

The NLERAP Approach

Sonia Nieto

University of Massachusetts—Amherst

Melissa Rivera

Hunter College City University of New York

Jason Irizarry

University of Connecticut

From the start, NLERAP has been based on two major premises: one is that a sociocultural and sociopolitical approach to learning is more effective than a traditional approach, particularly in the case of populations that have historically been marginalized through their education; and the second is that research is more meaningful and inclusive when it is defined through a participatory action research (PAR) approach. Each is described below.

A Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Approach to Teaching, Learning, and Research

Because there is no such thing as a “generic” student, the NLERAP approach to research honors students’ particular sociocultural realities. That is, students’ cultures, languages, and experiences should be taken into account in the design, development, and implementation of research studies. This means that linguistic variations (Spanish, English, bilingualism, bi-dialecticism, and youth language) all need to be acknowledged when conducting research on Latino/as. Furthermore, because Latinos/as reflect a tremendous diversity in terms of ethnic origin, history in the U.S., race, language use, social class, and other differences, NLERAP is based on the principle that research studies must recognize both commonalities and differences in these origins and experiences. Rather than assuming that these commonalities and differences are of little consequence, studies based on NLERAP’s principles recognize that sociocultural realities are an essential component of any research on Latino/as.

The NLERAP approach is also guided by a sociopolitical perspective. To view education within its sociopolitical context means to understand that education does not exist in a vacuum but instead is immersed in—and influenced by—particular political, economic, and social circumstances. This context includes both societal and school-based institutional structures, racism and other biases based on human and social differences (i.e., social class, language, sexual orientation, gender, and others), and the resultant traditions, laws, policies, and practices as well as school-based policies and practices such as ability tracking, high-stakes tests, curriculum and pedagogy, outreach to families, disciplinary policies. These policies and practices, in turn, reflect, albeit unwittingly, our society’s ideas and values about intelligence, culture, and other human differences.

The belief that some groups have an inherently superior culture, while others are less worthy, is unfortunately a deep-seated ideology in our history. For example, educational research literature on the experiences of Latinos/as in U.S. schools has historically been rooted in a deficit perspective (Flores, 2005). That is, rather than focus on school factors (funding, class size, curriculum, pedagogy, outreach efforts to families, tracking, disciplinary policies, and so on) and societal factors (inadequate health care, poor housing, lack of employment and educational opportunities for families, among others) that can lead to educational failure, the lack of educational success among Latinos/as has been largely attributed to cultural, linguistic and even genetic deficiencies. This is changing as new researchers begin to focus on sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that can influence schooling. At the same time, while deficit-centered research about Latino/a students has often been done by “outsiders” (i.e., individuals who are neither Latino/a nor who have been meaningfully connected to Latino/a communities), some scholars—primarily but not only Latino/a researchers—have challenged this deficit perspective for years (Cordasco, 1998; García, 2001; Nieto, 2000a; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Sánchez, 1940; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999).

A growing body of research demonstrates how the lack of value placed on Latino/a students' cultural, linguistic, and experiential resources has been both cause and effect of the low quality education they have received throughout their time in U.S. schools (Irizarry & Nieto, 2010; MacDonald & Monkman, 2005). For example, both Mexican Americans in the Southwest and Puerto Ricans in the Northeast, the largest groups of Latinos/as in the U.S., have endured sustained efforts to significantly compromise their access to quality education through segregation, poor quality of instruction, "sink or swim" approaches to language learning, substandard facilities, lack of representation in the curriculum, and lack of representation in decision-making, among other factors (Bucchioni, 1982; Margolis, 1968; Nieto, 2000b; Pedraza & Rivera, 2005; Sánchez, 1940; Valencia, 2002). This lack of access to quality education comprises what some have viewed as acts of violence, both physical and symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

More recent examples of educational failure have been no less evident, although hope for change is also more apparent. Participatory Action Research, another hallmark of the NLERAP approach, is one hopeful approach to teaching, learning, and research in the Latino/a community.

Participatory Action Research (PAR)

A second fundamental principle of NLERAP is that community perspectives should be included in research. This means that research needs to be collaborative, engaging diverse community members as co-researchers in an investigative and action-oriented process (Torre & Ayala, 2009). Given this perspective, a PAR approach is fundamental to how research should be conducted. As such, NLERAP's first research project on arts in education both embraced a PAR philosophy and implemented a PAR methodology with school-based educators, community-based organizational staff, and university scholars, grounding our collective efforts in five principles: to root our work in critical scholarship and sociopolitical movements, to encourage democratic participation, to facilitate co-construction of knowledge, to incorporate a creative process, and to commit to action and social justice (Rivera, Medellín-Paz, Pedraza, et al., 2010).

