
PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION: A FANONIAN MEDICINE OF THE PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Addressing colonialism and racism in schools and in educational research continues to be a salient problem in the field of education.¹ While schools are often seen as a site which provides a variety of goods for students—knowledge, employability, life skills, and so on—there is also overwhelming evidence that schools do significant amounts of harm to students, particularly those of color.² This is evident when we consider the impact of racist practices in schooling on the psychological and intellectual development of students of color.³ While schools may serve as a site of liberation in some cases, they also function as a site of oppression in many instances.

Educational researchers have sought to address the experiences of students of color in many ways. One form of doing so is through Participatory Action Research (PAR), whereby participants are engaged as co-researchers and work together to select pertinent questions or challenges, carry out the research, and generate recommendations from their findings. Scholars have utilized PAR as a form of facilitating students to become actional in schools as

¹ The relationship between colonialism and racism is discussed extensively by scholars advancing decolonial theories and practices, with many of these scholars building from the thought of Fanon. The logic behind colonial relations is based on imposing a superior-inferior binary. Superiority and inferiority are ultimately relational categories—to have a group that is superior, one must construct an inferior group. Racism is the manifestation of this logic of colonial relations at the level of race. Race itself is a complex construction that has been modified over time and its formulation varies spatially (e.g. races are perceived differently depending on geographical location). However, the purpose of racism is to maintain these colonial relations of superiority and inferiority. For an examination of colonial relations in anti-black racism, see Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (New York: Humanities Books, 1995). For an examination on geo-spatial distinctions of racism and the education of racial perception, see Michael Monahan, “The Education of Racial Perception,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 2 (2010): 209–229.

² There is a rich body of literature around the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of students of color. For an introduction to such work, see Nancy A. Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration: Zero Tolerance Policies and the School to Prison Pipeline,” *Forum on Public Policy Online* 1, no. 2 (2009): 1–21.

³ See Ebony O. McGee and David Stovall, “Reimagining Critical Race Theory in Education: Mental Health, Healing, and the Pathway to Liberatory Praxis,” *Educational Theory* 65, no. 5 (2015): 491–511.

well as beyond the four walls of the classroom.⁴ In addition to generating insights *with*—rather than *on* or *for*—communities of color, PAR as an approach to research is a form of assuring educational research is responsive to the needs and interests of the communities critical scholars claim to serve.

While PAR facilitates the ability of students to reflect and take action in the world, there is a deeper concern underlying praxis as a response to racism in institutions such as schools. I argue that there are unique concerns PAR must attend to when responding to the psychological and intellectual implications of colonialism and racism in schools for students of color. For this purpose, Frantz Fanon provides unique contributions for thinking about PAR both as an approach to partnerships with communities of color as well as a means of transforming inequitable institutions. His thought and practice as a psychiatrist and philosopher directly address the impact of colonial relations and institutionalized racism on the well-being of people of color. There are numerous parallels to draw between his praxis in and beyond psychiatric institutions and our own efforts to address these challenges in schools and in educational research.

I examine Fanon's notion of a medicine of the people in relation to PAR as an approach to educational research that partners with communities of color to respond to colonial relations and racist institutions.⁵ A medicine of the people is premised upon a sense of relationality and responsibility that recognizes patients as active participants in the process of healing. The patient, rather than passively receiving treatment, is brought into a deeper relationship with social reality through a confrontation of the society disordered by colonialism and racism. If a racist society is in part responsible for some illnesses, as Fanon argues, then a key element of the medicinal process is confronting and transforming the racist society so one can live well. I assert that the same is true for schooling as an institution. That is, schooling can serve as a medicine of the people if, instead of perpetuating racism, it functions as a site of facilitating action for the transformation of racist institutions, including but not limited to the transformation of schools themselves. I argue that PAR is a medicine of the people when utilized in such a manner.

⁴ See Erica Burman, *Fanon, Education, Action: Child as Method* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Jason Irizarry, *The Latinization of US Schools: Successful Teaching and Learning in Shifting Cultural Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2015); David O. Stovall, *Born Out of Struggle: Critical Race Theory, School Creation and the Politics of Interruption* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

⁵ A medicine of the people first appears in his dissertation, "Mental Alterations, Character Modifications, Psychic Disorders and Intellectual Deficit in Spinocerebellar Heterodegeneration: A Case of Friedrich's Ataxia with Delusions of Possession." This dissertation is included as part of the larger collection of Frantz Fanon's psychiatric writing in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, eds. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). I refer to this work in further citations as 'Fanon, *Dissertation*.'

