



## Is Participatory Research Compatible with Graduate Research?

### Reflections From Three Stakeholders

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## Is Participatory Research Compatible with Graduate Research? Reflections From Three Stakeholders

Lisa Armstrong, Colleen Loomis, & Esperanza Mairena-Torres

### Abstract

Graduate programs aim to train future researchers and practitioners in the values, skills and tools of their trade. This paper reports on the experiences of a graduate student, a youth co-researcher and a faculty supervisor while conducting thesis research within a community psychology master's degree program. In a program that values research, action and social justice we reflect on our struggles to exemplify these values throughout the thesis process while complying with departmental norms and institutional constraints. We begin by summarizing the research project and how the co-researchers became involved. Next each of us (the coauthors) provides our reflections on processes that occurred while conducting a participatory research project with attention to how it impacted us individually, each other and the research itself.

### Introduction

Participatory research has been gaining popularity over the past 50 years (Hall, 2005). Yet for some graduate students participatory research feels out of reach and completing it in the 12 to 18 months of allotted time seems infeasible. This paper draws on the participatory process used in conducting a master's thesis research project that investigated engagement with youth who are involved with gangs within the context of a community based prevention project.; the project defined youth as between 13 and 25 years of age and we use the same definition here. The research focused on the development phases of this prevention effort and sought to understand what youth engagement meant to the participants (service providers and youth) and what roles young people would have. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the struggles we (a former graduate student, a youth community collaborator, and a thesis supervisor) encountered while conducting participatory research within a master's thesis, to evaluate the quality of related research processes and products, and to offer suggestions for how to conduct participatory research from within the constraints of a graduate program. These illustrations are from our personal reflections on, our successes, mistakes, and compromises as we conducted imperfect, yet workable, research

collaborating with youth researchers during most phases of the research including data analysis.

First, we briefly review the existing literature of other researchers' reflections, the professional values of the field of community psychology, and characteristics and nature of participatory research. Reflecting on our research praxis and learning from those of others can be a useful tool for strengthening our skills as researchers and the quality of future research, particularly when we examine our mistakes (Sarason, 1995). A tool for self-reflection is autoethnography, the process of documenting one's own experiences in the research process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). From our colleagues' reflections we have learned that it is possible for adult researchers to conduct participatory action research with children (e.g., Kellet, 2010) and youth (e.g., Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010) and we have seen how autoethnography can facilitate reflexivity for a graduate student to revisit her standpoint as it relates to and impacts collaborative research (Langhout, 2006). These writings are select examples of the important role that reflexivity plays in our professional development. A gap exists in the literature on research reflections in the area of understanding the impacts of participatory research on community collaborators (Goto, 2010) and student researchers.

Collaboration with communities is one of the professional values of the discipline of community psychology as are empirical research and social justice, to mention a select few (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2007; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Society for Community Research and Action, 2011) and researchers' choices about when to collaborate are multifaceted. The decision to collaborate requires an assessment of potentially competing values, research questions and objectives, and feasibility. Although collaboration is a professional value, it is neither mandated nor deterministic in how it is applied. Each researcher makes decisions about when and how to collaborate. There are times when using this approach is inappropriate because "[a] collaborative relationship can be at odds with social justice" (Isenberg, Loomis, Humphreys, & Maton, 2004, p. 124). The value for collaboration should be weighed in the balance along with other values. When a collaborative method is warranted the next step is to decide which participatory approach is feasible to use.

