Tensions in Creating Possibilities for Youth Voice in School Choice:
An Ethnographer's Reflexive Story of Research

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Abstract

The following article relates a reflexive ethnographic research project that focuses on youth voice in relation to the process of choosing a high school and a language of instruction in Ontario, Canada. The purpose of this methodological article is to relate a story of research and explore the tensions between theory and practice experienced by a young researcher during and after fieldwork. To do so, I explore the theoretical and epistemological underpinnings of the relevance and importance of youth-centred research and uncover some of the complexities of conducting participant observation, interviews, and co-analysis activities with youth participants.

Keywords: youth voice, reflexivity, ethnography, school choice, language of instruction

Résumé

Cet article présente un projet de recherche ethnographique réflexif qui se concentre sur les perspectives des jeunes dans leur processus de sélection d'une école secondaire et d'une langue d'enseignement dans la province Canadienne de l'Ontario. Le but de cet article méthodologique est de raconter l'histoire d'un projet de recherche et d'explorer les tensions entre la théorie et la pratique vécue par une jeune chercheure pendant et après le travail de terrain. Pour ce faire, j'explore les fondements théoriques et épistémologiques de la pertinence et de l'importance de la recherche centrée sur les enfants, et de mettre en lumière les complexités de l'observation participante, des entretiens et des activités de co-analyse de données avec les jeunes participants.

Mots-clés : parole de l'enfant, réflexivité, ethnographie, choix scolaire, langue d'instruction

Above All, a Story of Research

As an ethnographer, I am the storyteller of this narrative account. In turn, as a reflexive ethnographer, the narrative accounts of my research are inextricably linked to my auto-biographical narratives, where the two are not separate stories. They are in many ways one and the same. The following article relates an ongoing reflexive research project[1] that focuses on youth voice in the school choice process in Ontario, Canada. The purpose of this methodological article is to relate a first-hand story of research, which contributes to understanding the complexities of conducting youth-centred research within a children's rights framework on the ground. I have lived this story of research as a counternarrative, as it pushes against existing normative discourses in the field of school choice. This counternarrative includes two of my voices: my theoretical voice, which is grounded in academic literature and framed by my doctoral studies, and my reflexive voice, which attempts to relate the entirety of this research process as it is lived by me, a young researcher with experiences, knowledge, opinions, and insecurities that necessarily shape my research. In recounting my story of research, I also explore the tensions between theory and practice that I experienced during and after conducting fieldwork with youth participants.

The following article opens with a detailed account of the emergence of this research project's central theme: the marginalization of youth voice in the field of school choice. Next, I expose the theoretical framework regarding youth voice as well as the importance of conceptualizing youth as agents, which leads into an epistemological look at youth participation in research. A counternarrative relating the complexities of theory and practice during the participant observation, interviewing, and data collection stages of a critical ethnography with youth in an Ontario French-language secondary school then ensues. Each section adds a new layer for reading the present story of research, which blends theory, methodology, and reflexivity, in the hopes of creating a productive space to question and interact with the text as well as the tensions it speaks to and evokes.

Searching for Youth Voice: Who Speaks and Who Is Silenced in School Choice Literature?

What has prompted me to explore the school choice process lived by francophone youth in Ontario? This story begins in 2010 when I began my master's research project on school choice. At the time, I was focused on improving retention in French-language schools in Ontario. As a francophone who lived through the ongoing process of choosing a linguistic minority school first-hand, I felt strongly connected to French-language schools' initiatives to improve student retention and hoped my research could be of some assistance. I was motivated by this topic, as there are a significant number of adolescents who choose to leave the French-language system during the transition to secondary school. Indeed, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) reports that in 2004, French-language schools in Ontario were losing 9.6% of the student population, or 632 students, during students' transition to Grade 9. In undertaking this research project, I discovered that the majority of articles in the field of school choice focus exclusively, or in large part, on the integral role of parents in the school choice process and fail to consider the experience of youth (Bagley, Woods, & Glatter, 2001; Bosetti, 2004; Bulman, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2008).

