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### A Poetics of Justice: Using Art as Action and Analysis in Participatory Action Research

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#### Abstract

This article explores the use of art as a form of communication and meaning-making in participatory action research (PAR). The authors, researchers and educators, contemplate this concept through a pedagogical lens, and consider the role that visual and performing arts can play in social action. Based on the work of a youth-adult participatory action research collective, the authors reflect on the pedagogical process used to analyze research findings, take actions, and affect local change. Created to investigate opportunity to learn issues, the youth members of the collective created spoken word poetry, post-cards, film shorts, and speak-outs to engage multiple audiences in their research findings. By engaging art as an element of PAR, actions can travel visually, viscerally, and verbally with the potential to influence individuals, communities, and policies.

Keywords: *art, participatory action research (PAR), education policy, youth research, community-based research*

*Like hot water boiling over*

*We in fear look down to the ground.*

*Hopeless that we can't pass this time around.*

*The tears from my eyes and the sweat on my back  
as I wipe my face and fear I have to pass this test.*

*The bloodshot in our eyes the strong clenching of my teeth.*

*The pounding of our hearts and the taps of my feet.*

*But wait. Listen. All of these exams truly absolutely got us beat.*

(Poem authored by a youth researcher, member of the New Jersey Urban Youth Initiative).

When conducting research that has deep personal meaning, there are moments when words, neatly strung together in academic prose, do not offer sufficient power or specificity to describe the emotional work engaged (Jones, Stewart, & Galletta, 2015; Fine, Roberts, Torre, 2004; Rivera, Medellin-Paz, Pedraza, & El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, 2010). In the opening poem, the author, a high school student and member of an intergenerational research team, articulated the visceral experience of a proposed policy that would require high school students in New Jersey to pass additional standardized tests to graduate. She used the imagery of trickling sweat, bloodshot eyes, clenched teeth, and pounding hearts to illustrate the kinds of responses that manifest in the bodies of youth (Roberts, 2013; Ruglis, 2011). Using the art form of spoken word, she described what the stress of meeting new requirements could look and feel like for students affected by the proposed policy.

In this article, we reflect on how the visual and performing arts can offer a means through which the affective components of academic research – the spirit work – can be meaningfully processed and expressed (Fox, 2012; 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011; Rivera et al., 2010). Using the physical body, the visual world, the spiritual, to express, process and analyze research findings can represent moves towards restorative actions (Kapitan, Litell, & Torres, 2011; Lara, 2002; Lykes, 2013; Rivera, et al., 2010; Roberts, 2013). We explore the role of art as an analytic tool, an expression of resistance and social critique, and part of a collective meaning-making (Fox, 2015) process in the context of a participatory action research (PAR) project.

PAR has a rich and deep history across disciplines as an approach and an epistemological stance. Not simply a method, PAR is characterized by a set of assumptions about knowledge production, expertise, and social change (Fals Borda, 2001; McIntyre, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2011). Specifically, participatory action research operates from the assertion that in research, those most affected by a social issue should be key players in any research process that seeks to understand the issue. PAR teams often operate as collectives. PAR recognizes that because of their social locations, each member of a collective brings a set of knowledge and expertise that is unique to that individual (Delgado Bernal, 2002). As members of collectives can be differently positioned (e.g., youth and adults) in terms of power and privilege, multiple approaches are used to communicate and build relationships, and to create messages and products for different audiences (Fine, Roberts, & Torre, 2004). Any research conducted must incorporate actions toward social change; however, the members of a collective should define these actions (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Fals Borda, 2001; McIntyre, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2011). Methods and tools used by PAR collectives to achieve their inquiry and social action goals vary according to the questions they are investigating and the context of the research. PAR collectives can employ traditional qualitative and quantitative methods. Other, less traditional, methods that can be used have been written about by a range of PAR scholars (Fine et al., 2004; Irizarry, 2011; Krueger, 2010; Linville, 2011; Ruglis, 2011; Tuck et al., 2008).

