Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books Ltd: London, 1999.

consider real research and “any other visits by inquisitive and acquisitive strangers.”⁸ Tuck, in conversation with Smith, centers her YPAR projects on “a critique of the ways in which whitestream voices are constructed as rigorous, logical, reasoned, and valid while voices outside the whitestream are considered experiential and emotional, representing devalued ways of knowing.”⁹ Research within the whitestream (the white, patriarchal academy) has produced what Tuck and other scholars argue are “stereotypical or erroneous analyses” of marginalized communities.¹⁰ These scholars have problematized the state of academic research to the point where alternatives are not only helpful but necessary.

Of course, if we are going to understand the history of research through a decolonization perspective -- as PAR operates -- we must consider the implications of true decolonization for research practice, as argued by Tuck and K. Wayne Yang in *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*: “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.”¹¹ We proceed cautiously and critically with theory grounded in indigenous studies. This project, the institution that supports this project, and the student researcher of this project are situated on stolen land, descended from settler colonialists. The tools and theoretical methods that decolonization lend to this analysis are not our intellectual property, though they aid in a movement toward a more equitable, liberating, and queer education. The use of the term “decolonizing” in a project without considering implications for Indigenous justice remains unsettling to the author, as Tuck and Wang assert it very well should.

⁸ Smith, 1999: 3

⁹ Tuck, 2009: 112.

¹⁰ Tuck, 2009: 112.

¹¹ Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society* 1, no. 1 (2012). Page 1.



THE EQUALITY COALITION

The ways that we've thought about doing research this year are based on work done by Indigenous people, people whose ancestors had their land and culture taken from them by white people (settlers). Colonialism is the violent process through which settlers took over land and culture, and *de*-colonialism the undoing of this process. We should always be aware that we live, learn, and work on land that was stolen from Indigenous people (in our case, the Wabanaki people).

Smith notes that her text *Decolonizing Methodologies* may be considered an “anti-research book on research.”¹² Indeed, the critique of academic research -- a critique that often seems “anti-research” -- is necessary in the construction of an alternative form of research. Smith names the action of conducting reactionary research as “researching back.”¹³ Researching back is a political action, it is a move in reaction to injustice. YPAR, in many ways, is based in the theory of researching back. In her work with a New York City research collective outlined in “Theorizing Back: an Approach to Participatory Policy Analysis,” Eve Tuck builds off Smith’s theory by questioning the construction and ownership of academic theory itself: “theorizing back [...] involves a demystifying and de-deifying of grand theory in order to revise, resist, and refuse stereotypical or erroneous analyses of us and our communities.”¹⁴ In Tuck’s aspiration of critical

¹² Smith, 1999: 12

¹³ Smith, 1999: 7

¹⁴ Tuck, 2009: 112.

theory, members of marginalized communities have voice both in research and in theory creation.

In “Polling for Justice,” a YPAR project based out of the Public Science Project in New York City, researchers conducted a city-wide survey to assess education, health, criminal justice, and policing in their schools and communities. To distribute their findings, the youth researchers produced a video¹⁵ in which an adult, dressed as a stereotypical PhD in a white lab coat named “Dr. Researchy Research,” lectures them about the “urban teen.” One young woman interrupts Dr. Research and asks, “Excuse me, can you stop talking about us? We’re sitting right here!” When the young woman explains that she’s actually lived her life as an “urban teen,” the professor responds, “Well, you might have lived it, but I’ve studied it.” Thus begins the youth researchers’ explanations of Polling for Justice, their findings, and PAR. Dr. Research asks, “Is that even a legitimate field of study?,” to which another researcher explains, “PAR is when we do research on other youth because we believe we are the experts of our own experiences.” This video, while lighthearted, provides a profound illustration of the ways in which PAR disrupts and talks back to traditional, or whitestream, research.

Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine’s *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* offers a comprehensive and rich overview of Youth PAR (YPAR) principles, case-studies, and reflections.¹⁶ Stemming from a foundation of critical youth studies, Cammarota and Fine define YPAR most simply as “a formal resistance that leads to transformation -- systematic and institutional change to promote justice” (2). Youth resistance can be categorized into three types: self-defeating, conformist, and transformational. PAR

¹⁵ “Polling for Justice,” Vimeo video, 13:55, posted by “redeye,” 2011, <https://vimeo.com/22363812>.

¹⁶ Cammarota & Fine, 2008.

framework outlines a formal (in the sense that it is intentional) process to produce transformational resistance.

Self-defeating resistance can be seen in Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor*, when a group of working class boys -- the "lads" -- skip school or drop-out to work in factories;¹⁷ their resistance to structures of schooling result in their own stagnation. Such resistance can also be seen in classroom behaviors that may be considered disruptive or delinquent -- sleeping, skipping class, talking back -- all common behaviors at the Alt. Indeed, our biggest challenge in both group formation and research progression was attendance; of our 12 group members, we typically had five or six present. Despite their "self-defeating outcomes," these behaviors can be viewed as resistance to injustice.¹⁸ Many of the youth researchers skipped school because they didn't see it as useful, or because of reasons noted earlier in our group activity (e.g. they didn't feel like their voices were heard).

Conformist resistance is resistance within educational systems at an individual level. The goals of this resistance might be "social advancement," "economic mobility," or efforts toward equality.¹⁹ I classify many of the efforts at Alt as conformist resistance. As you walk through the front doors of the school building, you read "Work Hard, Be Kind, Graduate," written in graffiti-like bubble letters on a laminated sign. To graduate is to be capable of upward mobility, so long as the students are compliant to the school guidelines and normatively successful. Transformational resistance, on the other hand, requires a shift from acting for personal benefit to a concern with systemic injustice. Such a shift requires the development of critical consciousness

¹⁷ Willis, Paul E. *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press, 1977.

¹⁸ Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 3

¹⁹ Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 3

or the ability, as Paulo Freire explains, to "intervene in reality in order to change it."²⁰

Transformational resistance is action-oriented toward the “greatest possibility for social change”.

²¹ PAR aspires for transformational justice and does so in a feminist way, as I will argue in Chapter 3.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Our research has a lot to do with resistance -- the ways that you and I resist social pressures to act a certain way, or go to a certain school. As we've seen, a lot of stereotypes about the Alt and TPSP come from the fact that you guys don't act the way society wants you to (maybe because you're a teen parent or because your anxiety means that you don't like being in a regular classroom). Instead of thinking of your behavior as “failure,” as the regular high school and the community might, I think it's important to think of it as RESISTANCE. You don't conform because you know that the system you're supposed to conform to is a bad system. PAR is a way to express that resistance effectively.

Youth Activism

I chose to work with youth, specifically, in this project because of the extensive literature documenting the socio-developmental and educational benefits of PAR for young people (cite literally everything i've read). Cammarota and Fine see the implementation of PAR as “revolutionizing education,” hence the name of their edited volume. They argue that YPAR

²⁰ Friere, Paulo. Education for Critical Consciousness. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005. Page 4.

²¹ Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 3

“represents a fundamental, critical strategy for youth development, youth-based policy making, and education” through its emphasis on identifying, studying, *and* fixing problems.²² Of course, no matter their minority statuses, youth have the added challenge of being dismissed and underestimated in their work. Historian Robin Kelley wrote, “All around us, young people are at the forefront of asking how we imagine a different future, but their theorizing goes unnoticed because youth are still seen as the junior partners of the social movement.”²³ Although 2018 has brought with it national coverage of youth activists and their profound power to enact social change, youth continue to be undervalued and rendered incapable of doing the work of transformational resistance, whether because of their lack of formal education or exclusion from formal decision making structures. YPAR offers the structure for youth to become researchers, activists, and advocates.

Importantly, though, YPAR work happens in intergenerational partnerships. In the case of this PAR project at Alt, my age (22) puts me in an ambiguous position -- not quite a “youth” in the context of our project, but not an adult. In many ways, my age, gender, and education status (as an undergraduate student) excludes me from academic spaces (not to mention professional and other male-dominated spaces), though certainly not to the extent that my co-researchers experience. At the same time, my academic privilege and age difference situates me as a quasi-adult, so I must contend with the power and privilege dynamics that manifest in an intergenerational partnership.

Harry Shier, in *What Does “Equality” Mean for Children in Relation to Adults?*, unpacks the concept of “adultism”: “the belief that the adult human being is intrinsically superior to or of

²² Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 7.

²³ Kelley, R et al. “Resistance as Revelatory.” In *Youth Resistance Research and Theories of Change*, edited by Tuck, E. and Yang, K., 82-96. New York: Routledge, 2014. Page 88.

greater worth than the child, and the child, by default, inferior or of lesser worth.”²⁴ As is the case with other systems of hegemony, adultism permeates the worldviews of both adults and youth. Being conscious of these existing biases, I was continuously aware of my tendency to doubt the youth researchers’ ability or experience. Even as I attempted to counter my adultism, though, the youth researchers were often resistant to a horizontal power structure based on experience, not age. In structuring our activities, I would emphasize the students’ roles as experts on their own experience and take a backseat as the non-experienced one in the group. However, the students continued to look to me for direction and control and at times called out the contradiction of my position as the appointed “adult” in the room and my insistence that I was not their “teacher” or in charge of the group. As the research process progressed, the youth researchers became more comfortable asserting their opinions and taking ownership of our actions.

Freirean theories of education categorize traditional education models (including the relatively traditional classroom within Alt) as “banking models,” which treat students as empty receptacles to be filled with knowledge and perpetuate an adult-centric social order in schools.²⁵ Youth participatory action researchers challenge the banking models in their school systems, simultaneously engaging in critical research and subverting the adultism that is so deeply built into their education structures.

²⁴ Shier, Harry. “What Does “Equality” Mean for Children in Relation to Adults?,” *CESESMA, Global Thematic Consultation* (2012): 1-12. Page 9.

²⁵ Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2002.



THE EQUALITY COALITION

I don't need to tell you this, but adults tend to think they're better than kids. This is called "adultism." Adultism makes it even harder for people to take our research seriously.

Adultism is everywhere -- in our schools, our homes -- and this year we had to get out of the mindset that I was the "adult" in the room and that you were the "kids." Over the course of our project, you took more control of the group, which is what I was hoping would happen. I hope that even in spaces outside of TEC, you recognize the power and knowledge you have as a teenager.

Chapters Ahead

In the pages ahead, I will explore the ways in which this PAR project was influenced by, interacted with, and spoke back to feminist and queer theory. I will argue that PAR is a feminist and queer method of community research.

In Chapter 2, *Project Overview*, I document the foundations, settings, and content of the PAR project I facilitated at the Alternative Education and Teen Parent School Programs in Waterville. Over the course of nine months, I worked with 17 high schoolers to study the stereotypes surrounding their school in the Waterville community, as well as the effect of those stereotypes. As we expected, the stereotypes were negative and prevalent throughout the community. Our group distributed a total of four surveys throughout the year and used the

findings to launch action items to produce a more positive visibility of the Alt and TPSP in Waterville.

Chapter 3, *PAR as a Practice in Feminist Education*, engages feminist theory, particularly that of theorist and activist bell hooks. I argue that PAR is a feminist research method, as well as a form of feminist education in the way that it facilitates a critical-consciousness raising. I also explain the necessity of feminist reflexivity, the practice of critical self-analysis, when working within groups holding disparate power and privilege.

In Chapter 4, *Queering PAR*, I explore the ways in which PAR is a queer method of research. Queer, in the sense that I am using it, provides a capacious category of sexuality and gender, as well as a politic that deconstructs, refuses, and reimagines. PAR is queer in its emphasis on analyzing social and relational structures, as well as in the way that it subverts power dynamics within traditional, heteronormative research. This chapter also explains how the experience of PAR opens up space for explicitly queer curriculum. Finally, I argue that the space of PAR is distinctly queer because of its ability to imagine other ways of being while orienting itself toward social change.

Following the bulk of theoretical analysis, I reflect inwards in Chapter 5, *The Precarious Life of PAR*. This chapter unpacks the struggles and tensions of conducting PAR within the academy, particularly at Colby. I consider the ways that community research is de-legitimized and pushed out of the academy, as well as the possibility that such pushout may be what sustains PAR work.

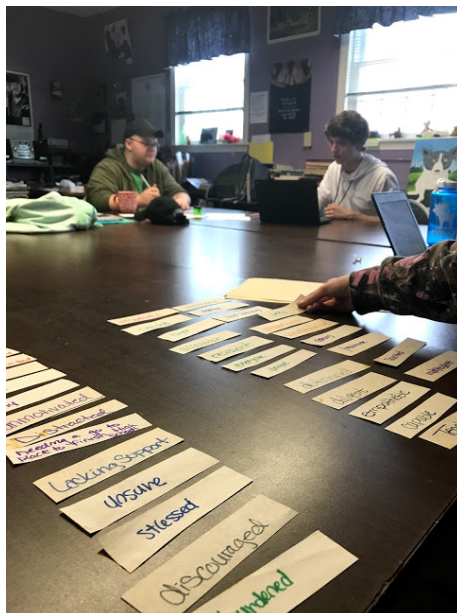
The thesis closes with the voices of the youth researchers in Chapter 6, *Student Reflections on PAR*. I offer an edited transcript of a conversation I amongst TEC this spring as they reflect on the work we have done and discuss what their future looks like.

Following the last chapter is an Appendix, which contains resources and research materials, and an Activities section, which outlines the activities I created for the facilitation of this PAR project.

The Equality Coalition: Research Project Overview

“How do they expect us to act the same as the regular high school students if they treat us different?”

-Alt Student



Introduction

Over the course of the 2017-2018 school year, I organized and facilitated a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project at the Alternative Education Program, often referred collectively as the Alt, and Teen Parent School Program (TPSP) in Waterville, Maine. Throughout the year, I met two or three times weekly with a dozen students at the Alt and TPSP as we conducted a research project on the origins and effects of stereotypes surrounding the Alt. In the fall, the youth researchers voted to name our group “Equality Mafia,” or “EM,” but we changed our name to “The Equality Coalition,” or “TEC,” in February.

Our project was messy, joyful, challenging, and radical. As a senior at Colby College, I facilitated this group as part of my Senior Scholars project. While this thesis provides an analysis of PAR, queer theory, and feminist politics, in this chapter, I describe the process and results of the youth researchers’ project, specifically. As much as possible, I have incorporated TEC researchers’ voices into this chapter, and I have gone over the final text with them to make sure it reflects their experiences, as well.

The Youth Researchers

Our full research team consisted of 17 students at Alt, all of whom attended group for at least a month. Because our group met during a study hall during the fall semester and as a class during the spring semester, our core group changed. During the fall, our group consisted of me and 12 students, though attendance was spotty for the students because study hall was also the time to make up missing assignments. When we switched to an “Independent Living” class (a course designation of the school) in the spring, we lost five students due to scheduling, but we

gained five new students and Linda, the Independent Living teacher. In this report, I will be referring to students by pseudonyms they chose. To maintain both clarity and anonymity, I will provide the students' pseudonyms and gender pronouns, but no other identifying information:

Fall semester group members: Lucius (he/him), Paul (she/her), Brian (he/him), Autumn (she/her), Shaquisha (she/her), Jen (she/her), Jay (she/her), Mark (he/him), Parker (he/him), Mary (she/her), Abigail (she/her), Alex (he/him)

Spring semester group members: Lucius (he/him), Paul (she/her), Brian (he/him), Autumn (she/her), Shaquisha (she/her), Jay (she/her), Mark (he/him), Cassidy (she/her), Ellie (she/her), Cheyenne (she/her), Kevin (she/her), Lisa (she/her)

In the fall, the youth researchers ranged from first year students to seniors, none of whom were enrolled in TPSP; in the spring, our students again ranged in grade, this time with two students enrolled in TPSP (both with absolutely adorable babies). One youth researcher identified as transgender during the project's duration, and their pronouns alternated throughout the year. Our group had one student of color, while the rest were white, as am I. Their ages ranged from 13 to 20.

The fall group was entirely opt-in, while the spring group was semi-opt-in, meaning some students requested to be in the class and others were added because of scheduling requirements. During the Alt's first week of school in the fall, I attended an all-student assembly, where I introduced myself and invited all students interested in planning a social action project to join my group. I promised pizza, space for discussion, and a willingness to help students at Alt change their school for the better. The next week, 12 students showed up, seven of whom ended

up sticking with the group throughout the fall. Three months later, in December, I asked these students why they showed up on our very first day:

“It was the first equality group I’d ever really heard of in Waterville, and I wanted to fix problems.” -Paul

“It was a break at school that we talked about stuff that we don’t get to talk about.” -Jay

“It’s like a little safe haven almost.” -Parker

“It’s kind of a chance for me to step out of my comfort zone, plus... equality... stuff.”

-Brian

“Pizza.” -Shaquisha

The motivation behind joining the group, obviously, ranged from idealistic to gastronomic, but it was important to me that each student chose to attend. After about a week of meeting, I introduced a consent form and contract, which asked the students to commit to the group, and I informed them they would receive a \$25 Visa gift card at the end of the semester, should they participate and follow the mutually constructed group guidelines. I knew I could not compensate the students fully for their time, because of the loose structure of the project, but I wanted to make clear that I valued their time, expertise, and labor as researchers.

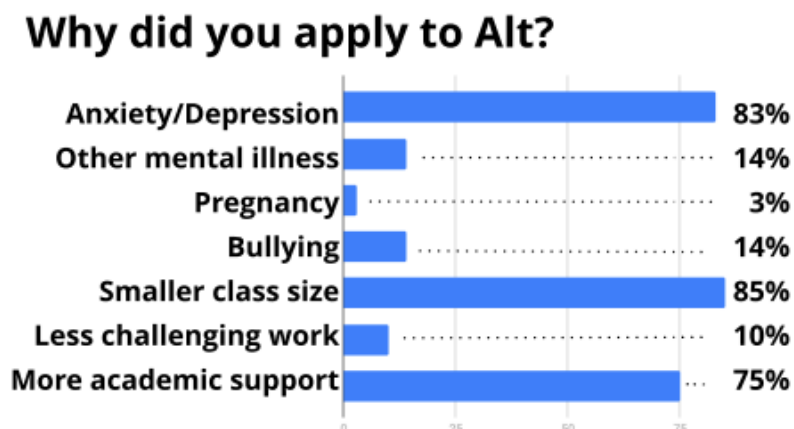
After a semester of meeting three times a week during the youth researchers’ 40 minute study hall, the school administration decided that the students needed to use that time for late or incomplete assignments, so they asked that our group meet during a class period, which was designated as “Independent Living,” or “IL,” on their schedules. Thanks to that switch, we would have more time to meet (75 minutes every other school day), but it also meant that we would lose some students to scheduling conflicts. The youth researchers in the first semester group had

the option to stay with TEC if their schedules allowed, and the program director identified a handful of other students who had expressed interest in joining our research team. During the second semester, the students received academic credit for our class, but the program director and our partner teacher Linda allowed me to retain my position as the project facilitator. These students, again, signed contracts of commitment and received the \$25 gift card at the end of the semester, but they were also required to attend and participate in group because it was a formal piece of their course load.

Situating Ourselves at School

The Alt and TPSP are housed in a brick building on the campus of Maine Children's Home for Little Wanderers. Nearly a mile from the traditional public high school, the Alt is considered a department of Waterville Senior High, and students graduate with high school diplomas from WSHS. The school is staffed by two program directors -- one for Alt and one for TPSP -- one administrative assistant, and five teachers. The Alt high school accepts students from freshmen to seniors, but its student body is skewed heavily toward juniors and seniors; the preference of the Waterville school district is that students attend Waterville Senior High School for at least a year before applying to Alt, an informal policy that infuriates the students at Alt, particularly those who had to lobby teachers and administrators for permission to attend Alt for their first year of high school. According to a pamphlet from the program director, the Alternative Ed Program has a capacity of 25 students and the TPSP has a capacity of 15, though total enrollment fluctuated above 40 over the year of our project.

