Messy Ethics: Conducting Moral Participatory Action Research in the Crucible of University-School Relations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that when university researchers engage in democratic participatory action research with schools the process requires a special type of attention to the ethical difficulties which can arise. We note how current professional standards of ethics are inadequate to fully address many of the dilemmas faced in collaborative research. We then share examples of ethical dilemmas that have arisen in our work with schools and demonstrate how each has contributed to the (developing) framework we have created to avoid or manage the kinds of messy ethical issues we describe. We argue that this framework reflects a continuous commitment to an ethics of practice. We believe that those engaged in this type of work must assume an ethical stance and view all decisions in the research process as ethical ones that potentially affect the lives of all of those involved.
INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) conducted collaboratively by university researchers and members of school communities offers great opportunities for both groups to learn from and about each other: scholars can gain special access to research sites and teachers, administrators and students can learn how to conduct research and then develop credible, insider, and evidenced-based changes about issues that concern them (Kuriloff, Reichert, Stoudt & Ravitch, 2009). But PAR also raises many complexities that must be addressed in such cross institutional research. These difficulties arise from the different histories and purposes of universities and schools and the different expectations and cultures they bring to the research process. There are also power relationships to be managed within and across the two institutions. Finally, the nature of the research itself can present both ethical and practical quandaries that often defy easy resolution. In looking back on the difficulties we have encountered in conducting PAR with schools we have come to understand that while many of the problems and roadblocks have been merely practical or functional, many others have been far more complex and profound. In numerous situations that have arisen over the years, we have had to pause and collectively grapple with a problem that is fundamentally ethical in nature. These ethical issues have taken many different forms and have arisen at many different points in the research process, but they all share the quality of forcing us to consider the nature of our work and how to protect the rights of all of the parties involved while conducting research for change.

In this paper we draw on our experience working with school-based participants on PAR projects in nine different schools over a 10 year period. In writing about the ethical challenges that have arisen in various ways in our work we hope to provide a picture of our process that will be useful for others who engage in collaborative research, especially in university-school collaborations.
partnerships. We acknowledge up front that we are relating these stories from our position as the university-based members of the research collaborations. While our commitment to always consider the standpoint of our school-based co-collaborators is part of the very fabric of what we do, we recognize that the school-based researchers grapple with the ethical difficulties in their own contextually valid fashions and that this contrast sometimes results in different ways of understanding and approaching them. Indeed, some of the dilemmas we describe arise out of these very differences. For these reasons, our paper explores our part of the collaboration and we recognize that our representations of the situations we describe are shaped profoundly by our standpoint.

In what follows we illustrate ethical difficulties through various examples drawn from our experience and then offer our own (developing) approach to managing the PAR research process. We then argue that to effectively address the complex ethical issues arising in such work, university-school researchers should adopt a reconceived ethical stance about how to conceptualize and enact their work. We seek to reframe our choices as researchers not simply as research choices but as the enactment of an ethical stance on research more broadly.

THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF BOYS’ AND GIRLS’ LIVES

The Center for the Study of Boys’ and Girls’ Lives (CSBGL) (www.csbgl.org) was founded as a research collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education and what has now become nine, elite independent schools. Its member schools\(^1\) each contribute to its financial maintenance. From its beginning, CSBGL has been devoted to democratically based, participatory action research. As collaborative, university-based researchers, the CSBGL staff is committed to helping schools do research in the service of action

\(^1\)The Haverford School, Episcopal High School in VA, Riverdale Country School, Greenwich Academy, Miss Porter’s Academy, Shipley School, University School, The Lawrenceville School and Dwight Englewood School.
to promote the welfare of children. Our PAR model is rooted in several principles. First and foremost, it is fundamentally democratic and constituency based. That means we want to help schools look at problems that administrators, teachers and students care about and believe are important. Further, once we have come to an agreement with the school on what questions to look at, we do not research them by ourselves but only in collaboration with a school-based team. Depending on the problem and what is appropriate, that team may include teachers, administrators and students. Second, we make every effort to conduct research that is rigorously empirical. That means we want to help school-based research teams ask questions in ways that can be answered and in ways in which the answers themselves can be verified in terms of commonly agreed on scientific standards. The third principle underlying our approach to PAR is that it is both reflective and interpretive. That means that as it generates answers to our questions, we also work actively to foster reflection about their meanings. It commits us to ask the school team and ourselves what the data are telling us about our boys and girls and our schools. A subsidiary of this principle is that we are committed to examining our findings through systemic lens. Thus we regularly ask what the relationships are among our findings about students and the school in which they study. Fourth, PAR should lead to action. The findings of our joint research efforts should result in practical outcomes that matter to the people involved (boys, girls, teachers, administrators, parents). These outcomes could result in a change in methods of teaching, in the curricula, in the advisory system, or in the ways in which a school evaluates or cares for its students (see for example, Schoeffel, van Steenwyk, & Kuriloff, in press). Finally, the CSGBL PAR model is iterative. That means that actions or interventions generated to address a problem themselves raise questions about their impact and effectiveness that should generate a new round of inquiry (Kuriloff, et al., 2009).
Handling Logistical Issues while Adhering to Ethical Standards

Working with the members of school communities to help improve the lives of students is incredibly rewarding work. It is also very difficult work. There are myriad practical, theoretical, and ethical difficulties that can arise when conducting participatory research across two types of institutions. At the most basic level we have to coordinate not only our often differing expectations and experience, but also publishing goals and meeting times. The nature of the research can present challenges as well. For instance, because questions and methods can evolve and alter rapidly over the constrained school year it can be difficult to prepare a university institutional review board application in a timely fashion. And, of course, our university-school teams apply professional standards of ethical conduct to our research projects. We work to insure that the results of our efforts have more scientific value than the dislocations and inconveniences they cause. We care about getting informed consent, maintaining confidentiality and otherwise protecting the people we are both studying and with whom we are studying. Attending to all of these considerations, however, can make timely progress difficult.