By engaging art as an element of PAR, actions toward social change can travel visually, viscerally, and verbally through individuals, schools, communities, and levels of policy (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2011). Various artistic modalities such as poetry, video, and performing arts have been used in PAR projects at different stages of the research process (Conrad, Smyth, & Kendal,

2015; Fox, 2015). For instance, PAR collectives have used poetry at different points in the research process to connect their analyses of data to the very real impact of the issues being examined. Cammarota and Romero (2009) use “I am...” poems in the beginning phases of developing a collective to support the individual identities represented within the group. The poetry writing exercise works as an offering of the spirit on behalf of the collective members, as each person shares aspects of themselves with the group. As the poems are read and analyzed to create Freirean generative themes, the exercise serves as a starting point from which to make connections between their experiences and the socio-political contexts in which they live. In *Echoes of Brown* (Fine et al., 2004), a PAR project researching the opportunity gap, spoken word artists and dance educators worked with youth to perform the results of their collaborative analysis. In this instance, members of the collective humanized and contextualized the findings of a survey administered to over 1,000 youth by placing young peoples’ lives at the center of their analysis. In the following paragraphs, we will offer some background on the New Jersey Urban Youth Research Initiative (NJUYRI)<sup>1</sup>, discuss the ways in which the artistic process functioned as an analytic tool and action form, and thread in examples from the project that illustrate these points (for a fuller description of the study, see Zaal & Ayala, 2013).

### **Project Description**

In 2008, a New Jersey based, cross-city coalition of education and community based organizations collaborated to encourage youth participation in the statewide debate about New Jersey education policy and high school graduation standards. Researchers, educators and leaders of youth-serving organizations came together to form the NJUYRI. The purpose of the project was to formulate a plan for research and action to inform the state legislature and the Department of Education as they made decisions about policies that would increase the number of high stakes standardized tests students would need to pass to graduate from public high schools. The cities of Paterson, Jersey City, and Newark were selected as recruitment sites because, as the largest and most populated cities in the state, their public school systems served the largest number of students.

Nineteen youth representing twelve high schools worked with adults in two day-long and one overnight youth “research camp” (Torre & Fine, 2011). These camps were opportunities for youth and adult allies to develop a common framework for understanding the research process. The camps focused on developing research skills, which ranged from identifying research questions to conducting interviews, designing surveys, and analyzing data. Each camp consisted of small group work, large group discussions, lectures, presentations by other youth and adults, and

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a list of the members of the NJUYRI intergenerational research collective: Hakiemah Bateman, Amira Berry, Jameka Carter, Lutfiyyah Chain, Francisco DeJesus, Kwame Gilbert, Simone Inman, Fantasia Jones, Mikhail Josephs, Cynthia Lee, Shawnteah McKinnis, Shantise Parker, Kenya Pauldo, Yissette Perez, Ericka Sanchez, Victoria Scott, Porsha Sims, Yahne Sneed, Keith Stephenson, Jennifer Ayala, Mary Bennett, Kaleena Berryman, Kandi Berryman, Theodore J. Best, Michelle Fine, Stan Karp, Sweetie Patel, David Surrey, Mayida Zaal.

creative and recreational activities. Pedagogical strategies that engaged youth's prior knowledge, commitment to community activism, and desire to learn critical research skills were used to develop the research camp activities. In between camps, youth from the NJUYRI collected data within their schools and across cities to investigate the capacity of their schools to satisfy the proposed graduation requirements and to document perceptions and evaluations of the proposed policy changes. Data collection involved conducting interviews, developing and administering surveys, and inventorying resources and equipment in the math and science departments of their respective schools.