What is more, this same literature indicates that many researchers and organizations label francophone youth who opt to leave a French-language school for an English-language secondary school as "cultural dropouts" (Allaire, Michaud, Boissonneault, Côté, & Diallo, 2005; FESFO, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008; Tremblay, 2007), a term that seems to imply that these youth "drop out" from the French language and culture. Though I have already taken a more detailed account of the use and validity of the term "cultural dropout" (Cotnam, 2011), I will nonetheless disclose that my criticism of this term in relation to youth voice is twofold: (1) the field of school choice is dominated by adults speaking on behalf of children, which includes imposing labels such as "cultural dropout" on them, and this represents an important symbolic violence that only increases in a minority-language community; and (2) if dominant discourse looks to adults as the "choosers" in the school choice process, why are labels imposed on youth? Why wouldn't parents also be considered "cultural dropouts"? Yet the "cultural dropout" label remains in use. As a result, it seems that francophone youth become marginalized within their minority-language community. While conducting my

master's research project at L'École de l'Ange-Gardien,[2] I introduced the term "cultural dropout" during a focus group with Grade 8 students in a French-language school. A number of students shared that they would not want to be labelled that way and, when asked why, one student replied: *"Comment peut-on décrocher d'une partie de nous?"* (How can we drop out of a part of us?) (Field notes, April 28, 2010). It was listening to these voices that prompted me to rethink the way I look at school choice as well as my approach to researching this process.

The field of school choice research in Ontario, especially as it pertains to language of instruction, is replete with considerable paradoxes. The dearth of research on youth's experiences of choosing a secondary school in addition to the preponderance of research looking to adults who speak on behalf of youth led me to question the way I look at school choice research. Moreover, in Ontario, the choice to study in the minority or majority language is an ongoing process. In fact, even if a parent has chosen a French elementary school, during the transition to secondary school a significant number of adolescents, either on their own or in consultation with their family, choose to leave the French-language system. Here we might ask ourselves, if the choice of language of instruction is ongoing, should not youth voices be included in research examining the choice of a secondary school? For my doctoral research, I thus decided to create a participatory research space to hear youth voices that continue to be systematically under-represented and marginalized within the academic field of school choice and respective public discourse.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Youth as Agents' Rights and Voice

Children are full citizens who have the right to negotiate the most favourable conditions for their emancipation and success. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) is an international and widely ratified treaty developed under the auspices of the United Nations in 1989. Divided into 42 sections, this international document seeks the respect and protection of children, a term that is used for all persons under 18 years of age. What is more, its Article 12(1) states that:

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2   To protect participants' identities, I have replaced their names with pseudonyms and have not identified the schools or school boards, or the regions in Ontario where they are located.

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989)

This article consists of three main parts: (1) the children's right to express themselves when they have an interest in doing so; (2) the need for the knowledge produced by children to be considered legitimate; and (3) the stipulation that a child must be considered "capable of forming his or her own views" to benefit from this right. Truly, the fact that these rights depend on the cooperation of adults is also one of its integral drawbacks, as the CRC opens itself to multiple readings and interpretations by adults. I align my research framework with that of Lundy's (2007) conceptualization of Article 12 and its inherent four factors: space, voice, audience, and influence. Researchers can oftentimes limit their interpretation of "youth voice" to the first two factors, implying that all one needs to do is create the opportunity (space) for children to express their opinion (voice) in order to respect their rights, but making room for youth voice is not sufficient so as to unsettle power relations or change their social realities. As researchers, it thus becomes imperative to work diligently to respect the rights of youth to be listened to (audience) and, perhaps most importantly, for their voice to be acted upon (influence) when engaging in a youth-centred research process (Lundy, 2007, p. 933). The results of the aforementioned CRC therefore require a culture in schools and educational research that is located in a conceptual framework of children's rights (Alderson, 2000; Swadener & Polakow, 2011).

Given that "issues of power and agency are indivisible from rights" (Swadener & Polakow, 2011, p. 712), the recognition of youth as rights holders requires a conceptualization of the child as an agent. Here we might consider Giddens's (2005) theory of rational agency, which proposes agents make choices while reflecting on their actions and how these may affect the social context in which they live. The reflexivity of social agents as well as their ability to make choices are two essential elements of this theory that applies to youth. However, Valentine (2011) argues that this model is limited because it does not reflect the dimensions of class, "race," language, or gender that influence power relations between children. She indicates that it is necessary to recognize the risks of attributing more agency to some children rather than others if it is assumed that

all demonstrate agency in the same way or have the same constraints imposed on them: "Thinking about agency in these terms requires considering not only how children shape and are shaped by school, and the power of adults over children, but also the differences in power and privilege between children in school environments" (Valentine, 2011, p. 354). Therefore, while drawing from Giddens (2005) and Valentine (2011), I believe it essential to immerse myself in children's cultures to attempt to understand the ways in which children demonstrate agency in their own manner with the hopes of theorizing the strategies utilized by children to make social change (Bélanger & Kayitesi, 2010; Oberg & Ellis, 2006). This respects youth's rights and agency more so than imposing a (adult) definition of how youth should think, choose, and act in their social environment to change their reality.

