

# TROUBADOUR

The Newsletter of St. Francis House, New London, Connecticut



Fall/Winter 2012

Vol. 14, No. 3

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## Hearing Youth Voices: A Call to Action

Written By: Chelsea Cleveland, Laura Burfoot, and Ranita Ray

In the spring of 2012, with the charge of school reform, members of the State Department of Education conducted an audit of the New London Public School system in which they interviewed Board of Education members, teachers, administrators, and a small number of parents. As the report was made public, it became shockingly apparent that the main constituency left un-consulted was the students. *Hearing Youth Voices* began as a youth-led participatory action research project designed to be in conversation with the state's audit by presenting students' perspectives and experiences within the education system—something we believe should be at the center of school reform efforts.

In June, Ranita Ray and Laura Burfoot attended an intensive, 5-day institute on participatory action research led by the Public Science Project of the CUNY Graduate Center in New York. Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach to research that prioritizes the expertise of those most impacted by the social phenomenon being researched. We, including friend and colleague Chelsea Cleveland, wanted to co-create research with youth about youth experiences in school—with the goal of adding new knowledge and data to the conversation about school reform here in New London and beyond.

Our team came together in the final weeks of June and work started in July. We were 3 adults and 10 youth. Thanks to the summer employment program of New London Youth Affairs, we were able to hire the teens as researchers. The Drop-In Learning Center came through for us in a major way - donating a space, complete with computers, as well as printing costs, food, administrative support and a host of other forms of hospitality. Anne Scheibner of St. Francis House led our fundraising efforts. We are deeply thankful to this community of friends and allies without whom our work would not have been possible!!

We had 6 weeks to accomplish our goal - to design research questions, pursue those questions in the form of in-depth interviews, analyze the data, and then present our findings to the community. We worked collectively on everything. We made dozens of decisions, small and large, together - about what questions we would ask in our interviews, how we would appeal to youth to participate as interviewees, how we would present our findings, who we should invite to the presentations, and many more.

In addition to our research findings, which you shall read about in the following pages, there were other extremely important breakthroughs this summer. One: several youth members of our team talked about realizing that they were not “alone” - that, through the group and the research they realized that the struggles and frustrations that they experienced both inside and outside of school, were much more common than they had thought, and therefore not any fault of their own. This was extremely transformative for them. Two: we watched each other's confidence grow. Many of the youth on our team had been marginalized - via suspensions, expulsions, placement in an online learning school - by the school system. We watched these students begin to take their own intellects seriously. We watched these students facilitate Q & A sessions in our public presentations with the confidence of professionals. They knew that they were experts - they had done the research themselves. Three: we built a community. Many members of the team talked about walking into the space at the beginning of the summer and not knowing the other youth in the room, or having judgments of them. And yet, by the end of the summer, we were not only filled with pride in the work that we had done together, but we had laughed and cried together, taken risks, stretched comfort zones, and laughed some more. Each of us has been transformed by participating in this project. We hope that you learn something new from reading about it, and that you are inspired to take action to support youth voice and leadership in school reform efforts.

Laura Burfoot graduated from New London High School in 1999 and Chelsea Cleveland in 2007. Ranita Ray is a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Connecticut.

## Many Voices Speaking . . . An Introduction to who we are

*A snapshot of how we introduced ourselves at our two forums at the New London Public Library*

We are 10 teens of color (and three cool adults) who interviewed other teens and young adults that go to New London High School, who were pushed out/dropped out, or graduated.



### **Hearing Youth Voices Team:**

*Standing left to right:* Ranita Ray, Chelsea Cleveland, Laura Burfoot, Xavier Rodriguez, Yanitza Cubilette, Erick Carrion, Tiyana Brown and Deryn Burrel

*Seated:* Sheila Cortez, Stacia Rosado, Kiara Delgado, Genesis Cubilette and Derenis Santos

“We are the youth of New London! And we are here because we care! We care about our community, our education, and our future.”

“We are part of *Hearing Youth Voices*; a group whose goal is to make a change, a change in the way our school system works.”

**“We are making this change by utilizing PAR. PAR stands for Participatory Action Research and it is our favorite tool. PAR is a way of gathering research, and not only gathering, but also taking action as well to solve the problems we’ve targeted.”**

“In the process of our project we have done numerous amounts of things.”

“We have interviewed other students like us to get their input; we have asked questions that we ourselves came up with.”

“We have participated in workshops teaching us about the different oppressions faced in our schools and in our society.”

“And of course we have researched many different sources.”

“We have learned to analyze what we gathered and decided what to do with all the information.”

**“We are youth, we are researchers and experts.**

**We’re here because we want to be heard.”**

## Research Procedure:

### Or, How We Got the Information We Did

**Step 1:** Learn about social and political issues so that we have a bigger picture to think about what issues are affecting students.