The struggles over getting qualitative research (and participatory research more generally) approved by IRBs have already been well documented in the literature (see for example: Eikeland, 2006; Khanlou & Peter, 2005; Mohr, 2001; Pritchard, 2002; Walsh, Hewson, Shier, & Morales, 2008; Zeni, 2001). Pritchard, in his description of the ethical issues connected to practitioner research (2002), does a good job illustrating the problems that many types of qualitative researchers, not just those doing PAR, will encounter when they attempt to fit their research designs into the expectations of an IRB.

While our PAR work is not exclusively qualitative in nature, we almost always use at least some qualitative methods. In addition, the non-traditional nature of this type of research
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brings up many of the questions and difficulties described in literature on action research and qualitative research broadly. The difficulties begin, as Pritchard explains it, because of the different understandings and expectations of what research is and does that often exist between the practitioner researcher and the IRB. The two parties may use different definitions of research itself and the IRB will often have difficulty understanding the lack of division between “researcher” and “researched.” Understandably, the board may be troubled by a lack of clarity about how to handle informed consent, the multiple roles the researcher may play in a setting, the fact that the research plan will evolve as it confronts field-based contingencies, the difficulties in preserving confidentiality, the potential for conflicts of interest and the possible role of reform in the proposed research (Pritchard, 2002). We have encountered these difficulties often in our work, both when dealing with our university IRB and, at times, when trying to explain this form of research to members of the school community who may be unfamiliar with and resistant to it.

CSBGL has found that one way to address the issues connected to research ethics has been to develop a set of ethical guidelines worked out between the senior author and Penn’s IRB (correspondence between Kuriloff & Kyle Stephens, IRB Administrator, 4-13-09; see Appendix I) and share them with school heads, teams and research coordinators. While CSBGL staff members work with all of the member schools to conform to these guidelines, the schools themselves have different views on the necessity of developing their own formal approval systems. Some have formed small boards made up of a knowledgeable parent, a teacher and an administrator; others have kept approvals very informal; if the school’s research coordinator and head approve, the projects have moved forward. Ethical issues arising from these disjunctures are addressable—if not entirely avoidable or neatly resolved—through a combination of annual reiteration of our ethical guidelines at the workshop CSBGL gives for school Research
Coordinators, careful collaborative monitoring of our joint efforts in each school, and general vigilance throughout the research process. Other ethical issues, however, have proven more challenging and are seldom discussed in the literature.

**PERPLEXING MORAL ISSUES IN COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH**

**Issues arising from PAR’s Orientation to Social Justice**

As in many theories of action research, collaborative research as practiced by CSBGL is designed to foster social justice. We also are dedicated to promoting equity for the participants with whom we work. Often these two goals are linked: we challenge ourselves to work broadly for social good, most often to further the interests of those who have historically been left voiceless. As we collaborate with schools, our projects often focus on issues surrounding the fair treatment of students. As the name of our organization indicates, we are committed to addressing issues connected to students’ lived experiences as gendered members of schools. We are equally concerned, however, with other aspects of students’ identities such as race, socio-economic status and sexual orientation and the ways that these identities affect their school lives. In the first two stories from our work we explore some of the ethical difficulties that have arisen for us in connection with our teams’ efforts to promote social justice for students.

*Perceptions of Beauty at the Birch School*

This situation arose in one of our schools, which we’ll refer to in this paper as The Birch School, where we were doing an initial “gender” audit that involved getting the lay of the land through many extensive focus groups of students and faculty. Like other schools in our collaborative, Birch has a relatively large endowment, buildings that many small colleges would envy, terrific athletic facilities and the like. Like many formerly all-boys schools—(and universities for that matter (see for example, *A Hero for Daisy*)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SDKk9qjX4Es, about the positioning of women’s crew at Yale after it went co-educational)—there remain vestiges of its history. For example, as in every other CSBGL school which was originally all male, boys’ sports fields take up more space and are more central than those belonging to the girls (though over time the school has been making an effort towards equalizing facilities). While girls sometimes voice complaints about this and other ways boys continue to be privileged at the school, until our collaborative work, they had not had a formal opportunity to discuss their views openly. Still, in a dozen different focus groups with a range of students we found a pervasive spirit of contentment at the school. As places go, Birch appears to be remarkably free of the usual tensions associated with schools having truly diverse populations, and its endowment and commitment made its student body much more diverse than schools in many wealthy public districts (Doyle, 1981).

We were doing one of the focus groups with students enrolled in a class about race at Birch and we asked what they were learning. One African American girl told us: “Well, we have learned about the genetics of race and the history of race in the United States but we haven’t learned about race at Birch.” When we asked them to tell us about race at Birch, another young African American woman said:

You know, there was an Internet competition for unofficial ‘Prom King’ where a couple of boys set up a sort of ‘playoff’ to decide the date of a very popular White boy they designated as the King. Students were asked to nominate [a couple of dozen] girls and then vote them down to the final one. Funny thing about it, not one of those women was Black. While the competition had been discussed among students, teachers, and administrators, views were all over the place and no official venues had been created by the school to help students interrogate the event.
When we raised this issue with the school-based research team as one representing fundamental questions of fairness at the intersection of race and gender, the administration embraced the issue as one worthy of study. A team of teachers and Penn CSBGL-associated faculty took up the challenge, helping three Black girls, all seniors, do a study of standards of beauty at Birch. The girls got pictures of Caucasian and African American girls from an old public high school yearbook, picked a group of girls from each and ranked them for skin tone from light to dark, using a well-accepted research technique (Breland, 1998). They then asked boys on campus to rate the pictures in terms of beauty and of what they called “dateability.” In brief, in line with much of the research literature (Hill, 2002; Le Langlois & Stephan, 1977; Malloy, Merighi & Murstein, 2001; Ross, 1997), their study showed a startlingly strong, direct relationship between skin tone and appeal: both White and Black boys favored the lightest, blondest girls. It showed an even stronger relationship between skin tone and “dateability” and also revealed that African American boys ranked darker skin tones less beautiful and less datable than White boys.