Each of the two programs within the school has its own mission, although most classes are dually enrolled (TPSP offers a “parenting” class). The Alt’s program states its “mission is to provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge, to develop skills, and to foster attitudes necessary for learning.”²⁶ According to TPSP’s website, its goal is “to help teen parents understand the concept of positive parenting, to support and assist them as they learn to deal with troublesome issues, and to provide a high-quality and relevant education so they can acquire the knowledge and skills to move forward in a healthy lifestyle.”²⁷ TPSP welcomes applications from parenting and pregnant teens across the state, while Alt’s requirements for admission are not so straightforward. The school’s Student Parent Handbook identifies its students as those whose “physical and emotional needs are not being met through current structure and approach of our schools.”²⁸ Students who fit this description at the traditional school are identified by teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors and encouraged to apply to Alt. From our research team’s preliminary survey in the fall of 28 students at Alt, we found the following rationale behind students’ applications to the Alt:



²⁶ Alternative Education Program Pamphlet

²⁷ <https://www.mainechildrenshome.org/programs/teen-parent-school>

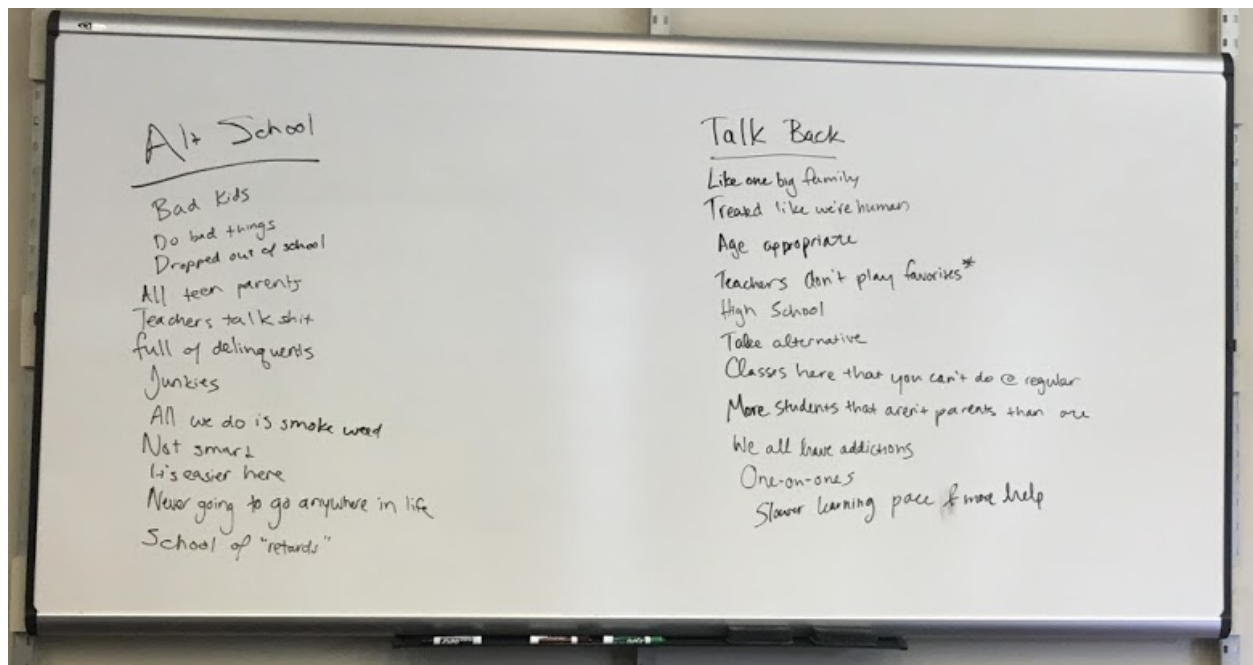
²⁸ Alternative Education Program and and Teen Parent School Program Student-Parent Handbook

A vast majority of students self-identified academic support (75-85%) as a pull toward the Alt and anxiety/depression (83%) as a push out of the traditional school system. Classes at the school are offered in conjunction with counseling and case management, though students in our research group advocated for even more mental health services.

Foundations and Fall

I recruited the first group of researchers with merely the promise of working together to create positive change in their school. I did not use the term “Participatory Action Research” until late in the first semester, instead carrying the principles of communal decision making and centering of student voices as my guide. In an attempt to let go of my own research agenda as much as possible, I wanted to hear from the students about what they needed and wanted, and then design the research project around them. In the first meeting of the fall, I asked the students -- who certainly did not consider themselves researchers yet -- what they thought our group was about; responses ranged from “I don’t know” to “make change in our community” and “get stuff done.” Over the course of our first month of meetings, we considered different topics for our research project, ultimately focusing on the negative stigma the group members face as students at the Alternative School. One student said that the common perception of Alt students is that they are “a bunch of pregnant druggies who do a line a day and dropped out of school.” Again and again, group members shared experiences of encountering stereotypes surrounding drugs, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and poor academic performance. These stereotypes, while infuriating, seemed to go unquestioned in the Waterville community.

In a group session aimed at identifying the researchers' own experiences with stereotypes in the community, I asked if we could identify stereotypes we'd heard about Alt and then counter them, or "talk back" to them, with things we know to be true about Alt. To "bad kids," we talked back with "like one big family"; to "school of 'retards,'" we talked back with "slower learning process & more help." Most importantly, the students noted, was their experience of being "treated like we're human" at Alt, an experience we wanted to convey to those students and community members outside Alt.



Over the next two months, we focused our research efforts on policy analysis and survey collection. Group members identified the effect of negative stereotypes on the treatment they received at the traditional high school. Alt students have the option of taking classes at the Technical school ("tech"), which is housed in the same building as WSHS. When the tech students entered the WSHS building for their classes, they reported being singled out to sign in, being barred from using facilities like the media center and library, and facing aggression from

administrators. One student, Alex, said that after being in a hallway during school hours before tech, an administrator threatened him with a restraining order if he entered the school without permission again. The students held these experiences in contrast to the school handbook and common rhetoric that say they are first and foremost students at the traditional high school. They identified the dual and opposing messages they were receiving; one student asked “How do they expect us to act the same as the regular high school students if they treat us different?” After collecting our group’s own experiences at the high school and identifying language in the handbook that designated Alt students as students at WSHS, we decided that we wanted to communicate our research findings to school administrators, both at Alt and at WSHS.

Before communicating findings, however, we needed to conduct extensive research. Over the course of the fall, we settled on, designed, distributed, and analyzed a survey for students at the Alt with the goal of collecting their experiences with stereotypes. We spent a few group meetings learning about how to design surveys (activity descriptions and instructions for these meetings can be seen in the appendix), and then we set to work developing our own. Our research questions at this stage were *What stereotypes are out there?* and *Where are the stereotypes coming from?* At the last minute, after a discussion about why students actually do apply to the Alt (despite all the negative assumptions), we added a question about reasons for applying to Alt, creating a list of options from members of the group’s own reasons. We distributed paper copies of the survey to all the students in the Alt over the course of a few days, incentivising completion of the survey with a piece of candy. We received 28 surveys back -- more than half of the student population.



The survey results confirmed that the experiences youth researchers identified were shared amongst students at Alt. But we were surprised to learn where students were hearing stereotypes. Excerpts below show sample responses from the survey respondents:

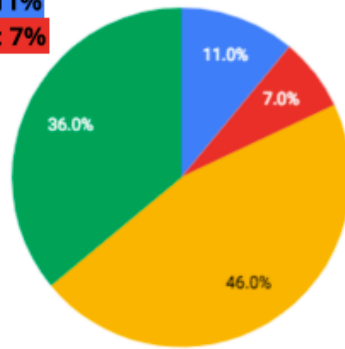
What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt?
(Please list or write in the space below.)
Druggie, drop out, parent

What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt?
(Please list or write in the space below.)
A lot of people seem to think students at this school are trouble makers, or they think they are going to the ALT to have easier work, when clearly we do not have easier work.

During a “data retreat” at Colby, which included a trip to the dining hall and a few hours in Colby’s well-equipped computer lab, we created the following graphs to illustrate our data findings (our full report can be viewed in the appendix):

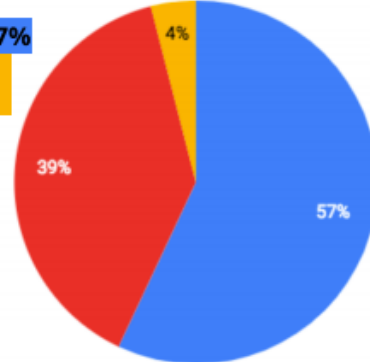
Grade Level

Freshman: 11%
Sophomore: 7%
Junior: 46%
Senior: 36%



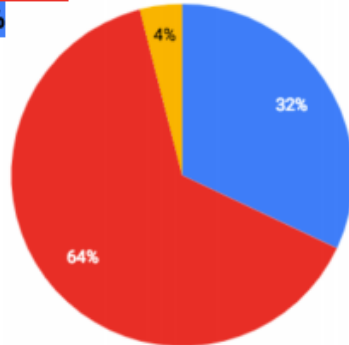
Gender

Man: 39%
Woman: 57%
Prefer not to say: 4%



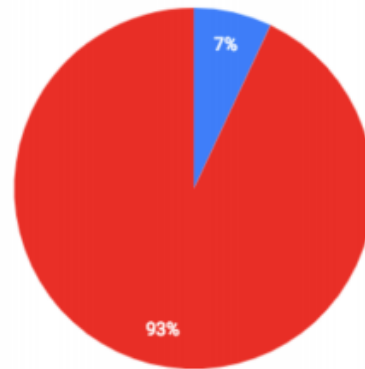
Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual: 64%
Bisexual: 32%
Other: 4%



Are you a teen parent?

No: 93%
Yes: 7%

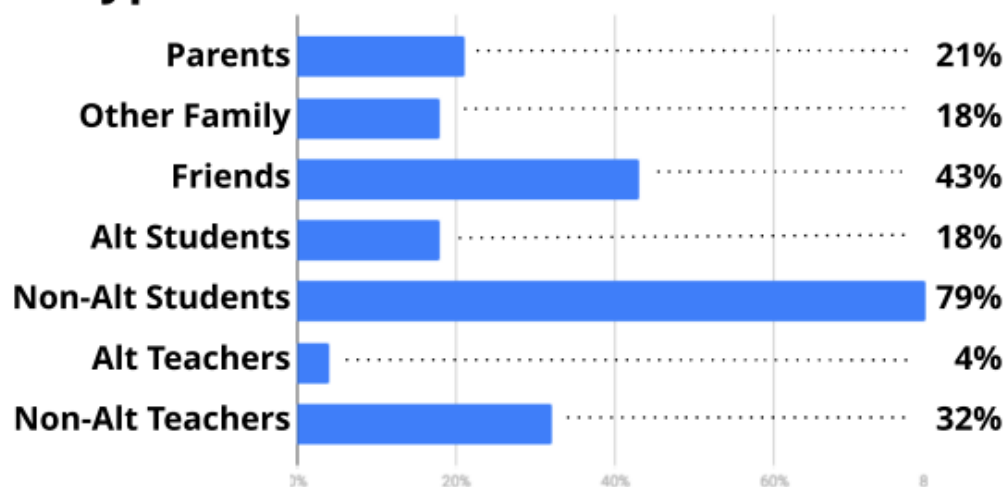


What stereotypes have you

heard about Alt? *bold font indicates recurring stereotype

*Druggies, Troublemakers, Drop-outs, Teen Parents, Stoners, Hicks, Potheads, **Bad Kids**, Jail Kids, **Dumb**, Easy, Weird, Out of Control, Troubled, Criminal, Lazy*

Where have you heard these stereotypes from?



Our findings made clear that negative stereotypes are prevalent in the lives of Alt students, regardless of gender, age, or grade. Though we were not surprised that stereotypes were coming from non-Alt students and friends, we were particularly concerned by the finding that 32% of students had heard negative stereotypes from non-Alt teachers. We decided that we needed both to take action and to continue our research to expand upon our preliminary findings. Our action steps centered around visibility and better representation for the Alt school in our community, since our data illustrated that many people were misinformed about both the students and the school. The action steps presented in our pamphlet (presented in full in the appendix) are below:

- Show the public we are different than their stereotypes
- Have speakers from the Alt come and talk at community events
- Pamphlets about the Alternative handed to Junior and Senior high school students
- Make a better Alternative School website (Easier to find)
- Meeting with Alt staff and students to address stereotypes
- Informational posters about the Alt at Junior and Senior high schools
- Better visibility (e.g. school sign on Silver St.)

In the spring, in conjunction with continuing our research efforts, we dedicated time in our sessions to studying the school website and planning the content of a new website. We met with the school district's IT administrator, who walked us through the process of creating website pages. In the last few weeks of the semester, we have plans to draft content for the website, invite a local reporter to write about our project for the newspaper, and use the funds from my budget to install a new sign on the main road that acknowledges the presence of Alt and TPSP on the grounds of the campus.

Spring Semester

In the spring, I wanted TEC researchers to think more explicitly about modes of PAR, so we spent a few weeks diving into the theories and processes of PAR before continuing our research, using resources from YPAR Hub²⁹ and of my own design (which can be viewed in the Appendix). We chose to use our survey from the fall as a springboard for further research and decided not to distribute our findings until we had more information. After much discussion, we decided that we wanted to gather more information from Alt students, as well as from non-Alt teachers (prompted by the startling finding from the fall) and Waterville community members at large. Before drafting our surveys, we clarified our research questions, both in general and regarding specific populations:

Main Research Questions:

- What stereotypes exist and how did they come to be?
- What effect do negative stereotypes have on students at the Alt?

²⁹ yparhub.berkeley.edu

Alt Student Survey:

- What stereotypes have you heard?
- Where have you heard stereotypes from?
- What do you want people to know about the Alt?
- How have you been affected by negative stereotypes as a student at Alt?

Teacher Survey:

- What do you know about the Alt school?
- What do you think is the criteria for a student to come to the Alt?
- Do you know any students at Alt?
- What are your personal opinions about the Alt?
- Why do you think kids go to the alt school?
- How do you perceive Alt kids?
- How likely are you to recommend a student attends the Alt?

Community Survey:

- Have you heard of the Alt and TPSP?
- If yes, how and from whom?
- Do you personally know anyone who attends the Alt?
- How would you categorize Alt students?
- How important do you think the Alt is to the Waterville community?

With these questions providing the base of our inquiry, we built three surveys: one to be distributed to students at the Alt via Google Form, one for non-Alt teachers at the Waterville Junior and Senior High Schools via Google Form, and one for a random sample of Waterville

community members. In total this spring, we surveyed 34 teachers and staff, 25 Alt and TPSP students, and 22 Waterville community members.



We again visited Colby for a data retreat, having lunch at the much revered dining hall before using the computer lab to build our data report. Our full report can be viewed in the appendix, but our key findings are summarized here. Amongst Alt students, every survey respondent reported hearing negative stereotypes about them, the most prevalent being “Druggies,” “Troublemakers,” and “Bad Kids.” In an increase from our fall survey, 92% of respondents had heard stereotypes from non-alt students, and 56% had heard stereotypes from non-alt teachers. Student respondents overwhelmingly reported wanting people to know that their school is not a bad place, but rather a school that provides them the support they need.

From surveying non-alt teachers, the researchers found that some teachers hold negative viewpoints on the Alt students, but they largely support the school and want access to more information. All but one survey respondent described the Alt and TPSP programs as “important” or “very important” to the school district. When asked to describe Alt students with three

adjectives, respondents provided positive (e.g. determined, eager, important), negative (e.g. troubled, unmotivated, aimless), and neutral (e.g. unconventional) descriptors. The negative adjectives were hard to process as a group, but the teacher survey overall provided hope and encouragement for our action items.

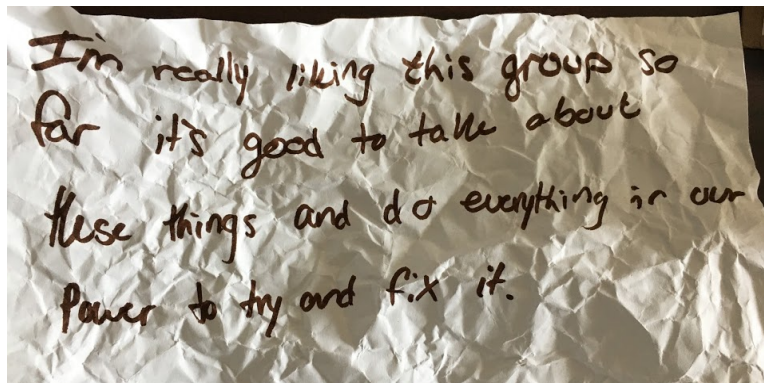
Finally, we surveyed community members with a very low yield rate (22). Of these respondents, 40% were not aware of the Alt and TPSP's existence. Of the other 60%, respondents were evenly split on whether or not they would send their child to these programs. Regardless, the respondents overwhelmingly cited the programs as important to the community.

We presented our data to Colby and Waterville community members at the Colby Liberal Arts Symposium, and we produced a report for circulation in the school district and city council. Our research and activism are far from over, but we can move forward knowing that there is a willingness from the community to learn more about our programs and to speak back to the negative stereotypes that surround us.

PAR as a Practice in Feminist Education

At last, there was the possibility of a learning community, a place where difference could be acknowledged, where we would finally all understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power.

-bell hooks³⁰



³⁰ hooks, bell. Teaching to Transgress. New York: Routledge, 1994. Page 30.

Feminist Classroom, Feminist Space

On my first day at Alt and TPSP in September, I showed up with a box of Dunkin Donuts, a pad of large sticky notes, and a bag of colorful permanent markers. I didn't know how many students would show up at 10:35 A.M., if any. However, in the few minutes leading up to the start of the period, 12 high school students began trickling into the classroom we were using, which serves as the media center, the library, and the administrative assistant's office. There were not enough seats, so I sat on the floor and asked everyone to join in a circle. There was an expected air of discomfort as we sat there eating our doughnuts -- them unsure who in the world I was; me, anxious that they would have no interest in a project with me.

With the dual intentions of easing into our group relationship and introducing feminist and queer concepts from the get-go, I asked us to introduce ourselves with our names, grades, and gender pronouns. I explained that gender pronouns were the way we wanted to be referred to in group and that they were important because sometimes people identify with a different gender than we assume. We went around the room, the students hesitantly giving their pronouns ("I guess, like, you can call me *she?*," "I mean I'm a *BOY!*") until we got to the last student. The student cleared their throat and told us, "I've never said this at school, but I actually want to use he and him." The room was silent for a moment, as my mind whirled -- *this is exactly the kind of affirming space I wanted to create, but WOW that was fast*. To my relief and excitement, the other students nodded along, a couple snapped their fingers in support, and one boy said, "you're okay; this is a judge-free zone."

Though the group was far from being a consistently affirming space, this moment illustrates the intentionality of the feminist education space I have been attempting to facilitate.

This morning in September was the first of nearly 70 meetings I held with these high school students throughout the 2017-2018 academic year, as we conducted our Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, researching the origins and effects of the stereotypes that surround their school. To understand the significance of the hours that our group spent together and the work that we did, I want to begin by meditating on the concept, the aspiration, of a feminist education. To do so, I turn to feminist theorist bell hooks. Like hooks, I understand feminism as a social orientation that transcends gender equity to challenge and end all systems of domination and oppression. In a feminist project, like this one, we attend to dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, class, and more. With reference to hooks, I ask *What does a feminist learning space look like? How can the act of educating be an act of feminist or queer liberation?*

In *Teaching to Transgress*, a text I regard as foundational to my work, hooks refers to education as “a practice of freedom.”³¹ She understands, as I do, education to be work that liberates both the mind from ignorance and the self from structures of oppression. While co-creating and engaging in a PAR space throughout the year, I operated under hooks’ tenet that a feminist classroom both challenges students and “respects and cares for the souls of our students.”³² Even the distinction of our PAR space as a “classroom” was a feminist question in this project. As we came to know one another, it was clear that many of the youth researchers did not think of school as a place that does the work hooks describes. During our weekly check-ins (sharing our past weeks’ peaks, valleys, and horizons), at least one student’s valley would be that they “had to come into school today.” For the first few months, I refused to call myself a teacher and the group meeting space a classroom, wanting to differentiate us both from the experiences

³¹ hooks, 1994: 4.

