CHAPTER

7

YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (YPAR)

PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO THE US AND DIVERSE GLOBAL SETTINGS

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YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION research (YPAR) is an approach to inquiry and social change that engages young people in identifying problems relevant to their own lives, conducting research to understand the problems, and advocating for changes based on research evidence (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; Ozer & Douglas, 2015). YPAR, similar to other forms of community-based participatory research (CBPR), is focused on increasing the power of marginalized groups in improving real-world problems via iterative cycles of inquiry and action (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). YPAR research and practice has grown in recent years: a 2016 Psychinfo database search, for example, shows more than three hundred citations using the term *youth-led participatory action research*. YPAR spans fields including public health, education, and community psychology, with youth researchers addressing diverse topics, such as neighborhood food access (Breckwich Vásquez et al., 2007), invasive pest management in the Ecuadorian Andes (Dangles et al., 2010), educational inequalities (Ozer & Wright, 2012), water quality in a rural Colombian watershed (Roa García & Brown, 2009), and community education about the judicial system (Stovall & Delgado, 2009).

CBPR focuses on equity and empowerment, as well as generating knowledge that is informed by insider experts on the nature of the problems studied. YPAR deserves specific consideration for how it can contribute positively to the development of children and adolescents who participate (Ozer, 2016; Ozer & Russo, 2016). YPAR is a particularly promising approach for disadvantaged youth in early to mid-adolescence because these are developmental periods characterized by fluidity and transition for individual and collective senses of identity and purpose (Damon, Menon, & Cotton Bronk, 2003; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). YPAR that involves youth in analyzing and changing the conditions that influence their schools and communities provides opportunities for youth to identify as leaders with purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Spencer, Fegley, & Harpalani, 2003), rather than seeing themselves in terms of negative stereotypes held by others (Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008). Further, YPAR seeks to enhance critical consciousness—critical reflection, motivation, and action—that pushes youth to investigate broader structural conditions that shape behavior rather than just individual-level explanations (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

A small but growing research literature indicates that YPAR is well suited to create and strengthen opportunities for youth to enhance their own knowledge, skills, and motivation; address inequities in health, education, and other systems; and expand the opportunities for meaningful influence in the settings in which young people grow and develop (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009; Cargo et al., 2003; Holden, Evans, Hinnant, & Messeri, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Ozer & Douglas, 2013). Individual-level gains found in qualitative YPAR research include increases in adolescents' sense of purpose, perceived support from caring adults, and positive attitudes toward school (Mitra, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007).

In this chapter, we provide an overview of key YPAR practices, examples of YPAR projects from around the world, and important choice points and challenges that are likely to be faced in practice. Similar to other researchers, we view YPAR as multidimensional: an intervention to promote positive youth development and improve inequitable conditions that undermine it, a re-visioning of young people not as problems to be "fixed" but rather as expert cocreators of knowledge, and an approach toward engaging youth and their expertise in research conducted about them. In practice, YPAR projects can vary with respect to focusing more explicitly on political empowerment versus enhancing youth's inquiry and action skills and their participation in improving and designing settings and programs intended to serve them.

KEY YPAR PRINCIPLES

As in any research, there are many paths and choice points in YPAR. YPAR needs to be responsive to the context of youth, particularly to the resources and limitations of the institutions and communities engaged in efforts related to youth participation, and thus by definition will not look exactly the same across settings. That said, there are core principles and practices in this approach that are important to articulate, including (1) bringing youth participants into the training and practice of research, critical thinking, and change strategy; (2) carefully attending to intentional power sharing between youth and adults, especially considering that youth do not exert the same power in school or out-of-school contexts; and (3) integrating iterative research and action phases into the project (Ozer et al., 2010).