So, what are the lessons from Birch? While its level of diversity is exemplary, and it is committed to equity, it still has an underlying, hidden curriculum that centralizes boys and harbors some boys who maintain a kind of hard-edged, hegemonic masculinity at the expense of girls. When understood within this context the event may be understood as an example of such schools’ history of educating boys for power—a history reflective of the origin of elite boys’ schools (Cookson & Persell, 1987; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Given that, it is at least arguable that setting up the contest and inducing the student body to objectify girls was not only sexist—and, as it turned out, racist—but also a bleak demonstration of young men exercising power over young women. African American girls suffer more, as they rest at the bottom of the parallel but
subordinate female social hierarchy in such schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009). Sadly, the African American boys participated in maintaining this hierarchy. More sadly still, even as the young women wrote up these results, they fretted about whether they would be asked to the senior prom.

With the full support of the school head, the girls presented their findings to key audiences including a CSBGL Round Table made up of all participating schools, teachers and administrators at the school, a key committee of the Board of Directors and their fellow students. Their study was sound and was well received by all audiences but their fellow students. We had not prepared the student researchers adequately for the resistance they might encounter from their peers. In another misstep on our part, we allowed the research team to be made up of only senior students. When they graduated that spring there were no engaged students left to move forward to action steps the following year. While their work did encourage useful discourse across campus and put an end to such “underground” competitions, at least in the near term, it did not result in fundamental changes in student attitudes at the school. Overall, the research project raised concerns for a year or two but left the fundamental causes untouched by an action plan.

Of course, it would take a long, sustained effort to address injustices arising from the deeply seated historically and culturally rooted curriculum of hegemonic masculinity or from profoundly ingrained racism. But an ethics of practice requires at least that when we do research that grapples with such issues, we create ways to sustain it over the long haul. When we and school teams raise issues that we all agree require addressing, we now feel it is our obligation to build a structure that has the capacity to do so. In this case our effort, which grew spontaneously out of a focus group we conducted in one class, resulted in a student team that did not have
cross-age membership so there were no students to carry on the work the following year. We could imagine interventions that would institutionalize forums for addressing the layered issues raised by “the competition” in safe public forms as part of the ongoing curriculum. We also could imagine ways to involve African American students and their parents each year in thinking about the implications of dating choices in order to build self-sustaining communities of support. But we had failed to lay sufficient groundwork for this kind of work. Having understood these issues, and with supportive school administrations, we now are in a position to follow through on addressing inequities that we (collectively) identify in our schools. The key here, of course, is gaining support of the school leadership. Sometimes this proves very difficult, confronting us with a different kind of moral dilemma.

_Confronting Tracking at The Maple School_

CSBGL’s work with each school is coordinated by a senior researcher (its Executive Director, Research Director or Co-Research Director) and a graduate student research assistant (RA). On her third trip to The Maple School, one of our RAs who was getting a PhD in math education met with the head of the middle school. On her first visit, she and the school team had discussed doing a project investigating how students at the school were faring academically. The research assistant had taken home a data set that included grade reports by subject and students’ race. On her second visit, she and the school head had discussed what the RA was beginning to see in the data. The RA had noticed that there were marked differences in grades by students of different racial backgrounds. For their third meeting, she had included financial data in her analysis, to see if class were playing a role too. In that third meeting the RA met with the middle school head, CSBGL’s Co-Research Director and the school’s Research Coordinator (RC), a teacher at the school.
Prior to this meeting, the RA had spoken candidly with the middle school head about what she saw in the data: in the past five years, all of the African American boys were systematically tracked into the lower level mathematics courses, and all but one of the Asian boys was tracked into the upper level courses. The RA showed the analysis to the group. She showed everyone how race and class seemed to be affecting grades over the past five years. She showed them descriptions of students broken down into grade-average quintiles demonstrating how African American boys were seriously over represented in the lowest quintile of each class. Lastly, the RA talked about math tracking—something she had become quite skeptical about after reviewing the large body of research on the topic.

The group discussed the data and the research findings. At the previous meeting, the RA had learned that the school was relatively non-diverse until 6th grade, when it began offering scholarships. The group discussed whether the African American students, who were new to the school, might be playing “catch-up” and if that could be playing a role in their relatively poor performance. The RA asked who decided on placement, and the head said that there was only one sixth grade math teacher, and that teacher decided which level the students would be in. The RA suggested that it was possible the data might be reflecting that person’s gate-keeping role: By excluding African American boys from the higher tracks, she might have been keeping them from what they needed to learn to advance. The RA suggested she also might be communicating lower expectations to them, which in turn might be evoking stereotypic threat (Steele & Aaronson, 1995). But the RA also was very clear that some other phenomena could have been at work (beyond the teacher’s behavior or the students’ academic preparedness) and that further research was needed.
The head replied that the administration knew they had a problem with that teacher (a statement upon which she did not elaborate) and that the teacher was going to retire in two years so the group should not worry about her. To be clear, the RA emphasized with the group that any research should not center on one teacher (for a multitude of ethical reasons). Regardless, instead of continuing to talk about future research possibilities, the head started talking about how the school could develop a summer program to help new Black students become acculturated to their new school. From the RA’s point of view, the head wanted to take action on the problem without doing further research to understand what was causing it.

After this discussion was over, the head said that the school was going to be changing its tracking policy. She said that they were going to start doing it earlier, moving from the seventh grade to sixth grade, or maybe even fifth grade. The RA reiterated that this move did not correspond with the current research on the topic, which shows evidence that mixed-ability classes have positive effects on all students, not just struggling ones. The RA went on to say that what the group had been talking about over the past hour showed that the school has an issue with tracking, and that this decision would make it worse.

In this example, the RA made an explicit ethical decision to object to a decision made by a member of the school-based research team that she thought was misguided and possibly damaging to a group of African American boys. Not only was she trying to defend the students, but she was also defending her work and field of expertise. CSBGL’s senior researcher tried to support the RA in the meeting without alienating the head (who in his mind too was on morally shaky ground around the gate keeping teacher and on educationally shaky ground around fostering further math tracking). Shortly after the meeting ended, the CSBGL’s Executive
Director got a call from the school’s RC asking that the RA be replaced as she had overstepped her boundaries by questioning the head’s tracking decision.

