FEELING LIKE RESEARCH PARTNERS AS A YOUTH-ADULT TEAM

Morgan Gardner, Linda Brown, Elizabeth Young and Allie Young
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Ann McCann and Carol Myles
Murphy Centre

ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) lacks concerted attention to what makes youth-adult teams feel like genuine partners. This paper explores our youth-adult PAR team's experience of what made us feel like partners during our five-year study of youth voice in educational change. Our findings reveal that we felt like research partners when our partnership was rooted in 1) real relationship; 2) shared power, responsibility and passion; 3) a culture of flexibility, creativity and unfolding; and 4) transformation. By conceptualizing partnership in a manner that incorporates both youth and adult felt experiences and shared understandings, notions of youth-adult partnership become more inclusive. These findings (re)orient current emphases placed on the partnering benefits to youth, research and social change.

KEYWORDS: Youth-adult partnership, participatory action research, research team, collaborative self- study, education, democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) studies conducted by youth-adult teams are increasing in education and community contexts. Within these contexts, how do youth-adult teams experience, understand and conceptualize their partnership? In particular, when do team members genuinely feel like partners, and how would they describe this experience? Research teams may be called a 'partnership' but may or may not actually feel like partners. Accounts of teams actively researching their felt experiences and conceptualizations of

youth-adult partnership are lacking. This paper reports on our youth-adult PAR team's collaborative self-study of the question, "What made this feel like a partnership and how would we describe this experience?" Central meanings of our experience of felt partnership include 1) real relationship; 2) shared power, responsibility and passion; 3) a culture of flexibility, creativity and unfolding; and 4) transformation.

Our PAR research comprised a five-year mixed method educational study on youths' perspectives, experiences and visions related to youth engagement in social justice educational reform in high school. Youth participants between 15-25 years were recruited within educational and community settings. Data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, creative workshops and a survey. The PAR study was conducted by a six-member youth-adult team (who also comprised the self-study group) who collaboratively carried out and coordinated all facets of the five-year research process (e.g., data collection, analysis, dissemination). This team comprised three youth/students between 17-19 years old who experienced educational barriers – Linda, Elizabeth, Allie; two teachers who teach at an alternative high school that emphasizes a flexible, supportive setting to meet individual needs of learners– Ann, Carol; and a faculty of education university professor - Morgan. Members' subjectivities varied in terms of age, financial means, formal education, job status, heritage/ethnicity, sexual orientation, family configuration, lifestyle, geographical location (rural/urban), and migration.

The youth-adult team were supported by a ten-member support team (comprised of youth, educators, youth-serving community professionals); the support team met the youth-adult team two to four times yearly providing input and support to the research. All team members were recruited by word-of-mouth and posters (placed in a youth organization and an education center for youth facing educational barriers). All members self-selected whether she/he was on the youth-adult team or support team; all members sought to expand youths' voice/engagement in educational change.

The youth-adult team began self-study of their partnership in the fourth year of the five-year PAR study. They explored their experiences and practices of what made them feel like partners.

YOUTH-ADULT PAR PARTNERSHIPS
To situate our present study within the larger context of the youth-adult PAR literature, we explore and discuss some of the current insights on partnership. These insights provide a grounding for our inquiry in which we explicitly center team partnership in a strengths-based, experiential manner and by having such investigations conducted collaboratively by youth-adult teams, rather than by outside researchers or by solely the academic team member(s). However, while the PAR literature conveys a plethora of issues related to youth-adult partnership, these studies often require the reader to largely infer or extrapolate whether team members actually felt like partners. As a result, rather than rich, full-bodied constructions of these landscapes, we often have inferred or partial depictions.

Youth-adult PAR studies often include information or reflections relevant to team members' work as partners within the larger scope of reporting their research findings. In some instances, explicit study of team relations or co-researcher experiences is found (see Lind, 2007, 2008; Torre et al., 2008). Overall, youth-adult PAR teams' conceptions and experiences of being partners can be explored through key areas commonly outlined in these studies. They include the discussions of a) PAR principles; b) rationale and benefits of youth engagement; c) member roles and tasks; d) concepts/frameworks related to team relations; and e) experiences of and reflections on practice.