This work focuses on the relevance of Fanon's praxis to PAR and his notion of a medicine of the people as a way to address the psychological and intellectual implications of racism in schools for students of color. I first discuss the significance of PAR in educational research as an extension of a commitment to and belief in the transformative capabilities of communities of color. I also discuss the ways in which Fanon's thought provides a distinct lens to think about colonialism and racism in schools as well as PAR as an approach to dismantling racism by juxtaposing his thought with the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire. Next, I provide an in-depth engagement with Fanon's idea of a medicine of the people, noting the parallels between dilemmas we face in educational research and the ways in which PAR as a response to these challenges is consistent with a medicine of the people. I close by providing snapshots of the work of three PAR researchers—Jason Irizarry, David Stovall, and myself—to demonstrate how a Fanonian medicine of the people can function in responding to the psychological and intellectual impact of colonialism and racism in schools in and beyond the United States.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND FANON

Participatory action research (PAR) continues to receive attention as more scholars grapple with how to engage in educational research that serves marginalized communities, addresses the pressing challenges of social reality, and produces knowledge that helps us imagine the yet-to-be. PAR is framed as both a method and an approach⁶ grounded in a political commitment to research with communities. Such a commitment reflects a belief in the ability of marginalized communities to understand, respond to, and transform inequitable conditions. Participants are engaged as coresearchers, selecting research topics together based on the particular challenges faced in the community, and the results of the research are used to provide recommendations for how to address these challenges. PAR is not so much characterized by the methods used, but rather by the relationship established with participants in addressing dehumanizing conditions and working towards

⁶ I do not distinguish in depth between method and methodology in this essay. However, as a point of reference we may use Giddings and Grant's distinction between method and methodology. Methodology "refers to the theoretical assumptions and values that underpin a particular research approach . . . methodology is a thinking tool that guides how a researcher frames her research question and how she decides on what methods and forms of data analysis to use." Methods, on the other hand, "are much more concrete and practical—they are the doing tools for collecting and analyzing data." The authors add "as tools, methods are almost always a-paradigmatic, and therefore any given method may be used in the service of any paradigm. In practice, however, some methods are closely identified with particular methodologies within certain paradigms." See Lynne S. Giddings and Barbara M. Grant, "A Trojan Horse for Positivism? A Critique of Mixed Methods Research," *Advances in Nursing Science* 30, no. 1 (2007): 52–60, 56; Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

ameliorating these conditions.⁷ PAR is better understood as an orientation and approach to research rather than as a discrete set of tools to be applied uniformly in any context. In this sense, PAR does not obey decadent disciplinary boundaries,⁸ suspending any a priori suggestion that one ‘tool’ in the toolkit is more appropriate than another. What will be done in PAR is determined both relationally, between the scholar-researcher and the participant-researchers, and by the challenges revealed in analyzing the situation in the community.

PAR has indeed gained attention due to intellectuals concerned with the disconnection of educational research from the challenges in our communities. More specifically, a major concern are those that claim to write for social justice or write on behalf of low-income communities of color, yet they do not even converse with those they claim to write for, let alone work alongside communities in struggles for change. This assertion is not to suggest that PAR work is the “right” way to do intellectual work. Rather, it is to suggest that PAR is reflective of how our political commitments are expressed in our scholarship and methodological approaches to research. In other words, if one of our political commitments is to produce research that is relevant to the experiences of our communities and is based on the challenges our communities face, then PAR becomes one methodology for realizing this work.

Some scholars in the field of education utilize PAR, and there are variations in the approaches taken to enacting PAR depending on the context in which one works. For instance, Jason Irizarry’s PAR work in high school is demonstrative of the way PAR can be enacted as an asset-based pedagogy that facilitates the acquisition of academic skills, respects and fosters cultural and linguistic diversity, and challenges the status quo.⁹ David Stovall also works in the classroom, but he takes PAR outside of the school/classroom through partnerships with community organizers committed to addressing the intersection of race, economics, and educational inequity in their neighborhoods.¹⁰ Furthermore, there are other scholars such as myself who are engaging in PAR work transnationally and thinking about the implications of such work for the purpose of schooling transnationally. I return to Irizarry and my own case later in this essay, but first let us address the relevance of Fanon’s praxis to PAR.

Why is the thought and work of someone like Frantz Fanon important for PAR, particularly in the field of education? Fanon is an example of

⁷ See Pamela A. Moss and Edward H. Haertel “Engaging Methodological Pluralism,” in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, eds. Drew H. Gitomer and Courtney A. Bell, 5th ed. (Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association, 2016), 127–147.

⁸ See Lewis R. Gordon, *Disciplinary Decadence: Living Thought in Trying Times* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁹ See Irizarry, *The Latinization of US Schools*; Django Paris, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93–97.

¹⁰ See Stovall, *Born Out of Struggle*.

someone who embodied in his praxis the very aims of PAR: a political commitment to address the pressing concerns of social reality through work with others, while also refuting the kind of methodological purity academic disciplines desire. It is my claim that PAR does produce knowledge consistent with the kind of political commitments I previously described, but that PAR is also able to do something else in the very process of conducting research when we understand PAR as a medicine of the people responsive to colonialism and racism in schooling.