From the point of view of the school, the RA had failed to respect the professional judgment of the head by making suggestions about how “her” program should be run. The head felt publically and inappropriately challenged in front of another member of the school staff. While senior CSBGL staff members agreed with this assessment, they also agreed with the position of the RA regarding both the achievement gap and about the problematics of math tracking. Given the nature of our compact with the schools (Kuriloff, et al., 2009) CSBGL had to replace the student with another RA.

As we stepped back and analyzed the problem, we came to believe it arose from our failure to adequately coach the RA to be more emotionally intelligent about the ways she confronted ethical issues perceived in the school. As a young academic deeply invested in her own knowledge, she failed to appreciate how the head of a school would experience the challenge to her authority based on expertise she had acquired over years of teaching and running the school. Further, school heads rightfully see their job as serving a variety of children and parents by balancing numerous demands. Many powerful parents believe in tracking, especially in math, as do many other parents and math teachers. Other parents feel quite as passionately in the opposite direction. Any head contemplating changes must navigate these turbulent waters (as indeed, must public school principals: See McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999).

To work effectively with schools for change means to both understand the challenges around the different stakes of academics and school administrators and to appreciate them as appropriate and central to their doing their jobs well. Only by assuming such an appreciative stance is it sometimes possible to find ways to use our skills to tackle issues we all feel are
morally problematic. In this particular case, CSBGL’s Senior Researcher was able to get the school to begin to address the problem over time, first by sharing the achievement data and data from a parent survey with the head of school. The head in turn got interested in interviewing African American middle school students and their parents. The combination of our data and his findings has led to a search for a program grounded in research into Black students’ concerns to prepare them for doing better in the school. It also has led to a renewed investigation of the achievement data, including math achievement. Whether this will lead to a reexamination of the tracking issue remains to be seen.

Moral Conflicts Arising from Competing Values and Multiple Roles

Publishing Data from The Oak School

Different ethical issues arise when PAR researchers do not keep the competing values of universities and schools in mind when contemplating publishing the results of their work. Since the schools are both paying for the work and have a large reputational stake in any findings, the CSBGL compact requires that any publications about particular schools be approved by the school head (Kuriloff, et al., 2009). Of course, this can lead to conflicts. An example arose from The Oak School team’s desire to understand the achievement gap in its school. Despite the fact that the school is highly selective and African American students enter with GPAs and entrance exams relatively equal to other students (well over one standard deviation above the mean) they are seriously overrepresented in the bottom quartile of GPAs in the school, a phenomenon found in other elite schools (see, for example, De Jarnett, 2006). To be sure that initial differences in entrance scores weren’t affecting this result, we checked the finding by co-varying student GPAs against the school’s entrance exam over ten years of student data. The results showed that after holding entrance tests constant, African American students, particularly boys, were still
dramatically “under performing.” This finding is replicated in other elite independent schools (DeJarnett, 2006) as well as widely in public schools (Ferguson, 2000; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kizzie, Rowley & Cortina, 2010). We have found it in other CSBGL schools too.

Since the school team and its Penn-based CSBGL Research Director knew that many of the explanations of the gap in public schools (e.g. “hyper-masculinity,” fear of acting White and the “code of the street”) were not in play as the students had been the very top performers in their previous schools (Coleman, 1988; Cassidy & Stevenson, 2005; Fordham & Ogbru, 1986; Anderson, 1999) the team set out to discover an heuristic model that it could use to frame a qualitative study to explore the question in more depth. Shortly after developing the model, the senior Penn researcher was invited to write a chapter in a book about African Americans in school. He invited school staff on the research team to co-author the piece and then asked the head if it were alright, as long as they ran the piece by him before it was published.

The resulting paper was a genuine product of the committee. It established the case for an alternative understanding of the achievement gap in elite schools by distinguishing the students from their public school peers in terms of their past achievement and their entrance scores and by then using the statistical analysis to show that “aptitude” test scores could not account for it. It then went on to build a model based on the literature and some data drawn from focus groups and interviews that members of the committee had conducted for related purposes. The paper de-identified the school and only identified the co-authors from the school team by their academic credentials—with no mention of the The Oak School name included anywhere. Nevertheless, when the head read the paper, he said it could not be published. He argued it would be too easy to simply Google the co-authors to discover their association with the school. He also felt that the paper was not fully fair in its characterization of some teachers’ contributions to the gap—a
reasonable critique, and one that could have been addressed once it was pointed out. He added that two members of the committee were skeptical about the use of this particular entrance exam as a covariate, and noted that there were a couple of members who wondered if the achievement gap were not more a question of Asian American “over achievement” than of African American “under achievement” (also reasonable critiques that we would have had to address in a revision of the paper). The head also had questions about whether entrance exams were the best measure of preparedness for this demanding school, suggesting, probably correctly, that a measure of critical thinking might work better. Despite those caveats, the head actually believed the findings and was happy to have the school address the issues; he just couldn’t risk having his African American parents, whose children Oak had worked assiduously to recruit, see the data and get a skewed idea that the school was a negative environment for their children—something he did not believe, even while acknowledging that the school still had more work to do in this area. The paper using school data had to be withdrawn.

This example illustrates the competing values of a university-based researcher, the school team and a school head. All agreed on the essential accuracy of the findings. On the one hand, the researcher and the team believed the model represented an important contribution to the field—one worthy of both publishing and testing. Indeed, members of the team suggested they take their names off the piece and that the university representatives publish it independently; something he would not do. On the other hand, the head was properly committed to protecting his school and his students. From his point of view, the school’s reputation was at risk and damage to that would injure all its constituencies.

In the end however, this example is not just about competing values. It is also about the failure of the senior academic to fully appreciate the legitimate and vital role of the head. Had he
taken such an appreciative stance from the beginning, it might have been possible to structure the team’s work so it built its statistical case on a set of CSBGL schools, or even more broadly, on data found in NELS (http://nces.ed.gov). The paper could be published in this arms-length fashion, though the issue of co-authorships would not be solved. Thus, it remains to be seen if that means such school-based collaborative work on delicate subjects can be published at all. But CSBGL has two counter examples. In years past member school heads allowed papers on highly sensitive subjects to reveal the schools’ names in publications (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Ottley, 2005). This suggests that the calculus involves heads’ personal assessment of possible risks as well as requiring vigilant university researchers always to keep their school collaborators’ positions in the fronts of their minds.