Today, in the field of sociology of childhood, various authors insist on the notion that every child has a voice and that it is the adult who must learn to listen (Alcoff, 2009; Fielding, 2004; Mayall, 2008; Spyrou, 2011). Indeed, youth voice encompasses much more than the choice to speak or not, but rather includes youth's complete "culture of communication" (Christensen & James, 2008). In this case, the choice to speak or be silent as well as non-verbal communication, writing, and any other form of communication is significant (Christensen, 2004; Komulainen, 2007). Bakhtin's work (1999, 2000) frames my academic interest in youth voice. For Bakhtin, all thought and language are dialogical—which means that everything a person says is as a response to what has been said before and in anticipation of what will be said. One's voice, as "multivoicedness," is thus social, relational, and co-constructed. I reflect on Bakhtin's theory, and recognize that as a listener, my responses and social location shape the meanings inherent in discussion and necessarily influence youth voices. My interest in youth voice research is therefore an interest in entering the cultures of communication of children not only to listen but also to participate in the process of dialogic communication with them, which necessitates an epistemology deeply embedded in a children's rights framework.

An Epistemological Look at Youth Participation in the Research Process

An epistemological position can be defined as a model for conceptualizing and conducting research, or a culture of research (Van der Maren, 2011). Research that focuses on youth voice requires a "new paradigm" to be part of the process of (re)construction

of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Oberg & Ellis, 2006). Thus, I propose a bricolage of paradigms (Morawski & Palulis, 2009), which responds to this necessity for novelty and highlights the need for flexibility while researching the varied and nuanced realities of youth. My epistemological position is heavily influenced by an interpretative paradigm that seeks to understand and complicate our sociocultural constructions of meaning (Ameigeiras, 2009; Savoie-Zajc, 2011). This position is relevant to research with a particular focus on youth voice through its attention to the opinions, motivations, values, and cultures of research participants as well as its recognition of the agency of children, since it assumes that people act deliberately and create meaning through their actions (Ameigeiras, 2009). Furthermore, my research is seen through a critical and emancipatory lens in order to shed light on inequality and power issues between youth and adults. According to Freire (2009), the phenomenon of discrimination divides society into oppressors and oppressed. Under these conditions, the critical questioning of "truths" imposed by society is a starting point for my youth-centric research.

The terms "youth as informants," "youth as research assistants," and "youth as research partners" are proposed by Kirshner, O'Donoghue, and McLaughlin (2005) to examine the varying roles that youth take on in ethnographic research. The roles that youth played in my research did not resemble the youth as informants model, where youth participation is limited to responding to adult questions, but rather fit into the youth as research assistants or quasi-partners model. In accordance with this model, there were attempts to share the ownership of this project and youth had an active role in the research data collection and analysis process. This framework for understanding research in the field with youth is pertinent in the context of this article as it allows me to situate the quasi-partnership I was able to build with youth participants, which never met the full partnership or fully shared ownership model. Youth participants were experts on the research topic, but were not afforded the opportunity to act as experts regarding the research process or share control over the data use and presentation. Full partnership was never this project's goal due to the numerous time and resource constraints of a doctoral research project. In fact, during my field research, I quickly learned that consulting and negotiating with youth participants in order to share ownership is no simple task. The time I spent with youth was limited by their astoundingly structured scholastic and extra-curricular schedules, which restricted the time we could spend together. This meant that consultations only took place during the data collection and analysis stages. Hence, youth

participants regrettably were not able to shape the goals of the research, which presents an important drawback of this research project as it was only conceptualized with adult eyes and voices. I am continuously reflecting upon and, at times struggling with, a variety of methodological questions and concerns regarding engaging and collaborating with youth during the research process, which I examine more closely in the following section.

Developing a Youth-Centred Critical Ethnographic Methodology

Youth often fall or are forced into passive roles at school, and the case is similar for academic research. Yet, while employing a methodology inspired by children's rights, it is important to remember that youth participants have the right not only to have their voices heard but also to play an active part in the research that concerns them—which includes data collection as well as data analysis (Lundy, McEvoy, & Byrne, 2011). To do so, a researcher need not stray from existing methodologies, but rather adapt them to respect and create (counter)narrative spaces for youth voices to be uncovered and, in turn, heard. I have thus chosen a critical ethnographic methodology to respect and highlight youth voice.