- Gender Roles
- Sexuality/Heterosexism
- Capitalism and Inequality
- Racism
- Violence and non-violence
- Opportunity Gap and Achievement Gap
- Resistance
- Stereotyping

**Step 2.** Have debates and discussions among ourselves to highlight experiences of NLHS and Magnet School students. This helps get us thinking about what kinds of questions we want to ask.

**Step 3.** Create a first draft of interview questions based on these experiences and other research (on the internet and in articles) done by us.

**Step 4.** Conduct interviews among ourselves to see what questions get us the most useful information.



Yanitza, Erick, and Stacia adding their ideas for Interview Questions

**Step 5.** Create a second, third, fourth draft of research questions every time we get new and important information from interviews

**Step 6.** Conduct interviews with students. Have a pizza party, offer food to attract students to come. Our goal was 40 interviews– we did 41!!

**Step 7.** Type up interview notes.



The Team typing up notes from Interviews

**Step 8.** One group of us read all the interview notes and highlighted words or themes that were in common among them- this is called coding.

**Step 9.** Out of the many themes that emerged we decided on the most important ones - we chose the most important ones based on our own opinions and also on which ones were repeated over and over again - this is how we chose our research themes.

**Step 10.** Then we counted the themes and compared what themes are coming up in what interviews with that interviewee's race, gender, school, grades, and whether they are in English Language Learner classes. We tally race, gender, school, etc. Example: If research Theme 1 is that students face discrimination, then we provide you with this information: Out of 40 students, 30 faced discrimination. Out of the 30 who faced discrimination 10 were Black, 5 Latino, 6 were women..... and so on. Understand? Now you can do your own PAR Project!!!

# RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM PARTICIPATORY

*Research Sample: 41 students*  
*Research Methods: In-depth Interviews*

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Gender:</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Class Year *</u>
Latino: 18	Male: 21	New London High School: 26	Freshman: 1
Black: 12	Female: 20	Science and Technology Magnet School: 5	Sophomore: 10
White: 4		Alumni: 10	Junior: 11
Native American: 1			Senior: 4
Mixed Race: 6			

\*Numerous students interviewed were unclear about their grade level.

*Research Theme #1:* Students experience positive relationships with some of their teachers.

**54% of students interviewed experienced a positive relationship with one or more teachers.**

75% of white students      30% of female students  
68% of Black students      60% of male students  
50% of Latino students

*Quote:* “ I love math, I had my teacher for all 4 years and she helped me with absolutely everything, not all teachers do their job, they don’t deserve the title of being called a teacher, but this teacher was always there for me and pushed me.”

*Quote:* “The teachers could have done way better. They didn’t give it their all, make me question myself with my education. Some teachers don’t care because of the perspective they have on New London and the students. They make it easy for kids with bad grades to pass which should be unacceptable.

*Research Theme #2:* Students also experience negative relationships with their teachers and it affects their productivity.

**80% of students experienced a negative relationship with one or more teachers.**

25% of white students      71% of males  
100% of Black students      65% of females  
70% of Latino students

*Research Theme #3:* Many students face serious life issues and struggles outside of school. This may lead to lowered academic performance.

**80% of students experienced this.**

60% of Black students      76% of male students  
66% of Latino students      85% of female students  
0% of white students (0 out of 4)

*Quote:* “My brother went to jail and I struggled with depression and anxiety. I went to counseling and started taking medication. I felt like I wanted to give up.”

*Research Theme #4:* Students observe and experience many types of discrimination in the school, including:

- A. Race/Ethnicity
- B. Gender
- C. Favoritism: athletes, magnet school students, “students who excel”

**51% of students experience one of these types of discrimination.**

71% of Black students	30% of female students
72% of Latino students	61% of male students
75% of white students	

*Quote:* “There’s absolutely favoritism in school. The teachers favor the students who excel. This affected my own motivation very much.”

*Quote:* “No, no, no. The magnet school is for smart people. And New London High School is for dumb people.”

*Research Theme #5:* Students internalize oppression and imagine themselves as academically inferior to magnet school students. They also believe that the magnet school provides better opportunities.

**100% of all students interviewed– male, female, Black, Latino, and white– experienced this.**

*Research Theme #6:* Bullying and Safety. Students were both victims and perpetrators of bullying. Many students felt unsafe in school for various reasons. Students were uncomfortable talking about bullying.

**48% of students experienced this.**

75% of Black students	52% male
44% of Latino students	45% female
50% of white students	

*Quote:* “People made fun of me cause I didn’t know English well and that hurt me.”

*Some other themes that were prominent during our research*

- Many students feel they do not have the support they need to be successful in school .
- Students perform better in class when they’re treated with respect.
- Some students think the discipline system is unfair.
- Students are more engaged when they see that what they’re learning will help them in real life.



