Recognizing the Knowledge of Young People:
An Interview with Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre on Youth Action Research

For the past two years, Michelle Fine and Maria Elena Torre of the Graduate Center at the City University of New York, along with other colleagues, have worked intensively with a corps of 50 high-school aged researchers to study the "achievement gap"—what the students quickly renamed the "opportunity gap" for the way it creates "separate but unequal in the same building." The youth researchers are white, African American, Latino, Asian, Afro-Caribbean; wealthy, middle class and poor; in special education and honors classes; from urban and suburban schools with financial and curricular inequities.

Their research has been prodigious. They've administered close to 10,000 surveys, and then analyzed them by race, ethnicity, track, suburban/urban, and school size. They have conducted focus groups and mini-ethnographies, cross visitations and individual interviews, to assess qualitatively the divergent experiences of students in urban and suburban schools. They are reviewing the transcripts of over 1000 suburban high school seniors to learn more about how race and class affect access to rigorous classes within the same building.

For excerpts from the Power Point presentation, *Race, Ethnicity, Class and Opportunity: A Critical Analysis of the "Gap" by Youth Researchers*, presented by Fine, Torre, and their youth research team to Bank Street College in March, 2003, **click here.**

In early March, WKCD interviewed Fine and Torre about their extraordinary work. The Friday before, eleven of their young collaborators had taken part in a dress rehearsal of a multi-media performance called "Echoes," connecting the findings from their research to the legacy of Brown v. Board of Education.

Barbara Cervone (WKCD): *You refer to your work as "participatory action research with youth." What does that mean?*

Michelle Fine: The two words, "action research," trace their academic roots to social scientists, like Kurt Lewin, who got deeply involved in community work and social action in the course of their research. But it was still largely the social scientists doing the research. The friendly amendment the word *participatory* brings is that it taps the knowledge of those directly affected by the issue or struggle, and invites them to shape the questions, the research, the knowledge, and the products—it views them as experts and not just subjects. To this, we've have added an additional amendment: recognizing the knowledge of *young* people.

One of the first things we learned in our work with young people is how differently they frame issues from adults or administrators. In our case, what we called the achievement gap they renamed the opportunity gap. The young people we worked with also quickly taught us that struggles for educational justice touch all young people—the very wealthy kids along with kids whose families don't have much money, urban and suburban kids, white, black, Latino, Asian, straight, gay, lesbian, trans, high track, low track, advanced placement, special ed. You can't study something like the achievement

gap without drawing in the differing perspectives of the students who live it every single day, treating them as knowledge holders and having them sit with you as you go through the steps of creating the questions, the methods, the shape of the project.

How have you worked with students to state the problem and frame the questions behind their research? How have they opened your own eyes in the process?

Michelle: We usually go in with a kind of broad umbrella around a problem, a struggle, a question, a policy, and then urge the kids to redefine it from their perspective. When we started working with students on the achievement/opportunity gap, we were, of course, tuned into the gaps with respect to finances and tracking. What we did not know was the depth of young people's experience with the gap in relation to respect. We didn't understand the depth of the gap in relation to external supports. We didn't understand that privileged kids were profoundly uncomfortable with the inequities in their schools.

In place of everything that you, I and others have written—the kind of top-down views on social injustice, quality teachers, finance and equity, textbooks—the young people gave us the texture of the social relationships, the yearnings, the betrayals, the everyday micro practices of inequity in their school.

Maria Torre: On a methodological note, a lot of what Michelle just talked about came out in the first summer research camps we held. But even prior to the camps, students helped us launch our research. We went into seven different high schools and had these very open focus groups, where we met with differently positioned kids—from high achieving kids in AP honors classes to ESL classes, from kids taking leadership positions in the school to kids in the shadows. We started out by asking them what are your favorite things about school? What really works here? What can't you stand? Then we went to more specific areas, like those Michelle outlined, that we already knew from the literature and our work would be hot spots. It was in those conversations that we moved from hot spots to more textured, nuanced understandings of, for example, the relationships with guidance counselors—not just how many guidance counselors there are per student, but what it means to have a woman of color as a guidance counselor…and then have her take on every other student of color in the school along with her regular load. Or what it means for a guidance counselor to say, Well you did really great on your SATs for a Latina!

Michelle: We can't underscore enough the importance of including in the research kids who are outliers—in our case, kids who were close to dropping out, in foster care or institutionally marginal, in gay-straight alliances. They are a special source of knowledge about a school's hegemonic and hidden curriculum. And we can't say enough for bringing kids together across schools, so that they're not just looking at the categories and margins within their schools but across the divides of rich and poor, suburban and urban. In our camps, we'd have urban kids say, Oh my God, that's what your school looks like? I want to visit! Which then provoked some cross-visitation,

which in turn prompted the urban students to ask, in a way they hadn't before, what does finance inequity really look like?

Tell me more about the summer research camps you've held as part of your achievement gap research with students.

