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Youth-Led Participatory Action Research and Developmental Science: Intersections and Innovations

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Abstract

In this review, we provide a conceptual and empirical overview of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) across disciplines. We consider the historical and conceptual contexts for the diversity of YPAR approaches and (*a*) the rationales underlying the rapid growth of YPAR in practice and research; (*b*) the relevance of YPAR for the study and promotion of healthy and equitable human development; (*c*) the state of the empirical evidence for YPAR impact on youth and environments, especially domains of social-emotional well-being and sociopolitical development; (*d*) challenges and opportunities at the intersection of YPAR and developmental science; and (*e*) important next steps for the field, including the further development of multimethod research and the need for stronger research and practice to support the capacities needed for YPAR integrity, impact, and sustainability.

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YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

This review focuses on youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), a youth-led approach to research, youth development, and systems change in which youth conduct data-based inquiry aimed at improving their schools and/or communities. YPAR can be completely youth led or conducted within a youth–adult partnership. In the partnership approach, adult facilitators support youth by providing training in the YPAR process. YPAR groups identify and investigate a wide range of topics of concern to them, such as improvement in peer and teacher–student relationships, mental health promotion, bullying prevention, inclusion of newcomer/immigrant students, sexual health, student body diversification, and school lunch improvement, to name just a few. After identifying a topic, youth are trained to gather diverse forms of data (e.g., surveys, interviews, observations, art) and draw on this evidence to advocate for issues that matter to them. YPAR entails an iterative process of critical reflection, inquiry, and action cycles. Sometimes youth act directly to enact change based on the collected data through peer education or other forms of youth-led programming or organizing. In other cases, youth advocate to adults who have decision-making power to change policies, practices, and programs (Fine & Torre 2021; Ozer et al. 2020a,b; Rodríguez & Brown 2009).

    YPAR is a form of participatory action research (PAR) or community-based participatory research (CBPR; more commonly used in the health fields), which refers to research inquiry

and action in which (*a*) those affected by the issue or question under study are the investigators, and (*b*) the goal is to generate knowledge for change to address the issue. "No research about us without us" is a key value in framing CBPR (Israel et al. 2005, Wallerstein et al. 2017, Wallerstein & Duran 2006). Thus, the research team includes or is composed of lay investigators who draw on their insider expertise as they are trained to conduct research, sometimes as part of partnerships with professional or academic researchers. CBPR is a participatory research approach rather than a research method (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995, Israel et al. 2005, Wallerstein et al. 2017). CBPR values expertise and shares power with lived experience researchers who can employ a wide range of research designs and methods, including traditional randomized controlled designs, epidemiological surveys, or qualitative research. Decision-making power is the crucial dimension.

Here, we first provide historical and conceptual contexts for the diversity of YPAR approaches and the relationship of YPAR to other forms of adult-led research as well as youth participation and engagement. We then consider (*a*) the rationales underlying the rapid growth of YPAR in practice and research; (*b*) the relevance of YPAR for the study and promotion of healthy and equitable human development; (*c*) challenges and opportunities at the intersection of YPAR and developmental science; and (*d*) important next steps for the field.

Historical Context

YPAR builds on a long history of participatory research approaches in diverse fields, including education, public health, social work, psychology (especially community psychology), and international development. While deep consideration of the rich history is beyond this review's scope, we note two broad streams that are often referred to as the Northern and Southern hemisphere traditions (Wallerstein et al. 2017). The former, originally framed as "action research" by social psychologist Kurt Lewin and colleagues' post-WWII body of research in the United States, focused primarily on enhancing organizational practices, i.e., workers posing questions and gathering data as a cyclical process of inquiry for continuous reflection and improvement (Rowell et al. 2015). The Southern tradition has explicit roots in empowerment and liberation, emanating from broader struggles for rights and power by socially and economically marginalized groups in the Global South, with particularly strong traditions in Latin America and India (Freire 1970). Both streams share participatory principles of valuing the expertise of those closest to the phenomena or issue under study, as well as a focus on cyclical inquiry and reflection. We note that this emphasis in participatory research of being close to the phenomena—and the importance of bringing "insider," lived experience expertise—diverges from traditional positivist and postpositivist paradigms in psychology that emphasize the value of distance and objectivity with respect to scientific inquiry (Guba & Lincoln 1994).

Given that YPAR engages youth, it represents a special case of CBPR that adds further key considerations regarding power. Children and adolescents do not enjoy the same legal rights, roles, responsibilities, or power as those of adults, which influences their role as researchers and advocates. Youth must also continually navigate "adultist" assumptions and narratives with respect to what they are capable of accomplishing (Cammarota & Fine 2008, Kennedy et al. 2022a). Thus, with its core focus on youth leadership and power—in the context of adult-controlled settings and with adults in supportive positions—the YPAR field puts a strong emphasis on the relative roles and power of adults and youth in the YPAR process. Youth often form close relationships with adult facilitators, who share power as the youth bring their own lived expertise to guide the stages of the research process (Jacquez et al. 2013, Malorni et al. 2022).
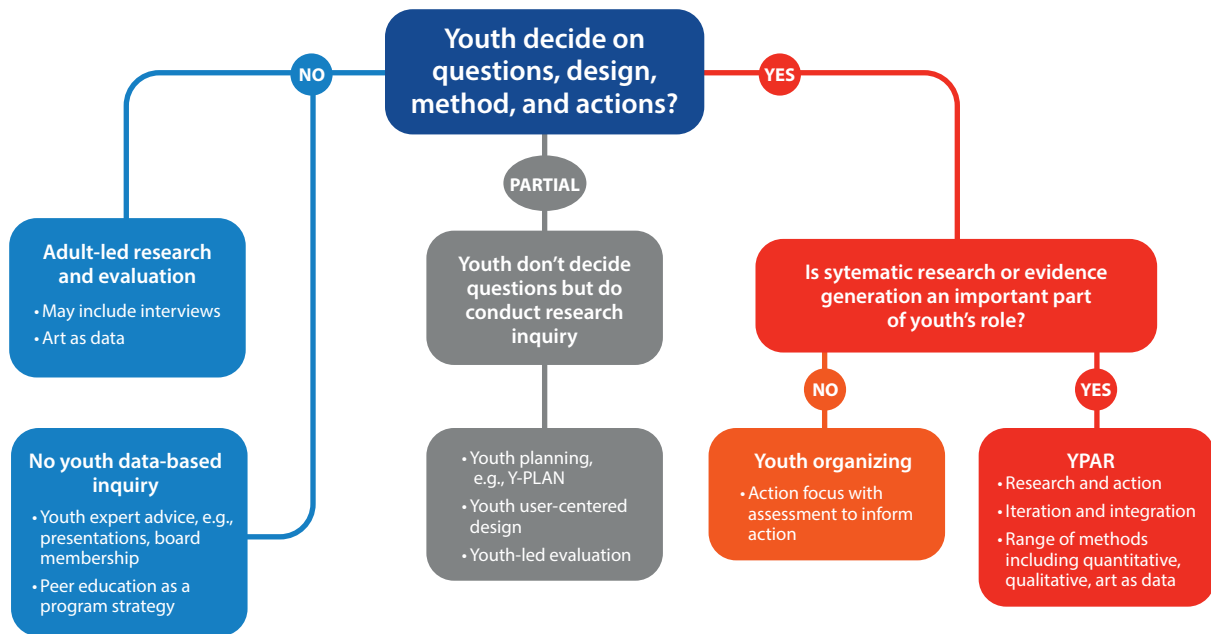
Figure 1