³² hooks, 1994: 4

the students had normalized and habituated to. In November, the students spent a meeting discussing the differences between our space, which we called EM at the time (short for Equality Mafia, the contentious result of a naming vote), and the rest of Alt. The key differences are below:

EM	Alt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult guides • No homework • Speak freely • Casual relationships • Feel less pressure • Words carry meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult teachers • Homework • Structured / on topic • Professional relationships • Feel pressure

In both settings, the group noted a supervisor figure, the act of learning, the presence of kids, and a set schedule for meeting. However, the differences noted point to our group space as one that embodies the ideals of hooks's feminist classroom, one in which participants feel cared for and listened to. Through hooks, I understood that the possibilities of a classroom were not as limited as the other spaces that the youth researchers experienced at school. I came to recognize our space as a classroom, not in spite of but because of its differences from the rest of Alt and other similar spaces.

hooks places value on emotions, not necessarily as raw forms of knowledge, but certainly as a key element of a liberating education. She rejects the idea that a nurturing education must mean a therapeutic safe space, but instead describes a classroom of consciousness raising that allows the possibility of creating “theory from the location of pain and struggle.” The learning community that hooks praises is “a place where difference could be acknowledged, where we would finally all understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power.”³³ hooks does the important work of acknowledging the pain of oppression without devaluing the rigor of theory. She acknowledges the limitations of the modern classroom but maintains hope that it still holds the possibility of being a site of liberation for students:

“They do want an education that is healing to the uninformed, unknowing spirit. They do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall experience.” (hooks, 19)

I appreciate hooks’s distinction between a “safe” space and what I understand to be a “liberating” space. PAR is a method of “creating theory from the location of pain and struggle,” which can only be done in a learning community that also makes space for emotional pain, processing, and healing. I think of the importance that raw emotion -- and allowance for vulnerability -- played in creating a research team strong enough to do research based in pain and

³³ hooks, 1994: 30

struggle, and I remember a session in October when a youth researcher displayed radical vulnerability. Below is an excerpt from my field journal:

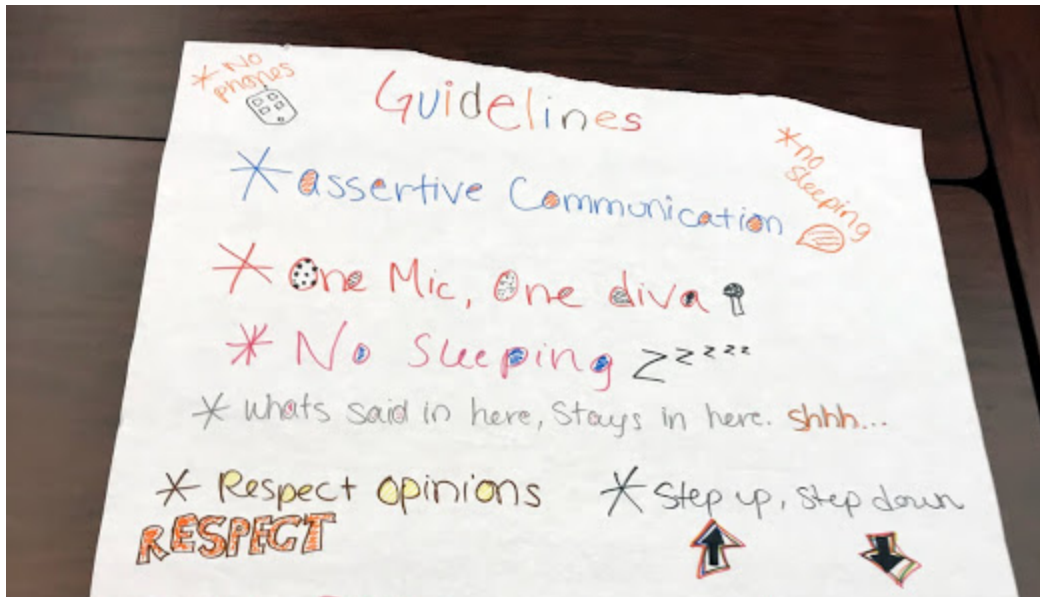
The mood today at the beginning of group was attentive and strong. I said I wanted to spend a significant amount of time checking in, since the past two weeks had been so crazy. After a couple people went, Alex, who had mentioned that something was going on, told us that his older sister died last week in a car accident, with her 1 year old daughter surviving. Alex was very upset, but not crying. He said he feels like he needs to be strong all the time, but he doesn't like people to see him cry, because it makes him "look weak." Plus, he said, he's had a "rough-ass life," so if he starts crying "everything just builds up."

The kids were amazingly empathetic and supportive. David, who tends to dominate the conversation, did give his opinion about it a lot, but he held back more than usual. Kids quietly shared that they had lost family members as well. I reiterated that this is a safe space, and I thanked Alex for sharing. I was really thankful that Alex felt comfortable and supported enough in this space to bring this struggle so honestly, and I was proud of the group's ability to care and support this news.

The liberating space I strove for is based on hooks's description of a "learning community," a community where we "understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power."³⁴ The parameters of our liberating space were set through my explicit instruction (e.g. naming my role and my expectations for group

³⁴ hooks: 1994, 30

participation) and through collective decisions (e.g. writing norms on our first day and repeatedly throughout the year). However, the *practice* of our liberating space -- the mechanisms that allowed us to understand, accept, and affirm (and dare to challenge) -- were instituted through the framework of PAR.



TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Feminism is the understanding that we live in an unjust world organized by unequal gender categories (sexism) and the belief that, by working together, we can end this sexist system, as well as other systems of inequity, such as racism and classism. I tried to make our meeting space a “feminist classroom,” meaning that it was a place where we made space to experience and talk about feelings and we practiced critical thinking. bell hooks, a feminist scholar that has influenced and inspired me, wrote that a learning space is one where “all understand, accept, and affirm that our ways of knowing are forged in history

and relations of power.” I think in group, that meant that we respected each others’ voices and recognized that our different experiences -- as a queer person, as a mom, as someone with depression -- are a strength and source of knowledge. When we recognize the power and privilege and struggle in our experiences, we learn better from each other.

Research

In late November, after two and a half months of constructing a research project with the Alt youth researchers, I recognized a major oversight in my project facilitation: I had yet to introduce, explicitly, the concept of PAR to our group. My failure to have a discussion on this topic was rooted in fear that the youth researchers would be uninterested in the theory or that they would be put off by the wordy and academic-sounding name. I justified my reluctance by appealing to hooks’s assertion that “the possession of a term does not bring a process or practice into being.”³⁵ However, as I continued to debate, internally and with my advisors, the ethics of writing an academic paper that is potentially unintelligible to my co-researchers, I decided that I must confront my own biased assumptions about my co-researchers, as well as my power to make decisions for them without their consent or even awareness. At the beginning of a meeting, I warned the group that we were venturing into academic jargon and handed out the following passage to them from *PAR Praxes for Now and Future Change*, by Eve Tuck, et al. (my emphasis added):

³⁵ hooks, 1994: 62.

“Our work stands in opposition to the kinds of research that have been and continue to be used for **domination**. Everyone is involved in developing research questions, project design, data collection, data analysis, and product development. Everyone is responsible for making our space a **participatory** space. We do not erase ourselves from our work, and our whole selves are involved because lots of kinds of skills and thinking are needed, not just one. Action happens all throughout research, not just at the end. By research, we mean looking again in order to make our own interpretations, breaking silences, and **reclaiming** spaces that have been used against us. Finally, research means refusing to accept **analyses** that paint us as lazy, crazy, or stupid.”³⁶

The group, as expected, scoffed at the sesquipedalian term, Participatory Action Research, but they quickly embraced the abbreviation PAR, and, as noted in the Introduction, one student turned to another and asked, “do you even PAR, bro??”

Engaging in feminist research means embarking on a critical analysis of the research process itself, which is where PAR offers a framework of practice. In *Feminist Community Research: Case Studies and Methodologies*, Gillian Creese and Wendy Frisby outline the family of research methodologies that they label feminist community research (FCR).³⁷ The approach of FCR is categorized by its collaboration with “those who are rarely included in knowledge production and policy making.”³⁸ This seemingly simple approach -- include marginalized voices in research about those who are marginalized -- is indeed complicated by profound power

³⁶ Tuck, E et al., 2008: 51

³⁷ Frisby, W and Creese, G. "Unpacking Relationships in Feminist Community Research: Crosscutting Themes." In *Feminist Community Research: Case Studies and Methodologies*, edited by Creese, G and Frisby, W, 1-15. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.

³⁸ Creese & Frisby, 2011: 1

imbalances, histories, and priorities. FCR imagines research in the sort of learning community hooks theorized, in what I recognize as a liberating space.³⁹



While the more recognizable forms of research (e.g. surveys, interviews) provide a clear launching pad for social action, PAR praxes also require capaciousness for care, which can be interpreted as relational activism. Caitlin Cahill describes this ethic of care in light of the ethical institutional review boards (IRBs) that determine funding and legitimacy of academic projects.⁴⁰ PAR researchers across disciplines often write about the tension between their conceptions of ethics and an IRB's expectation of ethical evaluation, with PAR practitioners intensely focused on the relational aspects of research -- relationships between academy and community, between researcher and researched, between researchers, and between identity groups.⁴¹ PAR projects are described as messy and nonlinear, not just because of confusing data but also because of the time, energy, and patience required to build relationships and do so in conversation with power

³⁹ hooks, 1994: 30

⁴⁰ Cahill, Caitlin. "Repositioning ethical commitments: Participatory action research as a relational praxis of social change." *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6, no. 3 (2007): 360-373.

⁴¹ Torre, M et al. "Participatory Action Research in the Contact Zone." In *Revolutionizing Education*, edited by Cammarota, J. and Fine, M., 23-44. New York: Routledge, 2008.

structures. A capaciousness for care in a liberating space meant that taking half an hour a week to check-in with everyone's peaks, valleys, and horizons held as much value as the time we spent tabulating survey responses and calculating percentages.

Praxis

Thus far, I have argued for the importance of maintaining a liberating space for students' agency and emotional health, as well as the ways in which PAR projects allow researchers to practice the values of a liberating space. More than once in the past year, I have been asked how a PAR project situates itself in our Education program. In institutions across the country, PAR projects live in departments of psychology, public health, community studies -- any discipline that requires and celebrates social science research. In response, I believe that the process of the PAR project, in addition to producing thorough and ethically-sourced research, is an educational experience crucial to the development of a critical consciousness -- a feminist education. Education practitioners/scholars have thoroughly illustrated the importance of representation, especially for minority and systematically oppressed groups of students, in traditional curricula and the necessity of revising pedagogy to better teach those students.⁴²

Representation is not enough for critical educators, who have engaged in a Freirean praxis, one that values critical consciousness and results from a pedagogy that supports students as they reflect on their own participation in social systems. Freire defines praxis as the combination of critical thought *and* action, noting that "action will constitute authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection."⁴³ To be clear, I am not citing

⁴² Find citation

⁴³ Friere, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2002. Page 66.

Freire as a feminist educator, though I do believe his educational theory provides a beautiful framework to understand PAR as a feminist praxis. His notions of freedom were linked to a fulfillment of manhood, a notion that I obviously reject. I follow the lead of hooks, who writes that his “phallogentric paradigm of liberation [...] represents a blind spot in the vision of men who have profound insight.”⁴⁴ hooks urges that critiques of this blind spot should not “overshadow anyone’s (and feminists’ in particular) capacity to learn from the insights.”⁴⁵

My lesson plans and facilitations throughout this year have been crafted with an intention on feminist praxis, and, consequently, I understand the research project process through the youth researchers’ development of critical consciousness. I marked the growth of critical consciousness in this group in three ways: anger at personal circumstances, willingness to broaden perceptions of injustice, and recognition of personal and collective agency within situations of injustice. These modes of being did not and do not exist in linear progression. PAR is messy, and messy means that linear progression needs to be thrown out the window, however frustrating that might be. The group is constantly learning, unlearning, growing, and regressing. I observed these stages happening in tandem and at distinct times, but never in a straightforward progression.

I read these modes of being through other critical educators’ writing on “theories of change,” particularly that of Eve Tuck and K. Yang in “Thinking with Youth about Theories of Change.”⁴⁶ Tuck and Yang define theory of change as the “beliefs or assumptions about how social change happens, is prompted or is influenced.”⁴⁷ These modes are how I understand the

⁴⁴ hooks, 1994: 49.

⁴⁵ hooks, 1994: 49.

⁴⁶ Tuck, E. and Yang, K. “Thinking with Youth About Theories of Change.” In *Youth Resistance Research and Theories of Change*, edited by Tuck, E. and Yang, K., 125-128. New York: Routledge, 2014.

⁴⁷ Tuck & Yang, 2014: 125.

theory of change within our PAR project: anger, critical consciousness, and recognition of agency.

Anger emerged in our very first encounter with one another. After introducing myself to the school at an assembly, I invited all the students to the front of the auditorium, where we stood in a circle, and I asked them to complete the phrase, “It’s not fair...” Responses ranged from LGBTQ discrimination to homework. Throughout the semester, during activities like this and other conversations, students would express both anger and defeatedness at injustices in their lives. The first goal of our project was to narrow in on a topic, a process fueled entirely by collective anger. The conversation kept returning to the stereotypes that students at the Alt face (e.g. druggies, delinquents, drop-outs). Particularly anger-provoking for the students are the ways that administrators at Waterville Senior High School (WSHS) treat them when they enter the premises. Alex shared the story of being threatened with a restraining order if he wouldn’t leave the school hallways, and other students voiced their anger in solidarity.

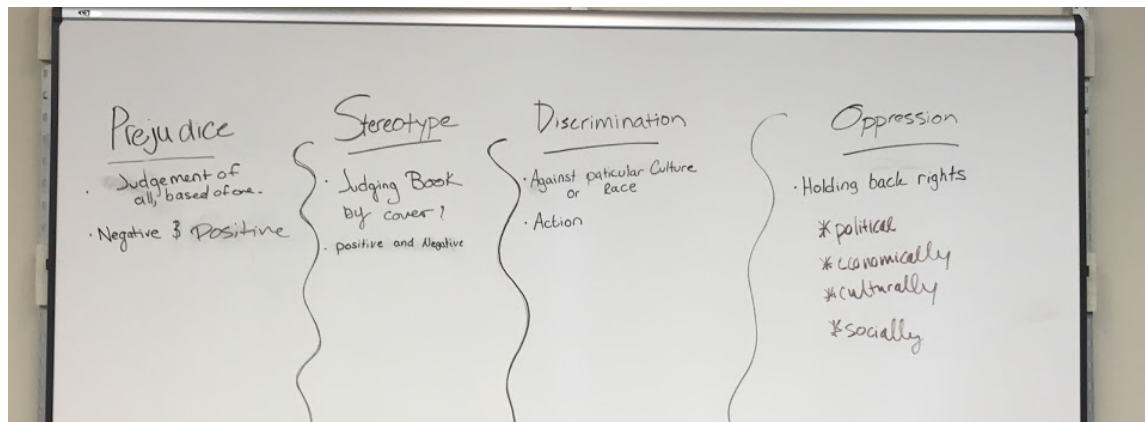
When I spoke to the principal about the situation, she said that the students were misunderstanding their situation. While we attempted to clarify policies, I was careful not to dismiss their anger as misunderstanding. The fact that the handbook did not explicitly label Alt and TPSP students as WSHS students was not truly of concern; what we cared about was that each of these students had experienced discrimination and were made to feel different and unworthy. Early on, one student summarized the situation: “How do they expect us to act the same as the regular high school students if they treat us different?” The students felt a continual dissonance between the expectations placed on them to act as regular WSHS students and the social and structural resources they are given by the school district. We acknowledged this anger,

sitting with it (sometimes I would just let the conversation go for 10-20 minutes as the students shared their anger), and then, when possible, translated that anger into action.

As we took the time to address anger at unfairness, I observed a willingness to broaden perceptions of injustice. This process was particularly slow and uneven, lasting most of the year and continuing past the end of my time with the youth researchers. When encountering space for anger, the group sometimes talked without stopping about the stereotypes they face, but when I asked them how those stereotypes affected them, most were quick to say that they don't let the stereotypes get to them. They point to kids who let stereotypes affect them as weak or stupid, despite all having experiences of bullying and ostracization that guided them toward Alt. Toward the end of the semester, after the principal and teachers were more transparent about the school's financial precarity, the students allowed the possibility that the negative stigma around Alt students might affect things as tangible as the district's budget. As our group space filled with trust and care, the students were more willing to admit that they might be hurting from the stereotypes they face. The resistance shifted to defeatedness, which eventually became a site for agency.

Broadening perceptions also existed in conversations about larger systems of inequality; conversations that were structured by activities and handouts I created for them. After a meeting in late September where the students (all white-appearing) verbally agreed that reverse racism was a real struggle in their life, we engaged in a conversation about structural inequality. Keeli had heard about cultural appropriation (she called it when "black people say white people stole something from their culture") and said she thought it was stupid. Lucius argued that all people have been enslaved at some point ("Consider the Irish!"), and Brian added that "the Africans are

even starting to enslave themselves.” Angered but not surprised by these understandings of race and racism, I came in the next day with a lesson plan to discuss the differences between stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and oppression. The students’ notes from this facilitation are below:



While the students were interested in and receptive to these ideas, they did not immediately apply these frameworks to their experiences. However, a couple of months later, Brian brought up an image he had seen on Facebook, distinguishing equality from inequality. The image, countless variations of which exist, features two panels of three people -- one tall, one medium height, one short -- standing behind a fence, watching a baseball game, the fence too tall for the medium and shortest person to see over. The first set, labeled “equality,” provides each person with a box of equal height; thus the tallest person can still see the game, the medium height person can now see the game, and the shortest person is still blocked by the fence. The second set, labeled “equity,” provides the tallest person with no box and the latter two with unequal boxes that allow each person to see the game at the same height as the tallest person. Brian explained that equity meant that everybody got what they needed, though they do not all need the same thing. This conception of equity is rooted in an understanding of power structures,

and I saw the students make the connection when they listened to Brian's description and nodded in agreement. In response I showed them one variation of the image, this time with another panel that reads "justice" and shows the three people tearing down the fence to watch the game without any boxes. During these moments, I recognized the students' growth as they developed critical consciousness and watched with excitement as they translated their consciousness to the development of their research.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Praxis kind of means what it sounds like: practice. A feminist praxis is the way that we practice our feminist beliefs. I believe that doing PAR is a way of practicing feminism. A theory of change is the way you believe social change happens. My theory of change for our group is that we felt anger, we developed a critical worldview (we took nothing for granted, and we refused to believe injustice was the norm), and we understood that together we had power to change our surroundings.

Reflexivity

A principle of PAR, as defined by Cammarota and Fine, is that "The research is collective, conducted not by an individual but by a group of researchers with multiple perspectives."⁴⁸ These multiple perspectives, consequently, bring multiple holdings of power to the research group, resulting in clashes and tensions between group members. This friction is not unique to the PAR project at the Alt, but it does illustrate the necessity of a feminist approach

⁴⁸ Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 5.

when practicing PAR. A feminist approach requires reflexivity and reciprocity. Reflexivity, as defined by Kim England, is the “self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher,”⁴⁹ and is often discussed in relation to fieldwork, where one person holds the power of *researcher* and all others are research subjects, the observed. Participatory research, in which the subjects are simultaneously the researchers, requires an analytical scrutiny of the self as facilitator and as privileged -- a feminist reflexivity. Working as an outsider, as the facilitator of PAR may be (particularly when operating out of an academic institution), attention to feminist reflexivity also requires attention to reciprocity, to the material and immaterial transactions between insider and outsider, college student and high-schooler, academic researcher and community researcher.