Once the data were collected, youth and adult allies compiled and presented the data at the camps and collaboratively analyzed the multiple data sources. During the analytical process, members of the collective reflected on their experiences of the research process and the policy in question. In response to the process and as a reaction to the findings, youth researchers, with support of adults, created spoken word poetry, postcards, slogans, and skits. Reflections took various forms and occurred during or in between research camp meetings. Youth researchers reflected on the data and research experience in various ways: through online posts, by illustrating their thoughts and feelings at the camps on a graffiti wall, and finally, writing a paper essay, articulating their experiences as researchers. The youth researchers were awarded college credit for their work, and thereby, were affirmed for their contributions in an academic context.

The NJUYRI took many actions along the way (Tuck, 2009; Zeller-Berkman, 2011). The largest action, in the form of a community speak-out, took place in August of 2009. The event was well attended and audience members included state officials, community organizers, parents, and students<sup>2</sup>. At the local sites, groups from the three cities took the knowledge and findings they generated within the research camps and shared them within their communities. For instance, the Newark team produced videos presented locally, the Paterson group presented their findings to school district leaders, and Jersey City youth presented their findings to their high school faculty, as well as to teachers in a local middle school. In the following pages, we describe how artistic expression was represented in the research camps, with a poetry-writing workshop, salsa dance lessons, and the engagement of other visual and performing arts.

### **Analyzing That Which Has No Words**

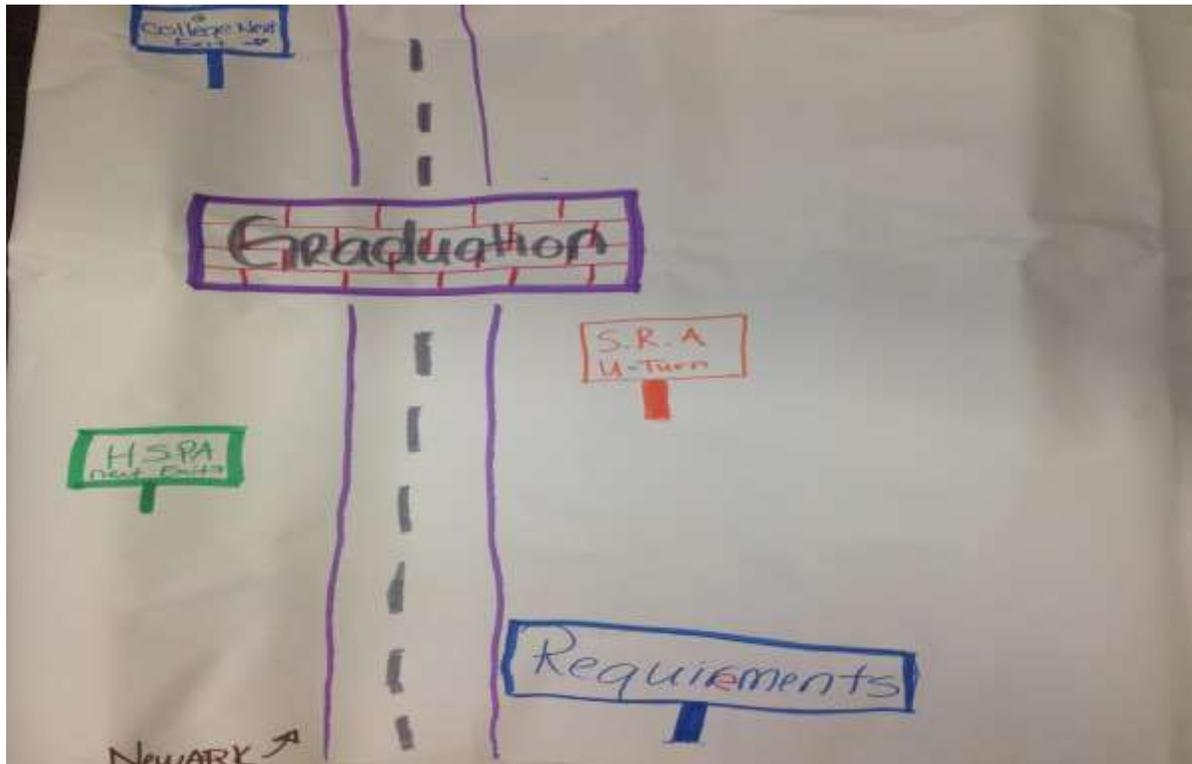
Art expands the ways in which we can make sense of and understand our data (Fox, 2012; 2015; Roberts, 2013). It grounds the analysis in the human experience and reattaches the emotional to the political and the scientific aspects of social science research (Conrad, 2004; Conrad, et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The joy and pain of the work cannot be painted over with the broad brush of objectivism, but need to be integrated, and offered a chance at explicit expression, rather than a light coating of presumed neutrality (Fals Borda, 2001). This has been described as theorizing from the flesh (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984), embodied analysis (Fox, 2012; 2015; Roberts, 2013), and creative praxis (Camarrota & Fine,