Participatory approaches focus on collaborating *with* stakeholders so they may have a more active role in the process (Patton, 2002); they are also resource intensive. These approaches include participatory research (PR), participatory action research (PAR), and community based participatory action research (CBPAR); the later two focus on an action outcome in addition to co-conducting research with participants and community-based research is initiated from within a community rather than from outside (e.g., university-based researchers), or at least the community has a majority power in shaping research objectives and processes. Participatory approaches, especially those with action in mind, often involve large groups of academics and community members and require a considerable time investment to ensure that all stakeholders are engaged and to use a democratic process for decision-making. This work also requires advisory committees, large budgets for honorariums, and several researchers. Decisions about which type of PR to use are influenced and constrained by access to resources (time, money, skills, etc.), ideologies (e.g., how subjectivity/objectivity are understood by various stakeholders), and institutional factors. Once a decision to use PR has been made researchers may draw on the many examples in the literature for engaging various populations in all or some of the research process (e.g., Harper & Carver, 1999; Wilson et al., 2007). There has been growing interest in how to conduct collaborative research with youth

(and more recently children), yet few studies have actively involved youth in the process of data analysis (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010).

Each of us decides if conducting research collaboratively is warranted by the research objectives, consistent with competing values, and feasible. These decisions are particularly challenging for research projects with limited resources, which is often the case for an undergraduate or master's student thesis. The student and her or his thesis supervisor face the responsibility of determining how PR will be implemented in a way that respects both the value of collaboration and the time constraints imposed by the university for completing thesis research. Our reflections specifically address two gaps identified in the literature by engaging youth in data analysis and by reporting the impacts of participatory research on a youth community collaborator, from her perspective. To provide readers a context, first we summarize the research project on which we are reflecting; then, we describe how we collected data for this specific article (i.e., our reflections). We decided to write most of the remaining text in first-person voice from the graduate student's perspective (first author) in order to provide a first-hand account for graduate students.

### **Before the Beginning: How a Co-Researcher Process Developed**

In order to describe the research approach used in this master's thesis, I must first describe how the idea for the method came to be. The master's program in which I was studying required both a research and practical component with the option of combining the two (e.g., using the work completed in the practicum as a basis for a research project). I completed my practicum within a gang prevention project and chose to combine my practical and research requirements for my thesis with the project members' support and consent. In this work I assisted with the youth advisory council (YAC) where I met youth who were interested in the project. During this time I realized how difficult it is to find and engage youth, especially those whose experiences make them eligible for the project such as having active or former involvement with a gang. I became worried that there would be few youth participants in the project and in my proposed study about youth engagement. After discussing this concern with my peers and my thesis supervisor, I decided to invite some of the youth to participate as co-researchers as a way to increase the youth voice in the research and to

increase the participatory nature of the study. Upon reviewing the PR literature, I could not find an approach that was compatible with the context of my project. That is how the decision to use a co-researcher model came to be a part of my thesis.

Below is a summary of the development of my thesis starting with co-researcher recruitment and training, then data collection, data analysis, and dissemination.

I chose to invite two particular youth as co-researchers for two main reasons. First because they were no longer involved with gangs and were living more stable lives. Other youth who joined in the youth advisory council meetings did not participate consistently, did not have contact information or were dealing with more immediate concerns such as substance dependencies and housing issues, whereas the two I selected were finishing school, had places to stay (either with family or independently), as well as employment and support systems. Second, both of these youth had been involved with gangs (as active members) in cities located outside the bounds of the project so their input had the potential to be distinct from the other youth participants. I met with each one individually to describe what the process would be like and both agreed to participate as co-researchers.

Another decision that had to be made once I invited co-researchers to my thesis research was whether or not they should also be participants in the study. On the one hand, since it was likely there would be only a few youth participants, the co-researcher's voices could have added more youth perspectives, however, their input could have been conflicting because the co-researchers were at a different place in their lives. This different social status could have also led to a misrepresentation of youth opinions, as the co-researchers were ineligible to participate in the prevention project because of not having been in a gang in the region. Based on this rationale, I chose not to invite them to be participants in the study but to incorporate their perspectives and reflections of their past experiences to improve the interview guide and data analysis. Their perspectives were included in the paper as expert opinions.

I met with the youth co-researchers several times before data collection in order to develop the interview guide and provide training on qualitative interviewing. I showed them a diagram of the research process that included the following steps: determining the interview guide, data collection, data analysis, report writing and dissemination. For the next step, all three of us met at the university campus to revise the interview guide and practice

interviewing. The co-researchers gave input for the interview questions and we practiced interviewing each other and discussed qualitative interview techniques (open questions, open posture, probes, etc.).