Feminist community researchers Colleen Reid and her PAR team note that participatory action research “requires an unsettling of traditional relationships in research.”⁵⁰ Rather than entering Alt with a predetermined topic of study and mining the students’ experiences to serve my academic interests, I created the conditions for the student-researchers to take control of the research process. Creating those conditions, though, is not as simple as walking into the classroom and handing the students money to conduct a research project. Rather, creating those conditions required me to negotiate with the power dynamics of the Alt’s semi-traditional classroom environments, as well as with our asymmetric positions of power within social structures. Reid et al. note the unsettling of *research* relationships, but I argue that YPAR, particularly, demands the unsettling of youth-adult and student-teacher relationships. The youth researchers at Alt were continually unsure of how to perceive me -- was I a teacher? A peer?

⁴⁹ England, Kim VL. "Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research." *The Professional Geographer* 46, no. 1 (1994): 80-89.

⁵⁰ Reid, C., et al. "Living an Ethical Agreement: Negotiating Confidentiality and Harm in Feminist Participatory Action Research." In *Feminist Community Research: Case Studies and Methodologies*, edited by Creese, G and Frisby, W, 189-209. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011.

Their boss? As much as I stressed horizontal collaboration, our interactions were taking place in a classroom environment where the youth were understood to be students, under the control of the adult in the room, the teacher. As illustrated with the Alt/E.M. comparison activity, the youth researchers did come to think of me as an “adult guide,” but it was not without pushback. One student, in particular, held me extremely accountable to my claims that I was not in charge of them. From my field journal in November:

Mary is constantly questioning the power dynamics I claim the group has. She is determined to prove I am really the “boss.” I suggested that we all turn toward the board, and she said she didn’t want to, and I said “Mary, c’mon, turn towards the board.” She said, “See! You are in charge!”

Mary held me to a high standard, and she also illuminated the fact that, regardless of my intentions for horizontal collaboration, our relationship will always be asymmetric.

Acknowledging the asymmetry and working alongside it, rather than continually contesting or ignoring it, is a key component of feminist reflexivity. As much as I aspired to be radically honest in my relationships with the youth researchers, our work together still existed in a school setting that valued my knowledge above theirs.

Critiquing my positionality in the PAR space must go hand in hand with an analysis of reciprocity within the research context. The benefits I received from facilitating this project were obvious -- academic credit, prestige of a senior scholars designation, and (hopefully) a college degree from an elite liberal arts institution. The youth researchers initially understood my participation in the project as a mandatory college requirement, and they would make fun of me, telling me that they wouldn’t do the work so that I would “get a bad grade.” Eventually, I

clarified that my academic performance wasn't really dependent on their work and that this was a project I initiated and desired. When we came to this understanding, our trust in each other grew; they realized that I was not there only for my academic benefit, and that I had a genuine desire to help them make change in their lives. One student, in the fall, said, "Anyone who says they want to help make a change where there's need for change... well... it's a good sign of you actually caring about us and what we have to do." Conversely, the youth researchers received from me the tools to conduct a research project, as well as emotional support throughout the year. In no way, though, do I believe that we reached reciprocity.

Shauna Butterwick describes the reciprocity in feminist PAR work in much the same way I describe reflexivity, as "asymmetrical," noting that "we can move beyond our immediate standpoints but we cannot know the standpoint of the other person."⁵¹ Operating within asymmetric reciprocity requires that the relationship continually aspires toward full reciprocity with the understanding that it cannot actually be achieved. As a gesture toward monetary compensation, I provided each youth researcher with a \$25 gift certificate each semester, as school rules and budget constraints meant that I could not compensate them fully.

The analysis of PAR practitioners María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine contributes immensely to the formulation of feminist reflexivity, though they never define it explicitly as such. Torre, Fine, and their research team from *Echoes of Brown: Youth Documenting and Performing the Legacy of Brown v. Board of Education* analyzed their experience as "high school students, college faculty, artists, poets, writers, graduate students, and college students"⁵²

⁵¹ Butterwick, Shauna. "Travels with Feminist Community-Based Research: Reflections on Social Location, Class Relations, and Negotiating Reciprocity." In *Feminist Community Research: Case Studies and Methodologies*, edited by Creese, G and Frisby, W, 58-74.. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. Page 72.

⁵² Torre, M et al., 2008: 24.

doing PAR work within a “contact zone”, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as a “social space where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power.”⁵³ Torre expands the concept of contract zones to suggest that they provide an understanding of “human interaction *across* power differences.”⁵⁴ In our case, these power differences were across class (I come from a wealthy background, while most students at Alt are from low-income backgrounds), gender, education, age, and sexuality. Bringing a feminist lens to Alt means that I could dive into this contact zone, aware that it would be messy and complicated.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Reflexivity is another fun word. The *flex* in the word makes me think of flexibility, like movement, which is a good way to think about this idea. It means the analysis of the self and the way the self moves. In this case, I’m talking about the importance of my feminist reflexivity when I’m working with you all doing community research. I need to be aware of everything I bring to our space -- adultism, the opportunity to go to a school like Colby, money -- and how it affects our relationships and our movement as a group. Having self-awareness, I think, allows us to work together productively and ethically (and in a fun way, I hope 😊).

⁵³ Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession*, 1991, 33-40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>. Page 34.

⁵⁴ Torre, M. E. "Beyond the Flat: Intergroup Contact, Intercultural Education and the Potential of Contact Zones for Research Growth and Development." *Unpublished manuscript, City University of New York* (2006). Page 2.

Queering PAR

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.

-José Esteban Muñoz⁵⁵

☐ Sophomore
☐ Junior
☐ Senior

Gender (check one):

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☒ Non-binary

Sexual Orientation (check one):

- ☐ Gay/Lesbian
- ☐ Bi
- ☐ Straight
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☒ Queer
- ☒ Asexual

Are you a teen parent (check one)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt?

Handwritten red annotations:

- "Demographic" written twice in red ink.
- "Demo. / Beh." written in red ink with an arrow pointing to the "Are you a teen parent" section.
- "are you enrolled in TPSP?" written in red ink.
- "Beh. / Exa" written in red ink at the bottom right.

⁵⁵ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press, 2009. Page 1.

On a Monday afternoon in late February, the first day back for the youth researchers after a week-long break, we sat together around the table in Linda's classroom with our now standard Domino's order (one cheese, one pepperoni and bacon, one half cheese/half pepperoni), discussing our second version of the student survey. After going over the different types of information that can be collected in a survey -- demographic, attitude, behavior, knowledge, and belief -- we went through the survey we had written in October, question by question. The second question in the demographics section asked for the respondent's gender; from our survey in the fall, we had listed the choices as "Man," "Woman," "Trans," "Prefer not to say," and "Other (please specify)." This time around, Paul asked, could we add non-binary? I said yes, of course, but my muscles clenched as I wondered what conversation would ensue. Cassidy, who had previously shown little interest in LGBTQ+ issues, asked what non-binary meant: "My favorite Youtuber has a friend who is non-binary, so I've learned a lot about that from him, but I still don't know what it means. I thought, 'I should ask Adrienne, I bet she could explain it to me.'" Paul was gesturing that she wanted to jump in, but she quickly became overwhelmed with the stress and pressure to explain such a complicated (and personal) topic. "It's ... like ... just ... we don't conform!!!!," she nearly yelled. I thanked her for sharing her interpretation and affirmed that, yes, non-binary is nonconformist. I realized that the sticky concept in this discussion was "binary," and I explained that binary means two -- "think of bicycle, bisexual" -- and the gender binary is the strict division of gender identity into two buckets, man and woman. Thus, non-binary means that a person identifies outside this strict structure. I watched as this idea sank in; Lisa's jaw actually dropped. I asked if the group would like to spend part of our next session discussing theories of gender and sexuality, and everyone nodded vigorously.

Let's Queer the Air

From the project's inception, I sought to facilitate a queer space, one in which our modes of being and researching were rooted in queer theory. It is important to note from the get-go that my intention was *not* to create a PAR project simply comprised of LGBTQ+ youth, as fun as that would be. I interpret queerness as a way of moving through the world and, in this case, effecting change in the world. A queer-identifying person, I did not inhabit queer spaces until I was a college student, where I found clubs, friend groups, and classes that affirmed my identity and challenged my conceptions of gender and sexuality. These are spaces full of possibility, care, and critique. My impetus to facilitate a PAR project rooted in queerness very much came from a personal inquiry -- can the queer spaces I inhabit now exist in places like those in which I grew up? From age 9 to 18, I lived an hour north of Waterville, in a slightly larger town with a similar population -- white, mostly working-class, and conservative. To be clear, I grew up with significant wealth and class privilege, attended a traditional and relatively well-funded school, and encountered none of the stereotypes the Alt students experienced and we researched. Still, I imagined and proposed this project with a desire to find or create these sorts of queer spaces with youth in Maine, in places that seem, on the surface, particularly unqueer, like the Alt school.

Initially, I sought to explore how the methodology of PAR is inherently queer in its subversion of power structures and knowledge production. After eight months with the youth researchers, my queering of PAR has expanded to include the possibility of curriculum and the importance of futurity, particularly *queer* futurity.⁵⁶ As a result of the critical

⁵⁶ Muñoz, 2009.

consciousness-raising work that is necessary to PAR, I have found the space particularly suited to a queer theory curriculum in ways I have not encountered in other youth work. Because the youth researchers are engaged in critical and subversive modes of thinking as they researched and critiqued community stereotypes and stigma, they interacted with introductory theories of gender, sexuality, and queerness in productive (yet unexpected) ways. In addition, I have encountered -- and then stimulated -- what I describe as sites of queer futurity, both within group dynamics and as part of the research process itself.

The term *queer* originates as a description of something different, something nonnormative. Many older people in the LGBTQ community associate the word with its use as a slur and consider it a form of personal degradation, though the word has been reclaimed, starting in the late twentieth century, to provide both a capacious category of sexuality and gender, as well as a politic that deconstructs, refuses, and reimagines. At the core of queer theory is a deconstruction of the gender binary -- that is, a troubling of the societal conflation of gender and biological sex. Judith Butler, a feminist theorist, provides a foundational approach to this deconstruction in *Gender Trouble*, a text that marks the crucial intersection of post-structuralism and feminist theory. In response to the youth researchers' keen interest in the gender binary, I chose to bring in an annotated passage from Butler, a text typically encountered only in elite academic settings. A passage from Butler's text, followed by an annotated version of the passage that we analyzed as a group at Alt, is below:

From Butler: *If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. [...] Assuming for the moment the*

stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies. [...] The presumption of a binary genders system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.⁵⁷

Annotation: There is a distinction between sex and gender. Sex may be biological, but gender is a result of culture. We say that gender is culturally constructed. Logically, gender does not always fall in line with sex. Even if we understand that there are two sexes (male and female, which doesn't account for intersex biology), there is no reason to assume that gender is binary. When we understand gender as independent of sex, gender becomes much more free, “with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one.”

Queer theory, in its deconstruction of gender and sexuality, provides a theoretical framework of uncoupling socially bound constructs. PAR practitioners are challenged to make a similar theoretical move, lent from queer theory, as they uncouple traditionally bound concepts

⁵⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

(e.g. youth and ignorance, teen pregnancy and irresponsibility, “pushed out” and unmotivated).

This mode of inquiry is queer.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Queer is a word that comes from the experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. As we’ve talked about, the gender binary that separates people into “man” or “woman” is a cultural construction, and queerness allows us to think outside the binary. It also offers us a way of thinking beyond sexuality. I think that a queer space is a space where the people inside are critical of any sort of social construct and injustice, even when the people there don’t identify as queer. In that way, our TEC space was queer. We have different genders and sexualities, but we are committed to thinking about things critically and being open to new ideas.

PAR as a queer method

When the term “queer theory” was first used in 1991 by Teresa de Lauretis, it was intended to “recast or reinvent the terms of our sexualities, to construct another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual,” though de Lauretis still intended the mode of inquiry for “male and female homosexualities.”⁵⁸ Clearly, the field has expanded, which allows me to consider queerness without queer subjects, to consider the queerness of a method, regardless of who practices this method. Patrick Dilley, in attempting to explain queer theory as a discipline, draws a distinction between queer as a quality and queer as an attribute, arguing that

⁵⁸ De Lauretis, Teresa. *Queer theory: Lesbian and gay sexualities*. Indiana Univ Pr, 1991.

queer theory takes on the latter and is subsequently interested in how sexuality is constituted through social relations.⁵⁹ This analysis of social relations and structures, though, is transferable beyond studies of sexualities; for example, queer theory can allow us to study how the stereotypes surrounding a small-town alternative education program are rooted in social relations. PAR, like queer theory, invites a critical mode of inquiry through its insistence on both challenging structures that normally go unchallenged and subverting the power structures that dictate who holds knowledge, who produces knowledge, and who receives knowledge.

PAR is a theoretical and practical framework for conducting research; it does not constitute a specific space or represent a certain group of people. Thus, to understand its queerness, we must look at its framework. To do so, I return to three of the principles of PAR proposed by Fine and Cammarota, which both inform and accurately reflect my experience facilitating and engaging in PAR. Cammarota and Fine do not define these as queer principles, but I hope to show the ways in which analyzing them through a lens of queer theory can expand their meaning.

1.) Researchers may carry various amounts of power within the site, and may be facilitated by “outsiders,” but the voices of the insiders are centered in the research design, questions, and results.

PAR prioritizes the voices of the insiders, even when outsiders have a role in the research process. Dilley notes that queer theory “inverts the notion of outsider giving voice to the insider as well as the notion of insider information being untouched by outsider information.”⁶⁰ PAR

⁵⁹ Dilley, Patrick. "Queer theory: Under construction." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 12, no. 5 (1999): 457-472. Page 459.

⁶⁰ Dilley, 1999: 460.

queerly situates the experience of the insider as knowledge itself, knowledge unknowable by the outsider (and perhaps not intended for the outsider's consumption). Queer theory itself emerged only after the gay and lesbian movement of the mid to late twentieth century, when the silenced voices and experiences of sexual minorities could be centered in academic study.

2.) The researchers "analyze power relations through multiple axes," including race, sexuality, gender, and class.

Queer theory differentiates itself from gay and lesbian studies by its recognition of the vastness of queer experiences. Queer individuals exist at the intersection of class, gender, ability... the categorization of social structures is infinite. Queer of color critique⁶¹ further explores the queer experience through the lens of race. Roderick Ferguson, a scholar in African American Studies and Gender Studies, calls for "a study of racial formations that will not oblige heteropatriarchy, an analysis of sexuality not severed from race and material relations."⁶² PAR practitioners, youth and adult, should aspire toward analysis in line with Ferguson's queer of color critique to produce the most radical, boundary-bursting research activism.

3.) The knowledge produced through research should be critical and oriented toward social changes.

Frisby and Creese, in *Feminist Community Research*, write, "all research, not just Feminist Community Research, is socially embedded knowledge generated from 'somewhere,' located in specific institutional arrangements and relations of power and privilege that structure the social

⁶¹ Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

⁶² Ferguson, 2004: 29.

world.”⁶³ Participatory action researchers reflect on those institutional arrangements. PAR, in the way that it interrogates the societal implications of research -- who does research, who is researched, who benefits from research -- approaches research in a mode similar to the mode in which queer theory approaches gender and sexuality. Queer theory asks whom and what is controlled by structures of gender and sexuality; PAR practitioners ask whom and what is controlled by structures of knowledge production.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

The ways that we have done research over the past year are queer, not because they are about LGBTQ+ issues, but because we have questioned social structures and you (the students, the ones who have experienced stereotypes) are the ones controlling the research process. We learn from queer scholars of color like Roderick Ferguson, who argued that we can not talk about racism and poverty without talking about homophobia, and vice versa. We, too, know that we cannot talk about some injustices without talking about the others -- for example, we know that stereotypes of drug-users are linked to stereotypes of low-income people.

Queer Wednesday

After our conversation about what it means to be gender-nonbinary, detailed in the opening of this chapter, I suggested that we spend the next couple of weeks in structured

⁶³ Frisby & Creese, 2011: 1.

conversation about gender and sexuality. The entire group enthusiastically agreed. Our analysis of gender stemmed from a demographic survey question (not unique to PAR), but I do not believe that any research group would open the space for a deconstruction of that question itself. Because participatory action researchers are, as Frisby and Creese say, critiquing not just knowledge but “the relations of power and privilege that structure the social world,”⁶⁴ it makes sense that we do not take for granted standard demographic questions. In planning this project, I knew that a critical consciousness-raising curriculum would be part of our research process, but I was not expecting to introduce, let alone engage in, queer theory -- trans theory, specifically, in this case -- directly with the youth researchers. However, because of the ways that PAR framework aligns with queer theory critique, the youth researchers were and are uniquely poised for entry into engagement with queer theory, a discipline so often elevated and inaccessible to those outside of academia.

I promised the group that I would spend some time in the next week talking about gender and sexuality. One of the students, intrigued and excited by my identification as “queer” (a new term for them), exclaimed, “Yay! We can have Queer Wednesday!” Thus was born #queerwednesday, a favorite hashtag of the group. As can be expected working in a school during a Maine winter, Queer Wednesday was postponed by sickness, then by snow-days. Finally, I showed up with a bag of rainbow colored goldfish and declared that the time had finally come. Even the teacher in the room cheered with excitement. Queer Wednesday followed a brief analysis of our preliminary survey results, which is not irrelevant. On this particular day, the group had read the results of the non-Alt teachers’ surveys, seeing the adjectives they used to

⁶⁴ Frisby & Creese, 2011: 1.

describe Alt students: burdened, unmotivated, struggling, discouraged, lost. The youth researchers had just recognized the connection between their experiences and a larger system of injustice that exists in the community. Such critical analysis of their own lives, unrelated to specifically queer ideas, situated our group to have a conversation about queerness with less judgment and with a greater sense of social injustice, ready to apply it to conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Queer Wednesday, along with the less structured conversations we had about queerness throughout the research process, has the added dimension of critiquing the production of knowledge within the discipline of queer theory itself. Eve Tuck, with youth researchers in New York, emphasized the importance of “theorizing back” to educational theory, challenging the role of the GED in young people’s lives.⁶⁵ I propose that PAR practitioners, even and especially youth, are capable of theorizing back to queer theory. Unlike the work of Tuck’s research group, the Alt youth researchers were not engaging with theory that considers their experience directly, but they were still working on a theoretical plane that all structures of academia are inaccessible to them. When I introduced the passage from Butler to the group, I prefaced it by saying that most people, if they ever encounter Butler, don’t do so until college, but I was confident they could read and analyze the text. Brian scoffed at me, saying “Adrienne, I’ve read War of the Worlds. It had a lot of big words. I think I can read this.” We read and talked through the text together. Our engagement with a queer curriculum is not what makes our PAR process *queer*, but it does challenge our *queerness* to align with PAR -- it makes our queerness participatory, based in critique, and able to be embodied through action.

⁶⁵ Tuck, 2009.



THE EQUALITY COALITION

Queer Wednesday was by far one of my favorite parts of this year. I think that, because of the way our research forced us to think critically about the world around us, we created space to have conversations about gender and sexuality. Those conversations are normally pretty hard to have in spaces like school, but it's important that all people -- queer or not -- can think about queerness in their own lives.

Futurities, queer and now

As the field of queer theory has grown, theorists have looked inwards, at the spaces they inhabit and what queers those spaces. While careful not to draw a dichotomy (false, of course), I want to examine the antisocial theories of Lee Edelman in contrast with the prosocial, distinctly hopeful theories of José Esteban Muñoz. Looking for queer spaces in the PAR project has aligned me with the latter conception of queerness. Edelman, in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, postures queerness as that which allows us to exist without regard for what the future holds. This antisocial take on queerness, what theorist Angela Jones refers to as “the antisocial turn in queer theory,”⁶⁶ is based on the queer individual’s -- particularly the gay/lesbian cis individual’s -- inability to reproduce. Instead of bemoaning this genealogical terminus, Edelman claims that an existence without futurity is a liberation, one which allows the queer to “insist the future stop here.”⁶⁷ What would it mean to live for ourselves, instead of for

⁶⁶ Jones, Angela. *A Critical Inquiry Into Queer Utopias*. Springer, 2013. Page 4.