Ethical Dilemmas Involving the Complexities of Protecting Participants and Researchers

Helping without Stigmatizing at The Pine School

At The Pine School teachers noticed that freshmen and sophomore boys of color were experiencing a decline in their academic performance compared to middle school. Meanwhile, the junior and senior boys of color had generally maintained high performance records throughout high school. An intervention program was designed to cultivate meaningful relationships among young men of color at the school across the grades levels to develop and strengthen their social, emotional, and intellectual competence as well as to promote their potential as school leaders. The program provides a structured opportunity for junior and senior boys of color to share knowledge about what accounts for their academic success as well as build a community of support. The program was originally initiated by the school as a project separate from their work with CSBGL. The goals of the mentoring program meshed with those of the
CSBGL research team well, however, and studying the program soon became a part of a research project.

At the annual CSBGL training institute, the teacher heading the program, an African American man, expressed an ethical concern regarding the potential stigma that students might experience if they participated in the program. He knew from his observations and his personal experience that boys of color often feel that members of a school community might question their ability to excel academically—particularly in a highly competitive school environment. He was fearful of reinforcing this stigma.

To address this issue, the students of color in the program are told explicitly that the program is not remedial. At each program meeting, students are reminded of the program’s vision and mission, which is to strengthen relationships and support for boys of color at the school and to help them to succeed socially and emotionally as well as intellectually. We hoped that by stressing the group’s mission to create relationships the students would not feel that the school was sending a message that they are not capable of excelling academically. Indeed, the students are indirectly coached to describe the program as an affinity group. Hopefully, this provides a perspective that contradicts the interpretations that propel the stigma. Further, the program is presented as a community of shared experience along racial and ethnic lines and provides a kind of support other students at the school get but tailored in particular ways for them. For example, Caucasian boys who are also Jewish students represent another group that comes together culturally and without stigma.

While these may be ways to diminish the stigma, the leader of the program acknowledges that students might experience some. Still, it is his belief that the benefits of the program outweigh the potential stigma that students might experience. CSBGL researchers want to
continue to explore the question. Given the original motivation for the program—the first and second year boys were not doing as well as the previous two classes—it is difficult to believe the boys have not figured it out. Some academic staff members of CSBGL wonder if a more honest approach might not be more effective. Claude Steele (2010), who developed stereotype threat theory, has a new book that argues that an honest approach is indeed better. Couldn’t the more senior boys, working in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) mode, work with the younger boys to discover what the roadblocks are to their doing better and then work with them, in an a new evidenced-based program, to attack the problem? The school’s understandable desire to “do something” quickly by creating the program actually runs counter to the more deliberative approach favored by the Center. Perhaps, had there been additional research and preparation before initiating the program, some of these problems could have been avoided.

Together we have tried to solve this issue by creating an YPAR team to explore how the program is working. In terms of the initial worry about stigma though, it is not clear whether this approach or following the strategy of defining the program as one offering support and solidarity would be less stigmatizing. What is certainly true is that negotiating what approach to take describes the terrain within which an ethical stance must be crafted.

Managing Power Relationships within a School Team at The Ash School

Another ethical challenge arose when one of CSBGL’s RAs was conducting two focus groups of lower school faculty about how the current anti-bullying programs at Ash were working, as well as how they were disseminated and enacted. The school-based research team consisted of five teachers, the lower school administrative assistant, the Research Coordinator and the lower school head. During the introduction to both focus groups, which included assurances of confidentiality, the participants asked who would be listening to tapes. The first
group of teachers suggested that they would not be as candid if they knew that the lower school head would be listening. With the school-based RC (a direct supervisee of the head), the CSBGL RA made a decision on the spot that the head would not be allowed to listen to the focus group audio recordings despite the fact that she was a member of the research team. The RA told the teachers that the head would only have access to an edited transcript that protected the speakers’ identities. She then went on to have two in-depth and open focus group conversations about the successes and failures of the anti-bullying programs at Ash. One of the issues that came up often was a lack of a consistent message across the school concerning the anti-bullying program. Participants in both groups felt that this was due, in some part, to the lower school head. Given that these teachers, like almost all independent school teachers, operate on one year contracts, the teachers probably would not want have wanted her to see these ideas associated with their names.

Directly after the focus groups, the RC and RA told the lower school head what had happened: That the participants felt uncomfortable with her being able to listen to the recordings and that they were told that she only would be given access to edited transcripts. The head was hurt by this for two reasons. First, as a team member, she felt that it was unfair that she would be removed from part of the research process. The RA immediately felt badly for not having anticipated this. She apologized for making that decision without consulting her or the research team. Second, and this is something that understandably bothered the school head much more, she was troubled that own staff did not feel that they could trust her with their honest opinions of how a school policy was working. The school spent $250 for transcription (originally, each team member was just going to listen to tapes of the focus groups because the team did not have any
discretionary funds), and both the RC and the RA went through the transcripts to de-identify the participants.

This example raises issues caused by the differential power that occurs in all cross-role school teams. The problem is how to take advantage of the different perspectives and knowledge of teachers and administrators or, in YPAR projects, students and teachers, in safe ways, without limiting the voices of any group. In this case, a prior discussion with the entire team (including the head of the lower school) about the necessity of maintaining confidentiality in any focus group or interview might have helped prepare the head for the teachers’ insistence on anonymity. It would not, of course, have prepared her for the results. Perhaps we need to explicitly alert administrators before a team starts working that any exploration of a topic of real importance may unearth troubling material: While everyone who works on a PAR project goes into it having helped design the research questions, qualitative work in particular tends to unearth surprising results.