Next we shared our availabilities and then I contacted the participants to set up interview times. Note that I used a single case study design and conducted a census of the population of the prevention program so every stakeholder involved in designing the project was invited to participate. Since I completed my practicum with the program, I was familiar to almost all of the participants. The service providers and youth were invited via email and the youth were also invited through personal messages entrusted with staff at the services the youth accessed. The participants ( $N = 12$ ) included one member of the YAC and 11 staff members. All of the interviews except one were recorded (I conducted a phone interview with one participant for her convenience). In total, the youth co-researcher and I interviewed four people and I interviewed eight people by myself. To improve the quality of the interviews, the thesis supervisor listened to the first two to give advice and feedback. The co-researchers and I also met 30 minutes before each interview to prepare any last minute questions and after each interview for 30 minutes to de-brief and discuss how we felt the interview went and how we could do better next time.

After the data collection was completed one of the youth co-researchers moved to another city to pursue post-secondary education and was no longer actively involved with the project but received updates. I invited the remaining youth co-researcher to stay involved; she had co-conducted 3 of the 4 interviews I did with the youth co-researchers. She stayed involved and helped with the transcribing (she transcribed one interview, I transcribed nine interviews and an undergraduate volunteer research assistant transcribed two interviews), data analysis, and dissemination. (Note that from this point forward in the text that the term "youth co-researcher" refers to the one particular youth who stayed involved in the research after data collection and is third author.)

Once I developed a codebook, I shared it with the youth co-researcher asking for her feedback. The questions I asked her included: Does this sound accurate based on your experiences with the interviews? Do the conclusion/implications I formed make sense based on your experiences with gangs? The youth co-researcher provided some feedback but overall felt the framework was accurate. The analysis

process was not very participatory; mainly she provided her opinion of my work. Her reflections on this process can be summed up with this quote from our reflection conversations (conducted for this paper) “did a good job, chose good quotes, I don’t know what you could have done better, it was organized”.

Throughout this entire process I was communicating with the thesis supervisor. During the initial stages of proposal development and the analysis phase we had standing weekly meetings otherwise we communicated periodically at certain check-in points such as when the first two interviews were completed and before my meeting to invite the youth co-researcher to participate in data analysis. Once I defended my thesis, the youth co-researcher and I met to discuss how we could disseminate the information. After brainstorming ideas, we decided to share the information with the gang prevention project so that they could give feedback and potentially use the model in their practice. The youth co-researcher and I co-created a visual presentation to exchange information with the project team and presented it at a staff meeting. After the presentation there was a lot of feedback and interest in the information.

### **How We Gathered Our Reflections**

There are many approaches to recording reflections such as personal narratives like autoethnography (Langhout, 2006; Du Preez, 2008) and autobiographical (Du Preez, 2008). We did not use either of those forms rather we decided to use our personal perspectives with and without gang experience and our responses to our own retrospective interview. The graduate student has no direct experience with gangs. She volunteered for four years with a homeless youth drop-in centre as a direct service provider where she met youth with similar life experiences as people who are involved with or at risk for being involved with gangs. The co-researcher was a former gang member. The supervisor has no direct experience with gangs. She has conducted a three-year, longitudinal study of juvenile crime enforcement and accountability, collaborating with a community-based program that diverted youth from a U.S. state justice system. In a semi-structured co-interview each person in the dyad responded to the same question. The graduate student determined a set of questions, shared the draft of questions with the thesis supervisor and then shared those in advance of meeting individually with the

youth co-researcher and the thesis supervisor on several separate occasions.

### **Reflections**

During our reflective discussions we examined three main areas: the positives and negatives of the process; the impact of power differences and academic hierarchy on the process; and the impact of research on the graduate student, the youth co-researcher, the thesis supervisor, and the integrity of the research.