⁶⁷ Edelman, Lee. *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press, 2004. Page 31.

our children, or for the Child -- the “perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmic beneficiary of every political intervention?”⁶⁸ Edelman would call this existence the queerest of existences, the existence of “sinthomosexuality,”⁶⁹ a sexuality that, without hetero reproduction, has no stake in the future. Edelman’s is a politically incorrect voice in the midst of liberal queers calling for marriage equality, support for LGBTQ+ families, and mainstream acceptance.

Reading Edelman in between meetings with the youth researchers -- students the education system has failed, who have little support and few avenues to upward mobility; teen moms who have dropped out and returned to high school after having their babies -- felt particularly jarring. I was angry at Edelman, angry at his suggestion that “queerness names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children.’”⁷⁰ That is not my queerness, I thought, and that is not the queerness of our research group. Angela Jones, too, in her introductory chapter to *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*, disputes Edelman’s antisocial worldview and provides a helpful critique: “for many people [...] have no desire to throw people off cliffs (metaphorically or literally), let poor children die, live in a void as a parasitic element of society.”⁷¹

While I don’t believe Edelman suggests such acts as a practice of queerness, I do suspect he would scoff at a youth activist research project, largely devoid of sex, being presented as a site of vibrant queerness. However, I believe that our group of youth researchers have the ability to theorize back, to present an alternate conception of queerness, one that does not doom them to the social structures that hold them to the “quagmire of the present.”

⁶⁸ Edelman, 2004: 3.

⁶⁹ Edelman, 2004: 35.

⁷⁰ Edelman, 2004: 3.

⁷¹ Jones, 2013: 11.

Instead, our PAR group's experience reflects a configuration of queerness that holds possibility, hope, and even futurity. The definition presented by José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* is one we recognized in our work of group formation, collective research, and a commitment to action: "Queerness is a structured and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."⁷² Muñoz, responding to Edelman's claim that to be future-oriented is to be Child-oriented, claims that "queerness is primarily about futurity and hope."⁷³ PAR is a practice rooted in futurity and in the ability to imagine a different way of being. In this way, I argue, PAR, regardless of its subject matter, can and should be considered a site of queerness. In the same way that practitioners of PAR ask who has access to knowledge -- and whose knowledge is seen as valid -- Muñoz questions who has access to an antirelational or antisocial theory of queerness and asserts that queers with identities at the intersection of systems of oppressions require a queerness that does not doom but instead sustains. Jones, too, scorns the exclusionary nature of antisocial queer politics, saying they "ignore at worst and neglect at best the necessity of emancipatory politics for many queers whose material conditions make embracing the negative a political privilege or luxury."⁷⁴

If queerness allows individuals to imagine a different way of being, and we have come to understand our research space at Alt to be a queer space, then we can recognize the role of imagining and futurity in our space. Cammarota and Fine call for the knowledge produced through PAR to be "critical and oriented toward social change."⁷⁵ In order for the knowledge to

⁷² Muñoz, 2009: 1.

⁷³ Muñoz, 2009: 11

⁷⁴ Jones, 2013: 4.

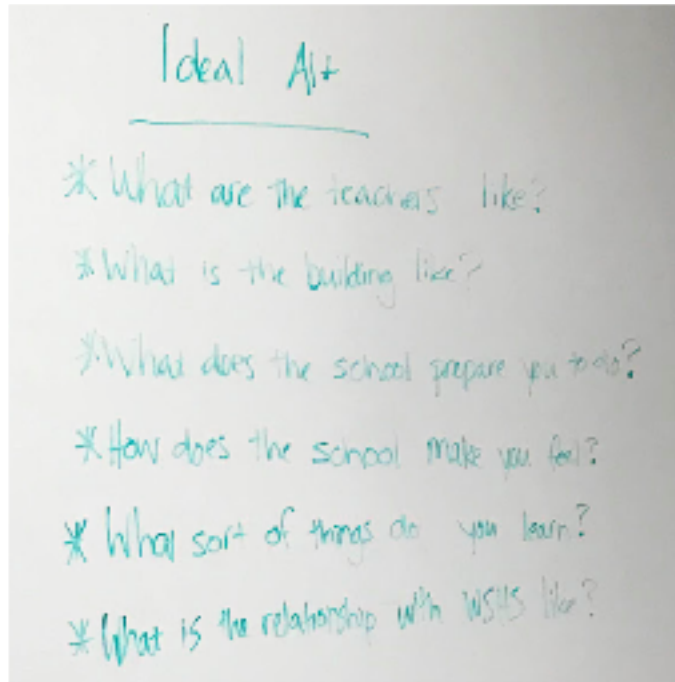
⁷⁵ Cammarota & Fine, 2008: 5-6.

be oriented toward change, it must be founded on the belief that change is possible. In many ways, I experienced the youth researchers' feelings of defeat; during our weekly check-in, at least one student would say they had no high or low point and that they were looking forward to nothing. Even at those times, though, I still sensed hope, if only because they showed up for group that day. Multiple times, students told me, "I was going to skip school today, but then I remembered we had group." I recognized a belief that change is possible in those moments and in the moments of joy, excitement, and anger we felt as a group.

This spring, I brought in an activity to group adapted from YPARHub,⁷⁶ an online resource: we had 15 cards with potential stages of the PAR process written on them. I asked the group to, in silence, put the cards in an order that makes sense to them. After they had lined up in a relatively logical pattern, I noticed that "Develop critical perspectives on 'what could be,'" a card I was particularly excited about, was thrown randomly in towards the end of the process. I asked if I could move that step towards the beginning, commenting that it is hard to make change if we are only thinking about the systems that are holding us back, and not about what it looks like to be liberated and in our ideal world. I recognized that our research process's foundations in futurity and utopian ways of being were obvious to me, but I had never named them as such. I began explicitly emphasizing the importance of imagining during group, both in conversation and in the activities I facilitated.⁷⁷ To begin, I asked that we spend half a group meeting discussing the "Ideal Alt."

⁷⁶ <https://www.dropbox.com/s/iz0h213a5edclrp/PAR%20process%20cards%20activity.pdf?dl=1>

⁷⁷ Full descriptions of activities can be viewed in "Activities" chapter.



When we started the exercise, the youth researchers were mostly naming concrete changes they would like to see in their school (better mental health support, different schedule structure, etc.) but as we kept talking, they became receptive to more utopian type thinking. I asked them, “How would you feel in this [ideal] school?,” wanting them to think less about our action steps in these exercises but rather about how it feels to exist in a totally different school environment than they’re in now. As I asked them to think more abstractly, we heard that in the Ideal Alt, students would “feel comfortable, safe, valued, smart, challenged, and like people believed in you.” At the Ideal Alt, “everyone’s equal,” we value creativity, and everyone is “fighting for a chance.” This Ideal Alt is not one to which we can map a clear path of action steps, as we try to do as part of the PAR process. However, going back to Muñoz’s initial definition of queerness -- “a structuring and educated mode of desire” -- we are able to orient toward immediate action in our work in PAR precisely because we can simultaneously desire a future that we don’t yet know the way toward. When I asked students if they thought they would

confront injustice now that they've worked in TEC, Kevin responded, "I know that society won't change for me so I will just keep doing what I do. I stand up for what I think is right and I don't care about what anyone else says."

One reading of Kevin's response might be that she subscribes to Edelman's definition of queerness, that she has recognized that her society is not built for her so she can focus on her own self. However, knowing Kevin, I recognize her assertion that there is a "right" that is worth standing up for, even if "society won't change." This "right" is, I believe, the result of utopian thinking, implicit or explicit. There is something beyond the quagmire of biased school systems, overstretched case managers, and inadequate mental health resources. Something worth standing up for.

A few weeks later, we returned to our conception of the Ideal Alt with an activity called "Object from the Future," adapted from María Elena Torre's activity of the same name. Warning the group that I was about to ask them to do something wacky, I asked us to close our eyes and imagine, for thirty seconds, the school we had dreamt about earlier in the semester. We named its attributes, the way it made us feel. Then, I explained that we were archaeologists from the year 3050 and that the Ideal Alt has already come and gone. As archaeologists, we had discovered the site of the Ideal Alt, and we were finding artifacts from the school. I asked the students, in groups of four, to imagine what artifacts might be left behind from this utopian vision, using words and images to present them.



Imagining an artifact from the “Ideal Alt”

One group, particularly intrigued by the activity, imagined a hovering workstation that would serve as a classroom. The station incorporated screens, writing, and audio to fit different styles of learning. There were options for collaborative or individual work with the implementation within the workspace, and its donut-shaped design allowed for easy access to a teacher figure, as well as the possibility of students leading activities and presentations. Finally, to implement the Ideal Alt’s perfect mental health resources, the hovering station offered both aroma and noise therapy, allowing its users to work with white noise or music and scents that calmed their anxiety. This activity, while not explicitly queer in its content, asked the students to both reimagine time and possibility. Muñoz argues that queerness is horizon, which “rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Edelman, 2009: 32.

The Ideal Alt is horizon; the students know they are never going to attain it, but to spend our time dreaming on it, and then reflecting on it, particularly when our action research is based in incremental change, is queer. Our research bends to what Muñoz calls “straight time’s gravitational pull,”⁷⁹ forcing us to think about what changes we can make at Alt in the time period we have as a group, or in the youth researchers’ time as students there. Especially in a space that is so focused on linear progress (“Work hard, be kind, graduate”), making the space for futurity-based thinking introduces “ecstatic time” into our group’s mode of being. Muñoz proposes ecstatic time, in opposition to straight time, “at the moment one feels ecstasy,” which can be in moments of sexual pleasure, but also “during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present, or future.”⁸⁰ I asked Lucius why we were spending our time doing an activity -- Object from the Future -- that wouldn’t lead to any practical research or action steps, and he replied, without hesitation, “Because it’s what we want.”

Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*, explores queer futurity and utopianism within the context of sexual experiences and the queer aesthetic (i.e. art). Both, while filled with beautiful possibility, are not accessible to our PAR space, nor to most PAR spaces. Our group meets in an art room, but the intellectualism and classism of art institutions, largely, make such art analysis seem distant and inaccessible. Meanwhile, sexualities in our group, while not silenced in the Victorian sense of Foucault,⁸¹ are not explicitly discussed, both because I would be asked to leave the school immediately and also -- and more importantly -- because I want to stress the queerness of

⁷⁹ Edelman, 2009: 32.

⁸⁰ Edelman, 2009: 32.

⁸¹ Foucault, Michel. "The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I." *Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage* (1990).

space that is not bound to sexuality, an aspiration starkly in refusal of Edelman's antisocial, erotic *jouissance*-based queer. Without dismissing the possibility for the youth researchers to experience queer futurity and ecstatic time in the ways Muñoz proposes, I note that ecstatic time was felt in moments of our research and group development this year, whether it was Lucius and Brian facing off in a no laughing contest (Lucius won) or designing surveys with a sense of purpose and urgency. It is recognizing and fostering the sites of queer futurity in our research space that makes it feel the most queer to me.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

I think what was particularly special about TEC was our ability to think about the future, to be really hopefully and idealistic, even when reality wasn't changing around us. José Esteban Muñoz is a scholar who writes about this idea of "queer futurity," which is the ability to free ourselves from the "quagmire of the present" -- all of the unfair systems that you deal with (for example, the stereotypes that we researched). During our time researching, I wanted us to spend time creating moments of futurity, which is why we did the "Ideal Alt" and "Object from the Future" activities. Even though those activities weren't directly contributing to our research and action steps, they reminded us of what could be. That, to me, is queer.

Futurity, though, does not equate to future, at least not in a hopeful or utopian sense. Two months before the end of the school year, one student dropped out of Alt. After learning the news

at group and chatting with the student on Facebook, I returned to the library to work on this chapter, my belief in the power of queer futurity diminished. What does it matter that I teach queer curriculum and imagine utopias with the students if social structures of inequity continue to exert their destructive power on the lives of the youth researchers? With time, though, I recognized that the queerness of a space is not analogous to the happiness or the joy of the space. Rather, the queerness in the space is the possibility to feel futurity while not needing to tie those feelings to the future. The queerness allows us to care for each other without insisting on a specific or progress-oriented future for each other.

Edelman is not wrong; queerness allows us to recognize momentary passion without implicating it with a future of progress. On a good day, in our queer space, we can imagine an Ideal Alt and then work together to write a survey to study inequality in school. But queer spaces have bad days too, days where moments of realness and emotion do not lead to work that will be recognized outside of our classroom.

Queer spaces do, indeed, exist in places like my hometown.



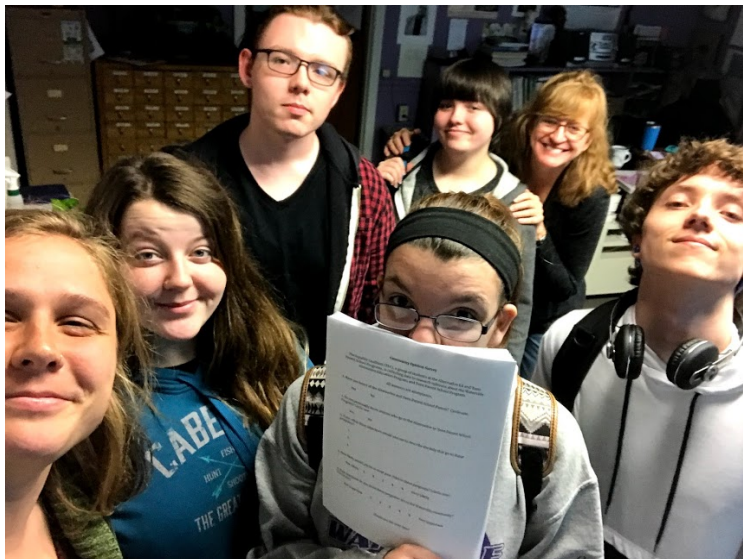
Queerness is not always hopeful, though. I think it would be silly to say that, by thinking about queer spaces and research, we are getting rid of all the things that make it hard for you to succeed at Alt. However, I do think that it allows us to care for each other in important ways. It doesn't actually matter to me if you're really good at survey writing, or

even if you are passing your classes. What matters to me is that you feel safe, comfortable, and valued in our space together. I think that's the most important work.

There Will Always Be Shoplifting At Macy's:
The Precarious Life of PAR

Feminists have challenged masculinist approaches to ethics for their minimalist notions of 'do no harm' to include a discussion of “do some good” with the research.

-Colleen Reid, et al.⁸²



⁸² Reid, C., et al., 2007: 206.

PAR is intensely emotional work. Throughout the year, I had moments where I doubted the entire project, unsure of its ethics, relationally and within the academy. My proposed analysis of the project included chapters on the application of queer and feminist theory, but writing just those sections seemed disingenuous. If I ask the youth researchers to critique their process of research, then I too must critique my process of analysis. The sections below trace and reflect on the messiness, tensions, and anxieties of my experience conducting PAR.

Precarity of PAR

In January 2018, I attended a five-day intensive institute at the City University of New York, the Critical PAR Institute, led by PAR superstars Madeline Fox, María Elena Torres, and Michelle Fine. Over the course of the week, the attendees -- scholars, activists, and community organizers from across the country and globe -- workshoped their PAR projects, learned from New York community researchers, and engaged in deep discussion about participatory research and its place in the academy. One afternoon, during a discussion focused on the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I was reminded of my experience explaining PAR to Colby's IRB.

During our class's Activism for Access project in spring 2016, we were told by the IRB that our project, situated in a high school classroom, wasn't real research and therefore did not need IRB approval. This year, I submitted the project to and was approved by the IRB, though not without confusion. The review process is structured such that applying projects have clearly defined researchers and research subjects. I was asked, "Who is doing the research, you or the students?" I ultimately posited myself as the researcher, with the students' research project as the *subject* of my research -- a configuration not reflective of PAR's collaborative nature -- to reduce

the risk of not being approved by the IRB. To clarify, I appreciate the origins of the IRB in preventing harm to disenfranchised research subjects (I will further unpack the research principle of *do no harm* in the following section, “Do Some Good”), but in the process of conducting PAR in the academy, the IRB can function to regulate the process in unproductive and even counterproductive ways.

The conversation around the IRB at PAR Institute helped me see that the dissonance I felt was not unique; scholar activists across the country were finding ways to appease or altogether avoid the IRB at their institutions to conduct ethical PAR work. After the group discussion, I approached Michelle Fine (cited numerous times throughout these chapters) and asked if she thought PAR would ever have a place in the academy. Her response surprised me: “There will always be shoplifting at Macy’s.” The midtown Macy’s, adorned with a sign declaring it was the “largest store in the world,” was just down the block from CUNY, and no doubt it had its fair share of shoplifters. I pushed further -- “so is the academy like Macy’s, and PAR practitioners are the shoplifters?” She responded yes; so long as the academy continued to be a system built on inequity and oppression (e.g. whiteness, patriarchy), PAR would be shoplifting. Then Michelle told me that PAR lives in precarity and that it *must* live in precarity. PAR work is inherently dynamic, unpredictable, and unmanageable. Thus, it fails to live neatly within academic forms of research and knowledge production.

To help me understand the effects of existence in precarity (my immediate reaction to Michelle’s comment was a deep sense of pessimism), I turn again to queer theory, this time to J. Mark Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam examines the subject of failure within queer art, arguing that queerness appears as failure within a heteronormative system and that,

instead of contesting the failure, queer art lives within the space of failure. He writes, referring to Edelman's theories of queer futurity that I analyzed in the last chapter, "The queer subject has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, and to unintelligibility, and instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition, [Edelman] proposes that we embrace the negativity that we anyway structurally represent."⁸³ PAR, similarly, must embrace its precarity, its failure to be recognized as "legitimate" research. Again, we see PAR's queerness, this time in its positionality.



"Legitimate" research?

PAR fails in what are considered rigorous academic spaces -- even those spaces that allow for critical theory informed by queer failure and other experiences of oppression -- because it demands an unsettling of the academic process. At times, the action component of PAR might be the refusal of research itself. Tuck and Yang, in *R-Words: Refusing Research*,⁸⁴ present a theoretical framework to the refusal of research, arguing that research is not inherently good.

⁸³ Halberstam, Judith. *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press, 2011. Page 106.

⁸⁴ Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "R-words: Refusing research." *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (2014): 223-248.

Moreover, they propose that “there are some forms of knowledge the academy does not deserve.”

⁸⁵ This shocking suggestion is made shocking, Tuck and Yang suggest, because “academic knowledge is particular and privileged, yet disguises itself as universal and common.”⁸⁶ The PAR project at Alt has encompassed significant knowledge and countless narratives, all of which are constitutive of our research experience, but not all of which is knowledge that I bring to this thesis for academic consumption. PAR, with a capaciousness of care, with liberating spaces, does not and *cannot* produce knowledge wholly for academic purposes. For that reason, it will continue to fail and live in precarity, happily.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

We think of failure as bad all the time, but often people call “bad” what they can’t understand or control. Researchers at places like Colby might not consider our work real “research,” since it is done by kids. Our work is precarious, meaning that it is uncertain and at risk to fail. However, I think it is this failure to fit the expectations of academic institutions that makes our work so revolutionary and special. We do this work because it is important to us, to our lives, and to our community.

Do Some Good

Earlier, I wrote that IRB processes hold the potential to be unproductive and even counterproductive in the effort to “do no harm.” Colleen Reid and her co-researchers explore the

⁸⁵ Tuck & Yang, 2014: 232.