PAR principles offer insight into the underlying values in forming partnerships. PAR principles position youth as knowers and knowledge constructors actively involved across the research in processes that are youth relevant, accessible, and informed (Brown & Galeas, 2011; Galletta & Jones, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). These principles ignite a view of partnership where youth are research partners engaging in shared power relations with adults and being treated as equals (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Kirshner & O' Donoghue, 2001; Lind, 2007).

Many youth-adult PAR studies include statements of rationale for youth-engagement-as-researchers. Articulated rationale may include, recognizing youth rights (Brown & Galeas, 2011; Brown, 2010; Hadfield & Haw, 2001), engaging youths' abilities (Kincheloe, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006), fostering youth learning, growth, and development (Brown, 2010; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001), and expanding youth voice, agency and empowerment (Lind, 2007; 2008). It also includes the recognition by adults of the need to partner with youth to create (social) change (Brown 2010; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Suleiman, Soleimanpour & London, 2006). While these rationale make explicit the reasons for youth-as-researcher, a strategic (e.g., political) need to justify youth as 'qualified' research partners (as compared to adults) often seems evident.

Documented benefits of youth involvement as researchers are commonly cited in youth-adult PAR studies. Youth researchers have experienced benefits of expanded voice, agency, critical thinking, engagement, activism and justice (Brown, 2010; Cammarota and Romero, 2011; Morrell, 2008). They have similarly engaged and demonstrated their multiple abilities and contributions across the research (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Powers & Tiffany, 2006), reported multiple forms of learning, growth, empowerment and positive development (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009), and have benefited research, educators, schools, communities, agencies and governments (Harper & Carver, 1999; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). While articulated benefits to youth span multiple facets of their identities/lives, the outlined benefits to adult team members stay more focused on their professional gains.

Team member tasks and roles offer insight into youth-adult partnerships by illustrating one measure of the degree and/or parity of youth and adult involvements. Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner (2013) indicate that while "some studies have involved youth at one stage of research, many researchers have effectively incorporated youth into every stage" (p. 186). Youth and adults have engaged both different and shared tasks/roles guided by various

factors such as, member strengths, access, interests, resources, experience and skills (see Atweh, 2003; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Commonly, adults teach youth research skills and knowledge, and foster youth development, while youth shape research tasks in youth accessible ways (see Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Joint decision-making within teams range from being partial to fully shared (see Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008; Lind, 2007; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Facilitation of research tasks varies from being adult or youth-led to mutually shared (see Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Tuck et al., 2008; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas & Hubbard, 2013). Academic team members are often the central facilitators of the overall team research initiative (see Dentith, Measor, & Michael, 2009; Guishard, 2009; Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Harper & Carver, 1999). Giving visibility to who is and is not involved across the facets of research, and the variables underpinning these designations, helpfully illustrate some of the similarities and variations in how partnerships are being enacted.

Youth-adult PAR studies draw on varied conceptual frames to inform their team relations, bringing shared and contrasting partnership meanings/desired practices into view. Often these concepts and theories serve to affirm, expand and/or compliment PAR principles. Concepts of relational knowledge (see Lind, 2008), Habermas' theory of communicative action (see Bland & Atweh, 2007), funds of knowledge (see Cammarota and Romero, 2011), contact zones (see Torre et al., 2008), indigenous theories (see Tuck et al., 2008), and critical and feminist theories (see Goessling & Doyle, 2009) relay a few of the articulated conceptual lenses informing team partnership priorities and understandings. Typologies conceptualizing lower to higher levels of youth researcher engagement and/or partnership have also been used to inform and/or assess teams' youth-adult relations (see Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). One framework distinguishes among youth engaged as "subjects", "informants", "research assistants" or "research partners" (Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001, p. 10).

In reflections on their research, many youth-adult PAR studies include insights related to team experiences and practices. These reflections are often articulated by the academic team member(s), with exceptions such as Cammarota & Fine's (2008) strong inclusion of youth voices. Reflections on practice are often framed around the successes and challenges of youths' engagement in the research (see Bland & Atweh, 2007; Galletta & Jones, 2010; Harper & Carver, 1999; Rodrigues & Brown, 2009), and at times, more directly on internal youth-adult team dynamics and experiences working as co-researchers (see Lind, 2007; 2008; Torre et al., 2008). External factors impacting youth-adult collaborations (see Dentith, Measor & Michael, 2009; Suleiman et al., 2006), as well as issues facing youth, adults or both are relayed.