Context: Youth as Experts and Knowledge Creators

Regardless of specific emphases, all YPAR projects assert that youth are capable of generating expert knowledge of value in addressing problems that affect their development and well-being. Youth can be valued partners in the scientific enterprise and agents for changes in systems and communities beyond the traditional role of serving as passive participants in research that seek to affect them. Positive views of youth—particularly youth of color—as providing expertise and leadership potential run counter to dominant stereotypical views of adolescents as sources of worry or threat (Camino & Zeldin, 2002) and as a group lacking in agency, wholly governed by hormones and peer pressure.

Researchers who study youth development with YPAR have identified how research validity is strengthened via partnership with youth researchers, including in defining research questions, developing instruments, and interpreting findings (Fine, 2008; Langhout & Thomas, 2010). The role of YPAR in providing an insider phenomenological perspective on youth development, especially for the investigation of sensitive, hidden, or hard-to-report phenomena, is discussed in greater detail in Ozer (2016).

Relationships: Adult-Youth Power Sharing

Sharing of power between adult facilitators and youth researchers requires intentionality and care given the inequality of adult-youth relationships, especially within the inherent hierarchy of K–12 school settings (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). We note that power sharing regarding key decisions and processes in YPAR does not mean that all ideas made by the youth should be followed uncritically. Rather, it means that the perspectives and interpretations of the youth researchers must be considered by the group for their strengths and limitations rather than outright overruled by an adult. The plan and process for decision making should be discussed openly and followed so that there are no surprises.

Engaging in YPAR requires preparing the ground early through activities that develop trusting relationships and communication skills among the youth participants and between the adult and youth participants (see Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell [2015] for in-depth analysis of building trust and negotiating power within a long-term educational partnership for YPAR). Conducting YPAR calls for effective adult facilitators who can train and guide teams of youth researchers on the journey without fully taking over steering the ship. Our research, and that of others concerned with the balance of power in youth development programs (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), analyzes how effective adult facilitators use strategies to maintain youth control over key aspects of the YPAR projects, such as defining the problem, choosing the design, interpreting data, and deciding on action steps, while at the same time providing helpful structure, such as breaking down tasks and keeping timelines. Importantly, in addition to guiding the organizational and learning processes of research and action, effective adult facilitators help students resolve conflicts—substantive and personal—and navigate the political complexities of seeking to make changes in institutions such as schools in which they have little power.

In addition to these "non-negotiables," other youth development activities that generally occur as part of high-quality YPAR projects include skill-building exercises related to working in groups to achieve goals and the expansion of youth's social network with peers and adult leaders (Ozer & Douglas, 2015).

Balancing Research and Action

Although this chapter focuses on YPAR, there are other approaches, such as youth organizing, action civics, and city planning, that often similarly emphasize equity and social change (Center for Cities and Schools, 2016; Generation Citizen, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). Of these related approaches, YPAR tends to be the most focused on generating and engaging with data—coupled with taking action based on those data. Because YPAR projects differ in context, group dynamics, issues, methods, and opportunity for social change, there is no easy formula for how to best integrate iterative cycles of research and action in a YPAR project. Research and action are not mutually exclusive: actions driven by well-designed and well-implemented research can deliver more targeted, meaningful impacts, and research that is driven by an action-oriented agenda can often be more relevant and useful.

YPAR PHASES AND SUPPORT RESOURCES

There are multiple curricula that can help scaffold groups interested in conducting YPAR projects; these curricula provide interactive activities that can be adapted to various development and educational levels. For our initial UC Berkeley–SF Peer Resources Project (2003–2011) that supported and studied YPAR in public high schools (Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Ozer et al., 2008), we drew from existing curricula (Anyon et al., 2007; London, 2001; Schensul, Berg, & Sydlo, 2004) to create a hybrid that fit the goals and pedagogical approaches of SF Peer Resources' middle and high school elective classes. In our recent efforts to develop an interactive web platform—the YPAR Hub—to help diffuse YPAR, we synthesized the contributions of multiple curricula; the result is a website with downloadable lesson plans and practical tips for adult facilitators, as well as examples of YPAR in the United States and internationally. Some of these resources are discussed in the following sections as we walk through phases of YPAR.

