


Engaging Young People in a Research Project: The Complexities and Contributions of Using Participatory Methods With Young People in Schools

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Abstract

The lack of student engagement in school has been studied from different approaches. Participatory methods are gaining acceptance and relevance in educational research because they respond to both ethical and validity concerns. Since youth engagement in participatory research should not be taken for granted and may overlap with student engagement in studies in schools, this article presents an analysis of adult researchers' and young co-researchers' field notes, journals, and reports of an ethnographic participatory research about learning in and outside school carried out in five secondary schools with 35 students. Findings show the different perceptions of youth engagement between young and adult researchers and how youth agency and autonomy may be more easily desired than recognized by adult researchers.

Keywords

student engagement, youth engagement, participatory research, ethnography, secondary school

Introduction

Student engagement has grown in the last 30 years as a major topic of research because it has been linked to early school leaving (Balfanz et al., 2007) and associated with academic motivation and achievement (Appleton et al., 2008), mental wellbeing, lifelong learning, student resilience, moral, ethical, and psychosocial development (Baron & Corbin, 2012). Though young people's growing disaffection toward school is an important concern, the response to student disengagement in many countries has been to try to change the students, not the system (Zyngier, 2008).

Participatory methods are gaining acceptance and relevance in educational research because they respond to both ethical and validity concerns (Holland et al., 2010). On the one hand, there is a growing concern about listening to the voices and recognizing the agency of the participants. On the other hand, participatory research seeks to assure a privileged access to data. However, involving young people as peer researchers may be a methodological and epistemological challenge (Schubotz, 2012).

This article builds on the results of an ethnographic participatory research project about learning in and outside school and elaborates a critical reflection on how nine university researchers and 35 students from five Catalan upper secondary schools refer to youth engagement. Since the students' participation in the research could be characterized as

both research and school activities, their engagement could be seen as both student engagement and youth engagement in participatory research. While trying to do research with and not about young people (Sánchez-Valero & Padilla-Petry, 2016), our group stumbled upon the issue of student/co-researcher engagement. Some of the questions that arose in our field notes and discussions were: How is student/youth engagement assessed in school? And in participatory research? Are there participatory research strategies that may assure student/youth engagement? Though student agency may be highly desired by teachers and researchers, do they always recognize and accept it? What is student/youth engagement and do teachers and researchers agree with youth on a definition? The analysis of researchers and co-researchers' reports show that student engagement in participatory research is a complex and rich issue and satisfactory results may show up in unexpected places.

The central questions of this article are: how do ethnographic researchers concerned about researching with young people and listening to their voices (Hadfield & Haw, 2001)

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understand and explain youth engagement in their reports? How do they interpret the instances of lack of youth engagement in the project?

This article is divided into four sections. The first presents some critical theoretical approaches to the concepts of student and youth engagement. The second section describes the research methods. We then present and discuss the findings and in the last section, we offer some conclusions and implications.

Student Engagement and Youth Engagement in Participatory Research

Student Engagement

Student engagement as a concept may be overused and under-defined (Appleton et al., 2008), but the lack of it in secondary schools is still an important issue in different studies (see Fredricks et al., 2019; Patall et al., 2019). For many students the school has “become completely banal, meaningless and without purpose, except as a reasonably pleasant place in which to meet and socialize with one’s friends” (Smyth, 2006, p. 286). Fostering student engagement has gained importance as a way of improving academic achievement and fighting student boredom and disaffection (Fredricks et al., 2004). Successful school completion is positively related to student involvement with and participation in the schooling process, one that fosters a sense of commitment and belongingness (Shernoff et al., 2003), and many studies have explored which factors promote (facilitators) or indicate (identifiers) student engagement (Furlong & Christenson, 2008).

Although there is little consensus about what student engagement is (Harris, 2008) and myriad definitions (Appleton et al., 2008), it is not limited to good academic results or attending classes and it includes the amount of effort, time, and motivation dedicated to academic activities (Harris, 2008). Engagement is often defined as a construct that has two or three components (Appleton et al., 2008). One common definition reunites behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, which are dynamically interrelated (Fredricks et al., 2004). Despite these three popular dimensions of student engagement, studies that consider two or more engagement dimensions are uncommon and the behavioral component is the most studied one “in industrial age schools with conventional classrooms in which teachers work alone” (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 438). Also, different studies examine the relation between different dimensions of engagement (see Pietarinen et al., 2014; Ulmanen et al., 2016).