Hearing Youth Voices presentation, August 2012



Excerpts from the Presentation we gave at the Public Library of New London on August 13th and 14th , 2012, in front of a total audience of over 100 community members.

### Expectations (excerpt)

*Written and Performed by Tiyana Brown*

What do you expect  
 From a teenager like me  
 To perform tasks simple or complex  
 Knowing my effort goes unseen  
 Last night mom worked late  
 Asked me to clean leftover plates  
 While my siblings are stuck on TV  
 Why clean up a mess I did not make?  
 I snuck out to go see him  
 But he has his intentions which to mine aren't equal  
 Overwhelmed by the impatient individuals  
 That just want to use me  
 Who never second guess to take  
 Not noticing it's getting late  
 And I've made the mistake of not studying or organizing  
 my work place  
 So I've fallen a little behind  
 No big deal to catch up  
 Now I must put these kids to bed  
 So we could all wake up  
  
 That girl takes care of her home by herself,  
 Cooks, cleans, and watches kids that aren't hers,  
 she's exhausted already and you just entertain to make it  
 worse!  
 She refrains from the pains mentally bruising her thoughts  
 Bleeding misunderstanding through her brain  
 She's interested in the fantasy of living in true peace  
 But that may never happen in this place she thinks so  
 Talking amongst her friends in the hallways always keeps  
 her sane.  
 So she does what she has to do just to make it by, pass the  
 world with gazing hateful eyes  
 Hearing all the lies that try to say she flies through grades  
 with passing colors  
 Not realizing she's not meant to please others but that's  
 all she knows  
 Although she's good at proving that sanity will be shown

### No Español

*Skit written by:* Erick Carrión & Derenis Santos

*Performed by:* Erick Carrión, Derenis Santos,  
 and Sheila Cortez

**Teacher** - Good morning students, today you are going to finish the essay you started yesterday. If you don't finish it today, I am going to give you homework for the weekend.

**Roberto**-¿Elena qué dijo la maestra? (Elena, what did the Teacher say?)

**Elena**-La maestra dijo que hoy tenemos que terminar el ensayo que empezamos a hacer ayer, y que si no lo terminamos nos dará tarea para el fin de semana. (The Teacher said that today we have to finish the essay that we started yesterday and if we don't finish it she will give us homework over the weekend.)

**Roberto**-Tarea para el fin de semana? Es muy difícil yo no sé mucho inglés recién acabo de llegar de Puerto Rico y estoy en ESL. (Homework over the weekend? That's so hard, I don't know very much English, I just came from Puerto Rico and I'm in ESL.)

**Elena**-Yo sé que tu puedes superarte y aprender inglés! (I know that you can get better and learn English)

**Teacher**-¡No español! No spanish!

**Roberto**-But am ESL student no English am learning it.

**Elena**- Teacher but he don't speak English and I am trying to explain him.

**Teacher**-If you want to speak Spanish go back to your country!

**Elena**-Oh g-d teacher, where does it say that it's against the rules to talk in Spanish or in any other language?

**Teacher**- Honey, in here it's my rules!!!! Go to the dean's office right now!

**Elena**-You are so unfair.... You don't even know what we were talking about.

**Teacher**-You want to go with him? I don't care what you were talking about! But you are not going to speak any other language in my class. This is the U.S. and in here you speak English!!!

*This skit is based on real student experience.*



## Broad Street Blues

by Anne Scheibner



The first issue of the *Troubadour* in September, 1999 started with a reflection on our life here as “an experiment with truth” to use Gandhi’s phrase. Over the years we have worked with our neighbors in many different ways and on many different aspects of life in New London. But this is the first issue of the *Troubadour* that we have really “turned over” to our friends and neighbors in this case to those involved in the *Hearing Youth Voices* experiment/project.

In the spring of this year I was asked to help raise money so that some 30 young people – middle school to high school age – from our neighbors across the street at the Drop-In Learning Center could go for a weekend workshop training in non-violence at the Voluntown Peace Trust. Laura Burfoot and Chelsea Cleveland were both involved in leading that event.

Laura lived and worked at St. Francis House back in 2005 and has continued as a member of the “extended SFH community.” In April she led a discussion at Clarification of Thought focused on “Education.” She reported on the weekend workshop in Voluntown and how the young people had identified problems in the educational system. She noted that the young people needed adult allies not to take over the work they had identified as needing to be done, but to support and empower them. She asked if we would be part of that support and we said yes.

In June Laura and Ranita went for a week’s training in Participatory Action Research with Professor Michelle Fine at the CUNY Grad Center in New York. Michelle and her pioneering work in urban education was well known to us through our friend and SFH founding board member Linda Powell Pruitt. I was delighted to see these threads in the life and work of St. Francis House weave together in new and exciting ways.