A diagram that maps overlap and differentiation among youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) and other forms of youth participation and adult-led research. Figure reproduced with permission from Ozer et al. (2020a).

Relationship of YPAR to Other Forms of Youth Participation and Research

In light of the multiple roots of YPAR and other forms of participatory research, the burgeoning practice and published literature encompass a range of diverse approaches and terminologies. While appreciating the flexibility needed in YPAR practice to respond to the contextual specificity of any one partnership or setting, we and others have pushed for clarity on YPAR processes and impact as well as on related forms of youth participation. We share a diagram (**Figure 1**) that maps overlap and differentiation among YPAR and other forms of youth participation and adult-led research (Ozer et al. 2018, 2020a).

Figure 1 focuses on two key questions that we propose are helpful to differentiate youth participation–related approaches: First, is there data-based inquiry for knowledge generation, and second, are youth deciding on the questions and methods (youth power in the process)? On the left of the figure are traditional forms of adult-led research that elicit youths' voices or perspectives in various ways, such as interviews, writing, or visual art. Also on the left are examples of youth participation without data-based inquiry (e.g., advisory boards, peer education). Shifting to the right of the figure, we see approaches in which youth conduct inquiry on questions or issues that are already selected by adult leaders (e.g., city planning, human-centered design, and youth-led evaluation (Flores 2008, McKoy & Vincent 2007, Ozer et al. 2020a, Univ. Calif. Berkeley Cent. Cities + Sch. 2024). The right side of the diagram differentiates YPAR from youth organizing approaches, i.e., YPAR entails high power and high data-based inquiry for evidence generation, whereas youth organizers may collect data to inform action-focused campaigns but not to generate systematic evidence (see Pinedo et al. 2024, in this volume, for more on youth organizing).

Why YPAR: Frames and Lenses

Aligned with the diverse roots of CBPR, YPAR and related forms of youth participation are typically oriented toward and justified by a range of rights-based, democratization, and improvement rationales, which we see as potentially integrative or complementary (Ozer et al. 2018). To set the context for the YPAR literature, we provide a landscape of the rationale and goals of YPAR and their potential relevance to developmental psychology and to the study and promotion of healthy trajectories in human development.

Rights and democratization focus. Rights-based arguments for YPAR and other forms of youth participation are common in international health and human development contexts, often framed in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; UN 1989) regarding rights to participation. A highly impactful framing embedded in ethical considerations for research, government funding, and programming in Europe and other UN member states is the Lundy model, which provides an actionable interpretation of UNCRC Article 12, focused on four dimensions: space, voice, audience, and influence (Lundy 2007, 2018; Lundy & McEvoy 2012; Lundy et al. 2011). That is, children have rights to facilitated opportunities to express their views, and these views "must be listened to" and "acted upon as appropriate" (Lundy 2007, p. 933). This rights-based focus on the participation of children and adolescents in research has been taken up by the research community and governmental agencies in Europe and the United Kingdom, including social welfare decisions (McCafferty 2021) and the COVID-19 response (Cassidy et al. 2020, Lundy et al. 2021, McMellon & Tisdall 2020, Percy-Smith et al. 2023, Stalford & Lundy 2022).

US-based YPAR practice and research are less oriented toward the "right to participation" frame, given that the United States is the only UN member country that has not ratified the UNCRC (UN 1989). In multiple fields, including education, however, scholars and practitioners focus on YPAR as an approach to youth and civic engagement that promotes more equitable systems and resources that shape developmental opportunities and outcomes for youth (Kirshner et al. 2021, Rubin 2012). Within K–12 education, YPAR efforts can be viewed as aligned with John Dewey's (1912) classic work on the importance of schools as a training ground for democracy. Furthermore, from an epistemological perspective, YPAR serves to democratize knowledge production (Fine & Torre 2021, Vaccarino-Ruiz et al. 2022) by working against traditional norms of who is qualified to demonstrate expertise and authority in deciding what should be researched and how.

Critical frame. YPAR framing in the education and youth development fields has emphasized three main principles of YPAR: critical inquiry related to youths' lived experience, participatory and power-sharing relationships, and action for systems change (Rodríguez & Brown 2009). In critical inquiry, youth engage with peers and adult partners in dialogue related to systemic issues impacting their lived experience and the root causes of inequities (Caraballo et al. 2017, Domínguez & Cammarota 2022). As noted above, power-sharing relationships are attentive to how adults and youth work to actively resist "adultist" assumptions that undervalue the perspectives and evidence generated by youth (Kennedy et al. 2022a)—and in promoting conditions for youth-serving systems to take youth-generated evidence seriously as relevant for informing policy and practice (Ozer et al. 2020b).