Protecting Students and Teachers on Mixed Teams at the Elm School

Working with YPAR teams made up of students and teachers may even be trickier. In the upper school at Elm, the collaborative team made up of students, teachers and CSBGL researchers did intensive work on locating and mapping “hot spots” of bullying. In the process, it discovered that some teachers were colluding with students to “wing” students who weren’t paying attention, who said “dumb” things or who didn’t come prepared. One teacher even kept scores of these hurtful remarks on the blackboard (Stoudt, 2009). In this project students also interviewed other students and therefore had to be very careful about maintaining confidentiality among their peers. Obviously, when a school-based research team is investigating sensitive subjects such as this within their own community, the potential for ethical difficulties is high. In
this case, the CSBGL Research Co-Director had taken elaborate steps to protect student and teacher team members. Not only had he done the usual education about the importance of confidentiality; he also had the students and the teachers feed their data through him so that teachers and students did not see each other’s unfiltered results (Stoudt, 2009).

In attempting to address such issues, CSBGL has been working to develop a new dimension to its compact that makes schools and especially the heads responsible for creating safe places for students, teachers and administrators to conduct their research. In trying to find the right language, the Board (made of the three CSBGL Research Directors and the heads of schools) is seeking to recognize explicitly that differentials of power can sometimes place members of research teams occupying different roles in threatening positions. However, while creating such a code is important, the real work of protecting the research participants (be they on the team or participants in focus groups and interviews) goes on in the transactions among CSBGL staff, research teams and school administrators. Here we as researchers need to be constantly alert to how the various players may be feeling, to invite them constantly to share their views of the enterprise, to engage them carefully in conversations about it and to remember how each participant’s views are shaped by their positioning within the organization. How then might we be more systematic in assuming such a stance when conducting collaborative PAR and YPAR research?

**PAR AS AN ETHICAL STANCE**

**Overview of Ethics as a Stance**

These vignettes, taken from our everyday work with schools, illuminate the complex nature of ethical issues that participatory action research involves—complexity that our current ethical codes are inadequate to address.
Running head: Messy Ethics

We believe that if researchers are going to conduct PAR ethically, they need to consider the work they do as ethical practice. In this sense, the choices we make as researchers are not simply decisions about research but are the enactment of an ethical stance and a profound expression of our values regarding the way people should be treated (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). Understood this way, we always strive to situate ourselves in our research as ethical choice-makers rather than as neutral or objective parties. As Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) argue for applied developmental work, we argue that:

Every act of [qualitative research] is an act of interpretation. And every interpretation made in such work is an ethical act, because people's lives are the focus of these interpretations and of the intervention strategies that result from them….From this perspective, the systematic deconstruction (critical taking apart) of our interpretations is an ethical responsibility because it allows for an increased understanding of the values and biases that underlie and direct our efforts. (xi)

In this sense, we link taking an ethical stance on research to taking an inquiry stance on practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). If we are going to consider our work ethical practice, we must be engaged in continuous, simultaneous inquiry about that practice in order to recognize the kinds of issues that must be reframed as moral choices. Taking an inquiry stance requires that we researchers develop and refine our understanding of the role of systematic reflection in our everyday efforts and that we view practice-based inquiry as an ethic of our research as well as a fundamental aspect of our vision of ourselves as researchers. It means that researchers must be committed to the process of self-reflection and the continual investigation into, and systematic critique of their work. This re-conceptualization of ethics as the very heart of our work helps us to imagine stretching the current confines on what constitutes ethical issues in research; it
enables us to begin to develop a more finely grained taxonomy of ethical issues in participatory research. In organizing the cases we have presented, we have begun to develop the outlines of such a taxonomy as well as to develop the skeleton of a framework for addressing them in practice. In turn, all of these point to the dimensions of a nascent ethics of practice.

**Taxonomy of ongoing Ethical Issues in PAR**

*Disjunctions between PAR and Ethical Codes*

The moral dilemma at the root of our work is that PAR efforts sometimes do not easily fit into current conventional codes. The remedies we have developed involve creating ethical guidelines that we review with our schools at the beginning of each year (see Appendix I). These guidelines enable university scholars and school-based researchers to anticipate issues and try to address them even in the fluidly developing world of conducting PAR. Nevertheless, we cannot anticipate everything and must remain disciplined in maintaining the ethical stance we outline below. In the next section we consider again the dilemmas we have just described and the lessons we have learned from them about engaging in this work ethically. We will show how in each case taking on an ethical stance will help us to at least manage and at best avoid similar problems in the future.

**Perplexing Moral Questions**

*Complexity of Protecting Mixed Role Teams.* As we have shown, moral dilemmas often arise when mixed teams with different power are working together, both within the school and across the university-school partnership. In-school researchers can be at risk when they discover issues that administrators find threatening. In the example from Ash, we showed how an administrator on the research team became offended and the research process had to be altered when teachers worried about her hearing their responses to interviews. When research teams are
drawn from different groups within a school, as is almost always preferable in school-based PAR, such issues will often arise. This was the case at the Elm School when student researchers interviewed other students and also uncovered instances of teachers participating in bullying. Taking an ethical stance in our work involves discussing in advance the potential of our research to cause such problems with the team, helping everyone appreciate the implications of power differentials and building safe ways of sharing data through a CSBGL intermediary. Of course, this is sometimes not enough and we must be steadfast in our willingness to interpose ourselves between the groups when such threats arise. Here again vigilance and courage must be an essential aspect of our ethical stance. As our example from The Elm School shows, students can be at risk if they unearth data that raises questions about faculty conduct that might provoke retaliation or about student conduct that could lead to disciplinary action. Both student and teachers researchers can also be at risk if their findings raise questions about the school that the school head finds problematic.

Complexities Involving Helping Deserving Students. Minnow (1990) has written in a penetrating fashion about the ethical dilemmas that she argues are an inevitable result of efforts to support disadvantaged groups by creating programs that set them apart. In the case of our efforts to support the program for under-achieving Black boys at the Pine School we all recognized that our efforts entailed this risk. On reflection, the solution to tell the boys that the program was to provide mentoring to them from older Black boys without acknowledging its academic aims seems flimsy at best. However, the choice to be upfront with the boys about the program also seems problematic. It is at least arguable that an appropriate ethical stance would include discussing the issue with the boys and their parents and then giving them a choice to participate. Of course, such openness is not without risks too. Ultimately, then, we are
advocating a stance that always attempts to recognize risks and that seeks to manage those risk by allowing the people involved to make their own choices about their levels of involvement—and to have a key say in the design of ways to help them.