The goal of ethnography is to study models of shared behaviours, languages, and beliefs as well as their social meanings in different cultural groups (Brewer, 2000). Ethnography is one of the most relevant and easily adaptable approaches to working with youth, especially as it allows a more direct and extended relationship with the children involved (Bélanger & Kayitesi, 2010; Corsaro, 2011). Insofar as classical ethnography describes "what is," critical ethnography necessarily asks "what might be?" with the intent to disrupt existing power relations that reproduce social inequalities (Brewer, 2000; Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012). In doing so, it becomes crucial for the critical ethnographer to challenge oppressive regimes of truth that circulate in society, while demonstrating reflexivity (Davies, 2008; Madden, 2010). I must, therefore, acknowledge my power, my prejudices, and my privileges as an adult researcher before denouncing the structures and power relations that oppress the youth participants of my study (Madison, 2012). As my research is coloured by my experiences and interests, my Franco-Ontarian identity and profound commitment to the French-language education system in minority settings shape my research. I often struggle with setting aside my linguistic, political, and personal interests that contributed to my choosing the school choice subject in the first

place. As an adult, I also reflect on the inherent power that I bring to youth–adult partnerships, but I have also learned that an imbalance of power is not always a fundamentally "bad" thing. In many ways, youth were motivated to discover that an adult wanted to hear their story and valued their opinions, and so, power can also be a motivating factor if it is perceived in the right light.

In order to respect the rights of youth, they must have the opportunity to negotiate and make decisions about data collection, which includes the ability to propose change as well as the right to refuse components of the research project (Corsaro, 2011; Hill, 2006; Mayall, 2008). Unfortunately, this proved particularly difficult in practice. The structure of my doctoral program required a detailed methodological outline in order to receive approval from my thesis committee as well as the university ethics board to conduct field research. I, therefore, was required to carefully plan out the data collection tools and timeline before meeting students, while nonetheless intending on negotiating with students once I arrived at their school. This task demonstrated to be more challenging than I had originally expected, given the many circumstances in which I had to negotiate with professors, members of the ethics committee, and the school's principal and teachers before having the chance to present my research to the youth participants who are the very heart of my project. To situate this research project within participatory research literature, I wish to clarify that I am not conducting action research. The goal of this youth-centred project is to encourage youth to study the social problems affecting their lives and to challenge existing power relations that reproduce these circumstances, but I am not inciting youth to action to remedy the situations (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). This is mainly due to the aforementioned constraints of my doctoral program, but I nonetheless find it important to clarify that bringing youth to action within their communities is not the primary goal of this research.

It is imperative for reflexive researchers to "move beyond claims of authenticity and account for the complexity behind children's voices by exploring their messy, multi-layered and non-normative character" (Spyrou, 2011, p. 151). It is from this perspective that I relate some of the "messiness" as well as the intricate balance between theory and practice, or what I had planned to do and what I was able to do, while conducting my first youth-centred ethnographic research project in a Grades 7–12 francophone school in Ontario (12–18 years old).

"Yeah, 'cause you're like a student, too": What Constitutes *Participant* Observation in an Eighth-Grade Classroom?

I conducted participant observation with a group of Grade 8 students, aged 13–14 years old, at École secondaire Citadelle, a different French-language secondary school from the school where I researched my master's project and in a different urban linguistic minority setting in Ontario. I was there for eight weeks in the winter of 2013. By sharing the daily routine with youth participants, I attempted to create a sense of equilibrium between them and me (Bianquis-Gaser, 2009). The participant observation also allowed me to discover the ethos of the group as well as the youth's individual experiences. My goal was thus to do some "deep hanging out" with the Grade 8 students (Geertz, 1998, as cited in Luttrell, 2003), but I was not sure precisely how to go about doing so in the early days of my field research. I endeavoured to take on an unconventional adult role in the school and class-rooms: to participate and better understand youth culture as if I were a Grade 8 student, without the dubious attempt to act as a child (Christensen, 2004; Mayall, 2008). Despite being a teacher, I was not there to fulfill the typical adult role of teacher (Hill, 2006; Oberg and Ellis, 2006). Instead, I opted to undertake multiple roles, some active and others passive, to keep pace with and meet the needs of youth participants (Christensen, 2004; Komulainen, 2007). Under these conditions, it was up to youth participants to decide when, where, and how they wanted me to participate in their group.