Improvement and outcomes focus. Other YPAR streams are more focused on improvement in multiple domains, such as interventions for youth development and well-being, school climate, developmental outcomes, and research on child and adolescent development. For example, when it comes to the design of programs, research, interventions, settings, and policies, the rationale is that youth have insider expertise of the phenomena and issues, and thus their meaningful involvement makes intuitive sense from a design quality and validity perspective. While the logic

here is similar to the rationale for conducting formative research such as focus groups for the design of an intervention or app focused on youth, a key distinction is that YPAR entails youth decision-making. This distinction is meaningful for intervention and program design as focus groups are typically "one-off" to target responses to specific content, but focus groups do not entail the training, understanding, and trust to enable youth to influence design decisions.

YPAR and Adolescent Development

We and others have conducted conceptual and empirical work to analyze the developmental and social impact of YPAR from a range of ecological levels (Ozer 2017). As we have outlined elsewhere, at the intra- and interpersonal levels, YPAR can support the social, emotional, and cognitive developmental changes that occur during adolescence (Ballonoff Suleiman et al. 2021). Both the processes and the impact of YPAR can enhance adolescents' developmental trajectories. We start by considering the conceptual relevance and then provide an overview of the current empirical literature as well as promising areas for innovation and impact.

Youth-Level Impact and Considerations

One lens focuses on the impact of YPAR on the youth who participate as researchers. YPAR can provide prosocial and empowering learning experiences for youth researchers, which can lead to an array of positive youth outcomes. In general, YPAR aligns with the positive youth development (PYD) frame, in which youth are viewed as having strengths to be fostered rather than as problems to be fixed (Lerner et al. 2011, 2021).

Youth–adult partnerships within YPAR. During adolescence, young people are examining who they are and experimenting with behaviors and roles as they shape their identities through interactions with peers and adults outside of their immediate family (Barber et al. 2001, Watts & Flanagan 2007). In YPAR, youth ideally form trusting relationships with adults who scaffold research and action tasks that are relevant to youths' lives and promote autonomy as they reduce their levels of support as youth researchers gain increasing competence in YPAR-related skills in research, teamwork, organizing, and presenting. These opportunities for increasing autonomy are an important component of adolescent development to increase intrinsic motivation for goal-directed, prosocial behavior (Eccles & Wigfield 2002, Ryan & Deci 2000). Positive relationships with nonparental adults can help young people clarify their sense of self, navigate challenges, and positively influence youths' self-esteem, self-image, and prosocial behavior (Sterrett et al. 2011). The experience of sharing power with adults, coupled with this relationship building, can enable youth and adults to view themselves as leaders and as capable of creating impactful change in their schools/communities (Cammarota & Fine 2008, Ozer & Wright 2012).

We note that youth–adult partnerships in YPAR can take varied forms. Multiple influential conceptual models have aimed to guide the youth development field with respect to youth–adult partnerships and their links to empowerment and positive youth development. While earlier classic models frame independent youth leadership as the ideal (Hart 1992), Wong et al. (2010) proposed that sharing of power between youth and adults is most conducive to promoting positive youth development and empowerment. Richards-Schuster & Plachta Elliott (2019) created a useful matrix of shared youth–adult power to guide the evaluation field, providing a framework for describing increasing levels of youth power with respect to consultants, collaborators, partners, or leaders.

Meaning and purpose. YPAR can also provide opportunities to support other key developmental needs of adolescents, including the forming of heartfelt goals and a sense of meaning and purpose as a result of positively contributing to others, either at the individual level or at the community

level (Burrow et al. 2023, Dahl et al. 2018, Fuligni 2019, Ozer 2017). Through contributing to other people and the community, youth also feel important and significant (Damon et al. 2019). Adolescents often perceive themselves to be purposeful but have limited opportunities in their lives to demonstrate this sense of purpose to create positive impact in their communities (Hill & Burrow 2021). Through YPAR, young people identify and conduct research on issues that are important to them, build relationships with peers and adults, present findings, and leverage these findings to inform social action.

We note that in many settings where young people live, work, and play, they are expected to follow rules and have few opportunities to meaningfully contribute; many young people, depending on their context and/or identity, experience marginalization rather than opportunities for contribution (Sumner et al. 2018). Along these lines, in research over the past two decades in public secondary schools with the San Francisco Peer Resources program, we have studied how YPAR can engage a broader array of students not already motivated to engage in traditional forms of student leadership such as student government (Ozer & Wright 2012). In this case, YPAR is embedded in elective classes that intentionally draw students across grade levels and academic achievement trajectories, with students working on issues of equity and diversity that they choose and are meaningful to them.

Identity development. Throughout adolescence, young people develop a clearer sense of who they are in the world, their values, and future goals (Branje et al. 2021). As a result of social, emotional, and neurobiological transitions, adolescents have increasing capacity to reflect on what it means to be a part of a specific social group and are continually refining their identity (Branje et al. 2021). YPAR can have specific implications in the development of ethnic identity, a particularly salient component of adolescent identity development (French et al. 2006). For example, in Ozer & Wright (2012), students shared in interviews how YPAR led to them and others viewing themselves in ways that counteracted stereotypes and low expectations that had been tied to their ethnic identity. One Latina young woman from a less-respected high school reflected on the pride of presenting her team's outstanding research in front of a team from the academic magnet high school, counteracting her fear of being "looked down on" or being seen as a "gangbanger." Similarly, students talked about the YPAR role leading to their being "taken seriously" by teachers and administrators for the first time, rather than being seen as "problems" (Ozer & Wright 2012). Prior research on sociopolitical development (SPD) emphasizes the importance for youth, particularly those from economically and/or ethnically marginalized backgrounds, to locate one's position in and relationship to broader cultural and political factors and to develop the "knowledge, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems" (Watts et al. 2003, p. 185).