Drawing from Paulo Freire’s ideas (Freire, 1993, 1968/2000, 1998/2001), different authors defend the democratic reconstruction of the curriculum and the idea that both teachers and students need to be engaged in school (e.g., McMahon & Portelli, 2004). McInerney (2009) refers to the Marxist concept of alienation to explain the students’ lack of meaningful connection to their studies fostered by the lack of

relevance perceived in the course content or by the highly individualized forms of instruction. Smyth (2006) sees young people’s withdrawal and disengagement as political dissent. When they choose to engage in school, it means they trust the legitimacy and the good intentions of the authority, that they will be able to maintain their identity, and that by complying with this authority, their interests will be advanced. He argues that young people bring their own frames of reference to school and, although schools assume a high degree of shared understanding, there is often a clash of frames of reference.

Therefore, where engagement is defined (narrowly) as willingness to become involved in teacher-initiated tasks and at the same time is separated from the students’ socio-political and cultural contexts, we find that if a student is engaged then the teacher is responsible, but if the student is disengaged then the problem is with the student (Zyngier, 2008, p. 1771).

The concept of student engagement may depend on the ideological basis of the teacher’s pedagogy (Gourlay, 2015; Zepke, 2014). Teachers from different pedagogical frameworks will expect and interpret different students’ behaviors as engagement or the lack of it. For instance, silence may be the desired form of engagement for some teachers while others expect questions and opinions as signs of student engagement.

Broad conceptualizations of student engagement see it as a conceptual glue that connects student agency and its ecological influences to the organizational structures and cultures of school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). These ecological views entail the need to distinguish between classroom engagement and school engagement, including school-based programs, clubs and activities. Youth engagement in community settings is also relevant, since engagement in one setting can influence the range of social-educational experiences and opportunities youth enjoy in other settings. Also, student engagement should be studied according to its object: with various tools, objects, technologies, tasks, activities, disciplines, people and places or social settings (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Our research group had a multidimensional and critical approach to student engagement, one that focused on understanding setting, identity and critical youth voices (Yonezawa et al., 2009). Student engagement should not be about engaging in a pre-structured educational system. Instead, students need to be perceived as proactive and critical participants in the co-creation of the institutional settings (Zyngier, 2008). Thus, student engagement should be understood beyond compliance to the norms. In an agentic engagement, students actively contribute to teaching and learning practices (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Youth Engagement in Participatory Research

Research with young people has changed in the last 30 years and literature on youth-centered methods has increased

(Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2018). Co-researching implies that youth participants are involved throughout the process as researchers and co-construct the findings (Martin et al., 2019). In educational research, students are often “consequential stakeholders and should be involved as sources of information and as partners in research” (Smit et al., 2020, p. 2).

However, the meaning of participatory research may vary from inviting children or youth to be participants though all the research has been decided by the adult researcher, encouraging children or youth to inquire into their own lives and decide some aspects of the research project or training children or youth to carry out research about other people’s lives (Holland et al., 2010).

The contributions of participatory research may be argued applying both an epistemological and a rights-based perspective. From an epistemological perspective, lay researchers would not have the problem generated by the baggage of social theory that may lead researchers to overlook or misunderstand issues in the data. Participatory research would also gain better rapport with respondents, use of the appropriate language and access to hard-to-reach groups (Schubotz, 2012). From a rights-based perspective, participatory research would be an empowering approach for young people, but its limitations and possibilities are often discussed considering that power and agency are attributes that children can have, and adults can promote or give (Holland et al., 2010). “Participatory research is characterized by shared meanings and the co-construction of knowledge” (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 23), which involves doing research with instead of on, making youth engagement a critical issue.

Methodology

The Research

The theoretical framework of the research combined different approaches to learning, education, and educational research. Our group shared a constructivist stance on learning mainly derived from Vygotsky’s work (Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Vygotsky, 1934/1987, 1926/1997), and a perspective on education heavily influenced by Freire’s critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 2020; Hooks, 1994). Thus, we understood that secondary school should democratically empower youth and foster young people’s agency by listening to their interests and considering what they learn in and outside school. It should also generate learning opportunities in which they can learn from the interaction with others. Finally, we saw educational research as inherently bound by the researchers’ positionality, and as examining social and political constructions of its objects such as learning, youth and school (Ellsworth, 1997; Wortham & Jackson, 2008).

This article presents partial results of an ethnographic participatory research project whose main goal was to study what and how secondary school students learn in and outside

school. Nine university researchers spent 6 months in five Catalan secondary schools (Spain), working with a total of 35 students aged from 15 to 18. The project was presented to them as something different from the usual school research projects, since they would share the responsibility of making decisions, creating research questions and applying different research methods and tools with university researchers. Almost all the meetings with the co-researchers happened inside their schools and the research done by them replaced a research project required by the secondary school curriculum and was later assessed by their teachers.