Maria: On average each camp gathered five to seven kids, from about seven schools, for two days. Most everything was focused around research methods and practices, and also the issue of educational inequities. But we also worked on building a community where it was as safe as possible to take risks and to trust each other. As to research skills, we recognized that part of the adult-youth researcher relationship is not just to put kids around a table and say OK know you do it, when they've never done it before, but to teach them the skills they need.

So we brought in roughly crafted surveys for them to look at, correct, weigh in on, edit, to add new questions and cross off others completely. We broke down into separate committees where groups would take on different aspects of the survey. One group went through and just looked at what's missing. They noticed, for example, that we didn't have enough on immigrant kids. Other kids made up open-ended questions, like, What's the most important thing a teacher ever said to you? Other kids did the design, creating a picture on the front of the survey that was a composite of their faces. Some looked at the questions we had borrowed from others and either added or re-worked questions, putting them in their own language.

We also taught kids interviewing skills and how to run focus groups.

Michelle: At our second youth research camp we came up against the emotional aspect of our research. We had gathered 7,000 surveys, we had it all broken down by race, ethnicity, track, school, and then we asked kids to either take a question and analyze the data for all the schools or to look at all the data for a particular school. What's going on at East Side? At Bedford? We soon realized that some of the data, especially the qualitative material, could be quite painful or hurtful. Instead of brushing it aside or talking about it only in passing, we realized we were obliged to help our youth researchers work through their feelings. We recognized that, first of all, there is knowledge in those feelings and, second, it needs to go somewhere.

We decided to create a "graffiti museum" where kids could post their feelings, speak back, and answer each other anonymously. We put up prompts to give kids a push, like a chart that showed the gross inequities in who gets a college degree by age 24, coupled with the question, Why do you think this happens. Some kids wrote awful things. You know, blacks are dumber than whites, or Asians are genetically superior. Before long, the walls were covered with paper. You could see how the kids were working through their ideas and responses, you could see the kernels of analysis. It might start with somebody saying, I can't believe a kid said some races are genetically inferior. And then it would grow into a whole wall conversation, with poetry,

drawings, quotes, and numbers that spoke to the politics and intellect of the work they were undertaking.

I got an email yesterday from a high school student in California saying he and others wanted to conduct focus groups on diversity and gender at their school, but he worried that students wouldn't open up in a focus group. What would you advise him?

Maria: I think we fall into believing that people don't talk openly about these things, and I think often, at least with the young people that we've talked to, it's that there aren't spaces to talk about them. There's no time set aside, there's no one asking those kinds of questions, and so the conversation doesn't happen because it's not allowed. Or it happens in bubbles among students, but never gets collected or carried on in a more formalized or fuller way.

Focus groups are a tool for airing issues, but they can also replicate the larger school inequities where there's a false consensus that everybody thinks everything is just fine and I'm the only one who disagrees. You have to do a focus group in a way that values the very different kinds of knowledge in the room. As a facilitator, you need to figure out how to encourage dissenters, disagreement and not argument, how to legitimate the unpopular view. One way to do this is to start by having everybody write first so that they know they have something to say. Another strategy is to bring in data from elsewhere, to say, Boy, white kids, black and Latino kids are all concerned about racism, and yet some are willing to speak up and some aren't, and then to ask, Why might this happen? This legitimates race and ethnicity as issues to talk about but also acknowledges how hard the conversation is.

I want to add that it's really important, when you are looking for information within one school about how differently situated kids see things, to run separate focus groups, at least to start, for these different groups. I remember in one school we heard a lot about how in a recent honors assembly, Latinos were really well represented, but it wasn't until we did the all-Latino group that we found out it was the same young woman who'd won most of the awards.

Michelle: Or if one of the reasons you are doing a focus group is to create a dynamic among kids who never talk to each other, then the place to start is with what they all have in common. How do you feel about the bathrooms? Everybody hates the bathrooms. Start with the easy issues, mixing pride with critique. Then move to, Where does it start to break? By track, by class, by race or ethnicity, by gender? And then go to the hard stuff.

When we were in California doing focus groups with students for a lawsuit [about school funding inequities], we began by having every kid fill out a survey that had open- and closed-ended questions. We wanted to have an "N" of 120, not just eleven focus groups, and we also wanted every kid to know they had something to say. Then we just started going around, saying, Every person say one fabulous thing and one thing you wish were different about your school. Then we gave them quotes from depositions

from other kids about their schools, which were mostly pretty negative, and asked, So what resonates, what doesn't? Then we showed them photos of a well-resourced public school, and asked, What resonates, what doesn't? So we mixed positive and negative prompts. Only at the end did we say, So there's this lawsuit, what would you tell the judge about your schools?

There's a thoughtfulness about the scaffolding of a focus group that's essential to its success. Individual interviews after the focus group are also very important, because things that kids won't say in the large group they might say individually—just as there things kids wouldn't think to say individually, but will say in the focus group.

What role have surveys played in your research with youth?