**Orientation towards Promoting Social Justice.** PAR in general, and certainly as practiced by CSBGL, is committed to promoting social justice. Ethical dilemmas arise both when we identify an issue at the school and again when we have the capacity to develop an evidenced-based action plan to address it but fail to do it, as occurred at Birch School when our student researchers all graduated and the research project faded away. Similarly, ethical dilemmas have arisen when we have identified a moral question that we feel is important for the school to address and it is unwilling to do so. We have learned in the first case that conducting the research is never enough; that when we have findings we must also develop an action plan that involves a project management scheme, including the necessary personnel (be they teachers, students, administrators, parents or CSBGL staff members) as well as the strategy and tactics to carry it out. In the second case, we have learned (painfully) that sometimes issues that to us clearly involve injustice, represent to the schools complex trade-offs among goods. Chastened, our stance has become one of considering the interpretive stance of our collaborators, employing our empathic imagination in developing richer understandings of their views and commitments, and finding ways of joining with them around what values we do share in common. For example, everyone involved at The Maple School wanted Black boys to close the achievement gap, even if we disagreed over tracking in math. But that may not be enough. We argue that assuming an ethical stance also requires us to take a long-range view and to develop strategies which over time will enable us to address our concerns—such as tracking-- in collaboration with the school.
Complexity of Negotiating Competing Values. Moral dilemmas arise too when the value systems of the university and the schools diverge. In the case where the joint research team at The Oak School developed a new model for understanding the achievement gap among very high performing Black and White students, our failure to appreciate the head’s responsibility for protecting the school clashed with the team’s desire to write about some school and teacher behaviors it saw contributing to the gap. Here our stance needed to include empathy and perspective taking. Had we done that, and therefore been able to anticipate the issues, we could have used data from a broader selection of schools to build the case for the model. Perspective taking also is central to the final major ethical issue we have encountered in the course of our work in participatory action research.

Complexities of Negotiating Multiple Roles. Moral dilemmas can arise from a failure to interrogate the professional framework one is employing to make decisions. In the case of the RA who challenged math tracking, a more appropriate stance would have been to keep in mind both her role as an RA with an expertise in math education and her role on the collaborative research team. She needed to consider multiple perspectives as she voiced her opinion. Ideally, she would have considered the head’s position and worked with the team instead of arguing for her position on a certain type of math instruction based only on her role as an academic. A similar case could be made about the CSBGL Research Director who let his academic goals cloud his sensitivity to the head’s needs to protect his school. Once again an ethical stance would have required perspective taking in order to anticipate potential issues arising from his multiple roles.

OUTLINES OF AN ETHICAL STANCE
We have proposed elements of an ethics of practice within each of these dimensions of our taxonomy. Together they contribute to an overall stance. To be effective, we believe that an ethical stance on research practice must interrogate every issue our teams address in their work in terms of questions of fairness and justice. We must ask ourselves: How do the questions that we raise affect various constituencies at the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual identities and the like? We must also recognize that those questions inevitably involve interpretations based on individuals’ positionalities within the collaborating organizations. In truly collaborative work, we have to be prepared to understand and appreciate those representations—both ours and our collaborators. This means we also have to be prepared to contest positions in a spirit of openness as we recognize that everything each of us is doing is value-laden and contestable: we must be willing to learn and to give ground when we have understood the various positions and conclude we are in error.

Such an ethics of practice requires researchers to have a disciplined understanding of our own subjectivities. Peshkin (1982, 1988) has written about this eloquently, describing the ways that researchers must not only recognize and accept the existence of their subjectivities, but sincerely and actively engage in practices to uncover and explore what those subjectivities are. He writes:

I decided…I would actively seek out my subjectivity. I did not want to happen upon it accidentally as I was writing up the data. I wanted to be aware of it in process, mindful of its enabling and disabling potential while the data were still coming in, not after the fact. (1988, p. 18)

He describes a process of monitoring his feelings and reflecting in writing whenever his emotions were aroused, both positively and negatively, while engaged in his research. In this
way he trained himself to seek out his subjectivities, note them, and constantly consider in what ways they might be coloring his judgment, choices, and interpretations. We have tried to take up Peshkin’s charge as a CSBGL researchers. We devote much time together working on our own ethical development. We have used staff meetings to read articles about the ethics of doing PAR—about being aware of our own subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988), about interviewing across race and gender boundaries and about the problem of representations (Nakkula and Ravitch, 1998; Mehan, 1996). Each month we address those issues as we consider reports on the work at each school. When we share drafts of our own papers (such as this one), we examine them for our bias and our unrecognized (mis)representations. We are also developing a system to run papers we don’t coauthor with school teams by them in order to discover what we may have inadvertently misconstrued, misunderstood or misrepresented. Finally, in the end, as the senior researchers we constantly stress the need for a kind of active empathy that disciplines us to see our work through the eyes of our collaborators and constituencies—and we ask our junior associates to hold not just themselves but us to those standards as well.
References


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APPENDIX I

CSBGL Research Ethics Protocol for School-Based Research Teams

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1. Keeping the School Community Informed

Experience has taught us that everyone in your school communities should know about the research you are doing in conjunction with CSBGL. Teachers, staff, parents, and students should know what CSBGL is, what your school hopes to gain by its collaboration with it, which other schools are part of the collaborative, who is leading the research at your school, and who is on the research team. We suggest that parents be sent a letter or email with this information at the beginning of each year. This letter also should describe the school’s project(s). Making sure everyone is informed serves a number of goals, including offering an opportunity to address any concerns that members of the school community may have, garnering more and better participation in the research, and spreading the word about the excellent work you are doing and what you hope to accomplish through these projects. The CSBGL point person working with your school will be glad to respond to the drafts of your letters before you send them out, if you wish.