Doing participatory research with young people inside schools is a complex task that requires the approval of principals, teachers, students and families. Integrating the research sessions with each school’s timetable and goals generated tensions: merging the research into a school-based activity provided an easier access to schools but risked turning the research into a school activity. The researchers wanted to assure free speech to the co-researchers and establish a relationship not based on assessment, rules and control with them. But the teachers and principals expected the researchers to keep them posted about the co-researchers’ activities and the youth to produce good reports that would be later assessed by their teachers.

Our university research group assumed from the beginning that our co-researchers had an epistemological advantage over us and would give us a privileged access to what and how they learned in and outside school. In four of the five secondary schools they were chosen by the school principals, and in one school students voluntarily decided to participate. Three of the five schools had already participated in previous projects with the same university research team. Since the co-researchers were aged from 15 to 18, they and their parents received a document that explained the research to be done and how the data would be treated and were asked for their consent. During the first sessions, issues such as authorship and anonymization of the results were addressed, making sure that students understood the terms and also contributed with their appreciations and reflections.

Regarding the participatory character of the project, the goals were already decided, and the co-researchers went through a process of methodological grooming, that is, an implicit persuasion that encourages youth to take part in the research project despite their initial reluctance (Bengry-Howell & Griffin, 2012). Besides being participatory research, all researchers worked in teams, which can be a challenge for an ethnographer (Cheney, 2011). Some work sessions were dedicated to intergenerational learning (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2018): the university researchers taught the young participants how to do ethnographic research and also learned from them about how and where they learn. For instance, the students worked on their observation and interviewing skills and learned how to do descriptive writing (Gioia, 2014).

Regarding data collection and analysis, on the one hand, co-researchers observed their own classrooms, interviewed other students and wrote field journals. They wrote their ethnographic reports and presented them both at school and at the university, where they met the researchers and co-researchers from the other schools. On the other hand, the university researchers observed each weekly session with the focus on the culture and relationship that was being built between researchers and co-researchers. They kept a field-work diary with ethnographic notes about the observations and conversation with students. Finally, they wrote an ethnographic report for each school.

The analysis was based on an ethnographical approach to the researchers and co-researchers notes and reports. The main focus of the analysis was students' cultures of learning, both inside and outside school. The use of digital tools and the pedagogical relationships with teachers, peers and friends were also analyzed. Although studying engagement was not the main focus of the analysis, it emerged as a main analysis theme, since our notes were full of observations about how the co-researchers engaged in the research and how a participatory research culture was created among youth and adults.

Student and Youth Engagement in Our Research

This article critically discusses student and youth engagement in participatory research. Student engagement and youth engagement in participatory research are typically seen through the adults' (teachers' and researchers') perspectives. Even when these perspectives are positive, they usually disregard young people's voices (Holland et al., 2010). Though the authors are adult researchers, we include the co-researchers' perceptions of the research by quoting what they wrote on their field journals and reports trying to avoid re- or mis-interpretations of their words (Gibson et al., 2017).

Participatory research is only participatory if there is engagement and even the best intentions of the researchers may fall short: "no research is inherently participatory, regardless of the participatory agenda senior researchers may have" (Schubotz, 2012, p. 105). Because of that, understanding what happens in real participatory research in schools considering the students' perspective is important. We analyze why our participatory intentions and intents fell short in some cases and we try to unfold the tensions faced by the researchers.

From a constructionist standpoint (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008), our data was constructed in interaction with the co-researchers. Both positionalities (researchers and co-researchers) are thus highly relevant to understand what happened in this interaction. The researchers' positionality is explicit in their reports, including hypothesis and expectations regarding the co-researchers and the findings. In an ethnographic constructionist research, acknowledging previous assumptions and expectations contributes to the validity and reliability of the research since they are deemed inevitable

and impossible to control or override. The co-researchers' positionality was also clear in their journals and reports.

'Students' positionality refers to who students are and what they do in relation to a particular engagement activity, in specific social contexts, at any given point in time. Positionality, in short, entails specifications of how person-activity-environment interactions vary over time and with changing situations' (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 445).

We considered all written material produced during the research by researchers and co-researchers, including reports, field journals, interview transcriptions and observation notes. In them, there were descriptions of the activities of the project, research questions, hypotheses, findings, and conclusions. The co-researchers' material also provided detailed accounts of their activities in and outside school. To maintain anonymity, the five participating schools will be referred to as Alameda, Mission, Skyline, Island, and Sunset.

