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The Importance of Youth Voice and Civic Engagement: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

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Youth Voice and Civic Engagement

Stanford University Professor Thomas Ehrlich defines civic engagement as:

> "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes." (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi)

This may sound like something limited to adults, but it's not. Civic engagement begins at a young age. Before young people are even legally able to vote, they can become involved in civic engagement through participation in education, family, and their community. While the long term goal of civic engagement is to prepare youth to be active members of their communities, short term benefits related to academic performance and social-emotional well-being help youth develop a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], (n.d.)).

Many might assume that young people develop civic engagement skills in the classroom. However, in recent years, states across the country are eliminating or de-emphasizing their civic education class offerings (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). This trend is particularly concerning as civic behaviors such as voting have declined among young people (Winthrop, 2020). That said, although civic education classes play an important role in promoting civic engagement, youth can develop the knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference in settings beyond the classroom. One approach that engages youth in all of these areas is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

What is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)?

YPAR is an approach to research that "offers a vehicle to meet a pair of complementary needs: good data for decision-making and positive youth development" (Newman and Sipes, 2022, p. 2). While there is no one model or place where YPAR is conducted, YPAR is one of many ways to incorporate youth voices into decision making. Using the research process to engage students in their community, YPAR focuses on data-based inquiry and evidence generation grounded in deep understanding of the problem to inform solutions that challenge power structures and promote second-order solutions (Ozer et al., 2022). Many different organizations are engaged in YPAR, so while this brief is informed by various efforts, my personal experience is with the approach taken by Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) as a YPAR participant and now as a graduate research assistant working to support a YPAR project.

In YPAR, students typically work with a teacher or an adult ally to identify a pressing problem or need in their school or community, study it collaboratively with their peers, then share their findings through written pieces and oral presentations to various community stakeholders. A key component of YPAR is that students can engage in issue areas that are of personal interest to them and that affect their school or community environment. The YPAR research process often includes:

1. Defining the problem
2. Selecting the research design and methods
3. Collecting the data
4. Analyzing and interpreting data
5. Developing the findings and recommendations
6. Presenting findings and recommendations to stakeholders

For example, in the Spring of 2024 the Gardner Center partnered with 10,000 Degrees to conduct a YPAR project (John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2024). The partner organization was interested in understanding the impact of its efforts to improve college access for low-income youth and it was particularly interested in incorporating youth voices to evaluate the effectiveness of its program.

Over 15 weeks, eight students were trained in the research process and learned how to investigate questions related to community college transfer and retention. Students developed the research questions with their adult allies at the Gardner Center and the partner organization, gathered and analyzed qualitative interview data, and then presented their findings and recommendations to staff from 10,000 Degrees. The partners listened to the students and then they began to discuss how their organization could enhance their efforts to support students more effectively.

How does YPAR promote youth civic engagement?

In addition to supporting positive youth development broadly, YPAR specifically supports young people to develop knowledge, habits, skills, and mindsets that are central to civic engagement. These include developing collaboration and communication skills while building critical consciousness.

Collaboration

YPAR supports the development of civic engagement by centering collaborative work. Through an iterative process of gathering information, analyzing data, and developing recommendations, participants are able to think critically and work together to present their research. Sometimes faced with data and findings that differ from their own views and experiences, YPAR participants begin to understand other perspectives. For example, in 2018, Michigan State University partnered with Central City to conduct the Central City Youth Co-Researcher Project, a city-wide YPAR project (Warren & Marciano, 2018). This project brought together 15 youth participants from a variety of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status backgrounds attending multiple high schools with the goal to facilitate their learning from and with peers whose experiences were likely different from their own. This allowed students to hear and process the validity of a range of experiences, expanding their ability to engage in civil discourse while building understanding collaboratively.

Warren & Marciano (2018) found, through careful consideration of the data, YPAR participants can see how their perspective is true and how other varying perspectives are also true which begins to foster cooperation and shared decision-making. Other scholars have observed that by engaging in this kind of civil discourse, youth can learn to communicate their perspectives and think critically, thus developing collaborative learning environments and building collaborative competence (Langhout et al., 2014). Dr. Rubin, a leading scholar in YPAR programming at Rutgers Graduate School of Education adds; "together, youth begin to believe they can make a difference in their community and know their voice matters, creating a path for civic engagement and social change" (Rutgers-New Brunswick Graduate School of Education, (n.d., November 22).

Communication

Throughout the research process, YPAR participants often have opportunities to continuously improve their communication skills by listening to one another, making meaning through conversations, writing a final report, and presenting as a team. By honing their communication abilities, young people can articulate their ideas, make connections, and amplify their voices. The culminating presentations are crucial for students as they can display their knowledge of the research to a group of community stakeholders who are invested in what they have to say. For example, a YPAR project conducted in Arizona shares how Yolo, a young high schooler "entered Cerro [High School] with limited English-speaking ability, but graduated conducting participatory action research presentations in English for the school board, federal, state, and local officials as well as national academic conferences" (Camarota & Romero, 2011, p.502). This YPAR project gave Yolo the opportunity to share his experiences with others as well as feel empowered to present his story in a new language.

The YPAR process allows students to gain transferable communication skills that extend beyond the YPAR project and support civic engagement. For example, Gardner Center YPAR participants have been invited to present to county offices of education, and funder collaboratives, as well as national conferences and convenings. Researchers have noted that when youth have opportunities to talk to different groups of people, they develop the confidence to speak up, share their perspectives, and contribute to their communities–all skills associated with positive youth development (See, for example, Geiser & Quinn, 2012 and Lerner et al., 2003).

Critical Consciousness

At a high level, critical consciousness involves the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems (El-Amin et al., 2017). YPAR is well-suited to build critical consciousness through its combination of elements that engage youth with their community by having them identify a problem they are facing, become researchers, and use their voice to recommend solutions to that problem. As an inquiry-based model, students can ask and investigate questions about the world around them and brainstorm solutions to a social problem that is affecting them; in YPAR students are both researchers and stakeholders.

Drawing on their own experiences, YPAR youth represent the needs of their community. By investigating a problem together, youth can engage in discourse that analyzes the role of organizational and institutional structures, thus building critical consciousness. For example, in May 2021, the LASIF Action Research Fellows, shared their findings regarding barriers to college access and success, highlighting that:

> "Barriers are not tied to individual deficits but rather are the result of a system that is failing first-generation students. It is not that first-generation college students are not ready for college. It is that colleges are not ready for them." (John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2021, p.9)

This finding led to youth recommendations that focused on what colleges should do such as increasing student belonging by connecting students with college affiliated organizations and establishing partnerships between colleges and college access organizations.

By participating in YPAR, youth gain the knowledge, habits, skills, and mindsets to critically analyze their social conditions and propose solutions to these problems (Watts et al., 2011, p.44). As stakeholders in this process, the youth become aware of their identity and role in their community. Instead of simply hearing about decision making from adults or being "pushed out" of conversations, YPAR participants learn how to actively contribute and participate in their community and in turn society, through a research process that builds critical consciousness, along with skills in collaboration and communication (Motsoasele, 2021).

Conclusion

YPAR can provide a positive youth development experience that supports youth capacity for communication and collaboration, while building critical consciousness. Through these opportunities, youth enhance their understanding of their community and their power to make a difference.

I say this not only based on reviews of literature related to YPAR, but also because it happened to me. At the height of the Coronavirus pandemic, I participated in a YPAR project in my Central Valley community led by the Gardner Center and the Kern Community Foundation (John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2020). This experience allowed me to develop collaboration and communication skills, and build my critical consciousness. Working alongside YPAR participants who were also from a rural community, my understanding of college access and success broadened. While we all came from rural areas, we had different work styles, lived experiences, and most importantly, perspectives on student grit and ability. For example, when it came to identifying obstacles youth experience during the college application process, one of my colleagues was convinced that challenges were due solely to personal abilities. However, through the research, we found that students pointed to lack of academic high school support as a major contributor to barriers students faced. The YPAR process enabled us to work deeply on our own personal convictions to work together and find common ground.

Growing up in the Central Valley, research about my community was scarce. Having the opportunity to do research about Kern County students and being able to present those findings to local and state stakeholders, gave me the confidence to speak in front of multiple audiences while expanding my professional network. YPAR allowed me to see the connection between research and community engagement. Our research sparked the Kern Community Foundation to create a summer bridge program for students and informed the implementation of a number of additional YPAR efforts statewide.

Including youth voices in program improvement and policymaking can happen anywhere. It is time to begin thinking about how YPAR and other youth development programs that build skills and knowledge to support civic engagement can be woven into programs and curriculum in schools, community organizations, and philanthropic organizations. Incorporating youth voices in decision making allows young people to co-create with adults preparing them for civic life. This will support youth today and their civic engagement in the future, which will benefit everyone.

About the Author
Yesenia Aguilar is a graduate student at the Stanford Graduate School of Education (MA '24). She holds a B.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles and has experience in community development, policy analysis, and educational research. Yesenia has worked on projects related to youth programming, expanding institutional departments, and founding a community college in her community.

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