**Reflections on the process.** During our reflections on the process as a whole, we first discussed what went well. All three of us identified our communication strategies as vital to the success of the project. The youth co-researcher and I found text messaging each other to arrange meetings and keep up-to-date with each other as the most efficient, while the thesis supervisor and I used email and Skype. We also identified that our having similar working styles and personalities facilitated our efficiency. I found it easy to develop relationships with both the thesis supervisor and the youth co-researcher and this quick transition to a comfortable relationship was an asset to this project that could not have been planned.

Each of us identified that we learned a lot from using the co-researcher method. The youth co-researcher pointed out that she gained knowledge about the research process, in particular about interviewing, transcribing, and how to translate a research project into a community presentation. She also learned how important organization was for research and professional settings like post-secondary school and job opportunities. I found having a co-researcher required a degree of comfort with conducting interviews, it required extra planning to arrange our schedules and it required more preparation in order to make sure we were all comfortable during the interview. The debrief discussions with both youth co-researchers after the interviews also forced me to create time to reflect on the impact of inviting co-researchers to participate in the research for my thesis.

The thesis supervisor discussed what she learned from this process, particularly how she adapted her mentoring style to help me both as a master’s student and as a teacher for the youth researcher. All of us described the experience as a professional and personal learning experience. We each learned different skills: the youth co-researcher an introduction to research, the graduate student how to teach the skills, and the thesis supervisor how to

instruct students in teaching a youth community researcher.

The challenges that were encountered largely surrounded time and resources. Some of the challenges the youth co-researcher and I faced were meetings being cancelled/delayed and minimal time for practice and training for interviews. I think I would have felt more comfortable if we had more practice time for interviews so the probes could have felt more natural. Sometimes during the interviews, the co-researchers would read the list of potential probes instead of using them based on conversation. One suggestion that the youth co-researcher came up with to address this issue was to have regular meeting times to make it easier to remember and schedule other commitments, thus making more practice time for interviewing a possibility. This would also make it clearer if missed meetings were a matter of commitment or scheduling.

Resources were also a challenge. Through our reflective conversation the thesis supervisor and I discussed the implications of not being able to offer the co-researchers adequate compensation. Had I been able to offer payment comparable to minimum wage, it could have led to more commitment from both of the co-researchers and allowed them to increase this project on their priority list.

An interesting personal struggle emerged regarding resources. The co-researchers and I met at coffee shops and I often purchased coffees and a small snack for both of us based on advice from a peer of mine who participated in participatory research. My peer suggested I purchase the coffee since I (likely) have more resources than the youth and it will feel more natural if we all have a drink. I struggled with the implications of this. Would the youth feel indebted to me if I purchased their refreshments? Does this act magnify our power differences? Or is what my peer said true and it will just make things feel more comfortable? From past meetings with the thesis supervisor I knew she often pays for her supervisees or research assistant's refreshments so I took this as a common practice and did purchase the coffee, however I always felt hesitation. I feel if I had been able to say "don't worry this is covered by the project" that hesitation would be erased and my concerns mediated since it was money provided by a third party for research meetings.

**Power differences and academic hierarchy.** The youth co-researcher and I were both concerned with how the co-researcher arrangement was going to impact my grade. She shared that there were times

when she could have handled more responsibility but was hesitant to bring this up. She was worried that her involvement might have a negative impact on my thesis; this was because there were times when she felt that she was not qualified to help with this project. All the while, I was also concerned with the impact of having a co-researcher on my thesis that would be judged by an academic committee. I worried about the impact of re-scheduling meetings with co-researchers on the timeline of my thesis and if the co-researcher's participation in the interviews would negatively impact the quality of the data. The youth co-researcher and I agreed that one way to address this concern in the future is to have these reflective conversations throughout the process, specifically asking each other what is going well, what is not and potentially thinking about it separately and having specific questions that will be answered at the next meeting.