Since most of the written material was related to learning (the main subject of the research), after reading all written materials, we selected the fragments that referred to the:

1. Expectations and first impressions. Both researchers and co-researchers mentioned their expectations and first impressions regarding the research and the group they would work with.
2. Positionality. Comprises the university researchers' statements regarding youth power, agency and participation and the youth statements about the position occupied by the university researchers, the goals of the research and their own goals.
3. Engagement of researchers and co-researchers. Includes both groups' statements about researchers and co-researchers' engagement and its causes.
4. Research practices. Encompasses both groups' accounts on the differences and similarities between school and research activities.
5. Social relationships between researchers and co-researchers. Contains all statements about the relationships established during the research.

Findings

Expectations and First Impressions

The researchers keenly searched for signs of engagement, agency, and autonomy among the co-researchers from the beginning: the former wanted and expected the latter to gladly commit to the project and autonomously attempt some ethnographic research about how youth learn in and outside school. The co-researchers were expected to go beyond research tasks, to actively participate in the decision-making process and change their position from students to researchers.

The researchers expected this involvement to make a difference: the research would be more appealing and democratic than the traditional school classes or research projects, and so the lack of engagement would not be a problem. Though the loss of interest in the project could have been anticipated (Schubotz, 2012), only Island's researchers mentioned the fear of disengagement right from the start because they were the last ones to start the fieldwork and were aware of the problems already faced by the other researchers in their schools, namely "disengaged," "uninformed youth" and that they were having difficulties finding school hours to do the research (Island researchers report). For instance, Skyline's researchers had already reported their co-researchers' doubts regarding the benefits of the project and concerns for missing classes to take part in an unknown research project.

The co-researchers' expectations and first impressions were mainly related to their reasons to join the project. They mentioned the topics that would be addressed by the research such as technologies, communication, or social issues. Some stated that they joined the project because they saw a connection with their professional future (e.g., becoming a journalist).

I also participated because I wanted to do a social project to help me decide which course to take later (Alameda co-researchers report).

As a group, we wanted to participate in this project because we were curious about how research worked, but also to work with people from the University and above all to investigate ourselves (Alameda co-researchers report).

The reason that motivated me to do this research was really the interest in doing something new; research that we have never seen in school (. . .) everything would be a good experience in which my classmates and I would learn many things (Mission co-researcher journal).

The reputation of the University of Barcelona generated high expectations, working side by side with University professors attracted many students because it seemed like an opportunity to learn about the University while doing a research project that was supposed to be different from standard school projects.

Positionality

The best part of this research, in my opinion, was that we, a small group of young people between 15 and 16 years old are in charge of it (Mission co-researchers report).

The positionality of the co-researchers varied in the researchers' reports. Alameda and Mission's researchers reports repeatedly placed the co-researchers as the main authors of the ethnography, using expressions such as "their

own ethnography" and "their own learning processes." Mission researchers stated that they recognized the co-researchers as individuals capable of retrieving their learning experiences "in and outside school and sharing them in their own reports" (Mission researchers report). Alameda's researchers wrote about their concern over avoiding paternalism, condescending looks and an evaluating attitude toward the youth. They considered their activity as decolonization: "they are starting to decolonize their thinking as students" (Alameda researchers report). They enthused that thanks to the research, the co-researchers were starting to "dare to question what they observe and to appreciate what all that says about their social life." Alameda's researchers' confidence on the participatory nature of the research was clear: "it was just a matter of time till they saw the research as theirs" (Alameda researchers report).

Island and Skyline's researchers did not show the same confidence as Alameda and Mission's. They mentioned having to ask for the work to be done, deciding for the co-researchers and establishing deadlines. In their reports, the co-researchers seemed to sometimes occupy the position of the disengaged student while the researchers regretfully saw themselves as teachers asking for attention (Island researchers report). Skyline researchers' report had plenty of references to the co-researchers' non-collaborating student position. Their lack of motivation, doubts about the value of the research and ambivalence toward it was mentioned throughout the report.

The Sunset researcher described an appropriation process in which the co-researchers progressively took control of the project. She positioned herself as somebody who was learning about how young people's engagement changes beyond her or the teacher's control. Though all five researchers' reports described a different process, the Sunset researcher report was unique in the sense that it tells a story of empowerment and appropriation beyond the researcher's control and expectations. As the positionality of the co-researchers changed, so did the researcher that accepted her lack of control and the co-researchers' agency.

We have been working for three days, we have done a mural about what we feel, what school is and about the life outside it. I am working in a different way which I find curious but also constructive. I am curious to see how this all ends (Island co-researcher journal).