Common themes of discussion across reflections on practice include: team atmosphere and interactions emphasizing trust, respect, safety/comfort, inclusion, equality, voice and relationship building (see Cahill et al., 2008; Lind, 2007, 2008; Torre et al., 2008); issues of power, control, ownership, authority and/or inequities of power based on difference (e.g., age, race, gender, income, class, education) (see Bland & Atweh, 2007; Brown & Galeas, 2011; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001); tensions between roles

engaged by the team member (Harper & Carver, 1999); and issues of time constraints, lack of support, mentorship, skills, training, logistical challenges and resource limitations impacting team relations and members (Brown, 2010; Harper & Carver, 1999; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Suleiman et al., 2006).

These examinations relay partnerships as messy, complex processes involving ongoing navigation and negotiation between youth and adults researchers, offering positive and challenging experiences for both. Experiencing youth-adult partnership as more challenging than imagined, but more rewarding than anticipated, has been articulated by teams (see Guishard, 2009; Lind, 2008). By exploring how these partnership themes coincide and/or collide with members' experiences of feeling like partners, we gain new insights to foster youth-adult teams' voice(s) and sense of agency as researchers and change-makers.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

In our qualitative, collaborative self-study, we explored our "felt sense" (Glendlin, 1996; 1970) of being partners to develop embodied, contextualized meanings of partnership. Drawing from Gendlin, we recognized there "is a powerful *felt* dimension of experience...that functions importantly in what we think, what we perceive, and how we behave"; *"[m]eaning* is not only *about things* and it is not only a certain *logical* structure, but it also involves *felt* experiencing" (Gendlin, 1970, p. 561). For Gendlin "meaning" is more than the conceptual, it is also richly contextualized; something embodied and experienced, not simply observed, discussed, and/or analyzed. We drew from Glendin's (1996) notion that "felt sense" - "the holistic, implicit, bodily sense of a complex situation" - is the foundation upon which "felt meaning" can emerge (p. 20). As a team, we engaged in art-making to explore and represent our felt sense of partnership via non-verbal, bodily, sensory, intuitive and more holistic ways of knowing (Gardner, 2012). We viewed reality and meaning-making as socially constructed and thereby subjective, situated, partial and on-going (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Via self-study, we sought rich descriptions of felt experiences and meanings to better understand our partnership practices (Bullock & Christou, 2009). We examined "the world as... [we] have come to understand it" and created new meanings through dialogue with ourselves, each other and our data set (Friedman & Rogers, 2009, p. 33).

Self-study sessions occurred in contexts, such as our homes, to better facilitate inner exploration and group reflection/dialogue. We met one to two times per month over ten months for two to three hours and had two full-day retreat sessions in natural surroundings. Data sources comprised individual and group self-study reflections via structured and free-write writings/journaling, concept maps, transcripts (from audio-recorded sessions) and notes from group sessions and visual artifacts. We began sessions with a group check-in and relaxation exercise to feel present and embodied. We engaged in individual reflection via journaling and art-making followed by group sharing, dialogue and activities to create an iterative process of individual and group exploration related to our felt senses, experiences, and meanings of partnership. For example, we used concept

mapping as a free association tool to draw out impressions/senses/words we connected to our topic; wrote individual descriptive accounts of felt experiences; created visual art to portray felt partnership; wrote together on shared experiences; and had lengthy discussions on partnership experiences.

Our on-going data analyses comprised varied analytic strategies. We each read the data carefully and identified initial impressions/insights/questions and topics/issues/themes and shared this with the group. We compared and contrasted our analyses and engaged in joint revision, construction, and validation of insights/themes/issues. Following these initial data immersion strategies, we went back to the data and engaged the interpretative strategy of the hermeneutic circle; this involved the back and forth process of relating the whole body of data to its parts, knowing one cannot be understood without the other (Porter & Robinson, 2011). This dialogic, inductive, iterative process was intuitive and creative and rigorous and in-depth (Moules, McCaffrey, Field & Laing, 2015). We opened up possibilities following hunches and felt senses. We also systematically sorted and resorted the data and identified and revised themes/sub-themes to continue deepening and sharpening our analysis in relation to our self-study topic (Creswell, 2012). Individually, we then carefully reviewed the data in relation to our themes/sub-themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.