A PAR approach also affirms the significance of Latino/a researchers as a force for transforming education because, until quite recently, the voices and perspectives of Latino/a researchers were nearly invisible in most of the research addressing the education of Latino/a youngsters (Pedraza & Rivera, 2005). PAR has emerged as a promising practice with the potential to improve educational experiences and outcomes for students of color (Camarota & Fine, 2008). With a focus on engaging youth in research connected to the material and socioemotional conditions of their lives, PAR "is typically undertaken as critical scholarship, by multi-generational collectives, to interrogate conditions of social injustice through social theory with a dedicated commitment to social action" (Fine, 2008, p. 213). More than a tool for inquiry solely for use by experienced researchers in the ivory tower, PAR is deeply rooted in the struggle for social justice and educational equity. According to Ginwright (2008), "With an emphasis on democratizing knowledge, fostering critical inquiry of daily life and developing liberatory practices, PAR is both an art and a method to engage youth in democratic problem solving" (p. 14). As such, many of the scholars working on PAR projects with youth have documented societal changes brought about as a result of these efforts as well as the positive impact such projects have had on students' academic and personal development.

Documenting the power of engaging youth of color in PAR, David Stovall (2006) speaks to the struggles of Latino/a and African American youth to have their voices and perspectives included in the process of school reform in Chicago, Illinois. The students in his study collaborated on a proposal for a new community high school in their neighborhood, organizing a youth collective across lines of linguistic and cultural difference, collecting data, crafting the proposal and advocating for its adoption by the school board and city council. Their innovative proposal challenged the conventional power relations that too often dominate schools where students are perceived as empty vessels waiting to be filled by teachers rather than as active contributors to various aspects of school governance including curriculum design and discipline (Freire, 1970).

In another PAR project documenting the outcomes of a multi-year critical inquiry that engaged African American and Latino/a students, Ernest Morrell (2008) convincingly documented growth among student participants as a result of engaging in collaborative research that focused on simultaneously engaging students in

activism and improving their literacy skills. As a result of this project, which took place over the summer during school vacation, students became more critical consumers of text as well as skilled producers of textual products, giving presentations from their research at various professional meetings and conferences and developing skills essential to successfully navigating school and gaining access to higher education.

Documenting the power of student voice and the impact of participatory action research as a pedagogical tool, Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2007) described the findings of a study of critical media literacy and urban youth. In this research, students were involved in a summer seminar building on their consumption of electronic media. The goal of the project was to develop students' academic literacies through critiques of the media and the creation of counter narratives that challenged majoritarian narratives rooted in negative, stereotypical depictions of urban youth. Students disseminated their findings in a number of venues, including local and national conferences, through presentations that incorporated various forms of media representations. The benefits of this project are not limited to the youth engaged in research, but also extend to the audiences, including pre-service teachers and community members, to which they have presented their work.

Scholars engaged in PAR serve as bridges between students and their communities, and they help students (and the educators, administrators and community members) develop the skills they need to transform themselves and simultaneously challenge systemic structures that foster inequality. Unlike other approaches to instruction and research with Latino/a students that seek to collect data to inform a body of literature (often inaccessible to the general public) in hopes that it might positively influence the work of practitioners and policy makers, PAR directly engages participants through instruction in the process of identifying problems and creating and implementing solutions to address the issue. As a pedagogical tool, it fosters the development of academic skills at the same time that it promotes positive change based on student research.

While there is a wealth of research on teaching and teacher education, very little of it draws on the experiences and recommendations of youth. Deficit-centered literature regarding Latino/a students characterizes them, their families and communities as the "problem" and as the primary impediments to their own educational and personal success. Instead of being positioned as the "problem" within school reform efforts, youth involved in participatory action research directly address the issues they have identified. The skills students develop through these field-based research projects have been far-reaching, preparing them not only to meet state standards for graduation but also making them more active, critical consumers of democracy, one of the espoused goals of public education. In these studies, PAR serves as an "activist pedagogy" (Torre & Fine, 2008, p. 23), transforming the educational landscape and positively impacting the education of Latino/a students.

In an effort to offer promising, empirically-based strategies for improving student achievement, studies based on participatory action research and culturally responsive pedagogy (to be addressed in the Instructional section) with Latino/a youth offer new possibilities for classroom practice and community uplift. The research cited in this paper does not constitute an exhaustive list, but rather is meant to highlight the potential that exists when Latino/a youth have access to academically rigorous curricula that affirms their identities and engages them in the struggle for social justice and educational equity.