CrossMark

Youth Voice, Civic Engagement and Failure in Participatory Action Research

Kevin J. Burke[1] · Stuart Greene[2] · Maria K. McKenna[2]

Abstract In this article, we tell the story of a changing urban landscape through the eyes of the youth we work with in an ongoing after-school program and community-based research project rooted in Photovoice methodology. In particular, we focus on the work that, over the 6 years of our time with youth, has "ended up on the cutting room floor" (Paris and Winn (eds) Humanizing research: decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2014, p. xix). This attention to the work that has fallen through the cracks is a move to engage the central tenets of Humanizing Research, but it's also a call to think critically with and through the failures that emerge in work with youth. We attend specifically to an ongoing failure in our work as a way to think about the kinds of promises that are often made and broken in participatory action research. In doing so, we tease out the implications of our work with youth and the steps community-based researchers can take to navigate the challenges that can impede the goals of fostering meaningful change.

Keywords Youth participatory action research · Humanizing research · Youth civic engagement · Photovoice methodology · Failure

> What are the implications for society as a whole…if there are no longer spaces for children that are not conceived as at least partially autonomous from the market and capital-driven forces (Aitken 2001, p. 117)?

✉ Kevin J. Burke
burkekq@uga.edu

Stuart Greene
Sgreene1@nd.edu

Maria K. McKenna
MMcKenn9@nd.edu

[1] University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

[2] University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

⌖ Springer

The logic used to *build* the growing cities of the 20th-century American industrial modernity now is retooled to dismantle Cleveland and other cities of permanent de-industrialization (Rosenman et al. 2014, p. 48).

I like it because it used to flourish. It used to…It's a…tree but I'm pretty sure it is dying now; maybe the winter was too harsh for it. So it's pretty dead. And I think in some [ways] it's like MidCity[1] because it used to flourish [and] now…now it does not as much anymore. But I think it can grow back (Emile, a youth researcher).

Introduction

Context and Failure

Our work with youth spans the course of 6 years and multiple community organizations. The genesis of the project we discuss here developed when a not-for-profit focused on neighborhood engagement invited the authors—a group of three academics whose work focuses on literacy, youth engagement, and ethical research with young people—to facilitate what would be a small and brief Photovoice (Lopez et al. 2005; Wang 2008) project with youth in the community. The not-for-profit's goal for this project was deceptively simple: develop and implement "small" neighborhood-centered community change projects with children that might arise from discussions of photos taken by youth, the likes of which they thought might include repairing broken sidewalks, reporting malfunctioning streetlights, or neighborhood clean-up gatherings. Six years and eight cohorts later we are all most certainly better for diving into this work, as we hope our youth co-researchers are but we have come to understand better the time-consuming, ethically-challenging, and sometimes heart-rending paths that emerge from this type of work.

Early in our work in MidCity with this not-for-profit, we were fortunate to connect with a local community center that serves middle and high school youth and sits adjacent to a small city park—which we'll call Reilly Park here. At the time of our collaboration, 6 years ago, we partnered with the Center to provide youth with a semester long experience in photography, oral history and data collection about the surrounding neighborhood. As a result of map-making, collage, photography, and the collective coding of data, the youth decided that in support of the local community, they wanted to embark on a rejuvenation of Reilly Park. Because we believe a great deal in the 'action' component of youth participatory action research, and perhaps, if we are really honest because of a great deal of naiveté (or if we are even more honest, hubris, on our part) we took the task on. We were certain that collectively we would be able to help our young people transform a community park without too much trouble. "Of course," we told the youth, "it will take time to figure everything out." Little did we know.

---

[1] All names have been changed.

After 6 years of work with youth in MidCity (Greene et al. 2013, 2014, 2016; Burke et al. 2016), Reilly Park is still not complete. Both basketball courts have been cemented though someone will have to volunteer to line them; both hoops are up but a mound of dirt, leftover from the excavation and leveling sits where the soccer field is meant to be; the main pavilion and sunshade has just been erected; permanent barbecue grates remain uninstalled. The soccer field has been surveyed but needs to be leveled and, due to questions about upkeep is likely simply to remain an open field; the new fence and landscaping the children designed remains a dream; the walking path meant for the elderly (the benches placed strategically for periodic rest) might yet happen. It might not.

The work done at and on the park has been cobbled together through a number of different efforts: small grant writing; donations of airtime from a local radio station; fleeting publicity from some local celebrities; a donation of concrete; and, most importantly, the commitment of a few local residents who believe in the project enough to push it forward by enlisting the help of architects, surveyors, and union contractors who have volunteered their time, labor, and materials. The benevolence of a woefully understaffed and underfunded city parks department has been crucial as well. A great deal of time has passed since the kids walked with us in the neighborhood, took photographs, and coded data about what community change would be most valued in the face of the rapid displacement of residents to make way for new development pushing south from a neighboring university (Burke and Greene 2015). In fact, some of the original youth participants are halfway through college. Now, despite all of their work, and in contrast to conversations with the mayor where promises to "help" were rendered, only half a park has been completed. Many years ago, we asked one skeptical youth working with us, "You don't think we can really do this, do you?" Her reply was a simple "No." We think of this exchange often as we continue to try to hold ourselves accountable for a promise we made so many years ago, about a project we didn't fully understand the dimensions of from the start, and a set of political and economic forces often out of our control.