So what did it mean for us to be “allies” in the initiative which you have just read about in this issue of the *Troubadour*? I was asked again to help raise money and with the help of the Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut and Reona Dyess, Director of the Drop-In Learning Center, we were able to provide needed support. We were asked to provide refreshments and a supportive audience for the “dress rehearsal” for the public

forums at the Library at which the *Hearing Youth Voices* researchers were going to present their work. So we did that. And then we helped with the outreach for the actual forums which were attended by the superintendent, members of the school board, the mayor and police chief as well as parents, fellow students, members of the wider community and the press.

Upon arrival at the forums, we were each handed a test completely in Spanish, told that we had 10 minutes to answer the questions and that we would be graded! This was the first “skit” of the afternoon and all of us were participants. After the tests were collected and “graded”, Erick Carrión explained that the purpose of what we had just gone through was to give us an opportunity to understand the experience he had had on being expected to take the CT state exams in English soon after his arrival from Puerto Rico as a sophomore at New London High School.

*Hearing Youth Voices* researchers then continued to present the results of their work through an engaging mix of skits, poems and power point followed by a question and answer session with the audience. There were many moving moments but for me the most memorable (in addition to the panic of having to try to resurrect my Spanish grammar for that first quiz) included when one young woman spoke of how empowering it had been to do these interviews and to discover that she was not alone – as she had always assumed she was – alone and inadequate and not expected to do well. And the second was when one of the young men verged on tears as he recalled the humiliation he had experienced in school as a not yet proficient English speaker. Lastly, it was the glimpse of how hard the life circumstances of these young students often are and wondering what an exciting educational opportunity it could be if high school education meant the opportunity to research and learn from those real life issues.

The forums and these pages of the *Troubadour* provide an inspiring glimpse of what was not only competent, cutting edge academic work by these students but also a glimpse of what it could mean if students were given more opportunities in school to engage in “community truth telling” based on research, analysis and reflection on their own experience.

*Anne Scheibner lives and works at St. Francis House.*

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**IN THIS ISSUE:**

**“Hearing Youth Voices: A Call to Action” by Chelsea Cleveland, Laura Burfoot, and Ranita Ray**

**“Who Are We” written by Yanitza Cubilette and Hearing Youth Voices**

**“Research Procedure” written by Erick Carrión, Ranita Ray, and Hearing Youth Voices**

**“Research Findings” all research completed by Hearing Youth Voices: Tiyan Brown, Deryn Burrell, Erick Carrión, Sheila Cortez, Genesis Cubilette, Yanitza Cubilette, Kiara Delgado, Xavier Rodriguez, Stacia Rosado, and Derenis Santos**

**Excerpt from “Expectations” written by Tiyan Brown**

**“No Español” written by Erick Carrión and Derenis Santos and performed by Erick Carrión, Derenis Santos, and Sheila Cortez**

**“Broad Street Blues” by Anne Scheibner**

Thank you for your interest in our project! We would love to hear your feedback and ideas. Please write to us at:

Hearing Youth Voices  
P.O. Box 1407  
New London, CT 06320

*Email: [nlyouthvoices@gmail.com](mailto:nlyouthvoices@gmail.com)*

If you would like to make a tax-exempt donation to our project, please make check payable to:

Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut  
with “*Hearing Youth Voices*” on the Memo line.

*Mail to:*

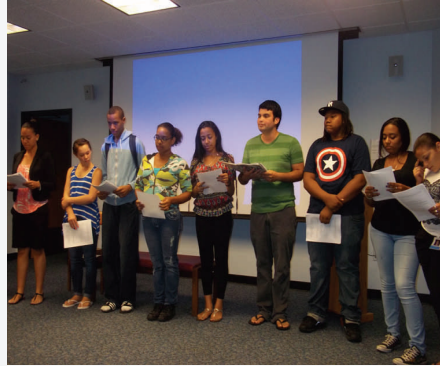
Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut  
147 State Street  
New London, CT 06320

**THANK YOU!!!!**





## **We are part of a group**



## **called Hearing Youth**

We are 10 teens of color who interviewed other teens and young adults that go to NLHS, who were pushed

## **Voices.**

We have heard and documented the voices of New London High School students through interviews for the past 6 weeks. We are using their perspectives on school to help change the thoughts and opinions of the adults that judge us and don't know what we go through. It is not our fault New London High School isn't the best. We don't always get high grades and we're not always well-behaved students. It isn't the teacher's fault either. It is a system that we need to change. If we all work together and communicate, we will make this school and our community a better place.

## **We did this by using PAR.**

What is PAR? PAR is participatory action re-