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<sup>2</sup> See also Carroll, K. (2009). Schools just can't keep up. Retrieved from <http://www.northjersey.com/news/education/schools-just-can-t-keep-up-1.984089>

2008; Rivera, et al., 2010) because it positions the body and emotion as analytic frames and sources of knowledge. Traditional social science research often tells us to ignore this process of embodied analysis because it may taint research findings and run counter to research goals (Fox, 2015). In PAR work, where participation and action are valued equally to the research, such embodied knowledge is critical to carrying out work that is responsible to collectives and to larger communities (Lykes, 2013; Roberts, 2013; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012).

Using Torre and Fine's (2011) idea of a "graffiti wall," we offered a space on the wall covered with blank paper and markers during each of the research camp sessions. Youth and adults were invited to write or draw their reactions to what they were learning, hearing, processing or discussing with others. One group illustrated a highway (see Figure 1) representing



*Figure 1* Graffiti Wall illustration created by youth researchers depicting a road to high school graduation their path to a successful future. Their illustration depicted the road to high school graduation with various potential detours and roadblocks representing the proposed changes to graduation requirements. This activity offered young people and adults a space to process the painful or troubling aspects of the data being analyzed in ways that may have been difficult to articulate verbally (Lykes, 2013). As such, artistic expression can be a means to process and communicate the emotional impact of the work (Rivera et al., 2010).

One youth researcher silently processed what she had learned throughout the camps, since she did not feel as comfortable as others speaking publicly. When the poetry workshop was offered, she used the opportunity to express and share what she had been processing in a language and manner that felt safer to her.

*Exito o Fracaso*

Ayer me entere de lo que van a hacer  
 Por un momento me senti como un hielo.  
 Senti un gran peso sobre mi cuando me dijeron esto.  
 No se supone que nosotros somos el futuro?  
 No se supone que vinimos aqui para una mejor educacion?  
 Pues en su afan de “mejorar” nuestra educacion  
 lo que van a conseguir es que abandonemos la escuela  
 Por eso estoy aqui frente a ustedes  
 Para decirle lo que siento  
 y para que piensen muy bien lo que estan haciendo.  
 Quisiera que por un momento se pongan en nuestros zapatos  
 y sientan la presion que estamos sintiendo ahora.

*Success or Failure*

Yesterday I learned what they're going to do  
 For a moment, I felt cold as ice  
 I felt a heavy weight come over me when they told me about this.  
 Aren't we supposed to be the future?  
 Aren't we supposed to be the ones who came to this country for a better education?  
 Well, in their desire to “improve” our education what they will accomplish  
 Is more of us leaving school.  
 This is why I stand before you today  
 To tell you what I feel and to ask you to really think through what you are doing.  
 For a moment, put yourselves in our shoes  
 And feel the pressure that we're feeling now.