Interestingly, just a half a mile to the north of Reilly Park, on our university campus, a four hundred million dollar expansion to a football stadium (adding three full buildings to the existing structure) progresses along without pause. The youth attending the community center watch with a mixture of awe and curiosity about how this expansion is possible. This must be a reminder of "the connection between space, place and power in terms of how children's local lived experiences are affected by global economic restructuring and change" (Aitken 2001, p. 15); it's also a reminder of the limits of political will and researcher capacity.

In this article, we tell the story of a changing urban landscape through the eyes of the youth we work with in an ongoing after-school program and community-based research project rooted in Photovoice methodology. This is an amalgam of years of work, including but not limited to our experience falling a bit short at Reilly Park. Our ongoing work is to engage youth in the revitalization of the city where they live and go to school but also, and equally important, to have youth develop a powerful personal narrative of themselves as caring and capable community change agents. Simultaneously we recognize our position, not simply as facilitators of this program but also as researchers who aim to explicate more fully the conditions, challenges,

and value of youth participatory action research. In this piece we share, in detail, an account of a specific story (of Reilly Park) drawn from this work embedded in a more holistic reflection on our years of community-based research with local youth.

Much of the existing research in the arena of youth civic engagement and participatory action research focuses—and we think rightly—on the successes of supporting and helping to cultivate youth voices for the sake of civic engagement (e.g. Fox et al. 2010); less work exists examining the forces that work against the valuing of youth voice, even in the face of our highest ideals as researchers. Our writing here is, thus, about some of the many barriers to doing humanizing research (Paris 2011) particularly in the current policy moment. This is, in essence, a story of kids who succeeded and adults who failed. In telling this story, we affirm the capacity of youth to create meaningful change and suggest ways that researchers can navigate the challenges that can impede efforts to foster youth's health and well-being in the ongoing development of neighbourhoods.

Photovoice and the Value of the Cutting Room Floor

Kaplan's (2013) use of Photovoice with urban youth throws into relief the extent to which youth recognize spatial inequality, and the failures of policy to distribute wealth and opportunity equitably. At the same time, the photographs youth take help viewers see the transformative effects of Photovoice as they use images of their neighborhoods to tell stories of race, class, and power. But these pictures also demonstrate the value of visual ethnography in bringing youth "out of the shadows." Youth need both educational and rhetorical spaces (see Roberts et al. 2008) that give them the ability to engage in critical, creative analyses of their lived experiences, while also resisting others' constructions of who they are. These spaces, we think, are educational opportunity zones and we can find them in conversation on sidewalks, in public parks, really anywhere youth are engaged in discussions about what they value and where they find inspiration and truth. Matthews and Limb (1999) make the important observation that sidewalks, street corners, and parks serve as "cultural gateways" that promote social interaction and enable youth to "create their own identities." These are spaces that youth frequently come into contact with "in ways not imagined by adults" (pp. 70, 78).

Youth's perspectives on what it means to flourish are especially important at a time when neighborhood schools are disappearing and policies have eroded public spaces (Greene 2013). Like Aitken (2001), we are concerned about "the endless carving up and claiming of space by different individuals and constituencies and how this process disenfranchises young people" (p. 11). Indeed, youth complain about the erosion of public spaces affected by community developers insensitive to their needs (Matthews and Limb 1999, p. 78). We are doubly concerned about this for youth of color as the national climate surrounding race and racial identity remains a contested and often dangerous and deadly space. Importantly, Paris and Winn (2014), in their compendium of Humanizing Research express a concern for what "ends up on the cutting room floor" in the reportage of work that sets 'out' into the community. They suggest that we might better:

> Understand how our research can be further dedicated to understanding not only how inequality happens…but also how we can be part of solutions that support equality within our research practices and in the lives of the young people and communities we learn from. (p. xix)

This article is partially a gathering of the rich data taken from our "cutting room floor" which made it there, in some part, because we have been much more likely to report on our successes than our failures. However, as Paris and Winn (2014) remind us as researchers studying youth agency in urban contexts, we need accounts of the ways in which work with youth that proposes values such as voice and civic engagement might just fall short in the application of 'real' implications for kids beyond the publication of articles.

Space and Place

As Shedd (2015) points out,

> People both shape and are shaped by places. This is certainly true for the physical boundaries circumscribed by the paths we travel (such as arterial highways, railroad tracks, and viaducts), and it is just as true for the social boundaries of race-ethnicity, class, and gender that we draw upon ourselves and others. (p. 9)

Through our work we continually wonder (as we wander) with youth, about the logic of an ever more powerful market economy that often whether inadvertently or intentionally dismantles the very fabric of community. Because of this research with youth, we share Giroux's (2010) concern that "as the sovereignty of the market displaces state sovereignty"—the public commons in essence—"children are no longer viewed as an important social investment or as a central marker for the moral life of the nation" (p. 42).

Bingham (2008) makes an argument that "relation is…a *necessary* condition for the existence of authority" (p. 12). Much of our work is about the negotiation of relational space and youth coming to see themselves as authorities in some certain ways regarding civic issues. We find hope in the development of these relational spaces and share here a story concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of young people to develop their life trajectories. But we also seek to spend time elucidating forces working against the process of building those experiences for and with youth, again, while resisting the tendency in working with local communities to come from a place of brokenness as the basis for explaining community change (Tuck 2009).