⁸⁶ Tuck & Yang, 2014: 235.

ethics of conducting feminist PAR in their paper “Living in Ethical Agreement: Negotiating Confidentiality and Harm in Feminist Participatory Action Research.”⁸⁷ The authors argue that research ethical boards (or IRBs) must shift toward decisions that are “co-created, contextual, and transparent.”⁸⁸ Further, they propose, feminist research must challenge “masculinist approaches to ethics for their minimalist notions of ‘do no harm’ to include a discussion of ‘do some good’ with the research.”⁸⁹ To operate under the goal of doing no harm is to assume that harm has not already been done to research subjects -- people and communities -- through systems of disenfranchisement at the hands of institutions in power, at times the academy. Research, particularly research on injustice, conducted without an explicit and *active* commitment to social justice is not capable of “doing no harm,” even if its methodologies are approved by the IRB.

Consider the context and history of my involvement at the Alt and TPSP. I enter the school space as a wealthy student from Colby, a powerful institution whose 200 year old relationship with Waterville currently holds a deep, seemingly irreparable economic and social divide. The Colby campus from many perspectives seems elitist, inaccessible, and privileged to the rest of the Waterville community. The economic disparities between the College and much of the Waterville population are so profound and so deeply rooted in systems of inequality that a collaborative research project would not have been possible without an intention to do some good. These past two years, particularly, the time period during which I was planning and facilitating the PAR project, Colby has committed to often ostentatious displays of capital,

⁸⁷ Reid et al., 2004.

⁸⁸ Reid et al., 2004: 206.

⁸⁹ Reid et al., 2004: 206.

announcing a \$25 million gift toward global experiences in spring 2017⁹⁰ and a college-wide campaign to raise \$750 million the following fall.⁹¹ Meanwhile, my meetings at the Alt school were centered around the possibility that the program would have its entire funding cut from the city's school budget. The disparity was obvious, but the path to do PAR with "no harm" was not so clear.

Reid and her co-researchers argue that "in order to confront the hegemonies of gender, race, and class relations," transfers of power -- "from researcher to participants, from academia to the community" -- "must also flow through the ethical agreements that are reached."⁹² I wanted the project at Alt to exist within ethical agreements, as Reid and co-authors suggest. Throughout the year, our group aspired toward a radical transparency, not only in our research content but also in our decision making. I was upfront with the youth researchers about my stake in the project from the get-go, explaining that I was getting credit and using this project as my senior thesis. I was similarly transparent about what I was writing, at times asking them questions explicitly for topics I was tackling in my analysis, such as trust and agency. We had conversations in group about the students' anonymity in my academic work. For example, many students wanted me to use their real names, but, if they were under 18, they would need parental permission. Our solution was to have the youth researchers choose their pseudonyms (hence the at-times silly and amazingly gender-bending names throughout). I was transparent about compensation, confidentiality, and budget; as a result, we operated in ethical agreement. These relational transfers of power are the result of feminist reflexivity in PAR work.

⁹⁰<http://www.colby.edu/news/2017/04/20/gift-of-25-million-to-colby-creates-new-model-for-liberal-arts-and-guarantees-global-experiences/>

⁹¹<http://www.colby.edu/news/2017/10/20/colby-launches-historic-campaign-to-support-transformational-education-innovative-initiatives/>

⁹² Reid et al., 2004: 206.

Relational transfers of power are not enough, though. These transfers of power must also flow in response to the structural inequality that shapes the hegemonies, even taking the form of material wealth transfer. Feminist community research across wealth disparity cannot exist without some sort of material transfers of power. In no way do I believe this project even came near radical wealth transfer, but, with this framework in mind, I budgeted for compensation (albeit, nominal) for the researchers and a substantial donation to Alt and TPSP, the stipulations of which were decided with the youth researchers. In addition, it was important to use access to Colby funds to purchase substantive food for our group meetings, including fresh fruit, carrot and hummus, and -- of course -- Domino's pizza.

These material transfers within PAR work, and feminist community research more broadly, should not be dismissed as logistical or operational. Instead, I believe they are a key element of a feminist ethic when operating within academia, particularly within wealthy academic institutions.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

A lot of research is done with the goal of "doing no harm." However, I think that researchers are aiming too low. In our pursuit of knowledge, we should also be aiming to "do some good." In our relationship, specifically, I was very aware of how much wealth (including money) Colby has, and it was important to me that I treated you with respect and that I used Colby's resources to do so. I gave you the gift cards, arranged the donation for the school, and brought in snacks because I believe that people with more wealth, when

aiming to do feminist work, must be committed to material transfers of power. Basically, if we want to do good work, it's important that we trust one another. Gaining that trust requires an awareness of power imbalance and then actually doing something to correct that imbalance.

Theory, Interrupted

From my field journal, October 2017:

I'm aware of this constant motion I have been in over the past two months, moving rapidly from elevated theory to sometimes frustratingly simple practice, an almost slamming. The slamming results in frustration, but, also, every time I slam from theory to practice to the other, I see things slightly differently. I've moved past the ignorant anti-intellectualism I practiced for a short period during the proposal of my project, but I am still not able to decipher how exactly theory and practice live in harmony, how to tear away the structure of classism/elitism of theory to get its value and simultaneously wrench practice from its high horse of inclusion and authenticity. I think, in some ways, I am inhabiting this space between WGSS and ED, and each is exerting its pull on me, resulting in the slamming.

This excerpt illustrates the mindset I held in the proposal and early implementation of this project: that queer theory and feminist praxis exist on separate poles of my academic experience, and that I needed to bridge the space between somehow. My experience facilitating PAR, though, has led me to believe that, as all dichotomies are false dichotomies, this construction can -- and should -- be deconstructed, but the process of deconstruction is not so simple. Moreover, my

attempt (and even failure) at deconstruction -- a process I outline below -- reveals what structures hold theory and practice apart.

Aiming to explore the juncture of PAR and queer theory, I considered two possible modes of inquiry: analyzing PAR through a lens of queer theory, or analyzing queer theory production through a framework of PAR. As the previous chapter (Queering PAR) shows, I settled on the former, though not without significant inquiry into the latter, which warrants unpacking. This inquiry, and the tension it produced, threw into sharp relief issues of legitimate research and theory within the academy. Attempting to find a way to bring queer theory explicitly into the space of our PAR project at Alt, I considered bringing theoretical texts into group and facilitating a response to them, attempting what I will call participatory action theory production (PATP).

My theory of PATP is built from Eve Tuck's writing on "theorizing back," a concept she produced along with her CREDD researchers.⁹³ Tuck calls theorizing back a "sister component in the larger decolonizing project"⁹⁴ of researching back, the dialectical result of PAR by marginalized communities. Tuck unsettles academic notions of who (the whitestream) is qualified to produce theory, arguing that those voices outside the whitestream are construed as "experiential and emotional."⁹⁵ Tuck and her co-researchers contested educational theory on school pushout and the value of the GED through their research on "the lived value of the GED credential."⁹⁶ Through their research design, which contested representations of GED-seekers as "nihilistic, self-destructive, unmotivated, and dull," the CREDD researchers provide a way "in which knowing [and] lived value can be theorized."⁹⁷ Tuck's co-researchers are theorizing back

⁹³ Tuck, 2009: 112.

⁹⁴ Tuck, 2009: 112.

⁹⁵ Tuck, 2009: 112.

⁹⁶ Tuck, 2009: 113.

⁹⁷ Tuck, 2009: 123.

in direct opposition to theory *about* them, presenting a distinction between their “theorizing back” and the PATP I am proposing.

The queer theory I was attempting to understand through and around PAR -- theory about gender binary deconstruction and queer futurities -- was not written toward the students at Alt, per say, which made it difficult for them to theorize *back*. The directionality was not so obvious when engaging the Alt youth researchers with queer theory. I was asking the students to engage with theory not about them and not for them. Our discussions of futurity, as well as our activities that I developed through queer theory, took place with queer students, straight students, and questioning students. Queer theory is written by and about queer bodies, but not all queer people (like those at Alt, or their peers) have access to it. I aspired, in this messy zone of elevated theory, various student identities, and very concrete conversations about community stereotypes, to facilitate a process of theorizing that was relevant to the students, was accessible to them, and that was co-constructed *by* them. Largely, this project failed. While we did manage to explore, together, how moments of futurity are relevant to our existence, we did not deeply engage with theory or focus our energy on creating theory, at least in a way intelligible or meaningful to the academy.

Undeniably, our lack of significant theoretical work was a result of my refusal to work outside the frameworks of PAR -- following ethics of collaboration, accessibility, orientation around and through the insiders -- when studying the juncture of queer theory and PAR. Aware of my academic and structural privilege relative to my co-researchers, I would not theorize *on* them. hooks writes, “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this

function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing toward this end.”⁹⁸ I could theorize on the PAR process and *with* my co-researchers about their lived experience in ways that were healing, liberatory, and revolutionary. Ultimately, then, the project had to live within an educational program.

In this grappling and tension, I did experience a collapse of the theory/praxis dichotomy I had feared, which gave me hope. Simultaneously, though, I felt the institutional structures -- of departmental divisions, of academic requirements -- that reinforced the dichotomy, ultimately preventing our group from engaging deeply with queer theory. Given my academic and temporal constraints, I shifted my mode of inquiry, choosing to analyze the PAR process through a lens of queer theory. I was disappointed, surely, but I believe the real implications lay beyond the bounds of academia and theoretical contributions. Queer critique is a way of knowing the world that is much more freeing, much more open. If we cannot find ways to make queer theory relevant to spaces like that of the Alt PAR group, then we lose some of the radical possibility of queer theory.

TEC.

THE EQUALITY COALITION

Theory is the system of ideas used to explain something. In my case, I take classes about queer and feminist theory, in which we try to understand ideas of gender, sexuality, and social inequity. Discussions of theory tend to be limited to spaces of higher education, spaces that not everyone has access to. (College is expensive! The application process is confusing! Public schools across America are not well funded and don't prepare students

⁹⁸ hooks, 1994: 61

for critical conversations in theory!) So, I think it's important that we find ways to talk about theory in spaces like Alt because, ultimately, understanding critical theory is so freeing, and it makes the world so much more open. I want us all to experience that together.

“I’d say we can at least cause people to think.”

Reflections on PAR



The following is a conversation amongst me and the Alt youth researchers about our work this year and what is to come. I have edited for length and clarity, but it is nearly a verbatim transcript of the student voices.

Adrienne: What do you like about the group?

Cassidy: I like that it's one big family, that we all get along with each other.

Ellie: I like how we talk about things that we don't in regular classes, you know what I mean? Like problems, instead of irrelevant things that happened so many years ago. We talk about stuff today and the future.

Jay: Problems we're living in.

Mark: I just like the group. I like being able to talk. It's like counseling but not counseling.

Cassidy: I just like hearing about, trying to come up with problems that we can solve within the community, within the school.

Adrienne: Did you have a place to talk about those problems before you were here?

Cassidy: No.

Cheyenne: Nothing was done.

Cheyenne: If you try to talk about this stuff in class, they're like "It's class, drop it, stop talking."

Paul: I feel like whenever we talk about the problems, we're kind of told to, like, shut up about it. Like, I don't know, it just seems like the teachers just don't want to talk

about it. Like, not everyone thinks like that. But, like, you're a student and you literally hear it [the stereotypes].

Adrienne: Do you feel like this group is capable of changing anything?

Cassidy: I mean, when we really put our minds to it. There's some days when we're in here and we get completely sidetracked, but the days that we actually try to get things done...

Cheyenne: Yeah, we cranked out last class.

Lucius: I'd say we can at least cause people to think.

Adrienne: What does it look like to make change?

Lucius: Different, 'cuz it's changed.

Cheyenne: Reallllly, Lucius??!!

Lucius: That's all I have.

Cassidy: To me, it's seeing a difference in the community itself.

Mark: Maybe to alter something in a way that people know that it's altered. I don't know, 'cuz change can be bad, too. It's really hard to describe it.

Lucius: Changing the thoughts of others, that's change to me. Be it bad or good.

Adrienne: What kind of change are we trying to make?

Lucius: Positive.

Adrienne: So we're trying to change mindsets?

Cheyenne: Their outlooks.

Adrienne: What's hard about that?

Cassidy: People, if they don't want to change their mind, they're not going to change their mind.

Cheyenne: People, they hear something bad, and that just repeats... it's bad it's bad it's bad. If they hear something good, who knows?

Lucius: Like Cassidy said, you can't really change someone who doesn't want to be changed.

Adrienne: What does it feel like to research something that affects your personal life so much?

Lucius: It feels good.

Cassidy: I think researching it makes you want to put your heart into it more.

Lucius: Oh, and it's something that we can all actually relate to, unlike, like, what the contents of a cell are.

Autumn: Makes you want to be more involved in it.

Cassidy: It's like you're researching your family tree. You want to find out more about who you are.

Adrienne: What does research mean to you?

Autumn: Finding out information about the subject you're researching about.

Adrienne: what's the purpose of doing that?

Autumn: I'd say knowledge.

Lucius: Finding information to form your own opinion. That's what research is to me.

Cheyenne: I think the people most important in this group are -- who's going to be here for more than one year? Us seniors, we did what we could do.

Cassidy: You guys will make the difference.

Adrienne: We know that change takes a long time.

Cheyenne: You guys gotta pick it up and keep going. The difference isn't going to be me.

Lucius: I think if we're going to keep this going for a while, we should take in, like freshmen, so they can keep the work going.

Paul: it just sucks that it's gonna take a while, cuz in the meantime we gotta deal with this. Like for me, I have another three years to have to deal with stereotypes and crappy food.

Cassidy: What Cheyenne is saying is that you have to keep it going. Freshman that come in next year. You gotta give them the feeling that they can be part of something much bigger than being a solo person. Cuz one person can make a difference, but there's a whole lotta people in here.

Lucius: Yeah, we're a pretty good team of people.

Adrienne: What do you want people to know?

Cheyenne: I mean for me, this is something that my child might be in eventually. For you guys it's different, because you don't have kids, but for me, well Ellie you know, but eventually our kids might have to come to a school like this.

Cassidy: That we've come a long way. That when we started we really didn't have a basic idea of what's going on in the community. Or at least I didn't anyway. And now that it's toward the end of the year, I know for sure that we're making a difference.

In the spirit of PAR, I decided to forego a traditional conclusion or reflection on the youth voices. I believe those voices are better left alone, granted the gravity and power they deserve. Instead, I will ask myself the same questions I asked my co-researchers. These responses are somewhat for you, the academic reader, but they are mostly for you, the TEC students. I want to make sure you all know how much this year has meant to me, what this work has done to me.

What do you like about the group? I like that the group has held me as much as I hope I have held it. I like that I can be honest and vulnerable when we do our check-ins, and that you actually know what is happening in my life. I like how you all made fun of me constantly, never letting me take myself too seriously. I like the space we made together.

Did you have a place to talk about those problems before group? I've had many places to discuss and organize social justice before, but this was the first time I felt such a strong sense of coalition, especially between people from many different backgrounds. And, in truth, I've never experienced the sort of stereotypes and stigma we confronted this year. It hurt my heart to know that you all have to put up with this judgment, on top of whatever else you have going on in your life. I am forever grateful that you let me into your school space and were so vulnerable with me.

Do you feel like this group is capable of changing anything? Abso-friggin-lutely. I think that we have changed the perspective of every person we surveyed and every person we presented to. But much more importantly than that, I think we ourselves changed because of this group. I watched new friendships form, I watched some of you

gain newfound confidence, and I watched you gain new skills. I believe we became better change-makers.

What does it look like to make change? I think change looks like a series of visible moments alongside a deep, slow shift in thinking. I think it's crucial to focus on both of these movements because neither is genuine if it's not influencing the other. For example, changing the mindset of community regarding the Alt and TPSP will be a long, slow shift, and it will require folks confronting the systems of thought they operate under. It won't change until people also confront their assumptions about poverty, race, sexuality, and ability. We focus on that shift by confronting our own biases and then carrying those conversations to our families and friends. Meanwhile, we can also focus on those visible moments, the changes in policies and representations. These actions help shift mindsets, and shifted mindsets make our actions easier.

What kind of change are we trying to make? Both policy/material gains and a shift in the way people think!

What do you want people to know? I want people to know that the most beautiful moments of our PAR project were not in the big things -- the presentation at Colby or the creation of our survey reports -- but rather were in the super ordinary, middle-of-the-week moments. I want them to know that you can apply the principles of PAR anywhere, with anyone, in any way that works for you. When it comes down to it, we all contain infinite possibility within us; I believe PAR makes room for some of that possibility to come to life.

Appendix



Appendix Items

Fall Survey Draft

Fall Survey (Final)

Fall Survey Results

Spring Student Survey

Spring Teacher Survey

Spring Community Survey

Spring Survey Results

Types of Communication Handout

PAR Intro & Reflection Handout

Queer Wednesday Handout

Types of Surveys Handout

PAR Process Steps

What's Not Fair About It? Handout

Grade:

- ☐ First year
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Other: _____

Gender:

- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Sexual Orientation:

- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Bi
- ☐ Gay/Lesbian
- ☐ Straight
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Are you a teen parent?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Questions:

What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt?

OPTIONS?

Why did you choose to transfer to Alt (check all that apply):

- ☐ Anxiety and/or Depression
- ☐ Other mental illness
- ☐ Pregnancy
- ☐ Bullying
- ☐ Smaller school size

☐ Less challenging academics

☐ Other (please elaborate): _____

Whom have you heard stereotypes from?

OPTIONS?

What effect has the Alt school had on you, positive or negative?

Please respond in the space below. No need for complete sentences.

Survey for SWAP group
All answers are anonymous.

Grade Level (*check one*):

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Gender (*check one*):

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Sexual Orientation (*check one*):

- ☐ Gay/Lesbian
- ☐ Bi
- ☐ Straight
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Are you a teen parent (*check one*)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt?
(*Please list or write in the space below.*)

Survey continues on backside.

Whom have you heard stereotypes from ?

(Check as many as you would like.)

- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Other family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Alt students
- ☐ Non-Alt students
- ☐ Alt teachers
- ☐ Non-Alt teachers
- ☐ Other (please specify):_____

Why did you choose to come to Alt?

(Check as many as you would like.)

- ☐ Anxiety and/or Depression
- ☐ Other mental illness
- ☐ Pregnancy
- ☐ Bullying
- ☐ Smaller school size
- ☐ Less challenging academics
- ☐ More academic support
- ☐ Other (please specify):_____

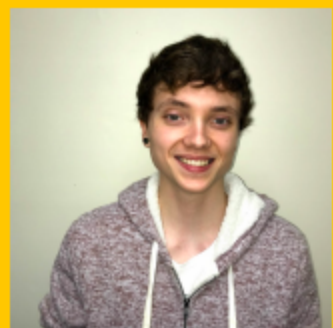
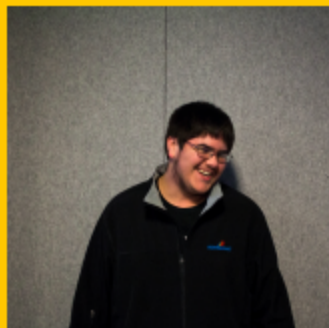
What effect has the Alt school had on you, positive or negative?

(Please list or write in the space below.)

Thank you for your participation!
If you have any questions, please see SWAP group members.



**TALKING BACK:
STEREOTYPES AT THE
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL**

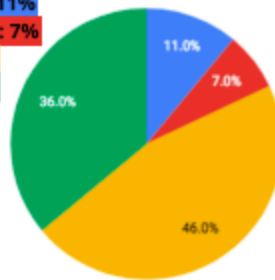


SURVEY RESULTS

We distributed a survey to all the students at the Alternative Education Program in October 2017 and received 28 back, about 56% of the student population. Our main findings were that most students are hearing serious negative stereotypes about Alt and that the stereotypes are coming from non-Alt students and teachers. Our results follow:

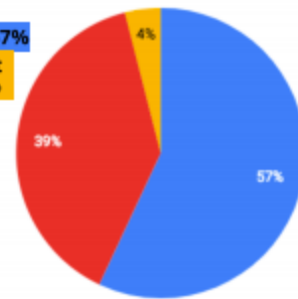
Grade Level

Freshman: 11%
Sophomore: 7%
Junior: 46%
Senior: 36%



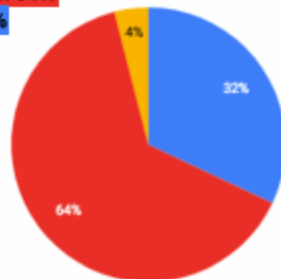
Gender

Man: 39%
Woman: 57%
Prefer not to say: 4%



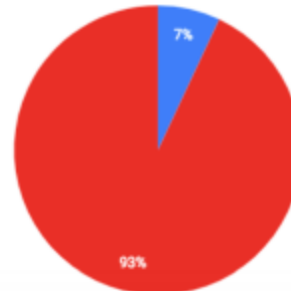
Sexual Orientation

Heterosexual: 64%
Bisexual: 32%
Other: 4%



Are you a teen parent?