The author of the above poem, a bilingual fifteen-year-old, conveyed her feelings with tactile images in the language she felt most comfortable using. In this case, instead of heat and fire, imagery used by the author in the opening poem, this writer described coldness, ice and pressures experienced as physical weight. In addition to the poem itself, what was meaningful in this instance, was the way poetry served as an outlet through which she and others expressed their understanding of and feelings about the issue under study. Prior to this, this young woman did not feel comfortable sharing her perspectives and understandings verbally; in some school contexts, without a closer look, this silence can be read as disengagement. The poetry experience offered a

mechanism through which the depth of her comprehension and analysis was processed and communicated (Jones et al., 2015; Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). Similar to a study by Ruglis' (2011), which linked health outcomes to school policies through participant x-ray mapping of their bodies, this example illustrates the impact of such policy changes on student bodies and minds – the physical and psychological toll recounted in lyrical form. Linkages, such as the one between health and education policy, can be facilitated in part by the creative processes involved in art making (Kapitan et al., 2011).

Like art, analysis involves movement and creativity, as straight lines of reasoning are ruptured, its pieces re-examined from different angles, then reconfigured to forge a new whole. Once reassembled, this picture demands something more, something to be done, rather than simply viewing the image created. With participatory action research, “action” is at the center, literally and figuratively. Research by itself is not sufficient; it urges movement towards social change and against the static lines of an oppressive status quo (Fals Borda, 2001). As Quijada Cerecer and colleagues note, the arts:

open up space for youth researchers to collectively process and question social issues they confront in their community while embodying forms of resistance that inspire and create collective participation and action toward social justice. (2011, p. 587)

In the following section, we focus on the “action” of PAR, and the ways in which the arts intersect with social change goals.

### **Redesign With Us, Not Against Us**

NJUYRI was organized with the intention, or perhaps hope, of influencing state policy at some level. At minimum, we wanted to ensure that teachers, parents and students were aware, and that board members and policy makers were informed of the community response and potential impact of this change in graduation requirements, particularly, though not limited to, urban high schools in New Jersey. To this end, we prepared an hour-long intergenerational, multimedia presentation, where youth researchers sat alongside adult allies to discuss the issue and our collective's findings. Each group within the collective invited key members of their communities to a community speak out at a university. The event, held on a hot August day, drew an audience of 75 college and high school students, K-12 and university educators, government education and legislative officials, parents, community organizers, and media representatives.

For our collective presentation, we used PowerPoint slides with tables and graphs to represent our findings, but also spoken word poetry, video, a skit, and at the end, a dialogue with the audience. NJUYRI produced a report (2009) describing the research, findings and recommendations, to distribute at this meeting, and other venues, including online. We understood that a report like this, though necessary, was not sufficient in reaching across audiences, and reflected this understanding as we choreographed this community report-back. Multiple products and modes of delivery were necessary to broaden the accessibility of research findings and therefore impact (Quijada Cerecer et al., 2011).

The event itself offered a space of provocation, for dialogue and dissent, critique and hope (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, & Bradley, 2010; Fine, et al., 2004; Tuck et al., 2008). In this presentation,

the arts offered multiple vehicles of expression and understandings of the issues, attaching to the findings a sense of humanity, agency and urgency. At the event, participants were presented with data tables based on the survey findings. Through videotaped role-plays, the audience was invited to imagine conversations between parents and students, which portrayed teachers, students and school board members interacting in a mock town hall meeting. The collective offered concrete examples of potential negative outcomes expressed visually with images of rescinded invitations to a graduation party and mock report cards highlighting the lack of resources needed to meet the new policies. Slogans such as “Redesign with us, not against us” were presented. As such, a critical space was opened offering multiple entry points for conversation. Employing performance and visual arts allowed us to set the tone and context for the dialogue that ensued. As the presentation came to a close, and one of the youth researchers invited the audience to discuss what next steps the community should take – a moment of participatory policy making emerged (Fine, Ayala & Zaal, 2012; Zaal & Ayala, 2013).

Members of the NJUYRI built on their own creative expertise for a variety of local actions, which included film productions, skits, spoken word, and awareness postcards. In considering the potential impact of requiring multiple end-of-course exams for graduation in the daily life of a student and her family, one group from Paterson conceptualized a high school graduation party invitation shown in Figure 2.