Little by little we made progress and I had more interest in the project, working as a researcher and knowing that we are helping other people to do research (. . .) I believe the project is very interesting since we are helping to study about how we learn by studying ourselves (Island co-researcher journal).

At the beginning of the research (. . .) I could not see how we would write a conclusion or connect the different aspects of the research from what we were doing. But now that we are almost finishing it, everything is tied up perfectly. It is like a mystery

series; in the beginning everything looks like a chaos and it is all very abstract. But then, while the series go on, you see that all fits and realize all the work it takes' (Mission co-researchers report).

Though all co-researchers' reports shared a common view that the ownership of the research was the University's, they revealed the differences in the co-researchers' positionality toward the schools. Moreover, they presented a process in which the co-researchers changed their understanding of the research and progressively took control of it.

Engagement

The researchers' and co-researchers' accounts on engagement were often accompanied by an explanation. Mission and Sunset's researchers explained some variations in the youth engagement through the personal interests of each co-researcher for the different modalities of languages used during the research. Mission's researchers repeatedly justified the co-researchers' engagement in the project through the informality and closeness of the relationship established with them. This casualness was gained through eating together and having special celebrations. In contrast, Skyline's researchers attributed a moment of lack of engagement to an excess of informality. Though informality was used to explain both engagement and disengagement, Skyline and Mission's researchers shared a common reasoning: the informality allowed or provoked by them affected the co-researchers' engagement, that is, youth engagement was a response to the adults' actions or pedagogy. Sunset's researcher explained the positive change in youth engagement in a different way: "two and a half months went by until the sessions were no longer characterized by our rules, but by theirs. With such transit I realized that the more the sessions were theirs, the less school dynamics were produced" (Sunset researcher report).

All five researchers' reports mentioned moments of lack of engagement among the co-researchers. Some of the researchers' hypotheses to explain it repeated classic school explanations for the lack of student engagement. It was never presented as a legitimate response to the lack of a democratic approach or a clash of frames of reference (Smyth, 2006). Mission's researchers thought that the youth started to feel anxious because they were at the "hard stages of the research." According to them, they were disturbed because they "were in a difficult part of the work, where the initial enthusiasm and novelty give way to the hard stages of the research: the systematic data gathering, ordering and analysis" (Mission researchers report). Skyline researchers' report was the one which most negatively described the engagement of the co-researchers using euphemisms such as "ambivalent" or "relaxed." "By then we were already aware that if we asked them to do something on their own, it was very probable that they would not do it" (Skyline researchers

report). Their frustration regarding the lack of commitment to the research tasks could be seen as similar to both a teacher complaint and a peer resignation about someone who does not commit to the tasks both agreed upon.

They are not used to working in an environment in which they are the ones that should make sense of what they are doing and their default approach is to wait for someone to tell them exactly what is expected from them and then they do it without giving it too much thought (Skyline researchers report).

The co-researchers' reports also had references to their engagement, but none to the researchers' engagement. The lack of engagement at a given moment of the research was related by co-researchers from Mission, Island and Sunset to the trouble they had in understanding what they were doing.

While we were doing the project, we saw that we lacked initiative and did not fill up the folders since we mostly did not fully understand the research (Sunset co-researchers report).

They asked us to observe a meeting with friends or a breaktime moment for that day. Nobody did it because we did not know exactly what to write (Island co-researchers report).

We had to change the plans because we did not like some of them or we did not show any initiative, other plans bored us, and what is more, people did not understand them. The (teacher) and (the researcher) (. . .) adapted the plans to our requirements. We think they did that because they understood that if we did it our way it was going to be better and it was also a way of seeing how we get motivated to do that work (Sunset co-researchers report).

Besides relating the lack of engagement to the lack of understanding, this last example also associates engagement to changes in the methods of the teacher and researcher. Though it is true that some co-researchers attributed their disengagement to the difficulty of the work, they also mentioned the need to make sense of what they were doing to engage in an activity. This explanation highlights the agency of the co-researchers in their engagement (Padilla-Petry & Vadeboncoeur, 2020).

Research Practices

The researchers repeatedly compared the project with curricular content, regular school activities, and learning processes. They assumed that the challenge of the project and their respect for the learners' criteria, initiative, interests and identity would engage the co-researchers more than school activities. For instance, Island's researchers called the research "subversive" because they were not teaching anything from the school's curriculum and were working inclusively with co-researchers with and without special educational needs (Island segregated students with special educational needs into smaller groups).