To understand the importance of PAR as a Fanonian medicine of the people, it is helpful to juxtapose Fanon's praxis with the Brazilian intellectual Paulo Freire who is often cited in PAR scholarship. There are significant commonalities in the thought of Fanon and Freire that I do not unpack in depth in this work. One reason for these commonalities to keep in mind, though, is the fact that Freire read and cited Fanon throughout his career, from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to *Pedagogy of Freedom*. While one could argue that Fanon's praxis is quite similar to Freire, one could also argue that this is so because Freire was actually building upon Fanonian thought. This is not an attempt to take away from the important contributions of Freire. Rather, it is to point out that accurately understanding intellectual lineages could help us understand the myriad ways Fanon influenced the development of Freirean thought.

However, there are also significant differences in their thought. A primary reason for this difference is the centrality of colonialism and racism in Fanon's work. This is not to say Freire ignored these dimensions, but to point to the fact that addressing the psychological, intellectual, material, and spiritual consequences of colonialism and racism were the priority for Fanon. This is evident not only in his psychiatric writings, but also in his philosophical texts and his revolutionary political theory.¹¹

Fanon's intensive engagement with the challenges associated with racism opened a related yet distinct form of praxis from Freirean praxis. This is evident when we consider the relationship between normative social conditions, illness, and wellness in Fanon's idea of a medicine of the people. A medicine of the people, as we unpack below, is based on idea that human beings can experience illness due to a variety of reasons, one of which is a disordered society. Though many in Western medicine assume that society is "normal" and "well-ordered," which leads to conclusions that an individual must be "abnormal" and "dis-ordered" if they are not functioning in accordance with social expectations, Fanon begins with a different examination of normative social conditions in a racist society. What passes as normal and well-ordered in a racist society is, in fact, abnormal and disordered. A person of color who experiences distress in such a society is not abnormal or dis-ordered,

¹¹ See Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008); Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

but instead exhibiting the ill effects of existing in a society that narrates them as non-human, deficient, or a problem.¹²

This understanding of normative social conditions, illness, and wellness leads to a distinctly Fanonian praxis of struggle as medicinal.¹³ To be brief, if society is in part responsible for the illnesses we experience, then part of the medicinal process is working to transform society: part of the path of becoming well is constructing institutions which facilitate rather than constrain our ability to live well. Though racist institutions—like schools—may contribute to illness, they can also serve as a site of challenging racism. The ultimate goal in a medicine of the people is not just to challenge racism within the institution, but to transform the institution so that it no longer serves racist aims.

A medicine of the people, then, is distinct from what Freire envisioned when he posited education as a tool to be used toward liberation. Rather than understanding schooling as a tool to be used toward any aim including liberatory ones, schooling as medicinal already begins with an orientation towards other human beings. In other words, the medicinal comes with an understanding of healthy normative and ethical conditions in our relations to others. This is critical for an examination of institutions such as schools: if institutions are constructed to meet the needs and interests of those they serve, then there is clearly an embedded normative and ethical framework in their construction. For Fanon, his praxis was grounded in responding to racism as an illness in that it has poisoned what we understand as normal and ethical behavior and relationships. That is, racism is in part a social illness that has distorted our ability to be in relation to one another, and racism can be eradicated from our institutions through action. Dismantling institutional racism is not only necessary for well-being, but the process of going about the dismantling of racism itself is a medicinal process. I extend such an understanding to schooling and PAR as a medicine of the people in this work.

¹² Du Bois' inversion of the "negro problem" is an example of such an acknowledgment of how a racist society both produces and advances abnormality as normal and well-ordered. Rather than accept that there is a negro problem, Du Bois instead argues that the problem is the racist society which constructs the negro and then poses the negro as a problem that needs solving. Moreover, the idea of simultaneously recognizing someone as a human being and dismissing their humanity is part of the bad faith necessary for racism. On this concern, see Gordon, *Bad faith and Anti-Black Racism*.

¹³ As opposed to a Freirean praxis that posits oppression as the problem and liberation as the elimination of oppression, Fanonian praxis as medicinal sees a more complex relationship between social struggle and wellness. One can, for instance, experience oppression yet still live well, and simultaneously one may not experience oppression yet experience profound illness. A more robust examination of Fanonian alienation and disconnection are beyond the scope of this work, though I address it in greater detail elsewhere "Colonized Intellectuals and False Revolutionary Leadership: Fanon, Freire, and the Liberation Paradox in Neoliberal Education" (Forthcoming).

A Fanonian medicine of the people would lead us to a two-tiered praxis to address racism in schools and to cultivate the medicinal potential of schools. The first is that by teaching and learning in a way that provides a deeper understanding of racism in our institutions and that facilitates action to transform these social conditions, we can repair dehumanizing relations and construct schools that do not propagate racism. In other words, we have the ability to educate in ways that are not racist and, furthermore, to construct schools as institutions that facilitate rather than impede the well-being of people of color. PAR as a pedagogy in the classroom is one tool of doing so, as we demonstrate in this work.

The second dimension this uniquely Fanonian praxis underscores is that in the process of repairing social relations and constructing new institutions which reflect these social relations, human beings themselves are healing and changing. Fanon refers to the formation of a “new humanity” throughout his works,¹⁴ and we can understand the new humanity as a necessary extension of becoming actional. That is to say, if racism in a society is no longer normative, then who is a “normal” human being in that society will also change through the medicinal process of transforming society. A new humanity emerges in the process of repairing and constructing humanizing institutions. In this sense, PAR is one process that facilitates the maturation of this new humanity while working to challenge racism in schooling.