Empowerment

Empowerment has been a central focus of participatory research, including YPAR, for at least two decades (Mitra 2004, Wilson et al. 2007). Empowerment integrates perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment (Zimmerman 1995). Promoting empowerment is important for adolescent development, and is even more salient for marginalized youth who navigate structural barriers such as poverty, racism, and heterosexism in their journey toward positive development and identity (Ozer & Douglas 2013, Watts & Flanagan 2007).[1] Zimmerman (1995) describes these three components

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[1]The first three sentences in this section are reproduced with permission from Nash (2023).

of psychological empowerment to understand how individuals perceive their own capability to influence a given context (intrapersonal component), understand how the system works in that context (interactional component), and engage in behaviors to exert control in the context (behavioral component). As an empowerment-focused, strengths-based youth engagement practice, the focus of YPAR seeks to disrupt patterns of adultism that many youth experience. YPAR can be a particularly salient developmental experience for all adolescents and particularly those who experience marginalization related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, political affiliation, and other dimensions of their identities.

Social-Emotional Functioning

A growing area of inquiry concerns the intersection of YPAR and the development of social-emotional competencies. At the youth level, one angle focuses on the potential impact of participating in YPAR on diverse areas of competencies, including social-emotional learning (SEL) domains related to emotional management, empathy for others and the self, and skills for developing supportive relationships and making responsible and caring decisions (CASEL 2022, Kirshner et al. 2011, Nash et al. 2024, Ozer et al. 2021). Transformative SEL (tSEL) is a more recent conceptualization that brings a stronger equity lens to the CASEL framework to highlight five dimensions: identity, agency, collaborative problem-solving, belonging, and curiosity (Jagers et al. 2019). This adapted framework includes consideration of the knowledge and skills for critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequities and collaborative action to address root causes (Jagers et al. 2019).

Another angle on YPAR and SEL raises the issue of how a developmentally sensitive approach to engaging youth in YPAR requires major attention to social-emotional skill-building, given the demands on youth when they engage in research and action focused on issues of deep concern to them. For example, youth may identify and study topics that are highly sensitive and painful with respect to their own lived experiences, such as bullying, dating violence, sexual harassment, underresourced schools, or unfair treatment by teachers or administrators. Reflecting on, gathering data, and advocating for changes in school or community environments in which youth have no formal power and where they may not be respected for their experiences or findings are not easy tasks. Empathizing with the role of YPAR researchers—and the adult facilitators who typically scaffold their work—we can reflect on the intensive social-emotional skill development needed for their group research work (e.g., deciding on competing topics and design, collecting and interpreting data) as well as for their interactions with peers and adults in advocating for changes to policies, practices, and/or peer norms.

A recent innovative example of YPAR focused on social-emotional development was conducted by middle school students in New York City (NYC) with a local university professor (Finesurrey et al. 2024). The student researchers, largely adolescent immigrant students of color, designed a longitudinal oral history project that was integrated into their humanities curriculum and their state-mandated SEL intervention; the project documented joy and stress in the context of COVID-19, racial uprisings, and economic struggle. They conducted 250 peer-to-peer interviews, following up on key aspects of social-emotional well-being, and reported that students experienced relief in knowing that their peers also struggled with anxiety and that they valued having a process and forum through which to influence their schools.

Educational Opportunities/Academic Engagement

Much of YPAR in the United States is conducted in K–12 education, and a key area of potential impact concerns educational engagement and achievement (Kornbluh et al. 2015, Voight & Velez 2018). YPAR training can build strengths in data-based inquiry, group communication, analysis

of complex problems, critical thinking, and scientific research skills aligned with academic standards (e.g., Kornbluh et al. 2015). Furthermore, the YPAR leadership role can potentially lead to a stronger sense of connection to peers, adults, and the school as a whole and make education more relevant and engaging. As one example, in a YPAR project in a middle school in California, student survey findings highlighted that only 7% of students felt like they had an adult on campus who cared about them. After they presented findings to teachers, school-level strategies were implemented to improve teacher–student relationships, and follow-up surveys showed a major improvement (74%; Ozer et al. 2020b). If YPAR can demonstrate effects on attendance and achievement, it aligns with the priorities of adult leaders in schools and makes a stronger case for the investment of resources, given the strong competing resource demands in many K–12 districts, especially in light of the widening of educational inequities in these domains following the COVID-19 pandemic (Gee et al. 2023, Voight & Velez 2018).

Impacts on Key Settings for Youth Development

YPAR also has the potential to affect youths' individual developmental trajectories via positive impact on youth-serving settings such as schools, social services, public health, and health care to better align their practices and policies with youths' needs. As these systems and settings integrate YPAR, they also create opportunities for sustained meaningful youth participation that supports positive youth development. There are two main promising strategies to engage youth in systems change within settings: One is via meaningful participation in ongoing evaluation and continuous quality improvement of programs and policies (e.g., Ozer & Wright 2012); the other is to strengthen the use of evidence generated in YPAR to inform both adults' understandings of the issue as well as improvements in policies and practices to improve developmental conditions in settings and communities (Ozer et al. 2020b). As an example of the former, girls involved in Girls Inc. programming were a part of a participatory evaluation (i.e., Girls Study Girls Inc.) for continuous quality improvement purposes in a large community-based, youth-serving organization (Chen et al. 2010). As an example of the latter, a YPAR project focused on reducing inequities in physical activity access in school and after school promoted setting-level changes such as the creation of a dance team and exercise breaks during the school day that impacted all youth, not just the YPAR group (Abraczinskas & Zarrett 2020).