One story we tell—or a series of stories by way of avoiding the danger of a unified and simplistic narrative (Adichie 2009)—is of Reilly Park, a small parcel of land at the edge of a gentrifying university community that is full of its own contradictory narratives. Reilly is a derelict park lacking in updates since the mid 1970s in the heart of an historically African American neighborhood; a vision of inclusive space, articulated by middle school youth at a local community center, meant to gather neighbors, to accommodate the differently abled, and to make

memory and unity newly possible; and a half-built place, a publicity stunt left behind, articulating the margins created by neoliberal market policy in a rust-belt Midwestern city gentrifying in fits and starts, and largely unsure of the use-value of public land. Amidst youth's efforts to create change at the locus of this park is another story of the success and failure of public–private partnerships, the appropriation of youth voices to serve public (and if we're honest, research) narratives, kids seeking spatial justice, and adult community partners working tirelessly to bring about change. And in the end, it's the story of the ways in which humanizing research (Paris and Winn 2014) can succeed and fail simultaneously despite our best intentions working with "youth and communities who are marginalized by systems of inequality based on race, ethnicity, language, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and other categories of difference and (in) equality" (p. xv).

Youth Participatory Action Research

In the remainder of this article, building on our narrative of Reilly Park we share some of the ways that youth participated in out-of-school spaces that cultivate democratic practices that are inclusive and foster civic engagement. We have adopted a model of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) that positions "youth" as "assets and resources that should be called upon to participate in community and social affairs" (Jennings et al. 2006, p. 35). YPAR and Youth Empowerment both aptly push research (and our thinking as researchers) into areas that do work that is "more than critique and analysis" because we firmly believe in the "need to develop through literacy research and teaching useful and strategic ways to combat racism in its various forms, providing hope for our students whose life chances are limited by current policy" (Greene 2008, p. 6). As apprentices in the research process, youth are empowered to use the tools of research to challenge whose knowledge matters. YPAR gives legitimacy to youth's experiential knowledge as a lens through which to define problems that have a direct impact on their day-to-day experiences. In this way, YPAR "carves out a space" (Bautista, et al. 2013, p. 2) for youth to share what they know as experts and renders youth as subjects—as opposed to objects in traditional research—who can examine their daily lives with the goal of creating meaningful change with other community members. Thus, Youth Participatory Action Research takes advantage of youth's position in the community and insights into the assets and challenges facing a given community or neighborhood.

Youth as a term is itself politically charged. We are reminded of Bishop's (2015) point in her own work on youth activism and organizing. As she explains, the very idea of youth acknowledges "the power of young people not as 'kids' to be controlled and 'children' to be quieted but as growing adults who possess the capacity to be leaders in the present" (p. 2). In writing about youth voices (e.g. Greene et al. 2013, 2014, 2016), we recognize the tendency in research to ignore the intersections of race, class, and gender in characterizing youth perspectives, to overlook the ways we can reinscribe relations of power through the use of youth's perspectives in advancing an argument, and that research on and with youth often

assumes a universal childhood that speaks in one voice (James 2007). Thus we seek to explain the particularities of youth's experiences in our work here. In positioning youth as viable community agents, as young people with a vision of what community and education should and could be, we acknowledge their keen sense of justice, powerful observational skills, and their ability work as a community. We also acknowledge the regular and painful marginalization within schools and communities of these same youth and share the struggles that emanate from this marginalization.

Youth Perceptions of Space

Walking (quite literally) side by side with our youth co-researchers is essential to our understanding of what types of spaces and activities are needed for children to develop authentic visions of their civic selves. We understand our neighborhood walks with children as a collaborative process of mental mapmaking about their community. We are reminded of one example when Lindsay, a middle-schooler led a small group of undergraduates, involved in a class related to our research work, through the neighborhood. They entered the historic city cemetery, which houses monuments dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century, including a memorial for a former vice president of the United States, who was a prominent citizen of the city. This cemetery was also one of the earliest integrated spaces in the community. Struck by the tumbledown nature of some of the headstones, Lindsay reflected upon her great grandmother:

> I wonder where my great-granny is. My mom's side. Her, gosh, her name was Adie Hawkings and her parents were slaves. She lived to be like 90 or 91. She, in her younger years, was probably a slave as well. I always wondered what her name stood for. I knew her my entire life, ever since I was a baby so that's why her death affected me.

The undergraduates remained silent, perhaps unable to come up with the words to mitigate Lindsay's seeming grief, but perhaps also considering the literal historical closeness of the institution of slavery for this young woman, and for them. They continued walking and Lindsay commented on a grave that had fallen over and wished someone would fix it. As they left the cemetery and headed back to the community center, Lindsay connected the experience to her memory of reading about the Holocaust in school asserting that everyone should have a proper burial. In the silence that followed, the pain of not knowing where her great-granny was, hung like a cloud.

Having the freedom to wander, and the bond of trust with her undergraduate partners, allowed Lindsay to make connections to a painful family past (one literally enslaved) with a beloved relative while slowly building toward a sense that the civic space of the cemetery ought to be restored out of respect for the dead. Additionally, this experience allowed Lindsay to continue the conversation at later points in the program, providing opportunities to compare other young people's experiences with those same spaces to her own. This link to the past is hauntingly resonant as the cemetery falls into disarray.