Though the above clarifies the relevance of Fanon’s thought in PAR, there are still aspects of PAR as a medicine of the people that need clarification. What is distinct about PAR as a medicine *of* the people as opposed to a medicine *for* the people? What sense of relationality and responsibility accompany PAR as a medicine of the people? What orientation does PAR as a medicine of the people have towards the future? These questions we take on below.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS A MEDICINE OF THE PEOPLE

There are numerous parallels and connections that we can draw between Fanon’s psychiatric practice and the educational practices we strive for. An in-depth exploration is best left for a later time, but one that I seek to unpack here is the way in which Fanonian psychiatry was not about trying to adjust the individual to a disordered society, but rather providing a nurturing and supportive environment for the individual to confront the disordered society and, ultimately, work to transform it. This, I argue, is also our goal in struggles for educational equity and in PAR.

Fanon’s dissertation is demonstrative of his insightful observations regarding the limitations of strict disciplinary boundaries between neurology and psychiatry to address the health of the individual, the intimate relationship between individual health and social health, and how Fanon’s notion of

¹⁴ See, in particular, Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* and Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*.

medicine emerges.¹⁵ Here, I focus on the point Fanon raises towards the end of his dissertation: “the possibility of a medicine of the person.”¹⁶ I suggest that the phrase “a medicine of the person” has a distinct Fanonian sense of 1) relationality and 2) responsibility that the phrase ‘a medicine *for* the people’ does not possess.

Relationally, “a medicine of the person” suggests that the patient is at the core of the relationship and an active participant in the process of healing. “A medicine of the person” indicates that it is the patient who serves as the point of departure in the selection of treatments, while a medicine *for* the person implies that the treatment is predetermined. In the framework of a medicine *for* the person, the patient has to simply be a passive receiver of a treatment. Furthermore, it is worth considering if switching the preposition would also imply a shift in the article of the phrase. In other words, the phrase would change from “a medicine of the person” to *the* medicine *for* the person.¹⁷ In this sense, the relationship between *the* predetermined treatment and passive reception of *the* treatment is made more explicit, where the patient is not only framed as non-actional, but also the neuropsychiatrists—who are extensions of the institution—are the providers of an answer to our ills independent of what the patient may do. As if in a Fanonian dystopia, the relationship between the patient and the treatment is mechanistic rather than humanistic. Some might suggest that this dystopic element constitutes some contemporary approaches to medicine, and it certainly also parallels concerns with mechanization in schools raised by critical pedagogues such as Freire.¹⁸

The second and related element is that of responsibility. If *the* medicine *for* the person frames the patient as non-actional and mechanistic, the medicinal process appears to be predetermined. The patient simply answers the questions of the neuropsychiatrist and awaits their prescription. In theological terms, the institution—with the psychiatrist as its extension—becomes God, and the patient succumbs to the will of God in order to be saved. However, what Fanon highlights in his writings is that the institutions we inhabit are in

¹⁵ Fanon, *Dissertation*.

¹⁶ Fanon, *Dissertation*, 270.

¹⁷ Fanon writes two paragraphs later: “Psychoanalysis entails a pessimistic view of humanity. *The medicine of the person* presents itself as a deliberate choice for optimism in the face of human reality” (my emphasis in italics). Though Fanon does use the article *the* rather than *a* in this sentence, it still seems plausible to argue Fanon’s use of the definitive article is different from its use in the phrase ‘*the* medicine *for* the people.’ For Fanon, the definitive article implies the treatment selected based on the needs of the patient and administered through the patient’s participation in the treatment, while in ‘the medicine for the person’ the definite article would imply the generality of the treatment irrespective of the patient. For Fanon, thus, the definitive article does not imply *the* general treatment applicable to all persons, but the best treatment based on the individual. Fanon, *Dissertation*, 271.

¹⁸ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 1998).

part responsible for the illnesses that cause us to turn to those very institutions for a cure. What is it that we do when something which contributes to the cause of our sickness is also advanced as the medicine? This is something we contend with in the field of education as well.¹⁹

Fanon underscores that the patient is far from a passive participant in the treatment process: their life history, capacity to share information, connect with others, interact with their milieu, make judgments and take appropriate actions are all components of a medicine of the person. Rather than rob the patients of their choice and impose a predetermined prescription upon them, Fanon views the role of the revolutionary neuropsychiatrist as one of reintroducing the patient to society in a way that combats alienation and facilitates connectivity.²⁰ This same approach—revelation, disalienation, and reconnection—appears throughout Fanon’s praxis in medicine, philosophy, and political theory.