This shared concern needs to be understood in context. A master's thesis occurs under the supervision of a university professor within a department, within a faculty at a university. Community psychology is one of the five sub-disciplines in the department where I was enrolled and the number of graduate students is relatively evenly distributed amongst each area. This means that community psychology comprises only 20% of the department and the remaining 80% of the department conduct traditional, (mostly) lab-based research. The fact that the youth co-researcher and I were both concerned about the impact on grades identifies the barriers traditional university settings present for participatory research. There are many potential ways to address these barriers, such as creating a participatory stream where students can pay a different amount of tuition since their research will take longer. Another way is to "showcase" more participatory projects and their value.

**Impact on the youth co-researcher.** During reflections for this article (i.e., after the thesis was completed) between the youth co-researcher and me, she identified two main impacts. The first one is that by participating in this project she was able to see how her past experiences as a gang member can be used to benefit a community. In the past she felt a lot of regret about her decision to be in a gang and focused on how challenging it was to make the decision to leave it. After she left, and before she became involved with this project, she was very driven to solve problems without violence and help others do the same. She also started exploring how to care for herself through her health and community

involvement (such as volunteering). The youth co-researcher's reflections on her experiences have helped her to grow as a person by prioritizing her values and morals, for example, to value her family with more communication and respect. By becoming involved with this project, she was able to act on her goal to help others by using her experiences. After her involvement with this project she feels as though it had to happen in order to get to a different stage of her life where she is able to use her experiences to help other people and the community. Her involvement also allowed her to give a different voice to a stigmatized group. For example, gang members are often only seen in a negative light, whereas this role allows a positive light to be reflected from a former gang member.

The second impact the youth co-researcher experienced was a change in how she viewed service providers. Before her involvement with this project she viewed them as "just doing their job" and closed-minded (they did not understand her experiences). After the interviews she felt as though some of the service providers did understand what youth in gangs were experiencing and that they had a lot of compassion for these youth. However, there were some service providers who exemplified her previous expectations. The youth co-researcher noticed that some service providers said contradictory things like they felt service providers should be there for the youth but that the youth should not be viewed as equals, and this made her feel doubtful of their true intentions.

**Impacts on the graduate student.** Using a participatory approach shaped what I learned from the research process. One of the ways it impacted me was in terms of preparation because before we could start interviewing the participants, I had to coach the co-researchers about the interviewing process and answer any questions they may have. It also required me to be very reflexive and ask questions such as "how will the participant respond to this question differently if I ask it or if a co-researcher asks it?" One way I prepared was by creating a comprehensive list of potential probes so that the youth would feel prepared. Meeting with the co-researchers was similar to my meetings with my supervisor; I went prepared with questions, seeking feedback and guidance and open to suggestions. Given my multiple roles and the differences in experiences between the co-researchers, the thesis supervisor and me, there were ample opportunities for intergenerational learning. I was able to teach research skills and the co-researchers shared their opinions about the

process to remind me that their concerns and my concerns are not the same. I was able to practice mentoring by engaging in conversations about stereotypes of gang members and the youth illustrated their awareness of racism and socio-economic marginalization they experienced.

My experience with participatory research is very different in practice than it is in theory and this does not limit its ability to have positive impacts. The youth co-researcher expressed having a very positive experience even though her participation in this was not fully participatory. Throughout the process I wondered if I should have invited co-researchers or not. I worried I was adding too much extra work to their schedules, or that I was not sharing enough responsibility due to my concern with finishing my thesis in a timely manner. There were many times I felt that the research project might be considered tokenistic, so I tried to be as honest and clear with the co-researchers to limit this possibility (for example by using a diagram depicting various research steps illustrating where participation was possible). Though this struggle is still not over I think having the experience of striving with it was very important. By completing this thesis I faced many (sometimes conflicting) expectations from my supervisor, from the department, from the ethics board, from the participants, from the co-researchers and from myself. Struggling with and managing these kinds of demands is a skill that participatory researchers need to cultivate and for this reason, I think using a co-research approach is beneficial for master's students professional development.