Walking around in the neighborhood, another youth partner, Clark, quietly whispered, "ghetto." The road was strewn with broken glass and plastic bottles, while cars barreled down the street with no regard for pedestrians. Clark pointed at the abandoned lots and unkempt houses as proof of a broken neighborhood, of a neighborhood he would never choose to be a part of. The skinny chain fences that separated us from angry dogs were sad symbols for Clark, as they signaled the entrapment of animals. The street itself, its name in crime blotters and on the tongues of scolds, symbolizes poverty for the rest of the city.

When asked, Clark tried to answer how poverty transforms a community into a ghost town. He noted that, without jobs, people must leave their homes. Consequently, without jobs to entice people to move in, these houses deteriorate and reflect the neighborhood's diminishing value.

When we have asked youth in MidCity to take pictures of things they thought could be improved, they have photographed the crumbling sidewalks in older, less well-kept parts of the city while also commenting on the clean sidewalks that surrounded newer houses and developments. For them, these new houses served as a boundary between the university and the older neighborhood where many of their friends live. As the larger houses closed in, youth in our research project worried at the diffusion of (the demolition of) the memories of spaces they'd shared with family and friends.

Gentrification brings into focus a set of contradictions around hope and loss that the youth grappled with in the photographs they took and in their analyses of how changes in the urban landscape could provide advantage for more people. That is, the youth could not always reconcile the seemingly inefficient use of space to build large single-family homes that often existed in close proximity to abandoned houses that could have been "rehabilitated," to use the language of the MidCity's own report on economic development. In a conversation between Jana and Shondra, two middle school aged co-researchers, Jana pointed out a tumbledown house that many of the other children also noticed with a puzzled, questioning tone. For Jana, this was a house that developers simply left behind amid the newly gentrified spaces just blocks from the community center where we worked and equidistant from Reilly Park. "Part of the porch, and it's like broken off of the roof and it looks pretty dangerous for like anybody who goes up to the door and they could get seriously hurt." Jana assumed that the "city" should take responsibility for doing something about this.

Youth's sense of equity and fairness served as a powerful lens through which they perceived changes in the city, particularly how space is used and the displacement that has fragmented their spaces. Jana, Leah, and Kaden expressed their concern that the poor are being pushed out and complained that developers were "buying up everything." Gentrified spaces may provide hope for some, but Kaden expressed a mature sense of loss when he shared the photograph he took of the empty lot where a house his mother rented once stood. The now-empty lot sits across from stores and next to the house that inexplicably has not been torn down. Kaden took a picture of the classic car that sat in the driveway of this house. He recalled seeing the car there when he was growing up and the memories of a place

where he felt loved and nurtured, where he could play outside and feel safe, and where he shared a meal that "tasted like heaven."

> My house got torn down 'cause of the university. There was only like five other houses there that had to move. They wanted to extend their land and so we had to move cause we couldn't pay rent….There was like two across the street and three of us and we used to have a huge backyard and we used to have a big tree and we could walk, like, I was sayin' the other day, a couple days ago, we could walk back home from [the community center], so it wasn't very far. (Focus Group, October 9, 2012)

When he described having to move, Kaden pointed to the economics that have contributed to change—that owners of rental properties raised rents that low-income families could not afford and then sold their properties for a profit given the changing market. Thus families like Kaden's were, and are, expendable regardless of their historical ties to civic spaces.

Reilly Park and the (False) Promises of Youth Participatory Action Research

Kaden was a member of a cohort of twelve youth who presented their proposal to refurbish Reilly Park to the members of a local neighborhood council many years ago. We recall the subdued excitement of the youth. They were halfway between the roles they knew—being kids at the community center—and roles they were trying on as community leaders and advocates. Leah explained to council members, "We learned a lot about becoming a researcher… viewing things around the neighborhood and deciding which is the good part or which is the bad part. So we started reviewing things around the neighborhood, doing observations, and brainstorming." Joseph urged the adults to think about the value of a park in the neighborhood. "If you see kids playing at the park, it will attract more people to move into the area. The community can use this as a place to exercise and hang around and meet other people. That's what I want the park to be like." A week later the youth met with the Mayor of the city who encouraged the kids to work with the Parks Department to develop their plans for Reilly Park.

Toward the goal of submitting a more well-developed proposal, youth met with a landscape architect to learn about the kinds of plants, trees, and shrubs they could plant; discussed their ideas with neighbors whose houses encircled the park; and met with an architect who provided them with a sample rendering and some tracing paper, and told youth to draw their own plans for what they wanted, including benches where young and old could sit together, a basketball court, a community garden, a sandbox, and a water feature. The architect incorporated the youth's plans into a single rendering and submitted it to the Parks Department where it was approved a year after youth met with the Mayor. Soon after, youth garnered support from a local television station and the adjacent university helped call attention to fund-raising efforts with a televised public announcement featuring the coach of the men's basketball team. In the middle of a press conference called at the local community center, the coach promised to hold a practice with his team at the to-be-

new basketball court at Reilly Park in the ensuing summer. Everyone was abuzz with the possibility of youth and youth research.

That was then. Six years later and we still have a park that is very much a work in progress, some skeptical youth, and a few steadfast supporters. We reflect on our own naiveté, engaging in a project that was certain to lead to the vagaries of general contracting, permits, permissions, and endless fundraising and realize that though our youth partners might have learned the value of telling stories, of doing research, and something about their own agency they might also have learned that though they had voice, ultimately they didn't have much power. We think, to some degree, that much of youth participatory work presumes that the value of our work is in engagement with the process (the photography, the guided walks, the coding, the discussions, the poetry). And we have long been proponents of that process, one that encourages youth to take on democratic responsibility and social participation. What we argue here, however, in this instance, is that the product also matters as to promises made to kids, implicit, explicit or otherwise.