RESULTS

Across our voices, experiences and subjectivities as a youth-adult team, strong threads of shared experience and insight on what made us feel like partners were found. Data analyses revealed four central themes: 1) real relationship; 2) shared power, responsibility and passion; 3) a culture of flexibility, creativity and unfolding; and 4) transformation. Table 1 provides an outline of these four central themes. We then offer rich descriptions of their meanings via team member quotes and reflections; this section is narrated using our first names - youth/students (Linda, Elizabeth, and Allie), teachers (Ann, Carol) and university education professor (Morgan).

In addition, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate two members' non-verbal, visual representations of feeling like genuine partners; these representations are reflective of our central findings. Specifically, Linda described her visual portrayal of feeling like partners as a "flexible, transforming, multidimensional process" (see figure 1). Allie shared that her drawing of felt partnership represents the "powerful feeling of team members' hands working and joining together, literally and metaphorically, to create genuine relationship links and bonds as a group" (see figure 2).

Table 1

What Made Us Feel Like a Partnership

<u>**Central Themes and Associated Meanings**</u>

Partnership as Real Relationship
-Feeling safe, honest, real, respectful, playful, brave, loved
-Experiencing genuine connection, care and mutual commitment towards one other
-Being able to be our whole and "messy selves" (e.g., strengths, limits, vulnerabilities)
-Being valued, heard, trusted
-Navigating conflicts/tensions directly and respectfully

Partnership as Shared Power, Responsibility and Passion
-Making joint decisions, co-creating, sharing ownership and passion
-Interchanging roles and responsibilities; moving beyond youth-adult roles/labels
-Valuing all voices and contributions
-Being co-learners; being both teachers and learners
-All members feeling their impact within the group

Partnership as a Culture of Flexibility, Creativity and Unfolding
-Creating equal access to participate
-Honouring each other's complex lives and commitments
-Lack of group rules
-Trusting and learning to flow with the messiness of the group and the research; not operating via authority or control

Partnership as Transformation
-Becoming more reflective, critical, creative and embodied as learners
-Changing conceptions/constructions of self/identity
-Shifting personal/professional/work/school/university identities (e.g., professionalism) and relationships

Partnership as Real Relationship
We felt like partners when we were in real relationship with one other. This meant experiencing genuine commitment and care towards each other as whole, complex persons across the strengths and challenges of our interactions. Partnership was felt when our connection went beyond prescribed roles (youth/adult, teacher/student) and there was shared vulnerability, honesty and respect across our good and tough times. In conversation we used the words "loving", "like family", "real", "mutual", "trust", "honest", "valued", "can be ourselves", "not judged" and "safe" to describe experiences of feeling like partners. Laughing, Ann shared, "I told my partner I have been married to our group longer than to her". We understood what she meant; we felt committed to the research and each other.

This relationship, however, occurred within our scope of being a research group. Outside the research work, we celebrated major events such as baby showers, birthdays, and graduations, as well as supported a member in crisis, but we did not become each other's social or peer group, nor was this our goal.

Figure 1:

Figure 2:
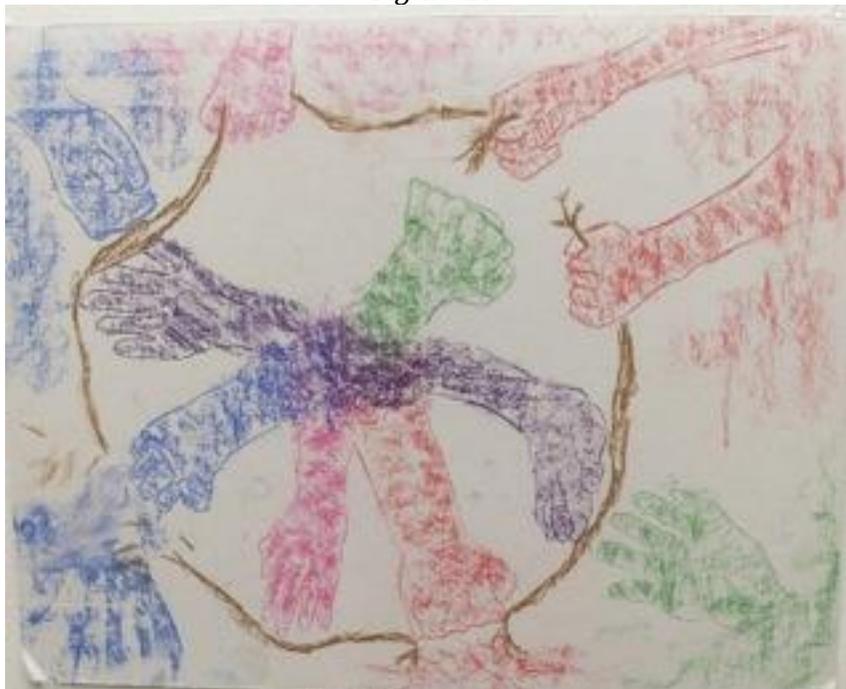
Smiling, Morgan shared with the team, "It felt like a partnership when you began teasing me and calling me on things. I felt relieved. I could trust our connection was real. You treated me as a person not a prof". In her journal Linda wrote, "I have come to discover that being valued, heard and respected by my whole group (peers and adults) has created a safe space where I could learn, grow and become…. [where] I flourish as a youth leader and partner…when I joined the group I was a troubled youth on the beginning of a long journey…" While Linda described herself as a "troubled youth" she was not viewed by the group in those terms; no group member was seen through a deficit or problem-based lens. This is captured by Carol's description: "when we were not at the top of our game, or if we missed the game entirely because we were tired or stressed…or in tough times…we were still considered a most valuable player…we did not have to fear being rejected, ridiculed or judged". We had tensions, stresses and conflicts. We felt angry, frustrated, hurt and let down by each other and the group, at times. We had some deep disagreements on issues fundamental to the research. Regardless, we cared enough about the research, group and each other to deal with these challenges; this fostered partnership. At times, better listening and an apology was exactly what was needed, on other occasions space was needed and taken; on some occasions common ground remained fragile or was hard won. Allie's journal stated:

> Our depth and honesty allows us to directly confront tensions and conflict… talking out…resolving difficulties feels like partners… moving forward together without animosity or allowing resentment to build up fostered new closeness…a transparency allowing us to continue breaking down barriers across our differences.

As we worked and grew as a team we realized, like Elizabeth, that "Our relationship with one another is our safety net. Even when it was messy, we were there for one another…like a family". This "safety net" was connected to *not* feeling we had to hide parts of ourselves; a new experience for us all. Ann told the group:

> I never felt like I had to hide a part of myself. This level of ease was new for me. In previous research, bringing my whole person to the table…likes, dislikes, issue would have been a no-no…you bring your professional work and thinking but leave the rest at the door. It wasn't something I expected to create or find in a research group.

Partnership as Shared Power, Responsibility and Passion
We felt like partners via shared power, responsibility and passion. We made decisions together, shared ownership of the research and valued each other's contributions. We were all teachers, learners and co-learners. We took on varied tasks, roles and responsibilities and we each felt we made a difference to the group and research.

Youth team members stated that: "this was different from past experience working with adults, teachers or bosses" and indicated "being intrigued from the start". They felt like

partners with adult members because they "have an equal role in all decision-making" and "know that we could count on having this power of voice in all facets of the research"; they felt "treated as colleagues rather than as students". For example, Linda wrote:

> During the composition of the youth survey we were equal partners in deciding which questions to ask, what demographic to target, and which structure to use. We have an equal say in creating and planning strategies and tactics for our group to implement…we had equal say in everything.

Crucial for youth was their experience that this equal voice did "not come and go, which is our usual experience with adults". Youth shared "Our suggestions are not filtered, and then either accepted or denied. Instead they stand as legitimate on their own merit." Youth emphasized the importance of feeling their impact in our group. Linda told us, "Regardless of how or what I was contributing, I saw how you all took my words to heart, and how they deeply impacted each person… and our research."

Adults came to the group "knowing youth were equal partners" but not necessarily knowing "what equal partnership would look like in our group"; they trusted "we would figure it out together." It was important to them that the "responsibilities of knowing", "figuring things out" and "workload" were not only their "burden", as adult members. They felt like partners with youth by being able to say aloud "I don't know", "I have to leave early, go on without me" and "could you repeat that, I was distracted". Moreover, they knew, as Linda stated, that "Youth members carried just as much weight and responsibilities of decision-making as adult teammates". Being co-learners, and both teachers and learners, made us feel like partners. As Elizabeth stated, "Everyone would seek advice from each other as opposed to youth seeking advice from 'the adults' as mentors and sources of facts. The adults would ask just as many questions and throw ideas out for the group to brainstorm on". Morgan wrote in her journal: "We all play lead roles, supportive roles, and shared roles. We move in and out of acts of organizing, coordinating, learning, teaching, challenging, creating, affirming, supporting, questioning". Ann shared aloud that the categories of "youth" or "adult" are increasingly "not relevant to the group".