Systems change from YPAR can impact all youth but can also be especially beneficial for minoritized and marginalized youth. When YPAR is conducted in schools, youth identification of inequities in data can lead to changes in school policies to reduce them. For example, involving youth with lived experience of inequities in YPAR projects can help address disproportionality in academic outcomes, such as school dropout and attendance (Abraczinskas et al. 2022a). Disproportionality can be impacted by youth identifying disparities in school-based data during YPAR projects and advocating for systems change for marginalized students, who have lived experiences of inequity in schools (Abraczinskas et al. 2022a, Anderson 2020). For example, in one YPAR project, students conducted research and identified low levels of teacher cultural competency as an area for change. The students' advocacy about their findings led to the creation of an annual mandatory implicit bias training policy for teachers and a teacher home visit program that was codeveloped by students; the principal; and the district's cultural, equity, and leadership team (Ozer et al. 2020b).

Strengthening meaningful opportunities for youth within K–12 education—and other hierarchical systems that serve adolescents—is especially important in light of developmental theory and research that emphasizes the problem of poor "stage-environment fit" when adolescents' schools typically offer less autonomy as youth need more (Eccles et al. 1993). Due to this mismatch, some youth may disengage from school during this time, especially youth who may be navigating

racism and other forms of exclusion and discrimination. For these youth, YPAR may promote the conditions to address some of this mismatch as well as build their skills in navigating and challenging unequal treatment and unjust practices in their schools and communities (Kennedy et al. 2022b). Addressing systems issues in schools can thus have a cascading effect to benefit individual youth through increased connections to school and a sense of mattering, fewer barriers to academic achievement (e.g., disproportionate discipline), and improved relationships with peers and teachers, which can improve attendance and domains of school climate (Abraczinskas et al. 2022a).

Impact on Science and Intervention Design

A range of models for YPAR and related youth engagement approaches have been used for the design of research and intervention studies, with a long-standing tradition in public health programming and interventions intended to serve youth (Ozer et al. 2020a, Patton et al. 2016, Warren et al. 2018, Woods-Jaeger et al. 2024), consistent with participatory design of community-based interventions (Minkler et al. 2003). A key rationale is that YPAR centers the voices and lived experiences of youth, particularly those who are often excluded and experiencing marginalization, in the development of the research, the process of data collection and analysis, and the action phase (Caraballo et al. 2017, Patton et al. 2016). For example, involving youth researchers in codesigning questions was reported to improve the developmental appropriateness of questions and to lead to deeper responses from participants (Bautista et al. 2013, Brown 2010, Gomez & Ryan 2016). When youth are engaged in analyzing or interpreting research findings, these efforts can lead to new insights (Kulbok et al. 2015). Youth also contribute to creative and community-centered ways to disseminate research findings such as sharing photography at a community venue (Bender et al. 2017, Hayik 2021), a 3D digital display (Nation & Durán 2019), or a video documentary (Maker Castro et al. 2022).

Along these lines, a notable example of a creative codesign of multimethod research is the What's Your Issue (WYI; **https://whatsyourissue.org/**) US national study of more than 6,000 LGBTQIA+ young people (Fine & Torre 2021). The study employed interviews, ethnography, and online survey methods. Youth engagement in survey development and data collection was conducted in "survey parties." For example, at an initial party, youth critiqued the "wrong draft" of an initial survey, creating a framing and space for youth to shape the research methods and measurement based on their experience. The NYC longitudinal oral history study discussed earlier (Finesurrey et al. 2024) provides insights on the affordances of YPAR for qualitative research; the authors reported that student participation in the reflection and assessment of SEL strengthened the data collection in terms of improved questions, more comfortable interview dynamics, and more nuanced interpretation of data patterns in their classmates' transcripts.

OVERVIEW OF YPAR EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

In light of the rapid growth of research about YPAR across the past two decades, an important development has entailed efforts to take stock of the literature about YPAR processes, contexts, and outcomes. This is no easy task, given the range of YPAR streams, epistemological traditions, and disciplines; e.g., a Google Scholar search indicates 84 review articles published across disciplines between 2010 and 2024. A qualitative review of YPAR in the education field, informed by a critical YPAR frame, interpreted the growth of YPAR as indicative of the valuing of local and Indigenous knowledge, further citing examples of how YPAR has promoted justice and addressed inequalities in schooling and beyond (Caraballo et al. 2017). At the time of that review, the authors noted ~1,000 papers on YPAR in education up to 2016; by 2024, there were more than 2,800.

Below we provide an overview of the findings of major review efforts across disciplines, the challenges inherent in this endeavor, and the implications for next steps.

Process and Context

A subset of reviews have focused on YPAR process and implementation. For example, Jacquez et al. (2013) conducted an early review of papers focused on CBPR (Israel et al. 2005) with youth published in English from 1985 to 2012, analyzing the reported roles of youth in various phases of the YPAR process. Youth most frequently participated in the identification of research goals and priorities, e.g., in selecting issues (77% of studies) and in designing or conducting the research (84%); youth engaged in analyzing data (54%) and disseminating and translating findings (52%) to a lesser degree.

Recent US-focused work has examined YPAR implementation in order to strengthen its sustainability and multilevel impact. A recent scoping review (Malorni et al. 2022) of 40 articles focused on YPAR relational practice and processes that facilitate critical inquiry, reflection, and action in youth development and out-of-school time contexts serving youth ages 12–18. The review identified three core relationship practices: (*a*) facilitating critical dialogue through exploring lived experience and identity and navigating difference, dissent, and conflict; (*b*) sharing power through providing opportunities for peer learning, collaborative goal setting, presence and engagement, and transparency; and (*c*) building a collective identity through learning about peers' communities, developing accountability practices, and creating collective efficacy for youth power to make change.

Anderson's (2020) qualitative review of 38 studies focused on facilitators of the implementation of YPAR in US high schools and identified pedagogical strategies (i.e., logistical and curriculum decisions) that facilitated YPAR implementation. Such strategies included YPAR integration into school electives and after-school time, the use of a curriculum, and modification of the structure to meet youths' needs. In addition, factors such as compensation for youth researchers, leveraging of university–community–school partnerships, school administration buy-in, and the broader policy contexts shape if, when, and how YPAR occurs. These findings highlight the interplay of multiple levels within school systems that influence YPAR implementation and the importance of capacity building for the implementation of YPAR in school settings.