Discussion and Implications

Amid the changing landscape of gentrified spaces, youth can help us to re-orient our understanding of place and community based research: what it means to have a sense of belonging, the effects of displacing children and their families, youth's need for safe spaces where they can flourish, and a sense of what is a just and equitable use of space that can serve the common good. Hearing their voices through the images and texts they produce is doubly important at a time when researchers (e.g. Miller 2012; Neuman and Celano 2001) have begun to map spatial inequality and demonstrate the extent to which low-income minority youth do not have access to important material resources that can help them flourish in and out of school. Youth help us see both the strengths and value of real spaces and the imagined spaces that nurture their hopes and life paths. Our youth co-researchers also help us realize our responsibility as ethical researchers to be patient with the processes (and outcomes), to "follow the child" as Maria Montessori might say, and to remain with projects, spaces, and children even when the "research" might feel complete.

In their Youth Participatory Action Research project focusing on the school-to-prison pipeline, Winn and Winn (2016) call attention to youth's uncertainty when asked to take the lead on defining issues and guiding the group. In fact, they point out that youth resist taking leadership roles under adults' guidance, especially when youth may not fully trust adults' motives for collaborating as partners in research. Others (Greene et al. 2013) provide similar evidence of resistance in their Photovoice project when youth did not take photographs until they developed relationships with the researchers. We sympathize with these youth perspectives even more fully after our experiences with Reilly Park and are still puzzling out how it is one goes about being both honest about power and privilege with young people while also seeking towards hope with them.

We have seen firsthand "the pushing out and keeping out" of urban and minority occupants in order to add to the attractiveness of city living (Hall et al. 2014). The

result may be to remove poverty from the urban core by removing minority, low-wage earners and their respective living spaces, but little is done to distribute resources more equitably. This is a theme we encounter in children's photographs and their perceptions that new housing should go hand-in-hand with making provisions for the poor and the homeless.

The stories that youth tell, particularly in spaces neglected by cities working to reinvent themselves in the image of a neoliberal economic model, can serve as a counternarrative with possibilities for creating sites of agential change. Their stories constitute a call for action and are especially important counternarratives given the changing demographics of youth spaces in and out of schools.

Our work with youth is also a story about youth activism in a context of government bureaucracy, public–private partnerships, and shifting economic policies that distribute material resources away from communities with the greatest needs. These resources include more public spaces and affordances, like artistic undertakings, to do the hard work of creating relationships and a nourishing community, quality education, housing, and healthcare. But while helping to give voice to the tensions that exist between what is and what could be, we would be remiss if we did not also take responsibility for helping kids navigate—and sometimes our failure to help them navigate—the economic and institutional barriers that they confront each and every day (see, for example, Weinstein and West 2012). Low (2011) puts it well when she observes that teachers and after-school programs can forge connections between home and school in order to foster children's emerging sense of leadership, creativity, initiative, and civic responsibility as a form of social action. It is important that these things are "recognized and supported in both places" (p. 151). How do you prepare kids to be adults, to be civically engaged in messy spaces?

We have learned from youth that it is not enough to provide opportunities for analysis and a critique of the discursive tensions between what is and what could be (Weinstein and West 2012) in a changing political economy. Six years later, the youth remain puzzled and at times disillusioned at our stalled park. While they can see that some progress has been made to install the equipment that was purchased, in their minds they didn't plan half a park, they planned holistically for the community. Ultimately, this is a story of how we as community-based researchers have, in our failure to ensure that the park is finished, even amidst ongoing efforts, betrayed their vision and by extension the youth, to some degree.

This is also a story of a beleaguered public parks department downsized, through disinvestment and forgone tax revenue, and the role of maintaining existing parks in the city. Finally, this is a story of competing interests among stakeholders who in many ways have been motivated by good intentions: the community organization that sponsored the project, the community leaders who continue to help prod the process to completion, the radio station, the university, and the youth. Throughout this endeavor, we struggled to ensure that the youth's voices remained at the center of the project, reminding those with power that completing the project would send a powerful message about what matters and in whose interests. This too is a lesson in collaboration, patience, and recognizing our own limitations.

What to Do

In the end, we can, in our role as literacy and community based researchers in urban spaces particularly, help advocate for community-school partnerships to foster the health and well-being of communities. These are communities, or neighborhoods, that promote social interaction and cohesion, that provide youth and their families with safe spaces, and that ensure access to resources such as grocery stores, parks, pre-schools, affordable housing, and healthcare. Thus the work of economic development would focus on the quality of life in a given neighborhood, equity, and the social impacts on youth and families (cf. Fainstein 2010). Sharkey's (2013) work examining the ways in which "places are passed on from parents to children" (p. 6) points to an ethos—if not exactly a method—to be borrowed: if we're to think about community-based research and youth participatory action research in particular as a mode for addressing the needs of communities, then the work of researchers has to involve not only practice and intervention, but time. That is, if oppression and segregation result from generational effects, as Sharkey's data indicate, then we probably need to deeply consider humanizing research approaches rooted in "reciprocity and respect" (Paris and Winn 2014, p. xvi) as requiring commitment over time. This has the added benefit of building the literature in YPAR longitudinally, providing robust experiences (data, stories) of the ways in which kids in particular, change over time in their thinking about community, engagement, citizenship, and literacy.