**Impacts on the thesis supervisor.** As a mid-career researcher and thesis supervisor her role was more distant from the research process. She provided advice and guidance and did not engage in the research itself. This is common practice in this particular academic program where many students develop their own research projects rather than working within a project a faculty member has in progress. This practice also is common within larger research projects. In this case, the thesis supervisor shared that she missed an opportunity to engage with a new youth researcher and to learn from teaching a young community member. The thesis supervisor and the youth co-researcher met informally a few times when the co-researcher was meeting with me on campus or at my defence. She did not work directly with the co-researcher. The institutional ethics board asked for explicit terms of who would be involved and have access to data and everyone involved was trained in the Canadian Tri-Council guide to ethical

conduct of research with human participants. That being said, the thesis supervisor also expressed to me that learning outcomes may be enhanced when a learner is engaged with a near peer (Vygotsky, 1978), as the teachers/students are closer in age and ability they provide more helpful and relevant insight and advice. I was a nearer peer to the youth co-researcher than was my supervisor. One potential disadvantage of having multiple skill levels of researchers is the additional level of hierarchy or bureaucracy that occurs, especially when senior researchers maintain decision-making power. Depending on the mentoring style of the researcher, their involvement can help if s/he provides advice and guidance at appropriate times and in appropriate ways, but can hinder if the senior researcher micro-manages or provides input at inappropriate times (such as suggesting changing the method after or during data collection). (These issues were not part of my thesis research experience.)

**Impact on the research.** As previous literature has noted, there are many benefits of using participatory research (Isenberg et al., 2004) including better research questions, more accurate analysis, and community credibility. Community credibility was noteworthy for this project because the participants have the power to design how the prevention project operates and they were very inspired by the co-researcher model. By including co-researchers with my project the interview questions and analysis were infused with their input, which allowed a space for their experiences to impact others. Overall, I think the quality of the research improved due to using the co-researcher model.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the experiences documented here and are potentially applicable to students, supervisors and co-researchers (community members) considering participatory research.

**Communication, supervision, and time management.** Having clear communication was vital to my project. It would have been very difficult to arrange meeting times and interview dates with the youth co-researcher or meeting times with the thesis supervisor if I did not communicate with them via their preferred medium. Additionally, being open about availabilities and desires to participate is also important. I found having a reasonable timeline with check points contributed to a smooth process. For example, the youth co-researcher and I checked in after each “section” – analysis, data collection etcetera to ensure that it was still reasonable for both

of us to be involved. These three things (open communication, correct communication mediums, and timelines with check-in points) all contribute to an efficient process.

Reflecting on the role of academic supervision in research with co-researchers arguments may be made for their being more involved. For example, greater involvement by a supervisor may ensure that the research process is systematic and it may provide for additional learning outcomes. In the present example, we did not have any experiences or reflections by stakeholders to support that more supervisor involvement is recommended. The level of supervision was not an issue raised by any of the stakeholders, including the academic committee that examined the thesis and the community partners. From our experience, increased supervision can both strengthen and weaken impacts on education and the research (as mentioned above); further, as mentioned above, if a student’s study is not part of supervisor’s research program

An additional recommendation is to be prepared for some meetings to be cancelled, delayed or unproductive. Collaborating requires patience, but you should also know where your limit is, such as how many missed meetings are too many? I determined this along the way and although some projects may require pre-planned timelines, being able to respond to situations as they arrive and making context specific decisions was important for me and to the research. For example, at one point the youth co-researcher got a job and it became more difficult for us to meet regularly, however she remained committed so there were longer intervals between meetings but the communication, collaboration, and work continued. We also did not meet during regular office hours in order to accommodate her schedule. Considering this, as I mentioned earlier, some institutional change may be required to accommodate this process. Creating a stream in research programs that allows more time to be dedicated to relationship building and consultative meetings would create a space that is more conducive to participatory research.