Issue Selection

It is critical that the issues tackled by the YPAR groups reflect the authentic concerns of the youth researchers—in other words, that the problems or questions are ones that they genuinely care about and want to influence. Before deciding on a topic, however, it is also important for the adult facilitators and youth researchers to be strategic in considering the potential allies, resources, and time they would have for any given issue. Who else will care about this issue? What are the existing governance structures and opportunities for the group to report back their findings? Even in the early stages of YPAR projects, thinking ahead to possible action steps and to the timing for getting on the calendar of key stakeholders for reporting back is highly recommended to make sure that there will be an audience for the results.

Multiple strategies can help support young people to identify an issue that they are motivated to work on and that is addressable within the time frame of the project. Although some YPAR groups target big community-level issues, such as reducing the number of liquor stores or air pollution in their neighborhoods, others take on more discrete issues, such as having clean bathrooms, drinking fountains, or adequate athletic equipment at their schools. Many examples of successful YPAR projects start with an open-ended issue selection process, guided by (1)

defining their community and then (2) assessing the strengths and problems of that community. Once the group has agreed on a more narrow area of interest, they can then define their research questions, hypotheses, and methods.

For example, when *Voces y Manos* conducted a YPAR project with Indigenous youth in rural Guatemala, they used a layered issue selection process. First, a small group of the older adolescents in the organization developed and facilitated internal focus groups with the younger adolescents who were guided by open-ended questions to learn what topics mattered to the group. The older adolescents recorded and transcribed the sessions, then identified the themes that emerged. They brought back the main emergent themes to the full group of adolescents—burdensome cost of school-related resources, lack of trust with teachers, fear of free expression in schools, gender inequities, and subjectivity of classroom grading—to dig into creating indicators for each of the issue areas. The full group then developed a survey that was later administered to a random sample of high school students in the municipality.

Although YPAR projects often start with an open-ended issue selection process, it is also common that the choice of topics is more constrained. This can occur for many reasons, such as when the YPAR project is developed in the context of an existing initiative to study a particular issue or evaluate services, or when the organization has a specific mandate to justify its existence or funding. For example, in the UC Berkeley–SF Peer Resources study, student cohorts sometimes began the school year knowing they were charged with addressing a particular topic, such as supporting youth of color with the transition to high school. The fact that these YPAR projects were conducted in elective high school classes meant that new students entered into the project every year or even every semester. When the prior year's YPAR cohort had made progress, such as increasing the ethnic diversity of the school or working to improve the cultural responsiveness of the teaching, there was a clear benefit to sticking with the same issue across cohorts to better sustain traction on influencing policies and practices. At the same time, there was recognition that it was important for new cohorts to work on issues that they genuinely wanted to change rather than solely carrying the torch of the prior cohort. In examining constrained cases of "bounded empowerment," we identified processes that facilitated youth ownership and sustained work, such as teachers' framing and buy-in strategies (e.g., asking students to further refine an existing research question or shape unfinished phases of a project); micro-power compensation (e.g., providing opportunities for autonomous decision making on specific tasks within the predetermined project); and alignment of student interests across cohorts (i.e., natural agreement across cohorts on what an important issue focus would be in their community) (Ozer et al., 2013). Thus, even when the topic is constrained, it is important that each youth cohort selects or adapts an issue that matters to it and is feasible to advance within the time frame.

Once an issue has been identified, it must be framed strategically. YPAR seeks to engage young people in social-ecological analyses to address issues that matter to them while identifying the root causes that create and perpetuate those problems. By identifying root causes as best as they can, youth researchers and adult facilitators seek to enact solutions that address the upstream sources of problems in order to foster meaningful, sustainable change. The framing of the issue shapes the research design, methodology, analysis, and action agendas; it also communicates the parameters of possible solutions to researchers, stakeholders, allies, and affiliates. For example, the framing of issues can inadvertently reinforce negative attitudes toward youth

by placing blame on the individual (e.g., "local students steal from neighborhood convenience stores at high rates") rather than acknowledging the influence of the conditions in which youth live (e.g., "local students experience high poverty because of the elimination of city rent control policies and subpar minimum wages").