Impact

Efforts for the qualitative and/or mixed methods synthesis of the impact of YPAR have emanated primarily from the public health, community psychology, and social work fields. The health sciences fields have a long tradition of CBPR and YPAR and a strong emphasis on generating practice-based evidence (Green 2008) to guide population health interventions and policy change (Ozer et al. 2018). A health-oriented qualitative review (Shamrova & Cummings 2017) focused on studies published globally in English between 2000 to 2016. Using an ecological framing to characterize YPAR outcomes for youth, organizations, and communities (Checkoway 2011, Gal 2017), they reported finding evidence for effects at all three levels on issues including water quality, accessible transport, antidiscrimination policies targeted toward the protection of LGBTQ students, tobacco access policies, and organizational policy shifts in sexual education policies. This research provided further insights about the methods and outcomes of YPAR, suggesting that participation may be associated with outcomes such as social justice awareness, perceptions of youth as change agents, social-emotional and cognitive development, and stronger relationships with adults and the broader community (Shamrova & Cummings 2017). The authors also highlighted that at that time most YPAR research had been conducted with youth and/or by researchers in high-income

Global North countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia as well as the European Union.

In the US context, a systematic review team focused on individual-level outcomes (Anyon et al. 2018) and environmental-level outcomes (Kennedy et al. 2019) for YPAR and related youth inquiry approaches published in English up to 2015. These reviews used an inclusive definition of youth inquiry: Youth investigated an issue based on their own experience using qualitative or quantitative methods and were engaged in roles beyond data collection. For environmental outcomes, Kennedy et al. (2019) identified 36 studies that reported impact in the domains of policy development (14%), program/service design or enhancement (53%), practitioner growth (33%), research benefits (39%), and changes in peer norms (6%). They identified YPAR processes associated with environmental outcomes, e.g., longer projects, student advocacy and presentations to adult decision makers. They also found that changing adults' values, beliefs, attitudes, or knowledge (i.e., practitioner growth) was a precursor to other school practice changes.

Of 63 studies reporting individual-level youth outcomes in Anyon et al. (2018), the most common domains were agency and leadership (e.g., empowerment; 75%), academic or career (56%), social (e.g., social support; 37%), interpersonal (e.g., communication skills; 35%), critical consciousness (i.e., the ability to recognize societal injustice; 31%), and cognitive (e.g., problem-solving; 23%). They did not identify any studies on youth emotional outcomes of stress, symptoms of anxiety or depression, or emotional regulation. Overall, they found that the literature consisted primarily of qualitative case studies, with an additional 15 studies that employed mixed methods; a small number (4) of studies used an experimental or quasi-experimental design. The authors called for more consistent reporting of methods in the YPAR field and noted the nuanced challenges of summarizing the field, given the highly contextualized nature of participatory research approaches and the primarily qualitative literature. This review advanced the field in highlighting the range of beneficial outcomes of YPAR for youth; however, the authors did not report on the strength of quantitative effects or trustworthiness of the qualitative findings.

Present Review

Our team has engaged in a systematic review process to provide an update of the YPAR literature published in the United States and internationally since 2015—given the continued growth of the field—and to seek to address the limitations of prior reviews (Nash et al. 2024). We approached the review with the following questions: (*a*) Has the field responded to calls for more consistent reporting of methods for qualitative and quantitative studies? (*b*) Is there substantial use of mixed methods and quantitative assessment of outcomes that might enable more cross-comparison or potential synthesis, expecting that qualitative methods will remain popular given the dynamic and contextually dependent nature of YPAR? (*c*) Has the use of experimental and quasi-experimental designs increased? Such trends may align with the strong interest and growth of YPAR in the health sciences as well as in education and international development settings in which donors and resource-strapped systems might well require more traditional indicators of evidence of impact to justify investments. Last, given the strong concerns about youth social-emotional well-being at the present time, and the relevance of YPAR for promoting well-being, has there been more research focused specifically on these domains?

Here, we provide a brief overview of our methods for our YPAR systematic review and share high-level findings of the domains of youth SEL and SPD, two strong and growing areas of investigation. We searched the psychology, education, and health literatures, including empirical studies with youth 25 years or under that entailed youth inquiry (at a minimum youth engaged in data collection and at least one additional component of the research process, such as data analysis or dissemination of findings), and we studied outcomes at the level of youth or their
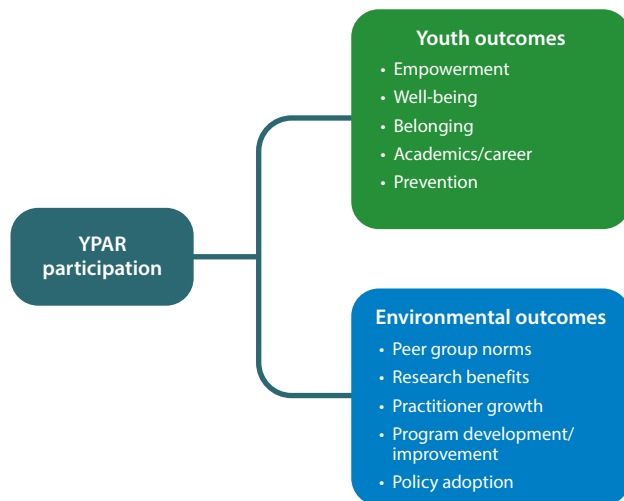
Figure 2

Overview of youth and environmental outcomes of youth-led participatory action research (YPAR).

environments. Aligned with prior reviews, we identified key categories of youth (academic/career, belonging, empowerment, well-being, and prevention) and environmental outcomes (peer group norms, research benefits, practitioner growth, program development/improvement, policy adoption). **Figure 2** provides a broad overview of the youth- and environmental-level outcomes of YPAR explored in the literature thus far.

