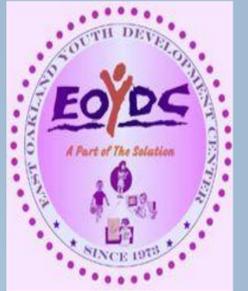




ENGAGING YOUTH IN MIXED-METHODS COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH PROJECTS

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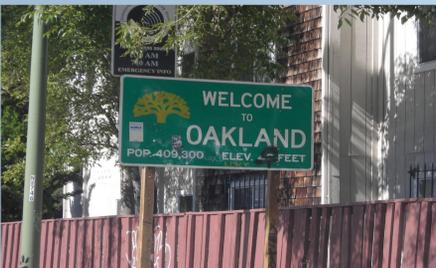


ABSTRACT

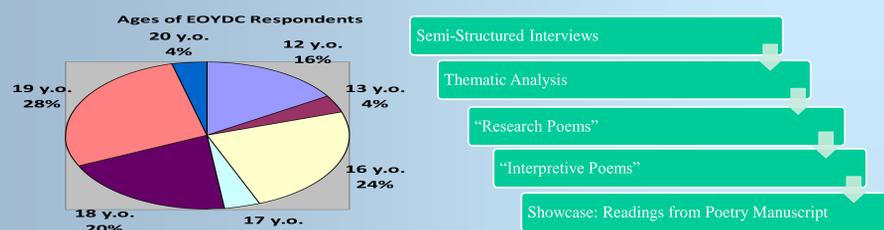
My Identity is Community (MiC) is a research collective in which the author collaborates with staff and adolescents at a community-based organization as co-researchers in order to delve deeper into the “everyday understandings” of youth of color residing in an urban neighborhood which has undergone and is undergoing neighborhood change. During the research phase, the youth conducted quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses. The use of narrative analysis, an emerging method in the public health and youth development fields, empowered participants to produce poetic texts to make sense of their lives and their home, school, and neighborhood contexts. Poetry, and other expressive mechanisms, has been shown to draw out powerful emotions from historically oppressed groups that other methodologies might not be able to capture. As co-researchers in the collective, the young people are acknowledged as “experts” of issues pertaining to their neighborhood, the community-based organization's staff build their capacity in research methods, and the author fosters a community-university partnership.

CONTEXT

In the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area of California, post-World War II African-American migration, urban renewal policies, gentrification practices, and comprehensive community-building initiatives have shifted the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and economic resources in local neighborhoods for over 70 years. By the late 1960s, as the national economy became deindustrialized, unemployment plagued Oakland with the city losing thousands of manufacturing jobs. Oakland's unemployment levels currently remain significantly higher than the Alameda County and California statewide averages. Residents in East Oakland must contend with economic, environmental, educational, and health inequities. However, the growing base of youth development and health services providers, faith-based institutions, and violence prevention efforts in this neighborhood offer sources of potential resources to leverage social capital.



NARRATIVE ANALYSIS



Thirteen of the interview participants have formed a “research collective” which we call “MiC” (My Identity is Community). The young people and I have engaged in a multi-stage process of an innovative qualitative method of *narrative analysis*. Narrative analysis is an emerging method in the public health, urban planning, and adolescent development fields (Poindexter 2002; Thomas 2004; Furman, Langer et al. 2007). A particular type of narrative, poetry, is also seen as a tool of qualitative research that can be used to investigate human phenomena (Furman 2006). Writers and researchers have deemed this “poetic knowledge.”

First, I reviewed my fieldnotes and the interview transcripts and performed preliminary **thematic analysis** of the interview data. I invited the research collective to meet with me as a group to review the data and relevant themes. In this way, the youth were able to provide “**member checks**” of the data, themes, and analysis as a way of increasing validity. They also were introduced to **demographic data** on East Oakland and began to compare their interview themes with the quantitative data collected by outside agencies.

Next, I facilitated weekly poetry workshops with the youth for a month, in which I introduced them to poetic techniques, poetic forms, and works from writers of color. During these weekly workshops, I presented “**research poems**” (Furman 2006; Furman, Lietz et al. 2006; Furman, Langer et al. 2007) to the group, which utilize the participants’ exact words from the interview data in compressed/poetic form, using line and stanza breaks. The condensed nature of research interpretive poetry allows themes in the data to become more obvious for the reader. During the workshops, I also facilitated the co-creation of “**interpretive poems**” (Langer and Furman 2004) with the group, that reveal our attempts as co-researchers to capture the essence of the lived experiences as expressed in the interview data in poetic form. We wrote individual “I Come From Poems” and a group “praise poem” as a positive salutation to youth in East Oakland, as the group acknowledged that they wanted to counter all of the negative attention that young people and their hometown receive in the media.

Such a process provides implications for representations of the nuances of people’s lived experiences and can allow a diverse set of audience members to engage with the research.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Emerging themes of the interview data revolve around: EOYDC as supporting the youth in making **positive transformations**, youth’s perceptions and experiences of **violence**, and **spirituality** as a coping mechanism for youth. Through the member checks with the youth, they identified a fourth theme of youth assuming **adult roles and responsibilities**. Such findings paint a more complex picture of adolescent development in a disenfranchised urban neighborhood—one of not only risks, but of resilience.



RESEARCH AND INTERPRETIVE POEMS

Research Poem #1

19-year-old Latino male

They assume that
every teen
from Oakland
is gang affiliated
a criminal
a dropout
But that’s not the case

Research Poem #2

16-year-old African-American female

Where you come from
doesn’t determine
Where you’re going
I’m on my way
Somewhere

Research Poem #3

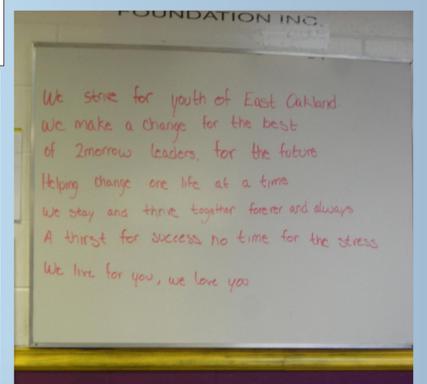
17-year-old African-American male

There used to be
an Albertson’s
a beautyshop
a Kragen
Now it’s an empty lot
not being put to use
Abandoned

Research Poem #4

19-year-old African-American male

God showed me the way
I’m
just going through phases now
just going through life
But I’m praying



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The final phase of this project is supporting the youth in co-producing a **poetry manuscript** of their work, which will be released in oral and print form at a **public showcase** in Spring 2011. As co-researchers in our collective, the young people can be acknowledged as “experts” of issues pertaining to their neighborhoods. Through this event, I hope to reintegrate the participants, armed now with poems-as-data, into a local initiative in Oakland poised to create **policy change**, such as the East Oakland Building Healthy Communities Initiative (EOBHC), the Alameda County Public Health Department (ACPHD), the Oakland Youth Advisory Commission, or the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth (OFCY).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The young interview participants, research collective members, and poets who collaborated in this research
Regina Jackson and the staff of the East Oakland Youth Development Center
Professors Emily Ozer, Nikki Jones, Malo Hutson, and Ralph Catalano
Roselyn Lindheim Award
Phoebe Prince Memorial Scholarship