How, then, is PAR related to Fanonian praxis and a medicine of the person? Fanon argues that “the medicine of the person presents itself as a deliberate choice for optimism in the face of human reality.”²¹ He chose to practice psychiatry with optimism rather than with fatalism or nihilism in the confrontation with human reality. I argue that PAR itself is a similar “deliberate choice for optimism in the face of human reality.” In this sense, I advance PAR as *a medicine of the people*. As we can gather from Fanon, a medicine of the people does not treat the individual so that they may return into the social world unchanged. In addition, a medicine of the people is also not to position the social world as fixed and immutable, resulting in the assumption that it is the individual who must adjust to the society. Rather, a medicine of the people is found in the intimate relationship between the individual and the social. More specifically, it is grounded in the capacity for the individual to transform both themselves and society. This is not necessarily sequential (i.e. first one must change and then society changes). Rather, it is dialectical in that one changes in the process of social struggle. PAR, like Fanonian psychiatry, operates with the premise that notions like fatalism before social reality are not only false, but serve to maintain dehumanizing social relations. If, as Fanon argues through sociogeny and sociodiagnostics, “society, unlike biochemical processes, does not escape human influence” then what both Fanonian

¹⁹ This type of reasoning is also evident in educational research. Educational scholars will simultaneously launch critiques of education as an institution of social reproduction premised on colonial assumptions of what it means to be successful, while at the same time discussing school as a place of liberatory possibilities. What PAR indicates is that both are true and possible at the same time.

²⁰ See “On Some Cases Treated with the Bini Method” and “Indications of Electroconvulsive Therapy within Institutional Therapies,” in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*.

²¹ Fanon, *Dissertation*, 271.

psychiatry and PAR advance is our responsibility to construct a healthy shared world through action.²²

Furthermore, PAR as a medicine of the people, unlike a medicine for the people, does not have a definite predetermined outcome. A medicine for the people has as its goal the reintegration of the individual to society. Its goal is ultimately to minimize the disruption to society. When the individual appears to create too much disruption, there are other mechanisms to constrain the individual. This is known all too well in the field of education through scholarship on topics such as the school-to-prison pipeline.²³ In critiques of education as social reproduction, schools—and often educational research—serve as a space for reproducing colonial relations.²⁴ While this critique provides a place from which to begin, it does not necessarily provide somewhere to go. In other words, what might we do when we confront this unpleasing truth in education? In “Indications of Electroconvulsive Therapy with Institutional Therapies,” Fanon prefaced seven recommendations for transforming the practices within psychiatric institutions. He prefaced his recommendations with the following phrase: “the *therapeutic demands* of *hospital organization* from an *institutional perspective* could be defined as follows.”²⁵ This wording is important to struggles in education as it emphasizes what it is that individuals require of the institution (therapeutic/educational demands); that our institutions are mutable should we choose to rearrange such institutions (hospital/school organization); and that institutions are constructed with something in mind or from a particular position (institutional perspective). Fanon was not only reconsidering what he and other staff could do from within hospitals, but he was also considering how to transform the institution itself by shifting the perspective through which psychiatry is practiced. We might think of PAR and addressing the institutional perspectives which organize schools in similar ways. Learning from Fanon, we can re-evaluate the relationship between the individual and society, positioning schools as a connective medium. PAR, then, becomes an aspect of the medicinal process—a therapeutic manner of teaching and learning, if you will—that has a humanizing orientation but not necessarily a predetermined aim.

The humanizing orientation behind PAR as a medicine of the people underscores agency and responsibility for transforming our shared world. Unlike traditional expectations in schooling—a predetermined lesson plan tied to educational standards, explicitly articulated learning outcomes, a

²² Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, xv.

²³ See Heitzeg, “Education or Incarceration.”

²⁴ See Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (New York: Routledge, 2016) for a discussion of the ways in which educational research, under the guise of conducting well-intentioned work, often perpetuates colonial logics.

²⁵ Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, 297.

predetermined assessment for students to demonstrate learning, and so on—PAR allows for answers to questions such as the *how* and *towards what aim* of schooling to emerge in the process of struggle. Fanon’s psychiatric practice reveals something similar. For instance, Fanon’s premise—a disordered society will produce individuals with disorders—already defied traditional conceptions of mental illness that characterized struggle with mental health as solely a neurological and, thus, an individual problem. PAR as a medicine of the people also refutes narratives of students as deficient, instead insisting that subjectivity and structure are dialectical and constantly remaking each other.

The outcome of a medicine of the people is unclear as it is unknown what may occur when an individual is introduced to society in a way in which they see the contradictions of social reality. *What will people do then? What will come next?* Fanon’s psychiatric work was not done in fear of this uncertainty. In other words, he did not shy away from fostering this confrontation between the individual and disordered society because he was afraid of what might emerge. Instead, Fanon’s therapeutic approach was grounded in this confrontation. Throughout *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon demonstrates how the black develops neurotic tendencies confronting a world rejecting their humanity. The way to combat this “epidermalization of inferiority” is not by evading a confrontation with the Manichean logic structuring colonial relations, but rather by facing it directly in a supportive and caring environment.²⁶ This is the work that PAR can do in schools and in educational research.