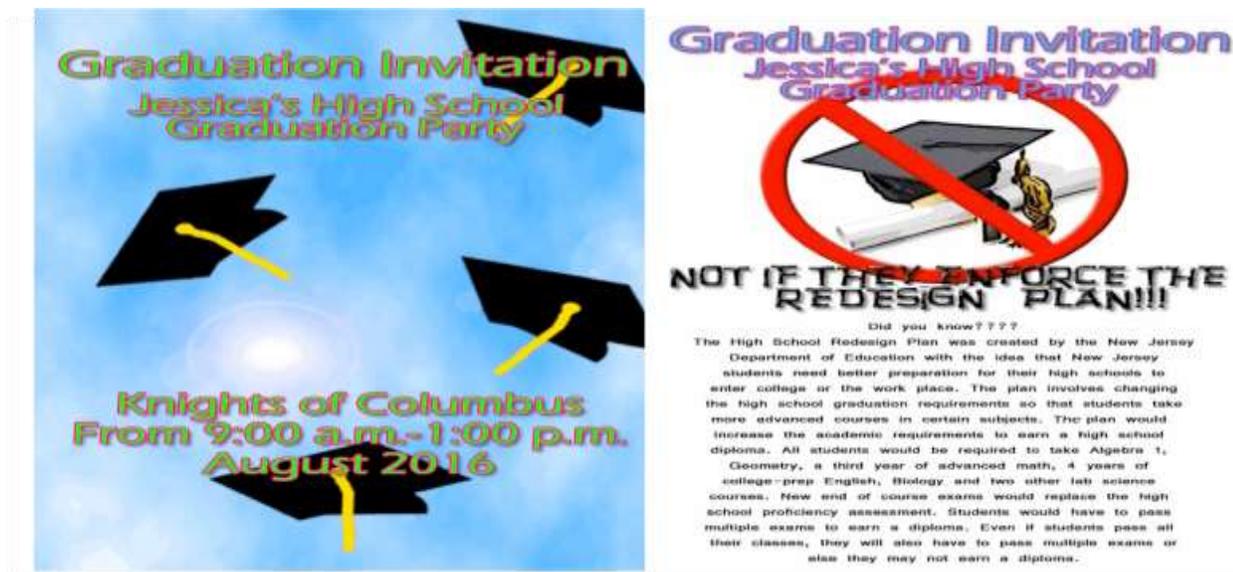


Figure 2: Image created by youth researchers depicting an invitation to a high school graduation party.

On one side, bright and celebratory images and colors, on the other side of the invitation postcard a harsh red cross out sign indicating that the party had to be cancelled. These contrasting images were followed by an explanation that the cancellation was an indirect result of the changes in graduation requirements. The artists included a few sentences about the policy change itself. Presented in an accessible format that connected policy to the experiences of youth and families, this awareness postcard communicated a subtle analysis of a potential negative outcome for future students – lower graduation rates. Postcards such as these were distributed at events, such

as the community meeting. The visual images served to further communicate the impact described in the report in which we used academic prose and numerical charts to communicate findings.

Video and film also served as mechanisms through which youth researchers communicated findings, or provoked awareness and dialogue about the issues (Jones, et al, 2015; Quijada Cerecer et al., 2011). For instance, one of the groups from Newark, the Abbott Leadership Institute, had a media arts focus, and independently produced two documentary shorts based on the findings of the collective. One of the documentaries was produced midway through the project, and consisted of a dramatization of a head official from the Department of Education confronting questions asked by the community in a town hall meeting. This film was shown in various local venues, but also during one of the NJUYRI meetings where the President of the State Board of Education was in attendance. It provoked dialogue on the issues, as well as providing another avenue for analysis. The second film was created in time for the community event, and was a fuller exploration of the issues, including interviews with key stakeholders.