Research Design and Methods

After landing on a topic with the guidance of adult facilitators, youth researchers engage in decision-making processes about the research design, methods, and interpretation of the data collected. Any issue can be studied with many designs and methods, so it is important to be strategic and inclusive in this core phase of YPAR. YPAR projects often focus on complex areas of inquiry and thus can be sliced many ways. Further, given that the researchers likely have personal experience with a limited range of methods—surveys, for example, are most common—it is important to use curricula that expose them to the rationales for prioritizing different types of research methods and data. Understanding the relative advantages and disadvantages of different forms of data is important not only for gaining insight into the issue that youth researchers are working on but also for promoting important intellectual competencies related to critical thinking and arguing from evidence, areas that are central to current educational standards and priorities in the United States and other countries (Kornbluh, Ozer, Kirshner, & Allen, 2015).

After deciding on an issue and defining a research question, one of the first steps that the research team must take is to search for existing data available to answer their question. Youth researchers may decide that they will be informed by existing data sets while also generating some new data on a particular aspect of the issue that needs to be understood through data from their own school or community. For example, youth interested in violence prevention might start with understanding published data on county crime levels and then decide to conduct surveys or observations in their own school or neighborhood to inform local action steps. Fortunately, there are new online resources that provide guidance in identifying and understanding existing data sets regarding health, education, housing, civic life, and other areas of interest (Center for Regional Change, 2014; YPAR Hub, 2015).

If new data are needed, selecting research methods that best shine a light on the issue at hand can necessitate balancing many competing needs and constraints, such as funding, equipment, time, and expertise. To support this process, the YPAR Hub has a decision tree to help guide groups through some of the choice points inherent to YPAR. Some research methods commonly used within the YPAR approach include focus groups, interviews, mapping, observations, photovoice, and surveys. Mapping, for example, is best suited for investigating issues that are tied to geographic locations whereas photovoice works well with issues that can be represented visually, either literally or symbolically (see Langhout, Fernandez, Wyldbore, & Savala [2015] for a detailed case example). Surveys generally enable researchers to gather data from a larger number of people cost-effectively whereas interviews provide for more in-depth investigation into individuals' experiences and opinions. Many projects opt to employ multiple methods to capitalize on the benefits of each.

As an example of choosing research methods, we consider *Viramundo,* a nongovernmental organization in Brazil that conducted YPAR to document disparities between wealthy neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro and the neighboring slums, or *favelas,* in Rocinha (F. Wittlin, personal

communication, October 10, 2015). The research team opted to use community communication technologies, such as participatory photography and videography, in their data collection. They videotaped interviews with community members on the streets and in homes in the city and in the slums responding to questions about bias and discrimination against the *favelas*. The research team then compiled and edited the content into a publicly available video. The viewer is thus able to not only gather the text content of what the respondents say but also their nonverbal communication (e.g., raised eyebrows, shrugged shoulders) and their settings (e.g., busy commercial street, dilapidated home). This visually oriented method facilitated *Viramundo*'s ability to best answer their specific research question and also gave them powerful material to engage with the media as part of their action plan for change. (See also Chapter 23 on international youth mapping.)

Data Analysis and Interpretation

A key point to consider in working with and interpreting data is how to do high-quality generation and analysis of evidence that is appropriate to the developmental and educational level of the research team and viable within time and financial constraints. It is important to make this as fun and interactive as possible, especially given that some youth may come to the project with negative experiences with learning with numbers in math and science. Even the term *research* may have negative connotations; it is better to focus on questions they want to answer rather than framing the process as a "big research project." Fortunately, data analysis does not need to be complicated to be systematic. For groups that want to keep it simple and do not have access to the Internet, much can be learned by looking at patterns using basic statistics such as means, medians, and ranges for different groups. Qualitative analysis of data can also be conducted through activities such as having youth sort hard copies of quotes in envelopes or tables around a room as part of a thematic coding process. For groups with access to the Internet, there are good free versions of computer programs, such as SurveyMonkey, that enable respondents to enter numeric or text survey data directly into the computer program; this saves time on data entry and can be used for easy generation of tables and graphs.