Of particular concern is the need to create the conditions to foster youth's capacity for agency. Capacity derives from having cultural and social capital borne out of having access to networks of power, knowledge of how systems work, and a sense of leadership. With little commitment for any comprehensive economic development in urban neighborhoods, our efforts can be directed toward developing social capital by collaborating with youth and helping them learn to navigate the vast webs of social capital so many others take for granted. Together, we can begin to shift the conversation from the extent to which economic development can create wealth, often in the context of private interests, to the ways development can enhance the well-being of a neighborhood, foster a sense of ownership, and provide the grounds for social action that protect the interests of those who live in a given neighborhood community. The question that remains, of course, is what does work that builds this capital look like, particularly over time in answer to our stated concerns about intergenerational effects, and the disenfranchisement of youth broadly speaking?

Winn (2016)—in a follow-up to research first initiated more than a decade prior to this most recent publication—writes of her forays into a group of youth "power writers" in New York City as a fundamental rethinking of work from "'damage centered research'" to the "humanizing research framework" (p. 4) that has come to color her thinking about community-based literacy work. Her "multi-sited ethnographic case study of Power Writing alumni" (p. 5) fills a gap in extant Youth Participatory Action Research and work with youth in community engagement by positing a long-term relationship. She also stresses the importance of using narrative accounts to measure the impact of a program whose effects belie

measurement by traditional (perhaps neater, if positivist) means. One of the barriers to longitudinal studies in participatory research is at the root of the action component of the work: often enough, at the end of an experience, there is a discrete project that is undertaken and, that action having occurred, co-researchers (youth and adults alike) move on. A second difficulty lies in the intensity of relationship that must be built in order to properly respond to the local context in which researchers work. Kids grow up, they move on; researchers, similarly, find other interests and as these tend to be scholars who aren't intrigued by the kind of data that might be gathered by sending (relatively) easy to submit surveys of ongoing engagement, say, YPAR often can be a collection of small studies, time-bound, whose lasting effects remain mystified if not wholly impossible to discern.

One example of research that seeks to mitigate the difficulty of one-off work is exemplified by Guajardo et al. (2016) who conduct *platicas* (retrospective conversations) with former members of the Llano Grande Center in Texas. What they find is that the "teaching and learning visions of Llano Grande" (p. 171), which inextricably link "self, family, and community," continue to inform the developing critical consciousness of its former youth members. These retrospective interviews (i.e., *platicas*) allow former participants to discuss their memories of community engagement work and to posit the effects such work had on their life trajectories. This is valuable work. What's missing in the models of each of these long-term studies is a process-tracing mechanism to look at change in real time, over a course of a number of years. Irizarry and Brown (2014) for instance conducted a multi-year project in schools that looked at the ways in which underserved youth, particularly youth of color, came to be reflective about and critical of dehumanizing approaches to teaching (and containing) students in their schools.

Reilly Park is a work in progress that may very well be completed, and we have learned some important lessons. To help navigate some of the challenges of completing a park within a changing political economy, we have come to understand the importance of forging connections among different stakeholders at every step of the way. This is especially the case in working together with residents in a given neighborhood, city leaders, a neighborhood association, if one exists, and the program or non-profit that underwrites the project. After all, dialogue and the building of relationships are at the heart of community-based research that affirms the interests of different groups in a mutually beneficial project. We learned the important lesson that we could not take these relationships for granted nor could we entirely avoid disagreement or misunderstanding. Still, we learned that having data and the vision of youth lent credibility to our project to refurbish Reilly Park.

We have since followed the relative success of the "The Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project" (Esliger et al. 2012), which uses Photovoice and surveys as data points to assess neighborhoods in 5 primary areas: (a) attractiveness, (b) diversity of destinations and density of resources that are readily accessible, (c) pedestrian access, (d) safety from crime, and (e) safety from traffic. The researchers in The Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project used a 227-item survey to audit the assets and challenges in neighborhoods that can serve as a tool for identifying the physical characteristics of neighborhoods that support physical activity, such as parks, walking and bicycle paths, and street design that foster social interaction and

cohesion. The resulting social networks help to ensure that youth have what they need because diverse groups of children can share vital information about what they know with one another. Researchers assessing the Smart Cities, Healthy Kids project conclude that a data-based approach to community development based on youth perspectives is critical to urban development and planning.

Specifically, they found that adopting a newer neighborhood design pattern promotes physical activity, increases the opportunities for social interaction within the neighborhood and improves safety (Esliger et al. 2012). We have adopted such an approach in working with youth and, in doing so, we have increased community conversations that have led to formal proposals for a community garden, a cross-walk at a busy interaction where we work with youth, a new park, and a literacy program. But the reality is that each part of the proposal reflects a different set of interests and it has become essential to ensure that everyone has a voice, that we address whose interests are served by pursuing one project or another, and that each stakeholder believes his or her voice matters.

By identifying what we see as essential resources, we take an ecological perspective (Greene 2013) to understand the ways in which youth navigate spaces of opportunity and, at times, risks, within the built environment. This ecological approach has the potential to support kids' ability to flourish in and out of school (i.e., standard literacy practices, critical literacy, and civic engagement). It is especially important, we have learned, to place kids at the center of any effort to design the built environment. Young people can be agents of change, but agency can only be realized within a context of competing interests and power that enables youth to participate as citizens with access to opportunity (Matthews and Limb 1999). Thus informing community-based research are what we see as three essential components: (a) equitable power-sharing in planning, developing, and implementing a plan for action; (b) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes; and (c) participation in sociopolitical processes that tease out dimensions of power to affect change within the political economy of a city where economic development often takes priority over the health and well-being of children and families.