What are examples of scholarship in the field of education that utilize PAR as a medicine of the people? Below, I provide an example of PAR as both methodology and pedagogy through Irizarry’s *The Latinization of US Schools*. I briefly highlight some of the elements of a Fanonian medicine of the people in his work. Those interested in a deeper engagement can reference the bibliography for the original text. I then link Irizarry’s work, the observations of PAR scholar David Stovall, and my own PAR research in a transnational context. I close by describing the relevance of PAR as a medicine of the people when inquiring into the role of schooling transnationally.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION AS A MEDICINE OF
THE PEOPLE

Irizarry’s work in the high school of Rana City,²⁷ a low-income predominantly Latinx community, emerged through an attempt to produce

²⁶ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, xv. Also, this Fanonian concept is taken up by Irizarry and Raible in relation to education and the school-to-prison pipeline. Jason G. Irizarry and John Raible “‘A Hidden Part of Me’: Latino/a Students, Silencing, and the Epidermalization of Inferiority,” *Equity and Excellence in Education* 47, no. 4 (2014): 430–444.

²⁷ Irizarry, *The Latinization of US Schools*. Rana City serves as a pseudonym for the school district.

scholarship addressing the pressing needs of our communities while also remaining in touch with the communities. Irizarry was negotiating between his political commitments and the ways in which the university provides individual rewards and recognition for scholars that do not “make any investment in those communities or assuming any responsibility for transforming the oppressive conditions and limiting situations.”²⁸ He chose to teach a high school course through PAR in which students selected topics related to educational inequity, formed questions to explore, conducted research, and provided findings and recommendations to address the situation. Upon beginning the PAR project, what he found in the classroom shocked him: students had internalized the message that they were deficient human beings. Students insisted that they were not smart and, when Irizarry pushed them to provide evidence, they gave responses such as “we are in the lowest classes . . . we don’t talk right . . . teachers tell us we are not smart . . . we are not like the white kids.”²⁹ Irizarry notes that this is demonstrative of Fanon’s notion of the epidermalization of inferiority and, indeed, we can see many of Fanon’s concerns discussed in *Black Skin White Masks* through an educational lens: academic zones of non-being; language as a tool of colonial domination in schools; the development of neuroses upon contact with the predominantly white teacher workforce; and—through an education in an anti-black reality—the fact that “there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” equates being *smart* or a *good* student to being a *white* student.³⁰

Facing these challenges, PAR became a medicine of the people as students confronted inequitable educational structures and pedagogical practices that informed their education. Student research addressed the impact of deficit-based perspectives in the classroom, academic tracking, draconian disciplinary policies, and the limitation of education when one is undocumented, among other topics. While students were confronting their educational reality and working to transform it, they were beginning to believe that they were capable and intelligent. Through the support and environment cultivated by Irizarry, students became more deeply connected with their own sense of agency and power, and they sought to use their research to inform educational practice. PAR became a form of combatting the detrimental psychological and intellectual impacts of racist schooling.

However, this did not necessarily dispel their belief that they were not *as smart* as other (read: white) people. A student said that PAR “‘is easy. Really smart people,’ she argued, ‘write books and articles and stuff.’”³¹ Here we see another element of a medicine of the people: the unforeseen possibilities that emerge from working to transform social reality. While Irizarry notes his reservations on holding academic books and articles as the standard for

²⁸ Irizarry, 11.

²⁹ Irizarry, 2.

³⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, xiv.

³¹ Irizarry, *The Latinization of US Schools*, 11.

intellectuality, this did provide an enriching learning opportunity. *The Latinization of US Schools* is put together with a series of co-authored chapters between Irizarry and students in the PAR class. Irizarry perceived himself as a co-researcher facilitating the process of writing with the student-researchers. This is similar to the kinds of partnerships in teaching and learning that Freire underscores with the student-teacher and teacher-student relationship,³² or Lewis Gordon with the idea of the teacher as an advanced student. Moreover, what is evident from the work in Rana City is that the same academic abilities we hope students develop—critical thinking, strong writing, and close reading skills, for instance—were all done through PAR. In other words, what teaching based on educational standards, almost scripted lesson plans, and standardized testing attempts—and often fails to—achieve, PAR actually accomplished. Furthermore, PAR does this not by acquiescing to the kinds of multicultural inclusion that leave the dominant dehumanizing reality untouched, but instead by acting to change those very dehumanizing conditions. Rather than accepting the epidermalization of inferiority and schooling as a site of social reproduction, PAR as both a methodology and pedagogy serves as a medicine of the people.

Irizarry's work is demonstrative of the power of PAR in the classroom. However, the challenges of education are not limited to the classroom, and PAR certainly has a place beyond the classroom. For instance, David Stovall writes:

Education, as the process of making informed decisions to improve the human condition through critical analysis and action, is not confined to the walls of a school building. Instead, it can also operate as the political exercise intent on providing communities that experience disinvestment, marginalization, and isolation with the ability to analyze and change their conditions.³³

Stovall calls attention to the role PAR has in addressing educational concerns outside of the classroom. Irizarry's PAR project in Rana City High School ended (2011) before I became a teacher there (2013). However, I also utilized PAR as a pedagogical approach, focusing on connecting the work in the classroom to struggles in the community. Consistent with a medicine of the people, PAR was informed by the challenges of social reality, but the ways in which the challenges were addressed were born out of struggle.³⁴ During my time as a high school teacher, PAR led to a series of different projects. For

³² See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin, 1993), specifically his chapter on banking education.