One way to reduce the pressure of data interpretation is to invite students to reflect on surprises between what they expected versus what they found as well as patterns among their sample. Guided questions can help youth researchers to highlight the key points of their findings and to note any meaningful differences among subjects (e.g., "Would you have expected English language learners to report more bullying than native English speakers? Do male and female students feel equally safe at school?"). Arguing from evidence is an important critical thinking and educational competency; thus, strategies in data interpretation in which youth researchers state a claim and provide supporting evidence help prepare the research team to provide a compelling report back to stakeholders and develop skills for weighing evidence. See the YPAR Hub home page (http://yparhub.berkeley.edu) for a video of how youth researchers gathered supporting evidence to improve teaching practices.

Voces y Manos, the organization in Guatemala previously discussed, provides an excellent example of the use of survey methods in an international context. The youth researchers surveyed high school students in their municipality to learn more about their issue from a maximum number of people at a minimal financial cost. After data collection, adult facilitators provided youth researchers with hands-on training in analyzing data, and the youth learned

skills such as generating graphs from survey data. In the data interpretation and analysis phase, the youth researchers realized that the results pointed to multiple manifestations of systemic issues related to poverty and disempowerment in their communities. Though many students chronically struggled with similar issues (e.g., lack of trust with teachers), they did not have a centralized place where they could safely seek support or request a review of their schools' practices. They concluded that the themes they studied were symptoms of a lack of infrastructure expressly designed to support local youth, and the youth researchers decided to focus their action phase on pressuring elected officials to commit to fund a preexisting but unfunded Office of Childhood and Adolescence. This office could then be reasonably charged with sustainably addressing and alleviating issues for youth in their community.

Outcomes: Reporting Back and Taking Action

After data collection and interpretation are complete, youth researchers and adult facilitators identify specific actions that they can take to address the problem, work to report their findings and proposals to relevant stakeholders, and negotiate the political and logistical complexities of working for change. For example, YPAR groups in the UC Berkeley Peer Resources project used report back activities such as peer education presentations to students, student-led professional development sessions for teachers, and slideshow presentations of key findings to teachers, school administrators, district decision makers, university partners, and funders.

Voces y Manos also employed a creative report back strategy that advanced their specific action plan. After deciding that the group wanted to use their data to make policy and budget recommendations for their municipality, they knew they needed to engage the target that could implement their requested change: their local mayoral candidates. As such, the youth researchers held a public forum to present their findings and policy proposal. They worked with a coalition of local organizations and youth organizers and involved local radio, television outlets, and social media to ensure that the forum reached a large number of residents and raised the profile of the event. Furthermore, students received trainings in digital literacy, print literacy, and numeracy (demonstrated in their PowerPoint presentations) that enabled them to engage in scientific discourse. Furthermore, the public forum was livestreamed for those who could not attend in person (e.g., *Voces y Manos* alumni, international donors). In all, 250 people in their small community participated in person—including all seven mayoral candidates—and an additional six hundred people watched remotely. By the end of the public forum, all mayoral candidates signed an agreement that they would implement the youth researchers' policy proposal to fund their Office of Childhood and Adolescence.

Another innovative report back was implemented by the Dream Teens, a national project in Portugal seeking to integrate youth voice into public policies that affect their lives and communities (Aventura Social, 2015). After working online in small groups with support from university teams to conduct the research, all youth researchers convened in person to reflect on and deliver recommendations to the National Secretary of Health. Following this event, the government ministry posted the Dream Teens' recommendations on their website, and key officials reported that the recommendations were "crucial" for tailoring national policies related to youth.