As a recent Schott report (2016) suggests, the challenges we all "face reside in identifying and delivering the broad array of supports needed to change the climate in which people live and learn." At the same time, Tate (2008) admonishes us to hear "the structured silences," to "hear the voices and document the experiences of traditionally underserved children and families" in spatially isolated neighborhoods in cities across the country (p. 397). If we see the interconnected nature of education within a broader ecology of children's lives, then it is important to see that our efforts to address the problems they face cannot be limited to a single story. Nor can we ignore the assets that children and families possess that we can build upon as partners to ensure that they have access to healthy lives.

We often ask youth to build their model of a flourishing community out of blocks, and we have been struck by the extent to which they focus on connectedness within a neighborhood. Relationships and sustainability often rise to the top of their priority list. In the words of one of our youth partners, "Parks and outside spaces are important cornerstones of community because they provide spaces of play for

people to interact outside their personal home spaces." Another youth co-researcher emphasized the need to create spaces where "a school and a church are within walking distance of a residential neighborhood. [A flourishing community] needs a homeless shelter and an animal shelter, a library and a bank. It needs a grocery store and a monument [to signify hope], and a rehabilitation center. It needs efficient public transportation and a gym." As we have seen in the design of Reilly Park as well, youth can change the nature of the conversation about what they need.

To return to one of the questions we asked at the outset, "what if there are no longer spaces for children that are not conceived as at least partially autonomous from the market and capital-driven forces?" The answer rests on accepting equity as a value, as the youth we work with do, and to believe in their capacity to ensure that cities, as Emile, our youth co-researcher told us, "can grow back" to meet the needs of all children and families.

We close with a cautionary tale about our community partnership. Our partnership originated with the goal of engaging youth in community development via material projects such as building a park. While we have tried to honor this goal as community-based researchers, along the way we learned that youth, also important stakeholders, value connectedness and relationships equally as much as any tangible outcome. We understand more fully that creating relational spaces is as important as developing the infrastructure of a neighborhood. That said, this doesn't allow us "off the hook" for promises we make explicitly or implicitly in our work with young people nor does it mean that we focus exclusively on the youth engaged in our work. Our co-researchers remind us that we err in our efforts to build community if we ignore the stories of people who inhabit the neighborhoods where we invest our resources or time, particularly if we overlook the fact that communities already exist well before we begin our work as community-based researchers. Educators, researchers, and community activists, alike, understand the nature of communities by building relationships and listening in respectful, humanizing ways to what our neighbors believe, think, and value. And we respect those relationships by not jumping ship when the going gets tough. Otherwise the changes that we advocate for may only mirror our own beliefs about what constitutes a healthy environment or reify the precise structures of power we seek to challenge in our work. Therefore, our writing can best serve others by giving "testimony to how community building begins in building from the existing community" (Zhong 2016) and the ways that place-making and forging relationships changes us all, not just in material ways.

In closing it's worth returning to our skeptical (pragmatic?) youth co-researcher who, at the outset of the Reilly Park project told us, in no uncertain terms, that she didn't believe we'd pull the thing off. In essence we've come to believe that we don't blame her—and her peers who may have been less blunt—for being skeptical given how frequently adults ignore children's ideas and how our political economy has contributed to persistent inequality that she has seen in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods where she has been raised. Why would she be expected to be optimistic, particularly given youth's experience of university-connected people dropping in and out of her life at their convenience? But we lose the opportunity to make a difference if we don't try. And this means helping her and others understand

the reality of power but also the ways that a specific "ask" with a coalition of different groups can help to leverage change. We have to push against structural inequality even in the face of failure while holding out, realistically to youth—and this was our mistake at the beginning of this all, we think—the possibility that direct action might not produce the intended effect, even as it causes any number of much harder to measure, effects, changes, differences, and possibilities in and around youth and the people and communities that work with them and on their behalf.

References

Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of a single story [Video file]*. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.

Aitken, S. C. (2001). *Geographies of young people: The morally contested spaces of identity* (Vol. 14). London: Routledge.

Bautista, M., Bertrand, M., Morrell, E., Scorza, D., & Matthews, C. (2013). Participatory action research and city youth: Methodological insights from the council of youth research. *Teachers College Record, 115*(10), 1–23.

Bingham, C. (2008). *Authority is relational: Rethinking educational empowerment*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Bishop, E. (2015). *Becoming activist: Critical literacy and youth organizing*. New York: Peter Lang.

Burke, K. J., & Greene, S. (2015). Participatory action research, youth voices, and civic engagement. *Language Arts, 92*(6), 389–402.

Burke, K. J., Greene, S., & McKenna, M. K. (2016). A critical geographic approach to youth civic engagement: Reframing educational opportunity zones and the use of public spaces. *Urban Education, 51*(2), 143–169. doi:10.1177/0042085914543670.

Esliger, D., Sherar, L., & Muhajarine, N. (2012). Smart cities, healthy kids: The association between neighbourhood design and children's physical activity and time spent sedentary. *Canadian Journal of Public Health/Revue Canadienne de Santé Publique, 103*(3), 22–28.