No: 93%
Yes: 7%



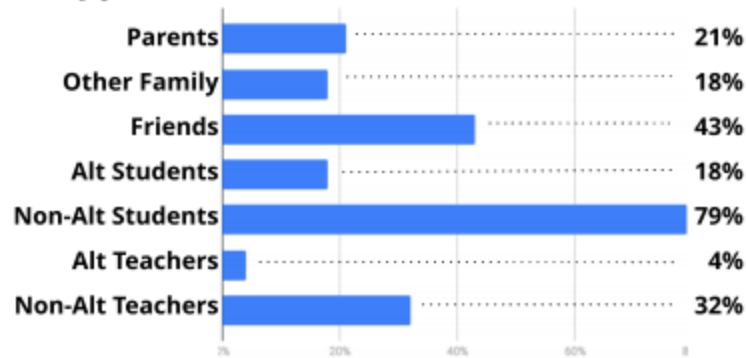
E.M.

What stereotypes have you

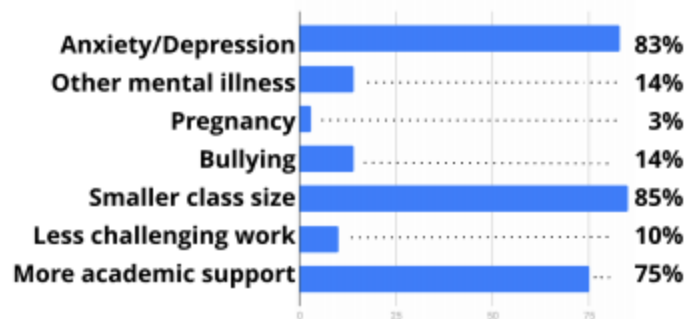
heard about Alt? *bold font indicates recurring stereotype

*Druggies, Troublemakers, Drop-outs, Teen Parents, Stoners, Hicks, Potheads, **Bad Kids**, Jail Kids, **Dumb**, Easy, Weird, Out of Control, Troubled, Criminal, Lazy*

Where have you heard these stereotypes from?



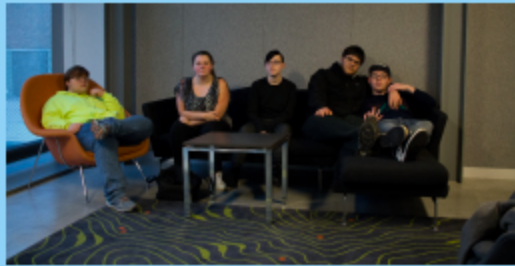
Why did you apply to Alt?



INFO

Contact us:
AltEdEM@gmail.com

Who are we?



We are: Wyatt, Lucas, Jessica, Summer, Carson, Taliya, Taniesha, Emily, Jalynn, Jack, Abigail, Adrienne, and Angel

EM is a group of students at the Waterville Alternative High School who meet regularly to address social and school issues such as stereotypes at the Alternative, the LGBT+ community, women's rights, racism, etc. EM is also an emotional support group and a safe space for the members while looking for solutions to issues we believe are important. We are different from normal school groups as most are lead by a teacher, but we are guided by a college student who views all of our thoughts and opinions as equal. We conduct surveys created by us to gather the thoughts and opinions of the rest of the Alternative students in order to help us make better solutions to the problems at the Alternative.

What's next?

Suggestions for next steps:

- Show the public we are different than their stereotypes
- Have speakers from the Alt come and talk at community events
- Pamphlets about the Alternative handed to Junior and Senior high school students
- Make a better Alternative School website (Easier to find)
- Meeting with Alt staff and students to address stereotypes
- Informational posters about the Alt at Junior and Senior high schools
- Better visibility (e.g. school sign on Silver St.)

We will continue to research the effects of negative stereotypes in our community and take steps to change the narrative.



Alternative Ed and Teen Parent School Program Stereotype Survey

The Equality Coalition (TEC) is collecting data to research negative stereotypes about our school. All answers are anonymous.

Grade Level (choose one)

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Gender (check one)

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Trans
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other...

Sexual Orientation (check one)

- ☐ Gay/Lesbian
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Straight
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other...

Are you enrolled in the Teen Parent School Program?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What stereotypes have you encountered about students at Alt and TPSP? *
(Check all that apply)

- ☐ "Druggies"
- ☐ "Troublemakers"
- ☐ "Drop-outs"
- ☐ "Lazy"
- ☐ "Sluts"
- ☐ "Bad Kids"
- ☐ "Juveniles" [delinquents]
- ☐ Other...

Whom have you heard stereotypes from? (Check all that apply) *

- ☐ Parents
- ☐ Other family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Alt Students
- ☐ Non-Alt Students
- ☐ Alt teachers
- ☐ Non-Alt teachers
- ☐ Other...

What do you want people to know about the Alt School and TPSP? *

Long answer text

What do you want people to know about you as an Alt/TPSP student? *

Long answer text

Waterville Alternative Education Program and Teen Parent School Program Opinion Survey

The Equality Coalition (TEC), a group of students at the Alternative Ed and Teen Parent School Programs, is collecting data to research opinions about the Waterville Alternative Education Program and Teen Parent School Program. All answers are anonymous.

* Required

What is your role? *

- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Staff

How long have you worked in the Waterville school system?

Your answer

If you are a teacher, what grade(s) do you teach?

Your answer

Do you know any students who are or have been enrolled in the Waterville Alternative Education Program (Alt) and/or Teen Parent School Program (TPSP)? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What three adjectives would you use to describe the students at the Alt and TPSP? (Please write three adjectives below.) *

Your answer

How likely are you to recommend a student to apply to Alt / TPSP? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all likely	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very likely

How important do you think the Alt / TPSP is to the Waterville School District? *

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very important

Why do you think students attend the Alt /TPSP? (Check all that apply) *

☐ Anxiety/Depression

☐ Other mental illness

☐ Pregnancy

☐ Bullying

☐ Smaller class size

☐ Less challenging work

☐ More academic support

☐ Other: _____

Is there anything else you want us to know about your experience with the Alt and TPSP?

Your answer

Community Opinion Survey

The Equality Coalition (TEC), a group of students at the Alternative Ed and Teen Parent School Programs, is collecting data to research opinions about the Waterville Alternative Education Program and Teen Parent School Program.

All answers are anonymous.

1. Have you heard of the Alternative and Teen Parent School Parent? Circle one:

Yes

No

2. Do you personally know anyone who goes to the Alternative or Teen Parent School Program? Circle one:

Yes

No

3. If yes, what three adjectives would you use to describe the kids that go to these programs?

1.

2.

3.

4. How likely would you be to send your child to these programs? (circle one)

Not Likely

1

2

3

4

5

Very Likely

5. How important do you think these programs are to the Waterville community? (Circle one)

Not important

1

2

3

4

5

Very important

Thank you for your time!

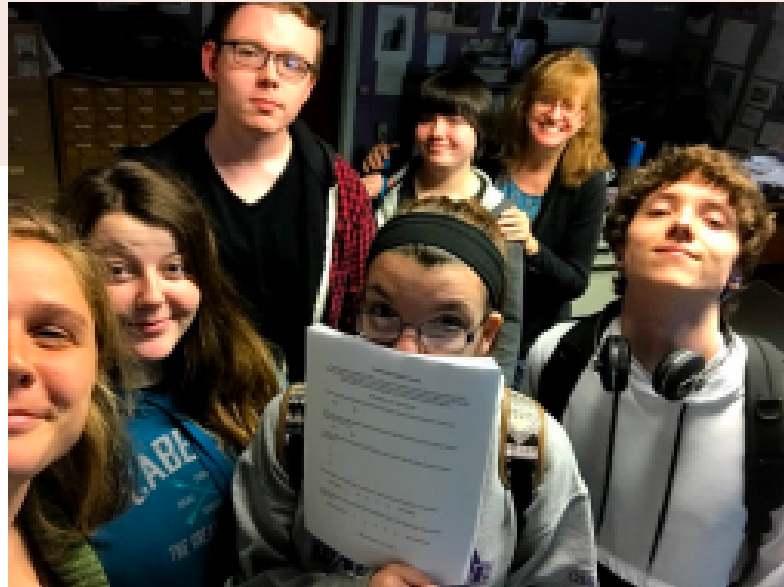


THE EQUALITY COALITION

Spring 2018 Research Report

Waterville Alternative Education and Teen Parent School Programs

T.E.C.
THE EQUALITY COALITION



Who are we?

TEC is a group of students at the Waterville Alternative High School and Teen Parent School who meet regularly to address social and school issues such as stereotypes at the Alternative, the LGBT+ community, women's rights, racism, etc. TEC is also an emotional support group and a safe space for the members while looking for solutions to issues we believe are important. We are different from normal school groups as most are lead by a teacher, but we are guided by a college student who views all of our thoughts and opinions as equal. We conduct surveys created by us to gather the thoughts and opinions of the rest of the Alternative students in order to help us make better solutions to the problems at the Alternative.

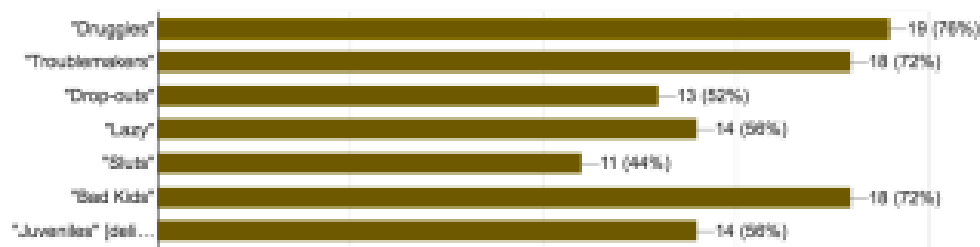
***We conduct Participatory
Action Research.***

Results: Student Survey

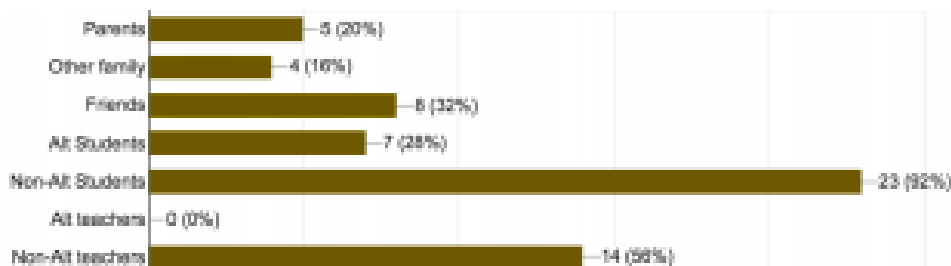
Respondent Demographics

We surveyed 25 students from all 4 grades out of around 40 students total. We found 28 percent of those students were a part of the LGBTQ community. 32% of students are teen parents. This tells us that we are working with a diverse population.

What stereotypes have you heard?



Whom have you heard stereotypes from?



What do you want people to know about Alt?

It's not a place for bad kids.
It's a place for extra support.
We get more one on one.
We are just as equal as everyone else!

T.E.C.
THE EQUALITY COALITION

Results: Teacher Survey

Respondent Demographics

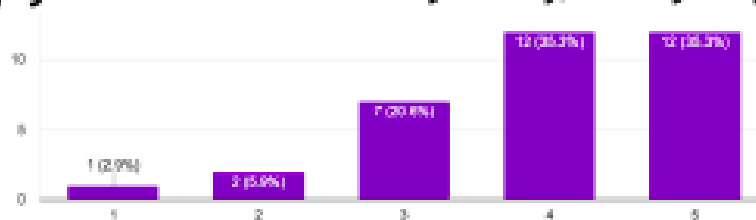
We sent a survey out to every teacher in the district (not at Alt), and we got back 34 responses. About 80% of the respondents were teachers, and about 20% were staff. More than half of the teachers we spoke to had taught for 10 years; our respondents know a lot about this school system. All but two respondents personally know a student who is attending or who did attend.

What three adjectives would you use to describe the students at the Alt and TPSP?

Most common: Unconventional, Independent, Unique, Struggling, Troubled, Important, Determined, Unmotivated, Aimless, Eager

These terms were probably the hardest data for us to analyze because the negative ones were personally hurtful.

How likely are you to recommend a student to apply to Alt / TPSP? 1 is very unlikely, 5 is very likely.



How important do you think the Alt / TPSP is to the Waterville School District? 1 is unimportant, 5 is very important.



TEC.
THE EQUALITY COALITION

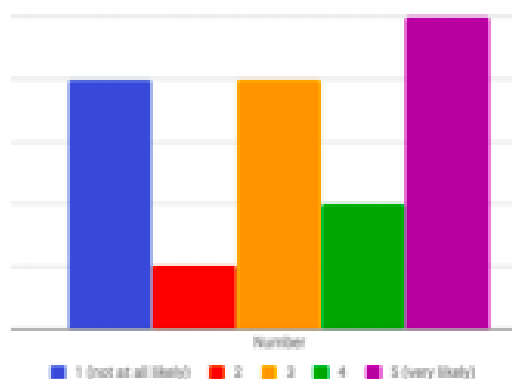
Results: Community Survey

Respondent Demographics

For our community survey, we clipboarded at the concourse in downtown Waterville. Our sample size of 22 is pretty small, but we still found the resulting data helpful. From the 22 people we talked to, about 60% had heard of Alt. Out of those 60%, a little over half know someone who goes or went to Alt as a student. It was clear to us that we could be doing more to make sure people know about our program. The following data are from just the 60% of respondents that know about Alt.

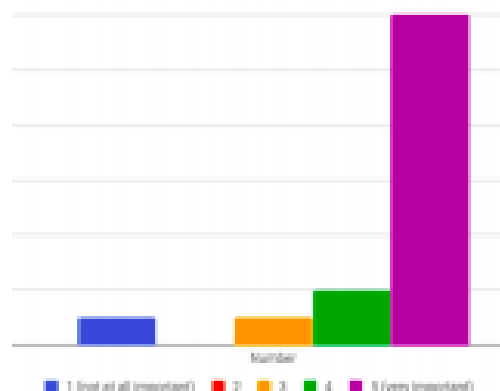
How likely are you to send your child to Alt / TPSP?

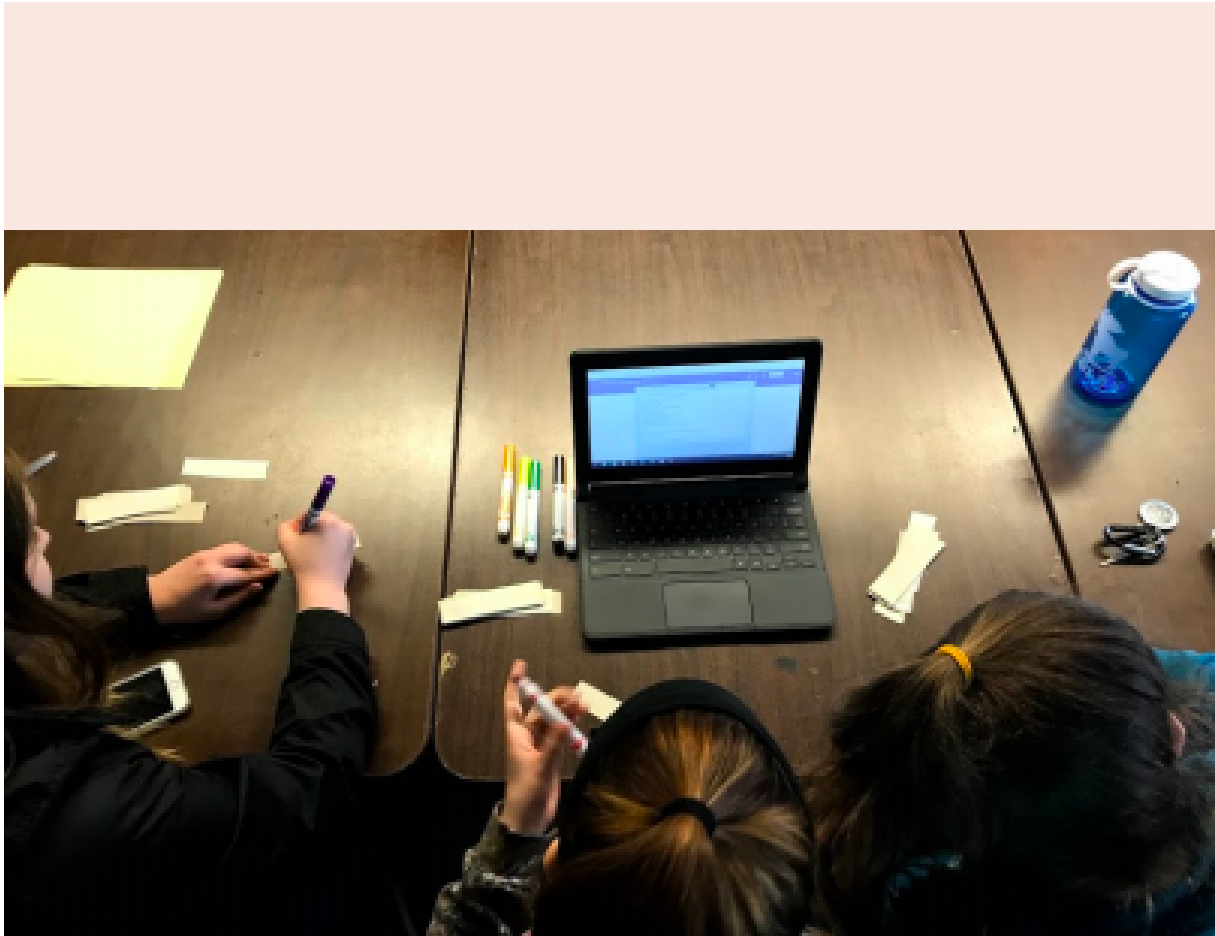
1 is very unlikely, 5 is very likely.



How important do you think the Alt / TPSP is to the Waterville School District?

1 is unimportant, 5 is very important.





What's next?

Knowing that there is a lot of negative stereotypes about Alt/TPSP makes us feel upset, but it also proves that we were right all along. We knew there were negative things said about us for while now, but we never looked into where it was really coming from. There are, however, a number of people who feel strongly about the importance of Alt and believe its existence is important as a method of graduation for students who just can't quite make it at the Waterville Senior High School.

Action Steps: Redesign school website for more accessible and accurate information; fund and install a sign on Silver St so people know where our school is located; continue our PAR project next year as we look at food access at school and home.

Questions? Email acarmack33@gmail.com

T.E.C.
THE EQUALITY COALITION

Name _____

Excerpt from Adrienne Rich's *Claiming an Education*:

It means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work. It means that you do not treat your body as a commodity with which to purchase superficial intimacy or economic security; for our bodies to be treated as objects, our minds are in mortal danger. It means insisting that those to whom you give your friendship and love are able to respect your mind. It means being able to say, with Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre: "I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all the extraneous delights should be withheld or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give."