My role as a participant observer, however, was constantly being negotiated, influenced, and determined by adults. I struggled to distance myself from being viewed as a teacher—this meant declining to team-teach or give any input on lessons, refusing to discipline or supervise youth, opting not to sit at or near a teacher's desk, and mini-mizing talking with teachers before and after class. I also attempted to participate more fully in youth culture at school by dressing more casually, but this was met with a warn-ing from the administration that I was not allowed to wear jeans. I, thus, was constantly readjusting my roles according to the rules and structure of the school. Throughout my fieldwork, I did find solutions that worked: choosing to wear the school sweatshirt as many students opted to do, sitting at a student desk, following the same rules that applied to youth as well as talking (well, mostly replying) to students during lessons. I even dared to speak English when spoken to, despite the rules that dictated one should only speak French in class in a French-language school. This was difficult and unnatural for

me as a francophone teacher and researcher, but it also brought me back to my days in a French-language secondary school when I incessantly spoke English with my friends. I thus lived the tensions between my current views on the importance of speaking French in a francophone school and relating to youth as my former younger self who spoke English because it was the language for social interactions in and out of school. I also discovered that laughing at a student's joke was an important way to participate in youth cultures of communication. These rules were not written out anywhere; but as I observed, I learned just what participation looked like.

As time went on, I was greeted by students in the morning before the first bell with questions or gossip and then had to rush to my seat after the bell had rung as the teacher reminded us that class was about to begin. Despite this active portion of my observation, I still often found myself in a rather passive role as I did not complete homework or assignments and did not contribute answers during lessons. Yet when students gave me a candy on Valentine's Day, just as they had given them to all of their peers, or when I became an accomplice for fun on the day we had a substitute teacher, I realized I was an (somewhat) integrated member of the group. This happened despite evidently not being a fellow eighth grader. In fact, Elena, a youth participant in the research project, told me "cause you're like a student, too" in response to our discussion on the roles of adults and students at her school and how I oftentimes didn't quite fit in with the adults. These words confirmed that it was possible for me to enter youth's daily routines and participate within their culture. Perhaps most interestingly, students genuinely seemed to want to talk to me. They would tell me about their day or their favourite TV show and, most often, my participation simply involved listening and being engaged in what they had to say—which almost always had nothing to do with their choice of a secondary school. Allowing youth to shape what participant observation looked like in their classroom instead of forming my own ideas of what it should be was central in allowing participation to be meaningful for the youth participants as well as myself.

Interviewing Youth: How to Respect Research Goals and Youth Voice?

I intended to conduct two semi-structured interviews with approximately 10 students regarding their choice of a secondary school during my field research. A semi-structured interview fits favourably into the methodology and epistemology of the project as

interviews open the door to an insider's understanding and knowledge of the dilemmas and challenges facing social agents (Poupart, 1997). Additionally, this data collection tool allows youth to express their voice and discuss important issues and themes that do not necessarily occur in everyday conversations (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Although youth are not always able to describe the social structures and constraints imposed on them, they can reflect on their motives and influences for making particular choices (Valentine, 2011). Thus, the one-on-one interviews allowed me to enter the cultural practices of communication of youth and were participatory for youth as they were encouraged to introduce new topics for discussion (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Schiller & Einarsdottir, 2009) and were respected in the various ways in which they chose to express their voice, including silence (Christensen, 2004; Komulainen, 2007).

When a high number of students (more than 60) volunteered for the interview portion of the project, I experienced a mixed reaction. I was comforted in knowing that a high volume of youth wanted to express their voices and experiences, but was also disappointed that I would not be able to interview them all. I ultimately identified the group-class with the highest number of volunteers and interviewed all youth in this group who were interested in doing so. In total, I interviewed 17 students: 12 individually and five in two focus groups. During the interview process, I put in place a number of choices for students that I hoped would make their roles more active, including the choice of date and location of the interview, the pseudonym that would replace their name as well as the language of the interview (French or English, or both). I also had insisted during the ethical review process of this project that youth would have the ability to give their written consent for the interview stage, rather than giving the authority for this important decision to their parents. Accordingly, the beginning of our meeting consisted of going over the consent form together and discussing their role in consenting to participate in the project. I also had some unexpected suggestions from youth participants, for example, when two groups of students asked if they could be interviewed together. Interviews with a focus group of three and a focus group of two students were thus conducted, and I was happy to make youth participants more comfortable by doing so.