Research workload was not always equally shared in the group. These differences were not based on age or assumptions of 'ability' or 'expertise' but on the realities of logistics, personal issues, pre-existing commitments (e.g., work, school) and on how we organically worked as a group. As Allie described, "Our group isn't really focused on assigning and completing tasks, rather we add strength and give energy to each other's ideas". Our felt sense of partnership arose from how we drew out, supported and became part of what each member had to offer, creating a collective flow of energy; this was rooted in engaging interchanging roles, giving as much as we could in any moment, and being willing to pick up where another left off. These dynamics were not defined by how much any member "pulled their weight" via tasks completed. Our partnership was ignited by feeling genuinely supported, celebrated and energized by each other; this made our quality of team relations as important as the research itself.

Partnership as a Culture of Flexibility, Creativity and Unfolding
Our felt experience of partnership could not have occurred without creating a culture of flexibility that allowed the research to unfold in ways that were as organic as planned. While PAR's tenets and cycles of action and reflection support an emergent process, our commitment to partnership expanded/stretched possibilities for flexibility. We had to release preconceived notions of how the research should unfold to give equal attention to our partnership's unfolding; being flexible and creative across our diverse contexts/ rhythms of living/working are key to feeling like partners. We worked to create equal access to participate, honour our complex lives and foster engagement without group rules.

Creating equal access to participate was central to our partnership. As Morgan stated, we "constantly negotiated issues so we could all participate"; issues such as "transportation, medical appointments, baby feeding times, teaching/class/extracurricular/home schedules, mental health issues". Linda wrote, "Various life situations impact my participation… and therefore impact my team including, family, work, relationships, addiction, mental health and finances". It was difficult coordinating "community, youth and university rhythms". Meetings were scheduled, cancelled, rescheduled and so forth; at times it felt impossible!

The three-year PAR study became a five-year project largely due to time needed to ensure everyone could participate in all facets of the study. We agreed that figuring out "how to be together" was the most stressful facet of our partnership. At times, we wanted to "give up" but one member was always "willing to figure out the logistics". Ann confessed,

> In the beginning, I did not want to worry about who had a ride or who did not. I did not feel responsible for that. I had enough concerns of my own. I did not want to have meetings with a child interrupting. I felt angry when people were late and we had to repeat things. However, if I was to stay in this group and be part of this team – part of a real partnership - I had to accept things as they were, not how I wanted them to be. Our partnership and research was very exciting and frustrating – it was alive and if I had major control issues (ok maybe just a few) this group would have shattered those.

We were all stretched and had to grow. Morgan noted, "Two youth members were thanking me for bus/taxi fares or childcare costs but I needed to start thanking them. It required them substantial effort. I just got in my car and my daughter was in school". We gave up evenings and weekends to move our work forward. We were all pushed beyond our comfort zones (putting aside other commitments) to make meetings happen due to different schedules. At times, we all felt resentful.

While, at times, we thought it may be convenient to have more "control and order", we all agreed we felt like partners because we had no "formal group rules" of conduct, communication, attendance, commitment or contribution. Youth expressed rules caused them "anxiety and intimidation." Linda bluntly stated: "Had there been rules against things that may alienate me, such as smoking, swearing, going on conversational tangents, or rules

of mandatory attendance, I would not have stuck around". Rules were reminders of "school" and of being in "unequal relationships with adults". We all agreed the lack of group rules ignited engagement and felt partnership. Elizabeth wrote, "Ironically enough, despite no team rules this is the most committed and genuinely caring environment I have ever been in". Group discussion content included: "lack of rules meant possibility"; "No one had to enforce rules or worry about being punished. Our energy focused on each other and the research instead"; "I wanted to be on time. I wanted to be prepared for meetings. I wasn't working to avoid repercussions, rather I was working because I wanted to support my team and match their efforts". Morgan wrote: "Who we were as persons, and our respect for one another, guided our interactions and nurtured our partnership, not rules or keeping each other in check". There was no plan *not* to have rules; the issue did not arise and rules were not viewed as a solution to our struggles.