Responsibility to yourself means that you don't fall for shallow and easy solutions--predigested books and ideas, weekend encounters guaranteed to change your life, taking "gut" courses instead of ones you know will challenge you, bluffing at school and life instead of doing solid work, marrying early as an escape from real decisions, getting pregnant as an evasion of already existing problems. It means that you refuse to sell your talents and aspirations short, simply to avoid conflict and confrontation. And this, in turn, means resisting the forces in society which say that [we] should be nice, play safe, have low professional expectations, drown in love and forget about work, live through others, and stay in the places assigned to us. It means that we insist on a life of meaningful work, insist that work be as meaningful as love and friendship in our lives. It means, therefore, the courage to be "different"; not to be continuously available to others when we need time for ourselves and our work; to be able to demand of others--parents, friends, roommates, teachers, lovers, husbands, children--that they respect our sense of purpose and our integrity as persons. [People] everywhere are finding the courage to do this, more and more, and we are finding that courage both in our study of women in the past who possessed it, and in each other as we look to other women for comradeship, community, and challenge. The difference between a life lived actively, and a life of passive drifting and dispersal of energies, is an immense difference. Once we begin to feel committed to our lives, responsible to ourselves, we can never again be satisfied with the old, passive way

Modes of Communication:

AGGRESSIVE

PASSIVE

PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE

ASSERTIVE

Passive



Compliant, submissive, talks little, vague non-committal communication, puts self down, praises others

"I don't mind...that's fine...yes alright"

Assertive



Actions and expressions fit with words spoken, firm but polite and clear messages, respectful of self and others

"That's a good idea, and how about if we did this too..." or "I can see that, but I'd really like..."

Aggressive



Sarcastic, harsh, always right, superior, know it all, interrupts, talks over others, critical, put-downs, patronising, disrespectful of others

"This is what we're doing, if you don't like it, tough"

Beliefs

You're okay, I'm not

Has no opinion other than that the other person/s are always more important, so it doesn't matter what they think anyway

I'm okay, you're okay

Believes or acts as if all the individuals involved are equal, each deserving of respect, and no more entitled than the other to have things done their way

I'm okay, you're not

Believe they are entitled to have things done their way, the way they want it to be done, because they are right, and others (and their needs) are less important

Name: _____

11/28/17

What is EM?

In one sentence, describe what our group does:

Participatory Action Research (PAR):

1. The “researcher” is a collective (group or coalition).
2. The researchers are “stakeholders” or “insiders” in a given situation
3. PAR researchers analyze power
4. Knowledge gained from research should be critical (improving social conditions)
5. PAR is active and NOT passive

“Our work stands in opposition to the kinds of research that have been and continue to be used for **domination**. Everyone is involved in developing research questions, project design, data collection, data analysis, and product development. Everyone is responsible for making our space a **participatory** space. We do not erase ourselves from our work, and our whole selves are involved because lots of kinds of skills and thinking are needed, not just one. Action happens all throughout research, not just at the end. By research, we mean looking again in order to make our own interpretations, breaking silences, and **reclaiming** spaces that have been used against us. Finally, research means refusing to accept **analyses** that paint us as lazy, crazy, or stupid.”

-Eve Tuck and fellow researchers, *PAR Praxes for Now and Future Change*

“[Research] makes me know that I was sitting down when I should have been standing.”
-Jodi-Ann

What does EM value?

What is EM's goal?

Why do you come to EM?

Differences between EM and Alt

EM	Alt Classes

Queer Wednesday!

Definitions:

- Gender Identity: Gender Identity: One's internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or another gender(s). Everyone has a gender identity, including you. For transgender people, their sex assigned at birth and their own internal sense of gender identity are not the same. Female, woman, and girl and male, man, and boy are also NOT necessarily linked to each other but are just six common gender identities.
- Gender Expression/Presentation: The physical manifestation of one's gender identity through clothing, hairstyle, voice, body shape, etc. Most transgender people seek to make their gender expression (how they look) match their gender identity (who they are), rather than their sex assigned at birth.
- Sex Assigned at Birth: The assignment and classification of people as male, female, intersex, or another sex based on a combination of anatomy, hormones, chromosomes. It is important we don't simply use "sex" because of the vagueness of the definition of sex and its place in transphobia. Chromosomes are frequently used to determine sex from prenatal karyotyping (although not as often as genitalia). Chromosomes do not determine genitalia.
- Sexually Attracted To: Sexual Orientation. It is important to note that sexual and romantic/emotional attraction can be from a variety of factors including but not limited to gender identity, gender expression/presentation, and sex assigned at birth.
- Romantically/Emotionally Attracted To: Romantic/emotional orientation. It is important to note that sexual and romantic/emotional attraction can be from a variety of factors including but not limited to gender identity, gender expression/presentation, and sex assigned at birth.

Judith Butler: Gender Trouble (annotated)

There is a distinction between sex and gender. Sex may be biological, but gender is a result of *culture*. We say that gender is *culturally constructed*. Logically, gender does not always fall in line with sex. Even if we understand that there are two sexes (male and female, which doesn't account for intersex biology), there is no reason to assume that gender is *binary*. When we understand gender as independent of sex, gender becomes much more free, "with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one."

(Gender Trouble, page 10)

Types of Information that can be gathered from Surveys⁹⁹

Demographic- relating to the individual's background and place in society

Example: What is your ethnicity?

These questions can also include grade level, age, gender identity, neighborhood. These can be very useful for analyzing your data.

Knowledge - questions that usually have a correct response and are used to test what the individual knows about a topic.

Example: Who was the first President of the United States?

Attitude - asks for the individual's opinion on a topic

Example: Do you think 16 year olds should be allowed to drive?

Behavior - wants to know about things the individual has participated or plans to participate in.

Example: Have you ever been in a fight?

Beliefs - asks whether the individual believes that something should happen

Example - Do you believe that people can take some responsibility for their health?

⁹⁹ From <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/investigate/survey-creation/>

Possible Stages of PAR¹⁰⁰

Form a strong team

Reflect on prior experiences

Develop critical perspectives on “what could be”

Figure out what you know and don’t know

Identify research questions

Meet with key players

Design research protocols

Collect data

Analyze data

Decide key findings from data

Discuss implications of data - “so what?”

Map who has power in relation to the problem

Select action steps - “now what?”

Engage in dialogue with adult personnel about your findings

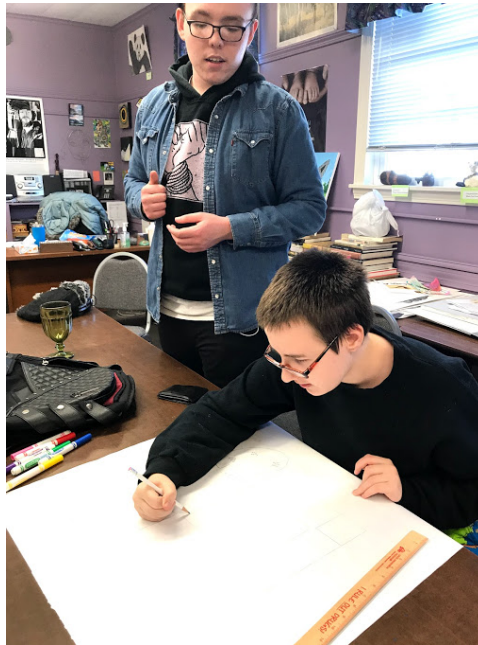
Evaluate whether you achieved your goals

¹⁰⁰ From <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/get-started-lessons/introduction-to-participatory-action-research/>

Activities

“The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand [...] an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine a way to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.”

-bell hooks¹⁰¹



¹⁰¹ hooks, 1994: 207.

Group Development

Activity name: Group Norms

Time: 15-20 minutes

Materials needed: large sticky paper, colorful markers

The how: Split the group into smaller groups of 3-4. Ask each group to brainstorm 5-10 norms they would like to hold in their work, providing examples such as “What’s said in here stays in here,” and “One Mic, One Diva.” After ~10 minutes, bring the subgroups together and ask each group to present their norms. Each proposed norm requires unanimous support to be added to the group norms list; give time for group members to raise objections to each norm, suggest edits or amendments, and discuss. For example, the proposed norm “No Swearing” was edited to “No harmful or bigoted language” before being unanimously added to our group’s norms. Finally, make time for artistic/interested group members to make a colorful norm poster for the meeting space. You might also ask group members to sign the norm poster.

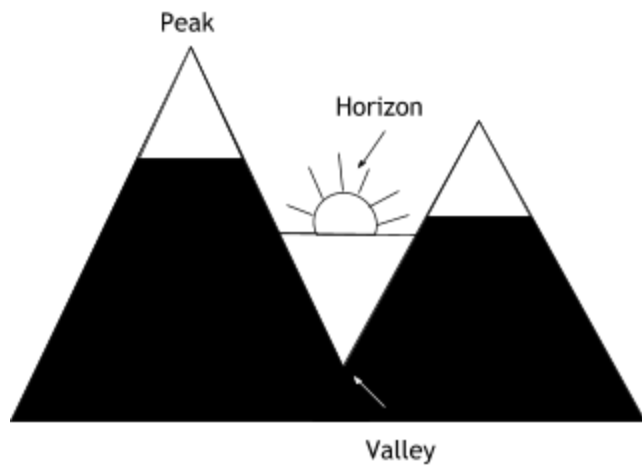
Activity name: Peaks, Valleys, Horizons

Time: 2-3 minutes per group member

Materials needed: None

The how: Each group member is asked to share, in the time since the last check-in, a “peak,” a “valley,” and a “horizon.” Peaks are the high points or rewarding experiences. Valleys are low points, or challenging and dark points. Horizons are what we are looking forward to. Stress that

peaks can be just little bumps, and valleys can be just little dips. Helpful visual:

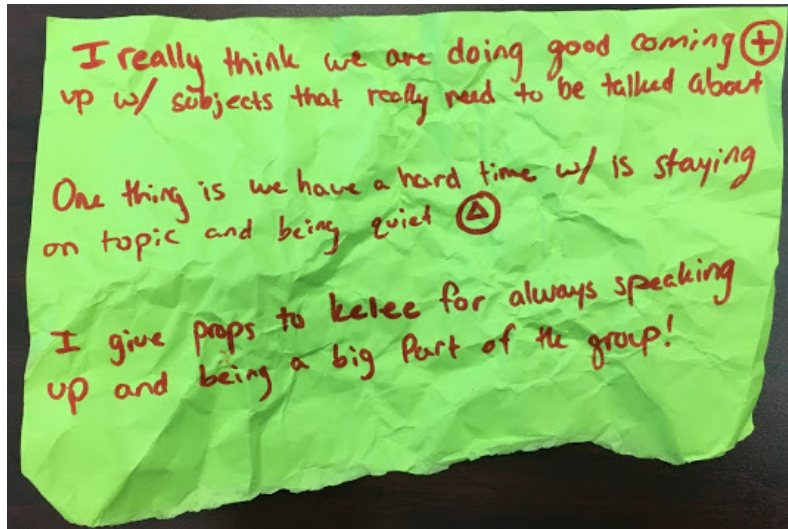


Activity name: Snowball Fight

Time: 10 minutes

Materials needed: scrap paper, pens/pencils

The how: Ask group members to, on their slips of paper, provide feedback on the group: one thing they like (a plus +), one thing they would change (a delta Δ), and one affirmation for another group member (a “props”). Emphasize that the papers are anonymous. Once everyone has written, each person can crumple up their paper into a “snowball.” Then, in an open space, for 3-5 minutes, have a snowball fight, throwing the papers at each other and around the room. At the end of the designated time, each person finds a paper, uncrumples it, and reads aloud what it says. After reading the feedback, group members can discuss.



Example snowball response

Activity name: Effective communication

Time: 20 minutes

Materials needed: None

The how: Provide the group with the following definitions of modes of communication -- verbally, on the board, or in a handout:

- Passive: Keeps quiet, avoids conflicts at all costs, mindset of “you win, I lose”
- Aggressive: Unwilling to consider other options, angry, threatening, willing to win at any cost
- Passive aggressive: emotionally dishonest and indirect, unwilling to be assertive, sarcastic
- Assertive: appropriately honest, empathetic, uses “I” statements, mindset of “we both matter”

Once group members have a grasp on the definitions, provide them with this scenario: “At the McDonald’s counter, you order a 20-piece mcnugget and a shamrock shake. When you get back to your table, you realize they gave you an 8-piece, even though you were charged for the 20-piece.” Split the group into four subgroups, and give each group a mode of communication and ask them to perform a skit of how they would handle the situation. Encourage them to be dramatic and silly (e.g. “I would JUMP on the counter, throw my nuggets across the room, and raid the cashier’s draw” for aggressive). After the exercise, remind group members that we aim for assertive communication, and we should be calling each other out when we hear other modes of communication.

Critical Consciousness

Activity name: It's not fair...

Time: 10 minutes

Materials needed: None

The how: Ask group members to stand* in a circle. In no particular order, participants can step into the circle one at a time and complete the sentence "It's not fair that..." Encourage the group to think big *and* small. After a statement is made, participants who agree step in the circle in silence, as well. After a moment, all participants step back, in silence. Continue for ten minutes.

*In a group without full ability to stand, alternatively arrange chairs in a circle, and have participants raise their hands to agree with a statement, instead of stepping into the circle.

Activity name: Gender Studies 101

Time: 40 minutes

Materials needed: Computer, handouts (see appendix), slips of paper

The how: Begin by handing out slips of paper, on which ask students to write any questions they have about gender and sexuality. Stress that they can write any question down, no matter how embarrassed or afraid they are to ask it. Do not write names on the slips and do not show to each other before handing it in.

Before continuing, do a review of your group guidelines, emphasizing the importance of confidentiality, respect, and willingness to learn new ideas.

Next, use the definitions provided to frame your conversation. You might also pull up resources from online, and acknowledge that you don't have all the answers. During our session, I was looking up the students' questions as they asked them.

Moving to the Butler text. Ask the participants to read the passage in silence, underlining/circling words and phrases that confuse or compel them. Then ask one volunteer to read the passage aloud. Possible discussion questions:

- What is the gender binary?
- How do Butler's ideas challenge the binary?

Finally, return to the questions that the participants wrote at the beginning of the session. Remove any offensive or overly personal questions, as determined by the facilitator, and then answer the questions to the group, to the best of your ability. Be honest when you don't know the answer, and model how to search for answers on Google. Ask for participant contribution for each question, prioritizing their voices and interpretations over yours.

End the session by again reviewing your group norms. It might be helpful to give participants links to online resources. Remind the group that these conversations are not limited to one session, and it is important to continue to ask questions and learn.

Activity name: What's not fair about it?

Time: 20 minutes

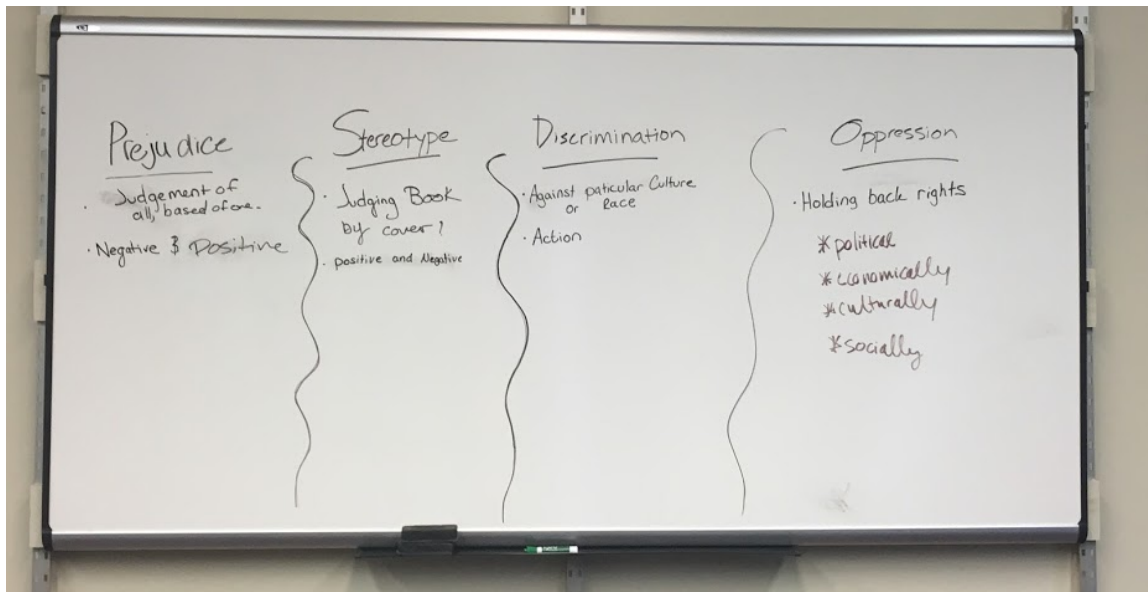
Materials needed: Large paper or whiteboard, markers

Using definitions of systems of injustice from: *Is Everyone Really Equal?*¹⁰²

¹⁰² Sensoy, Ozlem, and Robin DiAngelo. *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. Teachers College Press, 2017.

The how: On the whiteboard, write Prejudice, Stereotype, Discrimination, and Oppression in large letters. Give group participants each a marker and ask them to write what they know about each word underneath it. After five minutes of free writing, add the following definitions:

- Prejudice: a learned prejudgment (thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and assumptions) of others based on the groups to which they belong.
- Stereotype: Reduced or simplified characteristics attributed to a group.
- Discrimination: when we *act* on our prejudice
- Oppression: when prejudice and discrimination are enacted by the group of people in power over time and in various contexts.



Discuss these definitions, and then discuss the ways that they explain sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. Some sample questions:

- Are stereotypes always bad? When are they good?
- How do prejudices form?

- What is the difference between discrimination and oppression?
- Why isn't reverse racism a logical construction?

Research Skills and Processes

Activity name: Types of Survey Information

Time: 15 minutes

Materials needed: Large paper or whiteboard, sample survey

Adapted from: YPAR Hub

The how: Go over the definitions of the types of survey information -- demographic, attitude, knowledge, and behavior -- with group participants. After reading the sample questions on the handout, come up with sample questions for each of the types of survey information and write on the whiteboard, alongside the definitions. Then, distribute the sample survey, and ask students to work in pairs to identify what type of information each question is gathering. Encourage debate and discussion.

Activity name: PAR Process

Time: 15 minutes

Materials needed: Printouts of “PAR Process Steps”

Adapted from: YPAR Hub

The how: Hand out large printed copies of the PAR Process Steps, randomly. Ask researchers to, in silence, order the steps as they see fit. They will likely lay them out one at a time. Once they’ve decided an order, begin a discussion, asking *Why did you put this step first, second, etc.?* Remind participants that there is no correct order to the steps, and they might happen at the same

time. Record the final configuration of your steps, and refer back to it throughout your research process.

Queer Futurity

Activity name: Ideal world

Time: 15 minutes

Materials needed: Large blank paper, markers

The how: This activity is simple. Together, with your group, imagine the ideal version of your institution. In our group, we imagined the “Ideal Alt School.” Have one person volunteer to be scribe, ideally someone who can write quickly and concisely (this can be a good role for the facilitator). Explain to the group that you are coming up with the ideal version of your school/program, so no idea is too wild. Urge participants to think beyond reform, to think “beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz, 1). Some questions to ask:

- What does the structure look like? Is there a structure?
- What are the goals of this place?
- How does this place make you feel?
- What do you do here?

Record all answers on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, and keep around for Object from the Future.

Activity name: Object from the Future

Time: 30 minutes

Materials needed: Large blank paper, markers

Adapted from: María Elena Torre, City University of New York

The how: Revisit your “Ideal World” from the previous activity. Review how you would feel in this place, how it is structured, etc. Ask the group to close their eyes and be open to wild imagination. Explain that you are in the year 4000. Your ideal school has come and gone (your world now is even more liberated than you could have imagined). You are archaeologists that have come upon the site of your ideal school. In small groups, imagine what sort of artifact you might find at the site. Each group should spend ~15 minutes discussing their artifact and then ~15 minutes drawing it. Then groups present their artifacts. Some prompts:

- If it’s a school, what sort of learning tool would you find? Is it electronic? Visual? Audio?
- Is it a toy? A tool? Clothing?
- Think about the characteristics of our ideal school -- what objects would need to exist for these characteristics to happen?

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