Nash et al. (2024) focused on a subset of the overall review, applying a theory-driven conceptualization of (*a*) transformative SEL (tSEL), coding outcomes in the domains of agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, curiosity, and identity, and (*b*) SPD, coding outcomes in the domains of agency, worldview and social analysis, and societal involvement. We further refined our analysis to studies for which authors described their data analysis that generated the evidence for outcomes to focus on empirical rather than anecdotal claims. We included the diverse forms of qualitative and quantitative evidence generated across disciplines. The most common SPD and tSEL outcomes reported for participation in YPAR were societal involvement ($n = 22$; 88%), agency ($n = 17$; 68%), belonging ($n = 11$; 44%), worldview and social action ($n = 9$; 36%), collaborative problem-solving ($n = 7$; 28%), identity ($n = 4$; 16%), and curiosity ($n = 1$; 4%).

Overall, our review suggested that there is still a strong need for consistent reporting of YPAR projects and research in the literature, with room for strengthening in studies that employ qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to assess YPAR outcomes. For example, only 3 of the 10 studies that reported quantitative outcome measures reported effect sizes. There are reliable and valid quantitative measures of multiple youth-level outcomes of interest in the YPAR field (e.g., SEL domains, psychological empowerment), and there is limited growth in the use of the same or similar measures to assess psychological empowerment (Ozer & Schotland 2011, Zimmerman & Zahniser 1991), self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 1995), self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965), and social skills (Gresham & Elliott 1990). We note that these quantitative measures are all self-report, whereas the majority of qualitative studies are based on a mix of interviews with youth, interviews with adults, participant observation, administrative data, and document review of policy and practice changes at the setting level. With respect to our questions about research design, we saw an additional nine studies that used experimental and quasi-experimental designs in the SEL and SPD domains.

NEW DIRECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR THE YPAR FIELD

Based on our literature review and experiences in the YPAR field, we highlight several promising innovations and next steps.

Research Reporting

As discussed above, power-sharing frames may be helpful across disciplines to characterize the levels and forms of youth participation, including youth as consultants, collaborators, partners, and leaders (Richards-Schuster & Plachta Elliott 2019). In our updated systematic review, we found that the reporting of the relative roles and power of youth was not sufficient to clarify this kind of differentiation. Studies across disciplines could provide a clear characterization of the roles and power of youth across YPAR phases, could facilitate understanding if the project aligned with key YPAR principles and processes, and could enable exploration of patterns linking youth roles to impacts on youth and environments.

Multimethod Contributions

As prior reviews have found (Kennedy et al. 2019), we see strong promise in the further development of multimethod approaches to promote a cross-disciplinary evidence base to inform practice and policy. As a coauthor team deeply engaged in multimethod research and practice partnerships, we are particularly mindful of the value of data in the form of text and numbers in generating evidence regarding the processes and impact of YPAR as a dynamic and highly contextualized systems approach. The issue of evaluation designs with quantitative assessments raises challenges of sample size and statistical power, particularly in a field with few major funding sources. Academic–practice partnerships with collaboration in the design stage before large-scale rollouts of youth-serving programs and initiatives in the United States and internationally offer the possibility of integrating intentional variation, equitable wait-list control experimental designs, and stronger assessment of impact (Ozer et al. 2018).

Drawing on our earlier consideration of paradigms and disciplines in the diverse YPAR literature, we acknowledge debate in some YPAR fields about how some research designs and quantitative measures might flatten or decontextualize YPAR in seeking to summarize, synthesize, and/or assess impact. As scholar practitioners who work in partnership in the complexity and "messiness" of YPAR (Fine & Torre 2021), we take this concern especially seriously. At the same time, we seek to advance inclusive practice-based evidence (Green 2008) that can also help YPAR supporters in governmental and community organizations to justify investments in the context of competing demands for resources in undersupported educational and other systems that shape youth's development (Ozer & Hubbard 2025). We and other scholar practitioners can collaborate closely with youth and adult YPAR partners to develop designs and measures to assess process and outcomes in the principles and spirit of YPAR (Abraczinskas & Zarrett 2020; Ozer & Douglas 2013, 2015; Ozer & Schotland 2011; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

The growing interest in YPAR in developmental science, as evidenced by this and other reviews, YPAR symposia at meetings such as the Society for Research on Adolescence, and networks of YPAR scholar practitioners, suggests that the field is ripe to consider such integrative research approaches. This work can build on existing measures of outcome domains relevant to promoting youth well-being and addressing inequities in schooling, which could be combined with in-depth qualitative analysis to provide a triangulated view of YPAR processes and outcomes, further connecting the diverse paradigms and disciplines of YPAR (Reavley & Sawyer 2017).

Developmental Fit

As the field of YPAR has grown over the past 20 years, so too has the science of adolescence. Youth engagement broadly, and YPAR specifically, aligns well with the key developmental tasks of adolescence, including exploring the world; finding meaning and purpose; engaging in complex decision-making; developing values, goals and identity; earning respect and social status; and building social relationships with peers and adults (UCLA Cent. Dev. Adolesc. 2022). Integrating what we have learned about adolescent development into the design of YPAR projects can increase the precision of and maximize the impact on youth, adult partners, and their communities (Ballonoff Suleiman et al. 2021). As young people transition from early to middle to late adolescence, they experience evolving social, biological, emotional, and cognitive changes that impact their participation and engagement in YPAR. YPAR is not one-size-fits-all, and adapting YPAR strategies and approaches to align with participants' developmental stages can support success. It is necessary for organizations interested in supporting YPAR to honestly examine the resources and time available to support the YPAR project (Ballonoff Suleiman et al. 2024).

Adequately preparing and training adult allies are among the most important tasks to enhance the developmental impacts of a YPAR project. Many adults who serve youth (e.g., teachers, mentors, health care providers) have relationships with youth with inherent imbalances of power wherein adults are positioned to serve, support, and/or teach youth rather than partner with them. In successful YPAR projects, adult allies disrupt existing power imbalances, minimize adultism, and learn to authentically share power with youth participants (Kennedy et al. 2022b). We have developed guides to support practitioners who are interested in designing developmentally informed YPAR projects and for funders to assess the developmental alignment in proposals that include youth-engaged research and evaluation (Ballonoff Suleiman 2022, Ballonoff Suleiman et al. 2024). At their best, YPAR projects can be designed to maximize youth participation, protect against tokenism, facilitate community engagement and social change, and align with the pace, timing, and developmental stage of the youth participants (Ballonoff Suleiman et al. 2021).