³³ Stovall, *Born Out of Struggle*, 8.

³⁴ Stovall, *Born Out of Struggle* outlines Stovall's work in Chicago. His observations and reflections are poignant in revealing the intersection between educational struggles and their connection to other socioeconomic concerns in our communities.

example: student research interrogating educational inequity much like Irizarry's work; organizing parents and families in the community; bringing community organizers into the classroom to work with students on their PAR projects; student-led efforts to stage a play depicting the experiences of recently arrived students to Rana City and its high school, to name but a few examples. Like Irizarry's work, I found that my students could not only meet the academic expectations set by educational standards and standardized testing, but that they would exceed them through a pedagogy grounded in PAR while also gaining a deeper understanding of social challenges and working to transform them.

I eventually left the classroom and transitioned to doctoral studies in education where I sought to address a more complex question that appeared through PAR and a reflection on my own experiences and those of my students. All of us in the classroom—including the community organizers that participated in class—were either the first generation born in the United States or had been born outside the United States. Appearing often in our work was the intersection of education and immigration. What exactly was the relationship between the struggles people faced in their countries of origin that led them to migrate to the United States? What is the role of schooling both in their country of origin and in the United States? PAR then ceased to be a pedagogical approach within the US classroom and instead became one methodological approach to addressing transnational questions related to education.

The move to addressing the role of schooling in the lives of marginalized youth transnationally came through partnerships with Mayan K'iché and Kaqchikel students who had migrated to the United States. These were Indigenous students who were schooled both in Guatemala and the United States, facing a myriad of challenges related to the pervasive power of racism in the institutions of settler-states,³⁵ one of these being schools.³⁶ I describe some of these experiences elsewhere,³⁷ but for the purposes of this work I seek

³⁵ By settler-states, I refer to the construction of Euromodern nation-states following European invasion. Work around settler colonialism has argued that prior to the construction of settler-states, there was Indigenous sovereignty across Abya Yala (indigenous term for the Americas). What settler colonialism entailed was the systematic deterritorialization and elimination of Indigenous peoples. For more on the topic, one can begin with Patrick Wolfe "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

³⁶ See, for instance, Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). Grande specifically talks about the experiences of Indigenous students in the US context. For an examination of the Guatemalan context, see political philosopher and pedagogue Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, *El Racismo Contra los Pueblos Indígenas de Guatemala (Racism Against Indigenous Peoples in Guatemala)* (Ciudad de Guatemala: Cholsamaj, 2005).

³⁷ See Josué R. López and Jason Irizarry, "Somos pero no somos iguales/We Are But We Are Not the Same: Unpacking Latinx Indigeneity and the Implications for Urban

to clarify the challenges in relation to the transnational reach of whiteness, using the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala as an example.

The clash of marginalized peoples with whiteness and those who believe themselves white has complex contours when we account for the legacy of European Invasion and the dominance of the United States as the metropole of the Western Hemisphere. Guatemala, for instance, is a settler-state constructed after the invasion of the Spanish, which led to brutal and repressive violence against Indigenous peoples. However, this violence is made more complex when accounting for interventions by the United States in Guatemalan affairs. I have shown this elsewhere,³⁸ but briefly: in the construction of a Guatemalan national identity, the state attempted to move closer to whiteness by relegating Indigeneity as part of a glorious but primitive past while celebrating connections to the European/Spanish/White as the modern/civilized/developed, effectively narrating Indigenous peoples as incapable of contributing to the future; there was a 36 year civil war (1960–1996) in Guatemala where over 200,000 were killed in genocidal violence, and over 80% of the victims were Mayan peoples; the United States sponsored the coup to depose social democratic leader Jacobo Árbenz, which led to the Civil War, and it was the first CIA coup launched in the Western Hemisphere; though the Guatemalan state is an independent nation-state, the United States exerts significant influence in Guatemalan affairs, particularly evident in economic interests such as transnational corporations; continued reliance upon aid and support from non-profit organizations or non-governmental organization facilitates a direct and indirect promotion of US interests in the region; and even schooling shows a connection with US intervention in the imposition of universal schooling as well as policies for the teaching of the English language in schools despite the interests of marginalized communities in the region, namely Indigenous peoples who have objected to the role schooling has played in their communities. While some might suggest that some of these conditions appear to have little or no connection to race and racism, the long history of violence against Indigenous peoples and disregard for Indigenous life and well-being suggests otherwise. In other words, we would have to understand contemporary social, political, and economic life not only in relation to contemporary racial discrimination against Indigenous peoples—of which there is ample evidence—but we would also have to situate our contemporary analysis in this historical legacy of racism in the institutions of settler-states. The interventions of the metropole throughout the Western

Schools,” *Urban Education*, published ahead of print, March 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085919835292>.