In all researchers' materials, it was assumed that the co-researchers were not as engaged in their schools as they would be in the project. Alameda's researchers emphasized the enthusiasm of one co-researcher to be recognized, when youth are "normally marginalized and excluded." Mission's researchers wrote that they were changing the logic of teaching for the logic of researching. Sunset's researcher explained the growing engagement of the co-researchers through less school dynamics. Some researchers stated that they "gave" the co-researchers the possibility of working with them without hierarchies in a different (from school) research project that would prepare them for the near future.

From the beginning we wanted to offer them the possibility to get close to ethnography, as a way of broadening their knowledge, doing a different kind of research from what is offered by the experimental sciences (. . .) Besides allowing them to know ways of doing (research) and looking (at the reality) that might be useful for their daily lives and other learning experiences (Alameda researchers' report).

Two groups of co-researchers (Alameda and Sunset) stated that they were doing something different and special. They compared the project they did with the "typical research project" they used to do in school, highlighting that they have never done something like that before.

There is a way of working, the most common one, in which the teacher guides the student with a series of determined ideas. We, however, have worked in a more free, horizontal way, with equal conditions for teacher and student (. . .) This increased our dedication to the work (Sunset co-researchers report).

To participate in a project with researchers from a university as prestigious as the University of Barcelona seemed to me a great option, because it improved my writing skills, I express myself better and I am more hardworking than before. Since I was working with University researchers I was able to be more autonomous and constant (Alameda co-researchers report).

The role of the comparisons in defining or assessing youth engagement surprised us. The co-researchers' engagement in the research project was recurrently compared with: (a) their school engagement, (b) what the researchers expected from them, (c) the engagement of the co-researchers from other schools, (d) the engagement of university students, and (e) the researchers' engagement. The lack of autonomy and agency of the youth was mainly explained as an effect of the school's culture and not, for example, as opting out of learning opportunities based on the risks and opportunities they offer (Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012). In other words, since the comparison between the research and the school's work was a constant in the reports, youth engagement or the lack of it could both be explained by the alleged difference between the research and the school. Either they were engaged because the researchers were "giving" them something

different from school, or they were not engaged because they only knew how to work in a scholar context.

However, Skyline's and Sunset's researchers also noticed the difference in the engagement of the co-researchers between interactions with them in a school or research context and outside them. Likewise, Sunset's and Mission's researchers were able to describe when and how some co-researchers engaged in the research. By doing so, they qualitatively explained their engagement in terms of moments and activities that generated engagement for some of them.

Social Relationships Between Researchers and Co-Researchers

Our research group has gone through the changes described by Schubotz (2012): first doing research on young people, then research with young people and finally empowering approaches to young people. Yet, the novelty of doing participatory research was a challenge for us and the distance and the difference between researchers and co-researchers were key issues in the reports. For instance, Mission's researchers highlighted the importance of recognizing the co-researchers for their knowledge and accepting that adults, teachers, and researchers do not know everything. At the same time, they recognized the asymmetry of their relationship and highlighted their intention of minimizing hierarchical differences and strengthening the proximity and dialog.

The researchers' reports mentioned the expectation of having a unique relationship with the co-researchers: not a peer-to-peer relationship, but not a teacher to student one either. Spending time together certainly contributed to build relationships between the researchers and co-researchers (Holland et al., 2010) that could be understood as "research friendships" (Blackman & Commene, 2012, p. 235). According to their reports, the researchers tried to build relationships based on proximity and truth with the co-researchers, by neither assessing nor judging them.

Ethnography is founded on the differences between community members in one layer and between researcher and researched in a second layer (Gioia, 2014). The researchers mentioned the differences between both groups and reflected on how they got together. The differences could be related to the language used, to motivational aspects or to dissimilarities between what they were used to doing in school and the research proposals. Island's researchers mentioned the difference and distance between them and the co-researchers when the latter suggested using a Facebook group to communicate and exchange information about the research, keeping with their daily use of social networks. Island's researchers were taken by surprise as they did not have Facebook accounts and had doubts about being "Facebook friends" of the co-researchers in a social network. Sunset researcher emphasized the trust of the participants in their decision to engage in the project, but she stepped back from

her mutual trust and sharing hypothesis and compared the young people's engagement with what would be expected from an adult.

Even after they found their own research topics, the feedback they gave us made us think that they were not interested in what we were doing. Maybe, because of that, I was so surprised when, suddenly, they would prepare questions, make comments related to what we were saying or even draw a logo for the group (Sunset researcher report).

Sunset's researcher's surprise is a good example of the difficulty all researchers experienced when interpreting the youth's feelings, interests and motivation as they developed "their own ways of participating" (Holland et al., 2010, p. 372).