**Resources.** I found it very important to know what resources were available before I began my research process. This permitted me to offer both co-researchers an honorarium up front that facilitated their determining how much time they committed. I noted what resources I wish I had to allow for future budgets to reflect more realistic costs. This is especially important as a means of highlighting the



differences in costs between traditional lab-based research and participatory research. Time is also important to consider when conducting a master's thesis. Since participatory research often takes longer than non-participatory research, whether in a lab, survey, or observations; it may require students to extend their degree at their own cost.

There are certain actions I did not think to do during my masters but these ideas could be beneficial to future students. They include creating two budgets: an idealized one where the co-researchers or participants are paid for all the time they contribute and another with the amount of an honorarium they will receive. This is one way to express to a department the need for more available funds for participatory research. Additionally, whenever you (as a graduate student) do public presentations write to the department explaining that you are holding a public presentation about your research, this allows the department to see how your research sets a positive image of the university, increasing its value for the department and the university. This should not be considered personal bragging, but a tactic to increase funds for the participants and community members who are making this possible.

**Dialogue about participatory research.** In the program in which I studied there were several opportunities for reflection provided via thought papers and time in class. That being said, I think concentrated critiques of PAR were missing. Although criticisms of PAR were brought up in class by peers and our professor, our text and readings focused on the positives. I feel articles similar to Isenberg and colleagues (2004) should be included as they illustrate inherent flaws of PR. Paradoxically, in a program that aims to develop and support critical thinking a homogenized environment where we do not critique community psychology values, research and practices seems to have emerged. There are a lot of buzzwords and feelings associated with "participatory research", however, like the concept of "empowerment" we need to delve into its nuances and determine what we actually mean when we say participatory and why using this approach is important to research. Most of our classes were framed in a PAR-first model, where PAR was considered the best way to conduct research; all other approaches were presented as falling short of the ideal. It would have been helpful to talk about how to create positive, productive, meaningful research that is not PAR. That being said, if students have not experienced participatory research then it may difficult to identify the nuances.

There are two final points about what I have learned. One matter present during the entire time I was conducting thesis research was relationship building with the youth co-researcher, and like other relationships I needed to be aware of trust, common ground and other aspects of power. We only mentioned power in passing (for example, when dividing up work) and we did not have a specific conversation dedicated to it. As Langhout (2006) points out it is important to understand where/how our various forms of power intersect and this is one area in which I could have improved. Second, although resources may constrain the possibility for a master's student to use a participatory research approach, it is possible to work with co-researchers in positive ways that are compatible with participatory methods, doing so provides opportunities to apply some of the PAR concepts and to learn from that experience.

## Conclusion

The thesis supervisor, the youth co-researcher and I worked together to create my final thesis report by each contributing our strengths. Within this paper we offered our reflections on the co-researcher method used in my thesis. Within the confines of graduate school regulations and culture, adapting aspects of PAR is one way to conduct research that is compatible with participatory methods. Throughout this entire process, from writing the proposal to conducting the reflective interviews for this paper, I have struggled with an internal debate, wondering if inviting co-researchers was a good idea. The positives I considered were the increase of youth voice and people with lived experience in my project, the practical advantages for the project, and the favourable responses I received from both of the youth co-researchers. Nevertheless, I worried about the amount of power that was shared as well as the level of change that could be created. The negatives included the inability to follow exactly a particular methodology, to provide enough time and space for the co-researchers to become critical actors, to make transformative change and the fear of tokenism that comes with knowing I have more power and thus the responsibility of sharing that power. The final questions I have not answered are is this tokenism? Is it necessary to be transformative? And does participatory research operate as an all or nothing binary?

I feel compelled to act. I feel I must have practical implication in all of my work. I know within academia it is possible to "get stuck" in debating the

merits of ontological and methodological perspectives, this is important for teaching and learning, yet we must also somehow incorporate the messy reality. We cannot allow ourselves to be stuck in the “paralysis of analysis”. It is our responsibility to put our education to work and determine if it is possible to conduct research that has positive impacts.

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