³⁸ See Josué R. López, “CRT and Immigration: Settler Colonialism, Foreign Indigeneity, and the Education of Racial Perception,” *Md. LJ Race, Religion, Gender & Class* 19, no. 1 (2019): 134–165. I also trace the relationship between the United States and Guatemala in terms of schooling in my dissertation, *The Creolizing Classroom* (forthcoming, April 2020).

Hemisphere, Guatemala in particular, are demonstrative of the political and economic manifestations of racist practices beyond the borders of the United States.

These practices by the Guatemalan and US settler-states have detrimental psychological and intellectual consequences on Indigenous peoples in Guatemala, as my work with Indigenous youth in and out of school demonstrates. There is an attempt by many to valorize everything that is Guatemalan as opposed to Mayan, and to valorize even more that which is from the United States as opposed to Guatemalan or Mayan. Some young people refuse to speak their Indigenous languages, seek to dress in Western clothing and depreciate Indigenous wear, mimic aspects of US consumerism that impacts what they imagine they need to live well, and there is both a subconscious and conscious expression by many youth of the superiority of everything tied to the United States and a belief in the inferiority of that which is considered Mayan. As Irizarry pointed out with students of color in the United States, many of these Mayan youth perceive being successful, being intelligent, being capable as being White—more specifically, being “American.”

Fanonian thought shows itself to be quite relevant in responding to such challenges, particularly as Fanon wrote from both Martinique as a colonial possession of France and from Algeria in their fight for independence from France. Consider, for instance: in *Black Skin White Masks*, he addresses the relationship between the colonizing language and the language of the Indigenous peoples; in *Wretched of the Earth* he examines the way the metropole preys upon the peripheries for capitalist exploitation, highlighting the racialized dimensions of such exploitation; and in *Toward the African Revolution* Fanon discusses the evolution of racism over time so that while the form it takes may change, the underlying belief in the inferiority of the native remains constant. Moreover, both *Black Skin* and *Wretched* contain passages that address the role of schooling in maintaining colonial relations between the metropole and its peripheries.

A concern my research raises in relation to these challenges is with the purpose of schooling in the lives of marginalized youth, in this case Mayan students. Many Indigenous youth leave school in Guatemala to support their families economically. Those who graduate and even go on to university studies have difficulty finding employment despite their high levels of formal schooling. Moreover, Indigenous peoples have questioned—and continue to do so—the relevance and value of the knowledge taught in schools. They ask an important question that is relevant for examining the purpose of school transnationally: if the reason why people insist we should attend school is because schooling can provide increased economic opportunities, yet school does not provide us improved economic opportunities, then what is the purpose of attending school?

Examining schooling as a medicine of the people provides a possible answer to this dilemma. Rather than schooling serving to propagate the

interests of the Guatemalan or US settler-states, schooling can become a site of healing where the medicinal process of transforming inequitable institutions is the aim of the teaching and learning process. PAR becomes one way of achieving such a form of schooling, as students are engaging with the pressing challenges they face, learning through examining these challenges, and utilizing their knowledge to facilitate action in changing such conditions. It is possible that schooling as a medicine of the people conducted through PAR leads us to envision a distinct, transnational purpose of schooling as a site not of predetermined educational standards, curricula, and procedures for teaching and learning, but rather as a space where young people come together to examine social reality and, ultimately, take responsibility for its transformation.

CONCLUSION: A MEDICINE OF THE PEOPLE AND QUESTIONS OF THE
TRANSNATIONAL

There are parallels between Fanon's thought and psychiatric practices with struggles for educational equity. Fanon provides us with the idea of a medicine of the people, and I argued in the context of education that PAR is one example of such a medicine. PAR, as a medicine of the people rather than a medicine for the people, works in schools to make education a process of engaging with and transforming social reality. Also like a medicine of the people, PAR does not prescribe a predetermined solution but rather denotes an approach to teaching, learning, and educational research grounded in a deeper relationality and responsibility to re-shape society so we may all live well.

As a medicine of the people at the transnational level, PAR opens up a series of new questions. How do we build meaningful relationships across nation-states? How do we link struggles in one space with those of another? If schooling is a commonality across nation-states, what is its role in perpetuating or challenging inequity? How might we determine shared projects across nation-states and the differences based on the context in which one is situated? What is the role of schooling in transnational struggles? If PAR is a medicine of the people, we cannot provide predetermined answers to these questions. Rather, the answers emerge in the process of struggle. We can certainly turn to answers in history such as Fanon's struggle in Algeria or Marcus Garvey and the UNIA,³⁹ but not even history can illuminate the 'proper' path for us to take. Instead, in the spirit of Fanon, we can go forward in this work confronting social reality remembering human beings are "a 'yes' resonating from cosmic harmonies."⁴⁰ Like Fanonian praxis in psychiatry, PAR in educational research and schooling is a strong yes in action.

³⁹ See Robbie Shilliam "What about Marcus Garvey? Race and the Transformation of Sovereignty Debate," *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006): 379–400.

⁴⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, xii.