As youth participants of this research project were social agents, they were encouraged to recognize the nearly invisible structures of domination and the hidden curricula that shape and limit their (school) choices on a daily basis (Christensen & James, 2008; Lincoln, 1995b). During discussions with youth participants, they articulated

critical reflections that included: Which messages regarding school choice are transmitted at school and which are not? How can parents influence, orient, and even manipulate their children during the school choice process? How do friends openly and clandestinely influence one another while choosing a school? As well, youth participants were highly encouraged to suggest new themes of conversation, and the majority did so. Topics varied, but largely focused on the following: what it's like to go to university, my PhD studies, television shows, and movies. At times, themes were incredibly personal, including parental divorce, peer pressure, fights with and crushes on other students. During the interviews, these topics did not seem related to the theme of school choice. However, it was thanks to the new themes that were suggested by youth that I learned how divorce, broken hearts, peer pressure, and postsecondary goals directly impact choosing a secondary school. This co-construction of knowledge led to a more comprehensive and adequate portrayal of youth choice and voice because it presented what is most important in their daily lives. Going outside the margins of my pre-established list of questions allows us to take a closer look at school choice as it is *lived* by youth.

Youth Voice after Data Collection: An Ongoing Participative Process

Youth voice is typically filtered by the interpretations of adults (Coad & Evans, 2008; Fielding, 2004). Nonetheless, the data analysis process directly influences youth participants. Consequently, preserving the integrity of youth voice becomes an important priority and is essential for research with youth (Fielding, 2004; Lundy et al., 2011). A researcher must, therefore, be aware that their eyes cannot see the same way as those of youth. I am thus hesitant to impose my (adult) vision (concepts, categories) of the world on what I hear, as "what children say might be taken to mean what the researcher understands rather than what the children mean" (Spyrou, 2011, p. 158). This ongoing attempt to truly hear children during data analysis and dissemination necessitates including youth to assist in representing their knowledge as adequately as possible. Following suggestions made by Coad and Evans (2008), I asked youth participants to comment on their interview transcriptions as well as add or remove passages as they saw fit. I also suggested that they highlight passages or quotes that were important to them and that they would like to see in my thesis and its subsequent publications. Including quotes chosen by youth themselves has helped me to remain true to their priorities and minimize the important

risk of speaking for others that limits youth agency: "The central problem of speaking about others lies in our tendency, by default or by design, to mistake or betray the realities and interests of those about whom we speak in favour of our own" (Fielding, 2004, p. 299). Yet youth participants were not required to participate in the analysis process if they had no interest in doing so.

All of the inverviews were transcribed verbatim and averaged 15 pages, single-spaced. Almost all of the participants agreed to revise their interview transcript, but only approximately half of the participants commented and highlighted their text. I believe this was partly due to the fact that youth were asked to do this on their own in their free time. My attempt to avoid coercing youth participation in the analysis process resulted in numerous students not feeling accompanied in this new and likely overwhelming process of reading their own transcript and having to comment on its content. This speaks to the fact that "the researcher and researched both have power that fluctuates and shifts between the two" (Eder & Fingerson, 2002, p. 197). Youth participants' refusal to participate or lack of interest in the analysis process was an important way for them to express their voice. I, therefore, struggled with the intricate balance between encouraging youth to participate (and guiding them in this participation) and allowing them to feel comfortable in refusing to do so.

While analyzing the interview data from the first round of interviews over the summer of 2013, a number of questions arose regarding what was said and what was left unsaid. Though my research plan indicated that I was to interview students a second time in the fall of 2013 once they were in Grade 9 (aged 14–15 years old) and attending their chosen secondary school, I decided to invite students to participate in a co-analysis activity instead of a traditional interview. All of the participants (n=17) from the first round of interviews agreed to meet me a second time to participate in the co-analysis activity. The activities took 45 minutes on average and were conducted one-on-one in the youth participants' chosen high schools. During these one-on-one activities, students were invited to review data as well as the overarching themes identified and to respond to, comment on, question, or contest my preliminary analysis. The youth participants were not able to analyze the raw data, apart from the transcript of their own interview, due to deontological restrictions that protect each participant's anonymity and right to privacy. This meant that participants only had access to data that had already been analyzed and shaped by my lens, which represented an important limitation of this co-analysis activity. However, the

act of analyzing the data together was constructive and afforded youth the opportunity to confirm or deny the importance of different themes as well as the validity or errors in some of my initial conclusions. It also gave me a glimpse into the important differences between the ways that youth and I read this research.