Michelle: When we do participatory research, it's often directed toward policy makers (or in the case of students, administrators) for whom surveys carry a cachet of scientific capital that qualitative data does not. So the numbers that come from quantitative methods like surveys carry weight, even though I believe that social legislation is more often based on stories, on somebody's kid with Down's syndrome, somebody's sister who was beaten up, somebody's …and not on numbers.

But it's always good to combine methods. Surveys give you a sense of the extent to which the issues are representative. They answer the question, How do these issues cut across groups? What focus groups, participant observation, biography and poetry then do is answer, How does it play out? What does it mean? How do young people make sense of that?

[In the case of our achievement gap research] without the surveys, we wouldn't have known how grotesquely inequitable access to AP honors classes are by race and ethnicity, even for kids with college-educated parents. We wouldn't have known that in some communities, kids of color say, My teachers know me, they understand me, they love me—and they don't think I belong in honors classes. We wouldn't know that almost all kids really want to go to college and really want their teachers to think they're smart and feel committed to environmental justice and working in their community and helping those less fortunate. We wouldn't know that black and Latino kids are much more likely to act on that than are white kids. So there's some just boring wonderful things that we learned from our survey, like there are no differences in wanting to go to college, wanting to be smart, wanting hard classes, wishing a teacher would challenge you. That's great, because it counters all those stereotypes.

How do you handle the issue of consent, an underpinning of surveys and other research strategies?

Maria: We're pretty hyper about active consent for kids. The only time we relied on passive consent was with parents on the large surveys. We worried if kids were required to take a consent form home and get a parent or guardian to sign it, we would

reproduce the very class and race differential in participation that we were trying to redress.

We also are pretty careful about the ethics of our data collection. We avoid unobtrusive data collection, where, for example we write about something we've observed without the other person having agreed to the observation. We don't ask students to go into classes and take notes nor do consent to any idea they have—one group of students proposed that students in an AP class show up in its low level counterpart and vice versa. We're educating about research ethics, too. One byproduct is that the kids are beginning to understand some of the pressures that teachers are under, there's a perspective taking about why a teacher might do a certain thing. We're not interested in creating bad guys. We want our young researchers to develop an analysis that gets north of person-blame, that understands the systems and policies and structures that are behind the actions of individual people.

How has your research with young people become larger than the numbers from surveys and the comments gathered in focus groups and interviews? What roles have presentation and performance played in getting attention for the work?

Michelle: There was a conversation the kids had Friday after their performance that I found as powerful if not more powerful than the performance itself. First, I saw how many of the kids who weren't involved in the research understood that the "Echoes" performance *grew out* of the research. Second, I can't count the number of kids who said, This is a project bigger than me, this is history, this is future, this is other kids, I'm representing us, I'm *making a difference.* There's something about having a product like a performance, an obligation to educate others, which is really powerful.

Putting words into action—including art—gives them meaning; it's what drives all of us in our different ways, whether it's through church activities or through social justice work, or through educating. I keep seeing with these young people that they've really committed to this larger project of making a difference in other students' lives, in other schools. Even though that sounds very grand, it's very real, and I think performance is a concrete way to make that happen.

How do you measure impact?

Maria: Personally, in terms of the work that we do, I'm interested in effecting change on a lot of different levels. And if I don't keep that sort of perspective, then it's just too hard to wake up tomorrow, because the real change and the real structural issues are going to take a long time. What gives me hope and energy from the work—besides the belief that we are creating change—is that you can see change in the players themselves. If the effort is done well, even if the policy isn't overturned, the young person has experienced something important, an alternative way to speak back to injustice, and that gets carried on to other places in their lives.

Michelle: At the level of individual kids, there is so much that is undeniable and fabulous. The kid we got into college who otherwise never would have gone, the kid who decided not to drop out and went on to get her GED, the white suburban white kids who realize privilege comes with responsibility, the moms who call us to say how proud they are to watch their daughters speaking up and how that gives them strength to do the same.

At the level of educators, there are some educators who have been involved with this who have decided that their own frustrations around educational inequities are real political issues for them to raise…We've been invited to churches where the pastor and parishioners are black and hope our performance might be a way to raise up issues.

Thinking about the Brown decision, did Brown make a huge difference in the nation? For sure. In those particular schools? Probably not. They're probably all black now. But did it become a fantasy of a nation that [integration was worth struggling for], did it heighten consciousness? Absolutely. I still remember this one kid who stood up and said, I used to "see flat" (she used the word flat in a funny grammatical way) and I didn't understand that behind every number there was a whole process that created that number, so now when I watch TV or I listen to the news or read the newspaper, I know that you really have to think critically. This is what the Brown decision did for us: it made it hard for us to see flat.

Would your youth researchers say similar things?

Maria: I wouldn't have known how to answer that were it not for last Friday night, where the kids said, yeah, each one, teach one; yeah, I bring it to my college; yeah, now I know I can produce work that can get attention; yeah, now when I hear a racist comment I feel like I have to speak up. And I've heard this from other kids doing activist research, too, who speak about themselves as now being advocates and educators in their schools, their communities, on the street, in their families. It has arms and legs beyond our control!

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