2. Research Review

   - **In-School Research Advisory Board**: CSBGL recommends that each school form a Research Advisory Board to oversee all research projects. Ideally the board could be made up of a high-level administrator, a teacher, and a parent; the exact make-up of the board will vary from school to school. The role of the board is to be well acquainted with
ethical guidelines for research (see www.CSBGL.org) and to review all research projects undertaken by the research team before they begin to make sure they meet those guidelines. The board will consider the nature of the research, the safeguards the researchers will take to ensure the confidentiality of information and the safety of the participants. It will make sure the project’s value is substantial and any risks it entails are minimal. In the event of changes to the research plan or ethical questions arising during the process, the board will meet to help advise the research team.

- **University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB):** Your CSBGL point person will also submit a request for IRB approval before the launch of new research going on at your school. Your projects may proceed without such approval as your school has complete authority over them. However, we deem it wise to get Penn approval too.

3. **Consent for Research on Normal School Practices**

- **Surveys for Students:** There should be an explanation of the survey and the purpose of the research at the top of all surveys. Students should understand the extent of confidentiality for the survey (see the limits of confidentiality section below), and that they do not have to complete the survey, or any particular question(s), if they wish not to. If your school has not already sent out a passive consent letter (see below) or does not have a general consent to research for all enrolled students, then a letter explaining the purposes of the survey, its methods of protecting participants’ confidentiality and anonymity, and the fact that the students do not have to participate should be sent out to parents. You should speak with your CSBGL point person if you have questions about whether such a letter is necessary before sending out a survey.
• **Interviews & Focus Groups of Students:** When conducting interviews or focus groups with students, you should give the students an assent form to sign (or if they are 18 or older, a consent form), explain that their participation in the research is entirely voluntary, that they do not have to participate in it and that they may withdraw at any time. If the interview or focus group is being tape recorded, the students should understand that they can ask that the tape be turned off at any point. They should understand how the tapes will be safeguarded after they are made. In addition, information about the purpose of the research, the confidentiality and anonymity protections in place and the potential benefits to the school and to the children it serves should be presented. If there are any risks, those should be spelled out too. If the students are under the age of 18, you need to get parental consent as well. If the subject of the research involves ordinary educational practices, you only need a passive consent from parents (see below). In our opinion, the school should get signed assent or consent forms from students, even when the topics of the interviews and surveys involve questions about ordinary school practices.

• **Passive Parental Consent:** Your school may have parents sign a general consent form to conduct research when the students enroll or it may consider enrollment contracts themselves as sufficient agreement for students to participate in routine school improvement projects. You should see if your school leaders or attorneys agree that this is the case. If it is, then for the kinds of research we are talking about here (that involving ordinary school practices) you will not need anything more than to inform parents -- though it might be wise to gain their passive consent anyway. If your school does not have a general consent form, then you should send out a passive consent letter for your
CSBGL research. That is, at the beginning of the school year you will send parents a letter or email and, after explaining the project(s) to the parents in the letter, you should say that unless someone from the school (as designated in the letter) hears from them by a specified date, the school will assume it has their permission to proceed. The letter should tell the parents who they should contact if they have any questions and give their title and contact information. In most cases involving inquiry into ordinary educational practices that do not touch on delicate matters, such a passive consent process suffices. If the research is on a potentially sensitive topic, active parental consent should be sought (see below).

- **Research with Adults**: If your projects will involve surveys and interviews of parents, teachers, or other adults and do not involve delicate or sensitive issues, an explanation at the top of the survey or a letter explaining the research before the interview or focus group happens should be used. The letter should explain why it is important to the school; in particular how the research might help the school educate or otherwise help children better. The letter or explanation should be clear that the risks involved are minimal and that no one is obligated to participate. It should say further that anyone may choose not to do the surveys, or participate in the interviews, not answer particular questions or stop at any time. If an interview is being tape recorded, participants should know they may turn the tape off at any time they wish. They should understand how the tapes will be safeguarded. Finally, the information should assert and then explain how participants’ confidentiality and anonymity will be protected. You should ask the CSBGL contact person to review the draft letter before sending it out.
4. Consent for Research on Potentially Sensitive Topics

- **Research with Students:** If you are giving surveys or conducting interviews or focus groups with students on potentially sensitive topics (for example, student sexual behavior, bullying behavior, peer violence or self-destructive behavior such as eating disorders, cutting, suicidal ideation and the like) you will need to get active consent from parents and assent forms from students (or consent for those over 18) and make sure all researchers and participants are aware of the limits of confidentiality (see below). The form should spell out the potential value of the study as well as its potential risks. Copies of these forms should be signed by the students and parents. One copy should be kept by the parents and students and another held by the school’s research director or coordinator.

- **Active Consent:** Active parental consent is usually garnered through letters sent home that parents are asked to sign if they agree to have their children participate in the research. The student assent (or consent) forms can be given at the time that the research is conducted. Again, the forms should specify the potential value of the study as well as any potential risks. The student should be given a copy to keep and the researcher should collect a signed copy. As always, participants in the research should know who they can contact with concerns or questions.

- **Protecting Students and Limits of Confidentiality**

  In any survey, interview, or focus group inquiring about delicate matters (not ordinary school practices) students should be told in advance that the researcher(s) will have to disclose what they say (i.e. break confidentiality) if they learn through the study that the student is being subjected to abuse or violence, or is a threat to him or herself or to others. In addition, even in research examining ordinary practices, in the very rare case that a
student tells the researcher something that suggests s/he is a threat to him or herself or to others (this has never happened in CSBGL’s 7 years of work), the researcher is obligated to stop the process, explain to the student that the researcher cannot keep that information confidential and work with the student to get him or her to appropriate help.

All letters to students describing any research that involves them should specify an appropriate person or persons in the school (e.g. school psychologist or school counselor) to whom they may talk if an issue raised by the research bothers or troubles them. That school official or officials should understand they may be contacted by a student (or parent) and they should be kept informed about the progress of the work from its outset.

5. Publication

When you publish reports based on your research you must maintain the confidentiality of your participants. Often, though not always, the school too may wish to have its anonymity preserved. Please see the CSBGL Publication Policy for more information on this. Your CSBGL point person can also assist you with these matters too.