As an example, during a co-analysis activity with a participant named Mallory, I shared that I was surprised by a statistic that indicated that 90% of the Grade 8 students at her school believed their choice of secondary school to be the "ideal school choice." This data had surprised me because an important number of students within this 90% had been marginalized or silenced in their family's school choice process. Mallory was not concerned with the active or passive roles of students in the choosing process but by the 10% I had not yet mentionned: "I'm surprised it is not 100% because you should be happy with your choice because it is a choice that will stay with you for the next four years" (author's translation). This is but an example of the numerous ways that youth participants provided insights into the particularities of the school choice process and what concerned them most in response to a number of questions that had not yet been fully answered. In short, instead of myself bombarding youth participants with a new set of questions for a second interview, together we attempted to answer the essential questions that had already been posed through data analysis. It was in these moments that I felt that myself and the youth participants worked as partners together toward a common goal. They were the experts and I was asking for their help in answering questions that I hoped were meaningful to us all.

Moving Forward: An Ethnographer's Ongoing Reflexive Inquiry

While undertaking a critical ethnography, the concept of reciprocity is central. The reflexive ethnographer must then ask: Will this research benefit participants involved? With a research project focused on youth voice and rooted in a children's rights conceptual framework, another question becomes crucial: Do youth consider their voice as being adequately represented and legitimately considered? In moving forward, I find myself reflecting on these questions, which are central to the evolution of my research project. As we concluded our co-analysis meeting, a youth participant, Anna, shared with me: "It's good that you want to know what we think and that what we say will be used for something." These words evoke Lundy's (2007) space, voice, audience, and influence

factors, which are essential to truly respecting youth's rights to express their voice and have their knowledge considered as legitimate. Anna speaks to the importance of some-one hearing her opinion but also to the fact that what she and all of her classmates ("we") are sharing will be "used for something"—that their words will find an audience and will have influence. Relating this story of research legitimizes the contributions that the youth participants have made, and though they were not invited to contribute to the writing of this article, their voices are woven throughout this story of research and will be heard by a large scholarly audience.

It is Lincoln (1995a) who best summarizes the importance of reflexivity in con-ducting research with youth: "Listening to student voices can help us to find our own voices" (p. 89). This article consequently examines the ongoing reflexive process of a young ethnographer who is still uncovering her voice. My counternarrative begins with the story of how a research topic developed through my reflections on school choice liter-ature, including its marginalization of youth voice. Youth voice in relation to the process of choosing a high school and a language of instruction is an essential issue that needs to move from the margins to the centre of current school choice discourse. To do so, it is imperative to recognize that youth have important capital and knowledge and that it therefore becomes necessary to include youth in research that directly concerns them and the choices they must live. How to go about doing so is the challenge that I faced during my doctoral field research.

The delicate balance between theory and practice in research with youth is explored in this article to elucidate the "messiness" and nuances of youth-centred meth-odologies as well as the importance of creating spaces and possibilities for youth voice. While conducting research with youth who took on the role of quasi-partners (Kirshner et al., 2005), my ongoing reflection on questions regarding participant observation, inter-views, and data analysis with youth brought forth a new narrative on complex method-ological issues while shedding light on the struggles of conducting youth-centred research in an adult-structured school setting. Participating and engaging with youth implies enter-ing their cultures of communication in small but important ways, which include discuss-ing what is important and relevant to them and engaging in youth school culture that does not necessarily follow adult rules. Taking on the role of an unconventional adult not only is limited to participant observation but also is crucial during interviews and during the

data analysis stages of research. Treating youth participants as experts and co-constructing knowledge through dialogue were thus central to my research experience.

My story of research does not end with this article as my project and my counter-narrative will move forward. I will create a participatory process for the dissemination of knowledge through co-constructed presentations with youth participants. I will search relevant ways to allow for the voices that were exposed in this research project to be heard at community as well as provincial, national, and international levels. I will ask questions and reflect on ways to uncover, hear, and create possibilities for youth voice in educational research, because it is not only a method of realizing children's rights, but inevitably leads to better and more meaningful research.

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