Finally, YPAR projects can find inspiration for report back strategies in the larger CBPR field. For example, a campaign against discriminatory police practices in New York with the CUNY Public Science Project projected findings onto the sides of buildings at night, and the

Morris Justice Project in New York City created portraits of community members that challenged negative stereotypes about their neighborhood and distributed postcards with statistics comparing disproportionate unwarranted police stops in their neighborhood to those in a high-income neighborhood.

Scaling, Embedding, and Institutionalizing Change

Beyond promoting the skills and empowerment of the youth who participate in YPAR, a key goal of most YPAR projects is to make a meaningful difference in the problem that the youth set out to address. As noted in the academic literature (Sarason, 1996) and known all too well by those in practice, changing policies and institutions that affect the lives of youth is difficult—for well-connected adults let alone youth who do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as adults. Despite the challenges, there are important examples of YPAR projects that made a difference in influencing settings, policies, and systems that we consider here and on the YPAR Hub. In the United States, there are published examples of youth research and evaluation being integrated into the work of youth-serving entities such as San Francisco's Department of Children, Youth, and Their Families (Youth IMPACT, 2001) and organizations such as Girls, Inc. (Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010). Educational systems have been a major site of YPAR in the United States (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner, 2007; Ozer & Douglas, 2013). In other work (Ozer, 2016; Ozer et al., 2010), we used social-ecological and developmental theoretical frames to consider how YPAR can help address the "developmental mismatch" of secondary schools (Eccles & Roeser, 2011) by promoting greater opportunities for youth agency and influence through meaningful roles in school governance (Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

An important challenge for YPAR is embedding YPAR and related participatory youth approaches into systems-change efforts to expand the impact on policies and practices that affect youth development while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of YPAR's key principles and rigor. In addition to the web platforms already discussed in this chapter, there are noteworthy efforts under way to bring YPAR and other youth voice efforts to scale—some of which rely on social media to connect youth across schools, communities, and even countries (Aventura Social, 2015; Kornbluh, Neal, & Ozer, 2016). For example, UNICEF recently launched U Report, a text message–based platform focused on engaging young people in developing countries to provide data on important issues.

In Australia, the Improving Children's Lives Initiative at the University of Melbourne formed a partnership with *Behind the News,* a children's news program that is broadcast into K–12 schools by the Australian Broadcast Commission (L. Gibbs, personal communication, March 10, 2016; The University of Melbourne, 2016). *Behind the News* has developed an interactive approach to news journalism with students. Working with University of Melbourne as a research partner, the program will invite children to identify and respond to issues of concern to them, and the university team will then analyze the responses and report back to students in order to support further action.

Finally, another step that should aid the scaling of YPAR is the recent launch of the Kids in Action network by the International Collaboration for Participatory Health Research (ICPHR) to invite registration of participatory health research projects with children up to age fourteen years to use a peer support process that will promote best practices and facilitate positive local and collective outcomes (www.icphr.org/kids-in-action.html).

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of YPAR's key processes and phases, with a focus on illustrative examples from the United States and other countries, such as Guatemala, Brazil, Portugal, and Australia, while identifying relevant curricular activities for each phase. We proposed that YPAR has value in promoting positive youth development, particularly for the majority of young people in the world who must negotiate racism, economic inequity, violence, and other threats to their well-being. We suggested that the potential benefits of YPAR are multidimensional; it is not just an approach for strengthening young people's learning and development while improving community conditions but also for engaging young people's expertise in scientific inquiry about youth development and health. Finally, we considered current steps to scale YPAR that aim to deepen its broad impact, capitalizing on social and web-based platforms while seeking to maintain the integrity and spirit of the approach.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Considering the principles and complexities of YPAR, what might be some challenges to conducting YPAR at scale with large numbers of students across communities, and what current strategies and platforms are being used to help address these challenges?
2. Think about a school that you currently attend or did in the past. If you were to pick an area to improve, what would be on your short list? Pick one to reflect on in a YPAR thought experiment. Drawing on the examples in the chapter, including web resources, consider the stakeholders you would want to engage in this research and what kinds of research designs and methods might generate actionable evidence to help support improvements.

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