Skyline's and Sunset's researchers wrote about the changes in their relationships with the young co-researchers whenever they had moments of talking and sharing that did not belong to the research or to the school. Then, they would get to know the youth better and reduce the distance between them. Since these moments were referred to as both out of the school and the research, we may wonder about the role of the research group in the researchers' relationships with the young participants. By following the rules and agreements of the research group, the relationship with the youth was certainly constrained as it may happen with teachers who strictly follow the school's rules. As inescapable as they are, recognizing the role of the institutional rules in the relationships established inside the school seems crucial for understanding youth engagement.

The co-researchers also wrote about their relationships with the researchers and their colleagues. They mostly confirmed the informality of the relationships while mentioning the differences between them.

Our relationship with (the researcher) and (the teacher) was different. It was not a student-teacher relationship. They were two more people of the group, with whom we could make jokes and talk seriously. Even when we did not do a bit of homework set by them, they would not get mad and that generated trust among us, made us feel at ease and miss anyone who would not come (Sunset co-researchers report).

It was a pleasure to work with (the researchers) because I learned a lot from them and their way of writing (Alameda co-researcher journal).

We had some communication problems with (the researcher) because she asked us our point of view about what we were researching (. . .) and we did not want to talk specifically about our teachers. We have learned how to express ourselves comfortably always in a respectful and critical manner (Mission co-researchers report).

These examples show how the co-researchers enjoyed the relationship with the researchers in its differences from the

typical relationships with teachers. However, the last example also shows how they had to navigate possible loyalty issues and reminds us of the complexities of doing participatory research inside schools.

'Until now, nobody in the environment of the school had shown interest in my motivations, nor had I stopped to think of what my school colleagues really like to do' (Sunset co-researcher journal).

We teamed up in pairs and described our classmate. I think it was very good because besides learning more about your friends and classmates, we got to know how others see us (Island co-researchers report).

Part of the relationship between researchers and co-researchers was characterized by asymmetric learning interests. Both groups expected to learn from the other, but in some cases, it also led the co-researchers to learn more about their colleagues. From both points of view, this relationship worked better when the learning interests of both groups were met in a more horizontal relationship that kept the distance and the differences between adults and youth.

Discussion

Regarding expectations and first impressions of researchers and co-researchers', some possible problems could have been anticipated. On the one hand, as university professors, we could have expected moments of lack of engagement since no pedagogy pleases everyone (Kahn, 2014; Lund Dean & Jolly, 2012) and our research interests would not necessarily match theirs (Holland et al., 2010). On the other hand, some of the co-researchers' expectations did not match what was being offered to them by the researchers and a certain degree of frustration could be expected. Each school presented the research in a particular way to the students and all five recruitment processes had their share of misinformation. The differences between the expectations of researchers and co-researchers could certainly be reduced through more accurate information during recruitment, but not completely eliminated.

In terms of positionality, as Cheney (2011) pointed out, there is always a process of building rapport and trust between researchers and co-researchers and it requires time. We also understood that it is only through time and a slow process of building trust that students can make the research their own, becoming empowered researchers or learners. This need has also been addressed by Zepke (2017) while describing practices of critical pedagogy of engagement. One of the main purposes of this pedagogical approach is to foster empowerment among learners, which involves understanding the classroom as a space where students can develop personally by engaging in relational dialog. Therefore, their

voices need to be heard, valued and acted on by the educational community.

The issue of power and authority in the relationship among youth and adults also appeared in the ethnographic notes. In all participant schools, the co-researchers had to learn to actively take control of the research and tell the researchers about their hypotheses and findings. Whenever the co-researchers reminded the researchers of their authority (the researchers'), the latter felt awkward, though many of them stated their authority and control in offering something different from school that would surely generate engagement. Despite their concern for respecting youth agency, identity and autonomy and not being paternalistic, the illusion of creating conditions that would generate engagement seemed like a powerful temptation even for researchers who had a quite critical view toward school and student engagement.

Engagement was explained by the researchers in different ways. It was related to the appropriation of the project by the co-researchers, which is coherent with what Smyth (2006) says about young people's decision to engage whenever they trust that they will be able to keep their identity and therefore advance their interests. Some descriptions of engagement were in line with the idea that student engagement depends on its object (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). If the tasks, technologies, tools, and social settings of the research, to name a few, could influence the engagement of the co-researchers, then participatory research with youth would not be only about finding common goals and interests, but also research methods that may be of interest to the youth. In our case, the research tasks included observations and interviews, but also analyzing social networks and visual methods.