Partnership as Transformation

We felt like partners when the group experience felt individually and collectively transformative; when we all grew and experienced agency and empowerment. Linda wrote:

> The lessons I learned from our partnership are universal-- respect, confidence, determination-- and cross over my different selves (friend, mother, student, employee, and spouse). I took these lessons and applied them to the other dimensions of my life. I am now a more successful student, listener, speaker, activist, critical thinker, team player.

Ann shared aloud, "During this research I have come face to face with my own fears, grief and even anger and had to give up old ways that have given me security and safety." Elizabeth's journal stated:

> I was 17 years old when I joined the group. The personal changes I have undergone through our partnership have had a profound effect on my life... self-assurance, pride in my achievements, and confidence in my work I have gained truly changed the way I look at myself.

Carol narrated,

> I had seen systematic change in education as far off...I had become complacent. Through the strength and vision of our partnership, a new world of possibilities has opened up. I now see change as necessary, desired and imminent.

We were transformative partners when we felt self-aware, critical, connected, engaged and creative, and when this spilled into other facets of our lives. Partnership was transformative because our selves/roles (e.g., in relation to research, professionalism, being a youth) changed in ways that felt empowering and conducive to making a difference in our personal/home/school/work/citizen lives. Importantly, we understood that

transformation was made possible because of the on-going dance among all the facets of felt partnership (discussed in this paper) that went hand in hand.

DISCUSSION

As a team, we did not always feel like partners. However, drawing from Glendlin's (1996; 1970) notions of felt sense, experience and meaning, our self-study group examined and developed layered meanings of when we did feel like partners - something we had not previously known how to clearly describe. Our "major objective was to explore, document, and gain better understanding of the current situation" of our partnership (Ikpeze, 2012, p. 279). Making meaning of our felt, lived experiences pulled us into the fullness of our team encounters and selves that led to something more. We came to realize that we were not just 'studying' the strength of our partnership; we were further becoming this strength, by deepening and expanding our connections as co-researchers.

Youth-adult PAR studies report a plethora of challenges to youth engagement and team partnership; issues of power, control, ownership, access, diversity, difference, time, resources, mentorship, skills, commitment (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Brown, 2010; Brown & Galeas, 2010; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Harper & Carver, 1999; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Suleiman et al., 2006). These challenges reflect not only the complexities of PAR, social change, and the inequities of power based on difference, they also communicate an intent made by teams to name these challenges in the desire to address these obstacles. More directly, they can be seen as team members' genuine desire and willingness to struggle to work together in more deeply democratic ways in spite (and because) of our adult-centered, dominated world and culture of research. Our research affirms the importance of this desire and willingness to struggle.

In studying what made us feel like partners, a rich ecology of working together in more deeply democratic ways became storied. By 'deeply democratic', we mean experiencing a particular quality of dynamic relationality as a research team: Namely, one that reflects a "richer set of possibilities for agency" (Marginson, 2006, p. 214); in particular, agency that invites mutuality, dialogue, creativity, care, critical reflection, and egalitarian relationships as whole, complex persons within our situated contexts. We contend that the four interwoven partnership themes outlined in this paper reflect this kind of deepening democracy. This offers the PAR literature one possible 'frame' from which to consider youth-adult partnership research work.

Our findings affirm the value of shared ownership, decision-making and member participation across the research, as highlighted through PAR principles and team reported reflections on their experiences (Cahill et al., 2008; Galletta & Jones, 2010; Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Kirshner & O' Donoghue, 2001; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Tuck et al., 2008). Fostering a safe, respectful team environment and attending to inequities of power and voice, were equally central to our felt sense of partnership, as has been asserted in the literature (Cahill et al., 2008; Lind 2007, 2008; Torre et al., 2008). Our study serves to further expand and thicken this narrative of youth-adult partnership, while

also inviting, at times, a reframing and strengthening of its potential cohesion. We discuss these points below.