Youth-Serving Systems, Policies, and Practices: Equity and Diversity of Representation

How do researchers, policymakers, and practitioners strengthen the likelihood that YPAR roles extend beyond elite youth with the social capital and skills to serve in leadership positions, given the many demands on the most marginalized young people (Ozer et al. 2018)? Diversification and reach are major concerns in the international health literature; e.g., a Global South nongovernmental organization based in an urban center might work primarily with the most educated youth who have the largest capacity to engage (Patton et al. 2016). Promising approaches to the scaling and representation issues include the use of digital and online networks to facilitate YPAR projects and connections across geographic locales and populations (Abraczinskas et al. 2023a, Gibbs et al. 2020); for example, DreamTeens was a countrywide online YPAR and youth engagement effort in Portugal that informed priorities for the Ministries of Health and Education (Frasquilho et al. 2018). A strength of YPAR in addressing representation issues, in contrast with youth advisory groups, is that YPAR researchers can engage with a much broader and diverse sample of youth in their research projects, beyond presenting their own lived experience and perspectives.

Diversity and reach are also issues in US contexts, where, depending on the YPAR structure and recruitment approach, youth in YPAR may be those who are already interested in community action, have the capacity to engage in elective classes and extracurriculars, and/or are nominated by adult leaders in schools (Abraczinskas & Zarrett 2020). Less is known about YPAR with youth who are out of traditional schools, some of whom are impacted by punitive legal

systems. Such work, though crucial, poses additional challenges in recruiting, engaging, and retaining youth in these circumstances (e.g., youth who are experiencing homelessness or those in juvenile carceral systems). Strategies and considerations that are helpful to engaging these populations include coordinating meeting times around work schedules, providing support for basic needs, teaching coping skills, addressing interpersonal and mental health challenges, sharing oneself, partnering with trusted organizations/groups, and offering flexibility in the conceptualization and implementation of the research process (Abraczinskas et al. 2022b, Johnson et al. 2020).

Systems Impact and Use of Research Evidence

While YPAR research has examined how youth disseminate their findings and advocate for change (Anyon et al. 2018, Kennedy et al. 2019, Shamrova & Cummings 2017), less is known about what happens after youth present their findings, such as how adult stakeholders decide whether and how to enact youths' proposed changes. Shifting adults' perspectives can potentially result in sustained changes in research, policy, or practice (Kennedy 2018). For decades, scholars have sought to uncover the conditions under which research is used by policymakers and stakeholders (Nutley et al. 2007, Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980), including in schools (Asen & Gurke 2014) and health and social service systems (Horwitz et al. 2014, Innvær et al. 2002). This "use of research evidence" literature investigates research generated by adults; little is known about the use of research generated by youth. Recent work by Ozer et al. (2020b) focuses on understanding the facilitators and barriers of stakeholders' use of YPAR evidence.

An issue related to the impact of YPAR on systems pertains to whether, when, and how YPAR processes and evidence are integrated into existing routines in K–12 education and other systems. In addition to the SEL examples discussed earlier (Finesurrey et al. 2024, Ozer et al. 2021), a prime example of integration into existing programming focuses on the role of YPAR in informing and improving school-wide primary prevention programs at scale such as school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (Abraczinskas et al. 2022b). This integrative approach holds promise for the programming to be more effective and aligned with adolescents' developmental needs for meaningful participation while simultaneously working to improve student well-being and school climate.

Capacity and Readiness

Although we and others have developed resources, such as the YPAR Hub (**https://yparhub. berkeley.edu/home**), to guide YPAR practice, the YPAR literature has little consideration of the organizational capacity building needed to embed and sustain YPAR. Without dedicated YPAR capacity, there may not be sufficient integrity, sustainability, and impact, especially since deeper changes can take years to unfold. Assessing the impact on youth and systems also requires substantial evaluation capacity. Recent attention has focused on capacity building, such as the training of the substance use prevention workforce to partner with youth (Ballard et al. 2023), and on identifying capacity building as a factor in successful YPAR implementation in schools (e.g., support for adult facilitators who are navigating power sharing and serving as allies for youth when engaging with school leaders; Anderson 2020).

Capacity-building frameworks can play a useful role in guiding these efforts, such as the interactive systems framework (ISF) from community psychology. The ISF envisions that a synthesis and translation system (typically university researchers) translates research and provides intervention development knowledge to a support system (typically community-based intermediaries) that provides technical assistance to end users (the delivery system) (Wandersman et al. 2008). Ozer and colleagues (2008) applied the ISF framework to YPAR, illustrating the capacity of the prevention

support system to provide technical assistance for YPAR implementation. The ISF has been updated to incorporate readiness at multiple levels of these systems (i.e., motivation, general capacity, and innovation-specific capacity), in addition to broader societal factors that influence the uptake and sustained use of innovations (Scaccia et al. 2015). The components of motivation, general capacity, and innovation-specific capacity to guide YPAR capacity-building efforts (Abraczinskas et al. 2023b) are important future directions to study and support settings for the initiation, implementation, and sustaining of YPAR. We also see capacity needs for the career development of YPAR scholars in areas such as the navigation of institutional review boards, shared research leadership, and publication processes (e.g., Abraczinskas et al. 2022b; M. Kornbluh, M. Abraczinskas & L. Till Hoyt, manuscript under review). Through YPAR networks, partnerships, and discussions here, we aim to promote an inclusive vision for the YPAR field that is (*a*) integrative of multimethod research and practice knowledge; (*b*) grounded in power-sharing partnerships with adults and youth that promote the integrity, impact, and sustainability of YPAR in systems; and (*c*) effective in shaping more equitable and developmentally aligned opportunities and outcomes for all youth.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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