As Holland et al. (2010) put it, the moments of lack of engagement of the co-researchers left the researchers with a "bad ethical taste in the mouth" (p. 372) because then "participatory research isn't so participatory anymore" (p. 372). Though some researchers may have been unrealistic about the other commitments of the co-researchers and may have overburden them with tasks (Schubotz, 2012), the lack of engagement clearly challenged our assumptions, theories, and participatory intentions. A third factor (the school in our case) could always serve as an explanation. Similarly, teachers may blame the disengagement of a group of students on other teachers' pedagogy, the school's culture, the students' families, or the school's neighborhood. Judging by the researchers' reports, recognizing the lack of engagement as a sign of an active resistance against the project (Smyth, 2006) or the lack of a meaningful connection to it (McInerney, 2009) was hard for us. By doing that, the agency and autonomy of the co-researchers were only acknowledged when they favored the researchers' goals and methods of work, that is, when they were engaged in the research.

Social relationships between researchers and co-researchers were revealed as one the most important aspects in

fostering engagement in a participatory research project. The researchers' reports mentioned the expectation of having a unique relationship with the co-researchers: not a peer-to-peer relationship, but not a teacher to student one either. Spending time together certainly contributed to build relationships between researchers and co-researchers (Holland et al., 2010) that could be understood as "research friendships" (Blackman & Commane, 2012, p. 235). According to their reports, the researchers tried to build relationships based on proximity and truth with the co-researchers, by neither assessing nor judging them.

At the same time, part of the relationship between researchers and co-researchers was characterized by asymmetric learning interests. Both groups expected to learn from the other, but in some cases, it also led the co-researchers to learn more about their colleagues. From both points of view, this relationship worked better when the learning interests of both groups were met in a more horizontal relationship that kept the distance and the differences between adults and youth. The recent study conducted by Joseph (2020) has also documented the importance of valuing students' personal experiences and interests and recognizing that teachers are not the only source of "authorized knowledge" when participatory forms of learning are encouraged in a classroom.

Conclusions and Implications

Student engagement and youth engagement in participatory research inside schools may share some features. Following a critical democratic (McMahon & Portelli, 2004) or a critical transformative approach (Zyngier, 2008), student engagement would be built together by teachers and students while questioning the curriculum and the power relations inside school. Similarly, participatory research implies youth agency and control over the research. Also, in both cases, learning is at stake and student/youth engagement may depend on what is to be learnt and the objectives of this engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

The main conclusion of this article is related to what is understood and recognized as student or youth engagement. All five groups ended up with rich results and all the researchers and co-researchers seemed proud of the work done, but there were moments of tension generated by disengagement. These moments clearly challenged the researchers' assumptions and were both unpleasant and hard to explain. Finding ourselves in the same situation as school teachers often do was not entirely new, because university professors also face disengagement at the university. Nevertheless, due to the project's approach, there were different expectations. The reasons for the co-researchers' lack of engagement also resembled those often used by school and imposing goals and deadlines ended up as a necessary evil to make the co-researchers work in some situations. Recognizing the students' agency and autonomy whenever they did not work as

wanted or expected by us was tough for many of the researchers. Maybe, the key to understand these moments of frustration is related to Skyline's and Sunset's researchers' recognition of youth engagement when they least expected it, that is when things did not work out as they planned. Their surprise tells us about the difference between accepting agency and autonomy and only expecting it. Whenever the young participants changed the rules or did not follow the planning, they could genuinely engage in the project because then it was theirs. It also reminds us of the boundaries of democratic resolutions and good intentions as the researchers, like any teacher, kept their authority and followed goals that might never be the youth's. It is also a good example of the difference between seeing everything as a logical consequence of our good ideas, intentions and plans and accepting the surprises and novelties of any relationship (Cifali, 2005). So, instead of looking for moments in which all students or participants and all teachers or researchers are equally engaged in a sort of ideal mutual trust and communion around a common goal, we might try to qualitatively understand when, how, and why teachers and students engage or, as Zyngier (2008) puts it, the meaning of their engagement.

Our findings may have at least two implications for student and youth engagement in schools and participatory research. The first is that, regardless of the best democratic intentions and critical pedagogical approaches of adult teachers and researchers, youth will engage on their terms and follow their interests and both of these factors cannot be fully anticipated by teachers or researchers. Thus, truly listening and accepting youth's interests and terms are key to any participatory research project or educational endeavor concerned with student engagement. Second, the importance and desirability of student or youth engagement must not become some sort of imperative ideal of permanent full engagement. Moments of disengagement are inevitable in any educational relationship and should be accepted and understood instead of pathologized "as the undisciplined and apathetic object of engagement research" (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 10) or simply disregarded (Gourlay, 2017). Then, maybe, student engagement as a concept may help teachers, researchers and youth to think about the contexts and complexities of any educational situation.

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