Creating actions using varied media allowed the collective to inform decisions at the policy level, to engage the community in advocacy, and to educate others about the issues. Both in the large community meeting and in local actions, art served as “a transformational act of critical consciousness. Not only is art the making of things; it also awakens new ways of thinking and learning that things can change” (Kapitan et al., 2011, p. 64).

### **Imagining an Alternate Ending**

I would like to imagine a situation where the state actually had the sense to look further into the research produced by the Urban Youth Research Initiative. If so, the problems we have in regards to 10,000 students failing the AHSA [a current high stakes standardized test] and almost 3,000 students failing to receive a diploma would be very different. I would imagine the Board of Education pulling back on the High School Redesign Plan and giving it a total redo...the State would provide the necessities needed to go about these changes. I would picture schools with the supplies needed to prepare students, as well the teachers that will properly teach a class with the knowledge needed to handle such changes (Excerpt from a Final Essay authored by a youth researcher).

One year after members of the collective completed their work together, a subset of the youth members came together to reflect on the work and the status of the proposed legislation that would change graduation requirements. Together we learned that the change in policy had been officially approved, though there were delays in implementation, and some degree of scaling back from the original proposal on the part of the department of education. News of the passing of the legislation and adoption of the resulting policies were met with disappointment by members of our collective. Even though changes to graduation requirements would be made despite the efforts of our collective, and subsequent efforts outside of NJUYRI by parent and organizing groups, there was still room for hope. There were plans to halt the implementation of some of the

new requirements. By 2010, the increased credit requirements in math and science remained, but the end-of-course exams we focused on were ultimately abandoned by the State.<sup>3</sup>

Using their expertise in the arts realm, several youth researchers created a video, *See Between the Lines*, in which they pieced together snippets of the camps, and interviews of NJUYRI members and representatives of the Education Law Center, a statewide education advocacy organization. They engaged in an exercise of imagining and wrote alternate endings to this policy story as which they recorded as text and podcasts. This reflection and re-imagining created a space of possibility where the policy outcomes were not the only place where transformation could happen. Instead the filmmakers validated as critical sites of resistance the relationships, experiences, and production of knowledge formed within and across city-based teams of youth, families, community organizers, and educators (Fox, 2012; Lykes, 2013; Torre & Fine, 2011; Tuck, 2009). Using the arts, the critical imaginary can be a way of “engaging a collective dream life” (Kapitan et al., 2011, p. 64) where reflections and analyses in the context of everyday oppressions are shared in multiple ways. It is at this intersection of art and research that a community identity of resistance (Lykes, 2013) can be forged, and where what Cahill (2010) and colleagues call “a praxis of critical hope” can live.

### **Final Pasos in the Dance of PAR**

At one of the research camps, we concluded the day’s activities with a salsa lesson conducted by a university colleague. As we choreographed and danced we counted...1,2,3 step back, adjust, step together, pause 5,6,7. At the time, we did not include our dance lesson as an embodied method, although others have used dance in this fashion (Fine, et al., 2004; Kapitan et al., 2011; Roberts, 2013). Rather, our intention was to offer a space where the researchers could connect with one another, and to vary the nature of the day’s activities so that we were not only making space for thinking work, but also for body work and play (Fox, 2012; Garcia, 2012; Rivera et al., 2010). This dance – its steps, turns, and connections – could illustrate some of the ways in which research, the arts, and youth participation, can be choreographed to produce meaningful work (Roberts, 2013). Whether the arts are performing, visual or lyrical, they offer participatory researchers an analytic lens, a way of processing the emotive and embodied knowledge of the group, and a mechanism of transmission – making research findings accessible to wider audiences. The process itself involves *pasos*, steps that do not necessarily follow a linear progression, where members step together harmoniously, but also encounter unexpected turns, often needing to pause reflectively before continuing, and moving to a rhythm of change.

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<sup>3</sup> However, this assessment debate continues, resurfacing in its new face, PARCC, which the State adopted in 2015. Far from uncontested, in NJ and nationally, there is powerful and organized resistance from parents, students, teachers and community organizations.

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