Fainstein, S. (2010). *The just city*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Fox, M., Mediratta, K., Ruglis, J., Stoudt, B., Shah, S., & Fine, M. (2010). Critical youth engagement: Participatory action research and organizing. In L. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta, & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research and policy on civic engagement with youth* (pp. 621–650). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Giroux, H. A. (2010). *Youth in a suspect society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Greene, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Literacy as a civil right: Reclaiming social justice in literacy teaching and learning*. New York: Peter Lang.

Greene, S. (2013). *Race, community, and urban schools: Partnering with African American families*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Greene, S., Burke, K. J., & McKenna, M. (2013). Forms of voice: Exploring the empowerment of youth at the intersection of art and action. *Urban Review, 92*(6), 389–402.

Greene, S., Burke, K., & McKenna, M. (2014). Reframing spatial inequality: Youth, photography and a changing urban landscape. In H. R. Hall, C. C. Robinson, & A. Kohli (Eds.), *Uprooting urban America: Multidisciplinary perspectives on race, class & gentrification* (pp. 107–130). New York: Peter Lang.

Greene, S., Burke, K. J., & McKenna, M. K. (2016). When words fail, art speaks: Learning to listen to youth stories in a community photovoice project. In S. Greene, K. J. Burke, & M. K. McKenna (Eds.), *Youth voices, public spaces, and civic engagement* (pp. 235–258). New York: Routledge.

Guajardo, F. J., Guajardo, M. A., & Cantu, M. (2016). Where are they now? An intergenerational conversation on the work of the LLano grande center for research and development. In S. Greene, K. J. Burke, & M. K. McKenna (Eds.), *Youth voices, public spaces, and civic engagement* (pp. 169–185). New York: Routledge.

Hall, H. R., Robinson, C. C., & Kohli, A. (Eds.). (2014). *Uprooting urban America: Multidisciplinary perspectives on race, class & gentrification*. New York: Peter Lang.

Irizarry, J. G., & Brown, T. M. (2014). Humanizing research in dehumanizing spaces: The challenges and opportunities of conducting participatory action research with youth in schools. In D. Paris & M. T. Winn (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 63–80). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist, 109,* 261–272.

Jennings, L. B., Parra-Medina, D. M., Hilfinger-Messias, D. K., & McLoughlin, K. (2006). Toward a critical social theory of youth empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice, 14*(1–2), 31–55.

Kaplan, E. B. (2013). *We live in the shadow: Inner-city kids tell their stories through photographs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lopez, E. D. S., Eng, E., Robinson, N., & Wang, C. C. (2005). Photovoice as community-based participatory research method: A case study with african american breast cancer survivors in rural eastern north carolina. In B. A. Israel, E. Eng, A. J. Schulz, & E. A. Parker (Eds.), *Methods for conducting community-based participatory research for health*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

Low, B. (2011). *Slam school: Learning through conflict in the hip-hop and spoken word classroom*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Matthews, H., & Limb, M. (1999). Defining the agenda for the geography of children: Review and prospect. *Progress in Human Geography, 23*(1), 61–90.

Miller, P. (2012). Mapping educational opportunity zones: A geospatial analysis of neighborhood block groups. *Urban Review, 44*(2), 189–218.

Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*(1), 8–26.

Paris, D. (2011). 'A friend who understand fully': Notes on humanizing research in a multiethnic youth community. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 24*(2), 137–149.

Paris, D., & Winn, M. T. (Eds.). (2014). *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Rosenman, E., Walker, S., & Wyly, E. (2014). The shrinkage machine: Race, class and the renewal of urban capital. In H. R. Hall, C. C. Robinson, & A. Kohli (Eds.), *Uprooting urban America: Multidisciplinary perspectives on race, class & gentrification* (pp. 41–76). New York: Peter Lang.

Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2016). With power comes responsibility. Retrieved January 23, 2015 from http://schottfoundation.org/blog/2016/01/21/power-comes-responsibility.

Sharkey, P. (2013). *Stuck in place: Urban neighborhoods and the end of progress toward racial equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shedd, C. (2015). *Unequal city: Race, schools, and perceptions of injustice*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Roberts, R. A., Bell, L. A., & Murphy, B. (2008). Flipping the script: Analyzing youth talk about race and racism. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 39*(3), 334–354.

Tate, W. F. (2008). "Geography of opportunity": Poverty, place, and educational outcomes. *Educational Researcher, 37,* 397–411.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(3), 409–427.

Wang, C. C. (2008). Using photovoice as a participatory assessment and issue selection tool: A case study with the homeless in Ann Arbor. In M. Minkler & N. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Weinstein, S., & West, A. (2012). Call and responsibility: Critical questions for youth spoken word poetry. *Harvard Educational Review, 82*(2), 282–302.

Winn, M. T. (2016). Still writing in rhythm: Youth poets at work. *Urban Education*. doi:10.1177/0042085916641174.

Winn, L. T., & Winn, M. T. (2016). "We want this to be owned by you": The promise and perils of youth participatory action research. In S. Greene, K. J. Burke, & M. K. McKenna (Eds.), *Youth voices, public spaces, and civic engagement* (pp. 111–130). New York: Routledge.

Zhong, S. (2016). *1045 West Washington Street: The story of a space and the process of place-making*. Unpublished thesis. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame.