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Co-constructing Knowledge: Critical Reflections from Facilitators Engaging in Youth Participatory Action Research in an After-School Program

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Abstract: After-school programs serve as a way to enhance student learning with more flexibility regarding the curriculum and classroom structure. In this article, we reflect on our work with youth from diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds in an after-school program. Applying Youth Participatory Action Research as our guiding framework for teaching and research, we examine the collaboration between middle school and university graduate students in an after-school program. We revisit our written reflections of our collaboration with youth, and identify five prominent themes: (1) student development of critical literacy skills; (2) the importance of using multimodal tools; (3) co-construction of knowledge; (4) youth development of agency, confidence, and mental health; and (5) the messiness involved in the Youth Participatory Action Research process.

Keywords: after-school program, youth participatory action research, qualitative research, critical reflection, youth and adult collaboration



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Introduction¹

Students acquire knowledge in traditional and non-traditional formats. Traditionally, the classroom provides an environment for students to learn content in a structured format with specific curriculum mandates. However, students' knowledge acquisition and learning are not only limited to the traditional classroom environment. To complement formal classroom instruction, after-school programs (ASPs) serve as a way to enhance student learning while incorporating non-traditional means of instruction and activities that are not limited to a set curriculum.

ASPs are defined as programs that take place during part of the school year, happen outside of the school day, and are facilitated by adults (Durlak et al., 2010). ASPs increase youth learning and their development of skills, criticality, identity, intellect, and joy (Muhammad, 2020) through supportive interactions with adults and communication with peers on critical social and educational topics (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002).

Students learn and retain information when it is acquired actively (Fink, 2003). Active learning can take many forms, but the most important element is that students are actively involved in the learning

process (Prince, 2004) through hands-on activities and real-life problem-solving. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a method that facilitates active learning and creates a space for students to identify problems, examine solutions, and advocate for change within their communities (Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Ozer, 2017). Students learn best when

“Students learn best when they actively engage in activities and texts that foster the development and knowledge of their own identities and intellectualism...”

they actively engage in activities and texts (broadly defined) that foster the development and knowledge of their own identities and intellectualism while simultaneously (re)considering critical topics and issues within their communities (Muhammad, 2020).

The ASP in which our work took place served as a non-traditional learning environment, where youth had the opportunity to engage in active learning strategies. YPAR guided the design and development of activities and led to our critical reflections of the co-construction of knowledge in this setting. In this paper, we focus on our reflections. We collectively and singularly analyze our experiences co-researching and co-facilitating activities with our middle school co-participants in an ASP. The ASP was guided by the tenets of YPAR, including: youths are integral to all decisions that are made; the lived experiences and knowledges of youths are valued and centered; strong relational bonds and community development are

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use

pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns that they use to refer to themselves.

foundational; intergenerational apprenticeship is the basis of learning; and YPAR is political in nature and seeks to disrupt power structures in order to lead to the thriving of youths (Mirra et al., 2015; Cammarota & Fine, 2010). The ASP took place in a middle school in a Southeastern college town in the United States (U.S.). Students who attended this ASP represented emergent bilingual learners (EBL) and racially and linguistically minoritized populations. They were also an integral part of a 12-week service-learning graduate course. The major aim of this course was for graduate students and marginalized youth to co-develop a platform from which youth voices could be heard and acted upon. The purpose of this paper is to share our takeaways from our experiences of engaging in intergenerational action research and provide a reflective tool for researchers and educators to draw upon when applying YPAR in after-school settings (Mizell, 2020a).

Who Are We?

I, Tairan, am a female Chinese international student in the United States. My identities and teaching experiences informed my lenses and approaches of participating as a co-researcher in this after-school program. Reflecting on my own identities as a Woman of Color and a transnational individual in the United States, I can relate to and empathize with (in some ways) many of my Black, Latiné, Asian, and (im)migrant students' struggles and feelings as they try to thrive in oppressive systems in schools and society. However, as the youth and I co-constructed generative and reciprocal learning relationships, their resilience and brilliance gave me power and hope. Throughout this project, I firmly believed that the youths' literacies and critical consciousness were empowering and transformative for themselves, their communities, and those around them.

I, Chioma, am an African American woman who was raised by immigrant parents in the western part of the

United States. My personal educational journey and experiences working with middle school students provided the foundation through which I view the construction of knowledge. My ideas stem from the existence of multiple realities and those realities changing as a result of context. I have multiple years of experience working with middle school students in various capacities consisting of a tutor, mentor, after-school instructor, and health educator. Through my experiences, I have learned the importance of educating youth and channeling their energies into what sparks their interests. I believe students should seek non-traditional learning experiences and engage in different types of activities to understand and develop as individuals. This project gave me the opportunity to further develop my teaching skills and interact with our future leaders.

I, Jason, entered this work as one of the course's co-instructors/creators as a multilingual Black man who was raised in the U.S. South. My life experiences, while different from the youth with whom we co-constructed knowledge, was at the same time very similar. I grew up in a town not far from where this work took place. I also felt very connected to the youths because they were the same age as my son. Thus, I took the work personally as it had/has the ability to directly impact my son's educational and life experiences. I also entered this work as a veteran bilingual teacher-activist-scholar with over 20 years of experience working in both national and international bilingual schools.

What Frameworks Guide Our Practice?

YPAR is "a political act staking a claim for the right of young people to speak their truth to power and demand change" (Mirra et al., 2015, p. 64). As a political act that seeks to center the voices, needs, and joys of racialized and/or marginalized youth and their communities, YPAR is part of the legacy of many activist scholars (e.g., Du Bois, 1903, 2015; Taylor et

al., 2016; Yancy, 2008) and has been used as one way to center the literacies of racialized and marginalized youth (Greene et al., 2016; Burke & Greene, 2015).

As Burke and Greene (2015) stated, “YPAR centers the voices of youth and encourages them to take a critical perspective by naming the problems and the assets [i.e., the joys and pleasures found in their communities] that adults may often overlook.” (p. 389). They continue by expressly linking YPAR and critical multimodal literacies by positing that literacies developed within a YPAR constructed space may provide youth with a space where they can critically examine both “visible and invisible signs of inequity within schools and communities” (p. 399). Within this generative space, youth and their adult accomplices can work toward developing a trusting relationship. This is paramount because they, youth and their adult allies, explore what may be sensitive issues (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism) that may bring up feelings of shame, anger, hurt, and mistrust regarding adults and dominant institutions with which they engage daily (Kinloch, 2010; Mirra et al, 2015). As a result, it is paramount that youth and their adult allies form strong trusting relationships so that they can depend upon each other for solace and understanding as they critically co-examine their own thinking and lived experiences (Mizell, 2020b). This trusting relationship also marks a shift in how youth and their adult accomplices interact. There is a marked shift away from the adults being seen as the experts and youth as novices.

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Within this YPAR space in the ASP, youth become co-researchers, co-instructors, and co-knowledge architects. For this reason, throughout this paper many times we refer to the youth with whom we worked as our co-participants and co-researchers.

Additionally, within this YPAR space, we conceptualize critical multimodal literacies through the lenses of three phenomenal women scholars of color: Ladson-Billings (1995) (i.e., development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness), Morrison (2012) (i.e., valuing of Black lives/literacies/languages without the white² gaze), and Hasan and Webster (2011) (i.e., reflection literacy or study of literacy in context with a focus on who is included, excluded, and why, along with an understanding of linguistic variation). Ladson-Billings (1995) theorized sociopolitical consciousness as the process of critically working with students to use their community circumstances as official knowledge” (p. 477) in addition to “the ability to take learning beyond the confines of the classroom using school knowledge and skills to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems” (2014, p. 75). In our work, this meant that we, just like the teachers with whom Ladson-Billings (1995) worked, used the literal space of the ASP to critically examine, question, and when necessary, remixed school valued/dominant knowledge(s) and community knowledge(s) with youth.

Similar to Ladson-Billings’ (1995) valuing of community ways of being, Morrison (2012) sought to

² The authors follow the guidelines of APA 7th edition and capitalize most racial groups (e.g., Black, Latiné, Asian). However, we actively made the decision not to capitalize the racial label “white” because this term has been capitalized by hate groups, white supremacist groups, and white nationalist

groups to marginalize BIPOC communities. Our choice to lowercase “white” is intended to reject language and literacy practices that have historically reified the prominence of whiteness while marginalizing and dehumanizing other racial groups (Jones et al., 2021).

call out and push back on the idea that the lives and knowledge(s) of racialized communities are only valuable if seen as such through the white gaze. Alongside our youth co-participants, we worked to understand that our knowledge(s) were of value by themselves without having to be validated by dominant entities and narratives. In other words, we did not need to seek validation by filtering our understandings and ways of being through a white racial prism. As we worked to accept and understand that our value was not inherently connected to the white gaze (Yancy, 2008), we also drew upon the work of Hasan and Webster (2011).

Hasan and Webster (2011) pointed out that "reflection literacy refers to the need to approach discourse with a conception of linguistic meaning that goes beyond the literal meanings of the 'words and vocables,' insisting on a recognition of the assumptions that underlie what is said" (p. 197). In other words, they posited that literacy/-ies require(s) the user to come to a critical understanding of not only what is explicitly stated but also what is implicitly implied (i.e., the ideologies behind different literacies) and that this all takes place within certain cultural and thus societal context. Hasan and Webster helped us to recognize and have access to linguistic tools that we used to examine various types of text.

The interweaving of these women of color scholars' ideas helped us conceptualize how we could approach our work with the youth in the ASP. Through this framing, we explicitly worked with youth to co-examine how dominant or school sanctioned text (broadly speaking) are generally constructed to position us and our communities through a deficit lens. We also worked jointly to

explore the literacies of joy and pleasure (Wong & Peña, 2017) that are found in our communities. These literacies are what have and will continue to allow us to not only survive but also to thrive as we work together to dismantle the white supremacist system in which we live (Love, 2019; Muhammad, 2020). YPAR and critical multimodal literacies allowed us, youth and adults, to construct a site in which we were able to explore our community(ies) as we searched for solutions to youth-identified problems.

What Was the Context of This Work?

Our work in the ASP was implemented at Chestnut Middle School (pseudonym), a middle school with the majority of its population being historically marginalized students, located in Chestnut County in the Southeast of the United States near a major Southern land grant university. Out of all the students who attended Chestnut Middle School, 90% identified in school documents as Black or Latiné. Additionally, the school district labeled 24% of the students as EBLs.

“These literacies are what have and will continue to allow us to not only survive but also to thrive as we work together to dismantle the white supremacist system in which we live.”

Since the state classified Chestnut Middle School as a low economic and low-performing school, the school was eligible to take advantage of the 21st Century after-school grant program. The 21st Century grant program (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) provides funds to high poverty and low-performing schools so that community learning centers can provide academic enrichment opportunities to students during non-school hours, Monday to Thursday. These centers also provide some educational services to the families of participating youth. The work that we explicate in this article was listed as one of the clubs or after-school activities that

students at Chestnut Middle School who took part in the 21st Century program could choose from.

At the beginning of the Spring semester, students were given an opportunity to select among 20 different after-school activities. All students in the school were invited to participate, and yet, teachers explicitly worked to encourage students who they labeled as emergent bilingual learners and/or who had not met grade-level requirements on state-mandated examinations to participate in the ASP.

We, Tairan and Chioma, were part of a group of 14 graduate students (six East Asian [originally from Mainland China], one Black, and seven white) along with one Black and one white undergraduate student. Each of us were referred to as facilitators by the youth and the instructors of the course, instead of students. It was our job to work alongside our youth collaborators to complete the multimodal activities and co-construct knowledge (see *How Did We Work Together?* for a description of these activities). Jason, although also a graduate student, was one of the co-instructors for the graduate course. In addition to graduate students, each week, on average, 10-15 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students took part in the program. In addition, two to three high school students also participated. The high school students had previously participated in earlier versions of this project while they were students at Chestnut Middle School. Through semi-structured interviews and our weekly interaction with the students, the youth self-identified themselves as speakers of languages other than Dominant white English (Baker-Bell, 2020). Eighty percent of the students who took part in the program spoke Black English (Baker-Bell, 2020) as their first language, 10% a variety of Latin American Spanishes, and 10% a form of Dominant American Southern English (Paris, 2009).

How Did We Work Together? Co-Construction of Knowledge

Prior to each session with our youth collaborators, facilitators met as a group and discussed upcoming topics and associated literature. The goals of the facilitators included: (1) build reciprocal supportive relationships with the youths and each other in our shared learning community; (2) help youth develop their literacy skills through critical problem-solving and multimodal engagement; (3) co-construct knowledge through different modes of meaning-making; (4) help students build their confidence by giving them an opportunity to express themselves in different modes; and (5) encourage youth to advocate for their needs and make a difference in their communities. The program was divided into 12 different modules over one academic semester, January to May 2018. The first two weeks of the program were devoted to preparing the graduate students to work collaboratively with the middle school students. The adult facilitators read extensively about Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017), YPAR (Mirra et al., 2015), multimodality (Kress, 2010), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Gibbons, 2006), and other related topics. During that same period, the youths worked with Jason to get to know one another and explore their communities. Youths were also introduced to the idea of Photovoice (Del Vecchio et al., 2017; Malherbe, 2016) and how to tell oral histories. A librarian from the local land grant university who specialized in historical objects and stories led a two-hour hands-on session with the students about their stories and histories and how to use objects to retell them. In the following 10 weeks, adults and youth worked together to co-explore and identify significant community assets and challenges. Afterwards, the youth worked to co-construct/co-imagine/co-dream tangible artifacts and/or performances that embodied their proposed

solutions or ways of celebrating items they had identified.

Program Activities

Students and facilitators engaged in a series of inquiry modules to make sense of their school environment and community. Facilitators introduced youth to mini-lessons ranging from storytelling, Photovoice, and urban planning, to two- and three-dimensional artwork creation, journaling, and spoken word (Harman & Burke, 2020). (For a list of the various modules see Harman & Burke, 2020 or Mizell, 2020b.) Each week, students had the opportunity to practice and develop the skills they acquired from each mini lesson. For example, the legislative theatre (Boal, 2005) module gave students the opportunity to use speech, acting, and movement to discuss topics important to them. These dramatic performances allowed students in conjunction with their adult allies to negotiate different environments, generate knowledge, and develop convincing arguments (Medina & Campano, 2006). Below is a list of the topics we covered each week.

- Week 1: Warm-up theater games and getting to know each other
- Week 2: Using artifacts to tell stories of lived experiences
- Week 3: Photovoice journal of a school community walk
- Week 4: Personal stories of photos taken
- Week 5: 2-Dimensional (2-D) and 3-Dimensional (3-D) urban planning and landscaping
- Week 6: Improvisation theater and drama
- Week 7: Hip-hop music appreciation and creation
- Week 8: Group building, brainstorming for the final performance, and building 3-D models
- Week 9: Legislative theater and conducting research for projects
- Week 10: Finishing models and project building
- Week 11: Finishing project in preparation for culminating projects

- Week 12: Final performance for school principal and peers

As we progressed through the semester and as students engaged in various activities, they were able to critically interrogate the opportunities that they were exposed to at school. This created a space for them to propose solutions they identified in their community to adult community leaders and administrators. At the end of the program, students created a culminating performance outlining important topics within their school community. In conjunction with their adult allies, youth developed multimodal performances consisting of rap performances, aspects of legislative theatre, 3-dimensional modeling, and other modes to advocate for desired changes in their school. The culminating projects consisted of three distinct performances. The first performance demonstrated students' eagerness to create a student lounge where in the words of one youth, ". . .we can hang-out, not do anything bad, just hang-out without teachers always telling us what to do!" They created a 3-D model displaying the layout of the lounge (see Figure 3), which included bean bag chairs, a display of student artwork, and board games. The second performance demonstrated the need for an electronic marquee in front of the school. Through a combination of multimedia and legislative theatre, students emphasized the need to visually display announcements, student accolades, and demonstrations of school spirit. As one youth rapped, "I am J and I'm here to say, we need a marquee to see what we are doing that day." The final performance used 2-D drawings, a 3-D Lego construction, and a rap to outline the importance of including a trampoline park and a track and fence around the soccer field. This group stressed the importance of incorporating structured outdoor activities into the school environment.

Table 1. Overview of Themes

Theme	Operational Definition	Excerpt from Journals
Development of literacy skills	Students' socially, culturally, politically, and historically situated reading, writing, speaking, drawing, acting, and moving activities that express their understanding of themselves and the world around them.	[Student Name] was very surprised at the fact that I knew Chinese. Then, out of everything, she asked me how to say "I like your shirt" and "shut up" in Chinese (Qiu, Reflection 1). The highlight of the afternoon for me was hearing [Student Name] end of the day reflection, where he mentioned that he learned students have a voice. His words exemplified our intentions as facilitators of program objectives. We want students to understand that their voices matter and they have the ability to promote change (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 5).
Multimodality	Representations of students' use of different modes (e.g., drawing, spoken word, building, acting, etc.) to enhance their learning and express their opinions.	She was using her hands to create the space in her head into a real artifact...her imagination was embodied by tangible hand-made objects (Qiu, Reflection 4). Some students want to draw, while others prefer to build. I want to develop that more and have students make their points through the modes they feel comfortable using (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 7)
Co-construction of knowledge	Reflections on the collaboration between the facilitators and students collectively completing projects and/or constructing knowledge.	I was excited because I felt like our relationship as co-learning partners is steadily developing because she not only answered the questions she was asked but also cared about my opinions towards the same prompt (Qiu, Reflection 5). I did my best to ask him how I could help along the way. It was great to see the co-construction of the tree house take place (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 7).

Agency, Confidence, and Mental Health	Reflections addressing program activities that impacted students' (1) confidence, (2) capital to express their opinions, and (3) mental health.	(There was) high engagement of students in these games, as they are lively, happy, laughing, and active (Qiu, Reflection 7). I think movement for students, especially before they begin a task that requires quite a bit of mental focus, is extremely important (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 7). I was able to see personalities of students who seemed to be wall flowers or quiet contributors in previous sessions. I saw them light up as they acted out situations that were important to them and played both the authoritarian and student roles (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 5).
Struggles and Doubts	Facilitators' reflections on the challenges, struggles, and doubts encountered in the after school program and working with students as co-researchers/co-learners.	It is challenging to be a co-participant entirely because we are still guiding students towards the final objective...We are the ones who set the pace of discussions, who pose questions, who discipline the students, and whom the students look to for answers. (Qiu, Reflection 7). I asked her to turn the volume down because it was disrupting the game. I want them to be a part of the program and learn about all of the modalities provided, however, I am constantly seeing that both students are not participating in the activities (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 8).

What Did We Learn?

As adult facilitators of this ASP, we met with local middle school students for 10 weeks and composed written reflections of our experience for 9 of those weeks. In this section, we revisit a total of seventeen reflections—9 from Tairan and 8 from Chioma—that detail our collaboration process with the youth and our personal reflections of our activities each week. After numbering the journals, Tairan and Chioma conducted data analysis through a 5-phase analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). We inductively coded phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the reflective journals and created themes to organize and make sense of the data. In Table 1, we

include the themes that we extracted from the coding of our reflections, operational definitions of these themes, and excerpts from our journal entries. As the co-instructor of the ASP and the graduate course, Jason took pictures and collected the youths' work as artifacts.

Upon reflecting on our journals and the collected artifacts, we identified five themes: (1) students' development of literacy skills; (2) the use of multimodal tools and activities, and the direct effects of these activities; (3) co-construction of knowledge between middle school youths and graduate

students; (4) students' development of agency, confidence, and mental health; and (5) messiness throughout the YPAR process.

Development of Critical Literacy Skills

As literacy is a “mischievous concept” (Lunsford et al., 1990), it is informed by various conceptualizations in the current study. Literacy has been defined as an individual's capacity to understand, use, and reflect on written texts in order to develop one's knowledge (Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006); the awareness of cultural heritage, and the capacity of higher-order thinking (Lunsford et al., 1990); and the social practice that people do with reading, writing, and texts in historically, socially, and politically-situated contexts (Perry, 2012). We define literacy as the youths' racially, linguistically, socially, culturally, politically, historically, and (inter)nationally situated reading, writing, speaking, drawing, and artistic meaning-making endeavors that express their understandings of themselves, texts, and the world around them. Over the course of the 11 weeks, youth used all of their linguistic repertoires in order to express themselves without regard for the boundaries of named languages. One student wrote,

•Me gusta mucho trabajar con las personas de UGA because they are fun and They do a lot good and fun actividades que nos ayudan a entender y aprender nuevas cosas. pero que vuelvan todos los días que vamos a venir otra vez.

[Translation: I really like to work with the people from UGA because they are fun and They do a lot Good and fun activities that help us To understand and learn new things. I hope that they return every day that We are going to come again.]

Even though we were in a schooled space, students felt free to use a variety of literacies in order to record



Figure 1. Mistrust and Anger

their thoughts and feelings. Some chose to take pictures, others made videos, and/or expressed themselves through their drawing and writing in their journals.

Figure 1 was taken by one youth co-researcher in order to express his anger and mistrust of the school after his English as a second language teacher never returned to school after the Winter Break. As he told us, “se fue y nadie nos dijo nada. Ya llevo meses sin tener mi clase de inglés” (*he left and no one told us nothing. I haven't had my English class in months*).

Through the development of critical multimodal literacies, youth felt free to express themselves and their needs as they saw fit. They felt empowered to show their feelings regarding how school authorities did not feel the need to explain changes in school personnel to students. Using their spoken and written words, students pushed against the school

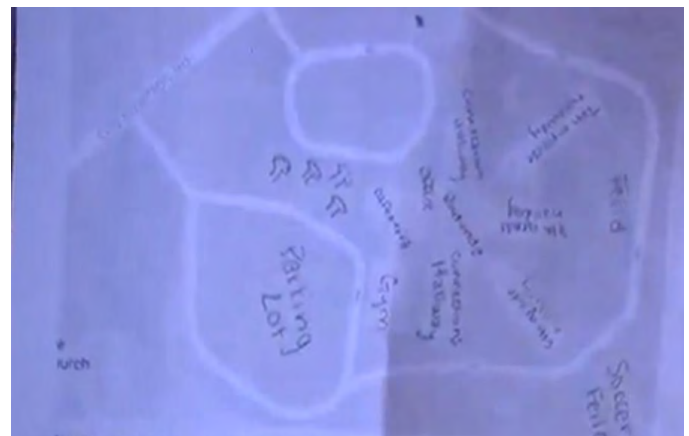


Figure 2. Map of Chestnut Middle School

policies that made them miss out on opportunities or feel dehumanized. Students' critical literacy skills were embraced and honored through their translingual and multimodal meaning-making processes.

The Power of Multimodality

Through different modes of exploration, negotiation, and meaning-making, all co-researchers—middle school and graduate students—built trust and relationships, pondered critical issues in the students' (school) communities, and created legislative theater performances. In our reflections, we discussed how students thrived when they participated in multiple modes of learning and meaning making.

To learn about urban design, students walked around their campus to map their school's academic building and surroundings. They took notes on a worksheet and drew pictures of the objects that they encountered (Figure 2).

In preparation for the mock and formal legislative theaters, students who argued for the lounge museum drew maps and layouts of their buildings from different angles and illustrated the functions of the lounge-museum (see Figures 3 & 4). In this process, students were exposed to scaling, urban

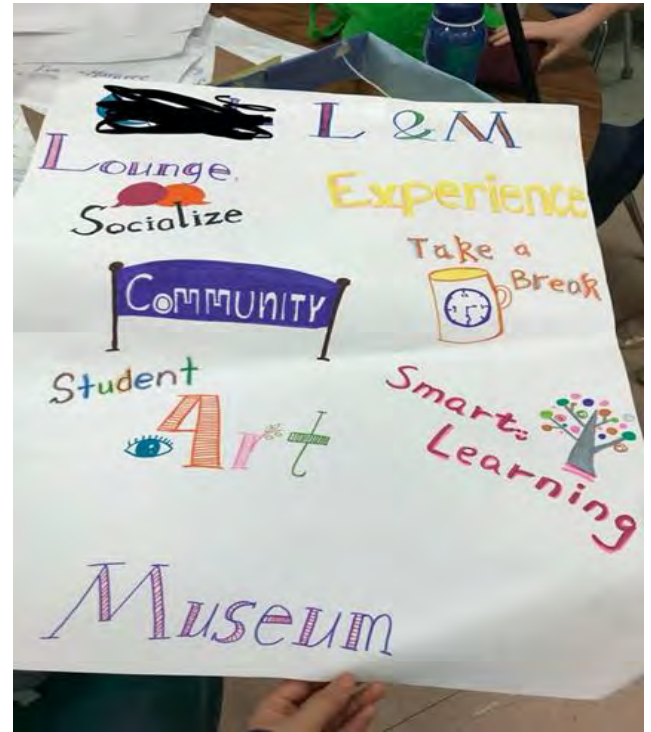


Figure 4. Lounge-Museum Poster

planning, interior/exterior design, and mathematics (Qiu, Reflection 4).

Theater, drama, and hip-hop cast new light on our perceptions of students who were usually labeled as resistant, struggling, shy, and quiet (Qiu, Reflections 5, 6, 8; Kas-Osoka, Reflections 4, 5, 6). Tairan wrote: "I was able to see personalities of students who seemed to be wallflowers or quiet contributors in previous sessions. I saw them light up as they acted out situations that were important to them and played both the authoritarian and student roles." Another student who was constantly perceived as disruptive in the program participated multiple times in the legislative theater. When she acted as a teacher and another student acted as a student asking for longer recess, she said: "Why should students get longer time to go to bathrooms when I have to hold it in for the whole day?" (Kas-Osoka, Reflection 5). The situations where students took initiative were fascinating because we witnessed a significant transformation when they were provided with



Figure 3. Model of Lounge-Museum

various options for self-expression (Qiu, Reflection 6, 8; Kas-Osoka, Reflections 5, 6, 7).

Knowledge Co-construction

Both Tairan and Chioma presented evidence of the co-construction of knowledge in their journal entries. Chioma narrated that she co-constructed the model of a treehouse (see Figure 5), explored 3-D artifacts, and co-created a rap song with her student co-researchers (Reflections 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). Additionally, she recorded that she pushed her student partners to think deeper when coming up with arguments. She also discussed taking a step back in theater games to let students lead the performances. She wrote in Reflection 6:

On this day, I saw strong evidence for the co-construction of knowledge. One student wanted to participate, however, he did not feel confident in what he was bringing to the table. I wanted him to understand that there is no right or wrong answer and that we are all learning in this process, so I started off by stating the lyrics I made up. I had my phone in my hand, so I decided to write something about how the screen on my phone was cracked. He then proceeded to look through his notebook. Another facilitator and I noticed that he had very creative drawings in his notebook. We asked him what the images were, and he described them as monsters. From there it took off. When he said his lyrics during the final performance, I could see that he was confident in what he came up with.

Tairan elicited similar accounts of knowledge co-construction. She reflected on the joint efforts of youth and adult participants' construction of block amusement parks (see Figure 6), collaboration in community mapping, continuous negotiation of ideas, and creation of scripts for drama and rap music (Reflections 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).



Figure 5. Model of Treehouse



Figure 6. Block Amusement Park

In her Reflection 5, Tairan narrated that after the mock legislative theater activities, all groups were asked to reflect on the experience based on the questions “What did you learn today?” When her youth partner finished discussing the question with another group of adult participants, the student turned to Tairan and asked, “What did you learn today?” Tairan was astonished by delight and wrote: “I was excited because I felt like our relationship as co-learning partners are steadily developing because she not only answered the questions she was asked but also cared about my opinions toward the same prompt.”

Agency, Confidence, and Mental Health

We saw evidence of students' agency development through exposure to different modes of learning, meaning-making, and co-construction of knowledge. Particularly, this evidence included students' articulation of their needs, realization of their voices, evolution in their self-projection, and the manifestation of happiness.

Among the hip-hop music that students wrote, one student wrote a line that goes as such: “Only got two minutes to go to the bathroom, my bladder exploding sitting up in this classroom” (Qiu, Reflection 6). Additionally, upon completing the mock theater activity, students were asked to reflect on their experiences. One student who participated in the drama skits raised his hand and stated: “I realized that I can have an opinion.” (Qiu, Reflection 5; Kas-Osoka, Reflection 5). These youths' words exemplified our intentions as facilitators and the ASP objectives. We wanted students to understand that their voices matter, and they have the ability to promote change. Working alongside students allowed us to see this transformation unfold.

In early reflections, Chioma wrote about how students may have hesitations about themselves

regarding their singing or writing skills (Reflections 2 & 6). However, after the modeling of a professional hip-hop artist, Linqua Franqa, and the co-construction of song lyrics with the facilitators, youths who were initially apprehensive about their abilities in writing and performing performed at the end of the session (Reflection 6).

Tairan wrote about her youth partner's growth in terms of articulation and justification of her beliefs and ideas. In their group, all members agreed on the idea of building a lounge-museum in the school, and it could be placed in extra trailers outside. After multiple brainstorming activities, the youth expressed that she does not want to convince the principal to give them a trailer because she does not need it that badly and she does not think that the lounge would become a reality (Reflection 6). However, upon scriptwriting, evidence exploring, and multiple rehearsals, this youth was able to perform in front of her friends, some participants in other sessions, and her principal to advocate for a space to build a lounge-museum (Reflection 8).

These examples show the unmeasurable capabilities of students and how multimodal scaffolding and modeling are extremely important to students' awareness of their potential. Upon experiencing success and affirmation, students' confidence was boosted, which could have longitudinal influences on their self-perception, self-projection, and performance in future endeavors.

Furthermore, one of the most important messages that we identified from the journals were the student and adult co-researchers' expressions of happiness and enjoyment. Chioma wrote that she saw students light up as they acted out situations that were important to them and played both the authoritarian and student roles (Reflection 5). She also articulated that being able to play games outside with students gave them a sense of freedom, because they were not

confined to the indoor space for the entire time—more than one student in the class mentioned they enjoyed being able to go outside.

When reflecting on students' involvement in games both indoors and outdoors, Tairan wrote: "It was fascinating to see the high engagement of students in these games, as they were lively, happy, laughing, and active. I feel like these words are seldom used to describe kids nowadays in school because they are pressured by standards, worksheets, and standardized testing" (Qiu, Reflection 6).

The Messiness of the YPAR Process

The last theme that we identified in the journals was the messiness of taking part in this co-learning process. Due to the program taking place in an after-school setting, student participants were constantly changing. Hence, many times, artifacts, ideas, or arguments that were constructed initially would be miscommunicated and missed after a few sessions (Kas-Osoka, Reflections 7 & 9; Qiu, Reflection 7).

Another constant struggle was the management of "disruption" in the classroom. At times, some students talked or played music loud enough that it disrupted the work that was taking place. This occurred to the point where whole group and small group conversations and activities could not go on. Due to the positionality of adult participants and the unfamiliarity between some students and adults, it was hard for us to decide when and how to stop the disruption. In Reflection 4, Tairan wrote:

The girls started getting very loud and disruptive and started calling one of the boys

in the bigger group "strawberry hair". I tried to quiet them down, but I found myself struggling with how. Because I have not worked with the girls before, I did not know if I should distract them, talk to them, or criticize them through humor, or just physically separate them—I did not know where the boundaries were because I did not know the girls. This incident reminded me of our discussion on the importance of building trust and relationships with these students. Only when there is a strong relationship and trust between co-researchers will we be able to solve problems and work together. Because the girls and myself did not know each other, we did not have a mutually constructed comfort zone.

"Only when there is a strong relationship between co-researchers will we be able to solve problems and work together."

As previous classroom teachers, we found it challenging for us to let go of traditional notions of order and structure, where students listen quietly to the teacher and the teacher is in control of "classroom management." On the one hand, letting go of the need to "control"

the classroom was a struggle for us as we (re)consider our understanding of "classroom management." On the other hand, we felt constrained by (1) our desire for students to perceive us as safe entities with which to share their stories and vulnerabilities and (2) our desire to maintain what we had been previous taught was order and structure. Even though we position ourselves as co-facilitators of these workshops with the students, we still found it challenging to navigate the relations of power between ourselves and the youth.

Discussion and Implications

The literacy-oriented multimodal activities provided opportunities for students to reflect on themselves as individuals, their relationships with each other and their surroundings, and the realities of the world that they live in. Using different ways of meaning-making, the students drew on their myriad linguistic, social, cultural, political, and historical backgrounds to advocate for the opportunities and realities that they aspire for. In this process, their literacy skills were affirmed and developed, while they gained a deeper understanding of their identities, cultures, everyday life, communities, and school. Also, as a learning community, we co-constructed knowledge while building and promoting the students' (and at times our own) agency, confidence, and mental health.

In this participatory work, we positioned ourselves as co-researchers and collaborators alongside the students. However, the power dynamic between facilitator and student still existed. Future research should take into consideration students' perspectives of the facilitators and how that may impact their willingness to open up or respond to activities or prompts. As researchers, we should be aware of our positionalities within YPAR and how that may influence our interactions with students in the after-school environment. Instead of providing prompts and leading students down a preconceived path, we should be willing to explore numerous paths to framing ourselves as both facilitators and learners. The sharing and distributing of power are essential in participatory work.

Additionally, improvisation within the after-school context is essential. Some students may not attend sessions regularly. As co-researchers, both the youth

co-researchers and facilitators need to be able to adjust to the week-to-week situations and available resources. Throughout this course, we worked with many students, both consistently and inconsistently. We made it a priority to address the uncomfortable nature of the unknown and weave our way through the classroom environment. Understanding this process ahead of time may ease the tension associated with the inconsistencies.

Moreover, it is important for practitioners to know that it is acceptable for art and meaning making to occur unintentionally and through various modes. We had sessions where preconceived plans were in place, but the environment did not allow for that particular plan. Even though we did not follow our

“Their literacy skills were affirmed and developed, while they gained a deeper understanding of their identities, cultures, everyday life, communities, and school.”

initial plans, co-learning existed in the altered space and it manifested beautifully. Additionally, students should be provided with varied modes of scaffolding, instruction, engagement, and assessment. Through different modalities, students can learn which activities pique their interest, and which mode(s) of meaning-

making they need to explore further. The offering of multiple choices of multimodal activities can become varied opportunities for our diverse students to apply their individual and collective strengths and increase their level of participation in ASPs and beyond.

According to the authors' reflections, in many instances, critical literacies development, co-construction of knowledge, development of student agency, and exposure to multiple semiotic resources took place simultaneously. It is pivotal that all those participating in YPAR and various learning spaces—students and facilitators alike—are aware of the learning and meaning-making that is taking place and intentionally reflect on these collective learning

processes. Providing different modes through which students learn allows opportunities for exploration and critical reflections. When there is awareness, there is a possibility of change. When students are given the opportunity to explore and express themselves through different semiotic resources, they can thrive academically, interpersonally, and personally, despite negative preconceived notions and stereotypes that they are labeled with. Participatory work has the power of transformation.

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