Our findings highlight the value and importance of centering the partnership relationship itself. This provides an alternative lens from studies that frame partnership in the context of expanding youth engagement (and development) and/or with the view to better navigate the complexities of PAR and social change (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Jacquez et al., 2013). As Torre et al., (2008) state, "[i]n our work, we add a dimension that is typically not discussed in PAR; this is, we seek to open up a conversation about PAR inside a contact zone [i.e., their name for their PAR team]" (p. 23). In our self-study, we were centered on the quality of the reciprocal partnership relationship. This centering of the 'felt strengths' in our relationship allowed us to make a wealth of connections and insights about our collaboration that would not have occurred had we focused primarily on understanding group relations through the lens of youth engagement or PAR.

Narratives are problematic in terms of whom and what is made (in)visible. Strengths-based accounts are not all equal in terms of their attention to social justice or with respect to their inclusion of individuals' and groups' complex life worlds (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Our shared consensus of what made us feel in partnership reveals the importance of strengths-based narratives of youth-adult partnership that are inclusive and just. Our results suggest that there is value in thickening narratives of how adults benefit from partnering with youth. While an array of benefits to youth as researchers are reported spanning multiple facets of their identities and lives, (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Cammarota and Romero, 2011; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Harper & Carver, 1999; Morrell, 2008; Powers & Tiffany, 2006) benefits attributed to adults tend to focus on their professional, as opposed to personal/interpersonal identities and lives. By constructing a more inclusive narrative of adult benefits we give more equitable visibility to the range of gains for all team members. Moreover, we are better able to understand youths' contributions to adult members. While the literature outlines benefits to youth of increased sense of voice, empowerment, learning, positive growth, agency, confidence, citizenship, critical reflection, our team found these were true for adult team members too. For us, feeling like partners meant that adults experienced as much growth, challenge and benefits as youth.

Before starting our self-study, we had not anticipated to find so many facets of shared experience across our individual concept maps, reflective writings, arts-based work and joint discussions. Our findings indicate it was not just youth who felt like partners when we were interacting as messy, whole persons who made mistakes, had bad days and insecurities, felt vulnerable, confused or without an answer, adult members felt the same way. While youth felt that they learned from adults, adults equally felt that they learned from youth. Just as youth felt in partnership when we were able to move beyond youth-adult roles/labels/binaries, work without group rules and create flexibility to accommodate their lives and commitments, so too, did adult members feel in partnership via these forms of relations. Both youth and adults experienced transformations within themselves and in their relations to others. These findings convey a strengths-based account of partnership that is inclusive in forwarding both youth and adult narratives of

experience; this account is holistic in recognizing members' complex identities and lives. We believe this relays important qualities of fullness and equity needed in conceptions of youth-adult partnership.

Our shared meanings of what made us feel like partners opened a new facet of equality and sense of cohesion among us as a team. We shared passion for social justice educational change. Our vision of research aligned to participatory forms of inquiry, such as PAR. However, we did not begin our research knowing what our partnership would look and feel like. It was clear from the start that we were a group of diverse individuals and we did not know how things might come 'together' as a team. We underwent many struggles. We had doubts. We knew what it meant to grapple by the seat of our pants. Divisions separating youth and adults - those real (e.g., power inequality) and constructed (e.g., social roles and expectations) - seemed to make real felt partnership unlikely, even as we worked to blur and challenge these divides. And yet, we did experience genuine partnership and found a surprising consensus on what made us feel this way.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

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Dr. Morgan Gardner is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. Her areas of research include student voice and engagement, participatory action research, social justice and democracy in education, social justice strengths-based perspectives, self-study, arts-informed research, low-income community leadership in educational change and educational alternatives. She has authored the book, *Linking Activism: Ecology, Social Justice and Education for Social Change*, co-edited the volume, *Narrating Transformative Learning in Education* and published articles in various educational journals. Dr. Gardner and her colleague, Dr. Kirby, are the recipients of the R.W.B. Jackson Award for the best peer-reviewed paper in the *Canadian Journal of Education* for 2010-2011 titled, "The schooling they need: Voicing student perspectives on their fourth year in senior high school".

Ann McCann and **Carol Myles** are teachers at the Murphy Centre. They both have their bachelors of education and master's degree in counselling psychology from Memorial's Faculty of Education.

Linda Brown, Elizabeth Young and **Allie Young** were youth PAR team members. Linda has completed high school and Elizabeth and Allie have recently completed their undergraduate degrees and professional schooling in social work and nursing at Memorial University.

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