



“Man, Somebody Tell that Kid to Shut up”: YPAR Implementation at a Rural, Alternative School in the Deep South

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Abstract

This paper explores the implementation of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) at a rural, alternative high school in Alabama. Students at the school were atypical from those usually described in the YPAR literature in that they were predominately white, working and middle class, and lived in rural neighborhoods that were geographically removed from their school. Data included observational field notes, responses to survey items that explore conceptions of community engagement, focus group and individual interviews, and artifacts from the YPAR class. We organize our findings along two domains. The first focuses on youth perspectives about community, including the ways these perspectives did not foster a sense of collective action and how youths felt (dis)empowered and cynical about community involvement. The second includes our reflections on the development and implementation of this YPAR initiative and explores how this implementation was (mis)aligned with the extant literature on YPAR.

Keywords: *Youth Participatory Action Research; Reflective Practice; Alternative Schools; Rural Schools*

Introduction

We turn off the main four-lane highway onto a county road. We stop at the railroad crossing and, to the right, is an antique store. Rusty wrought iron outdoor furniture and vintage signs populate the exterior of the store. On a picnic table set, we see a figurine of a painted black boy in blue overalls who is seated, fishing. We make another left onto the crumbling road where the school is located. The porch of the first old house holds unpainted figurines like the ones sitting outside the antique store. We surmise that these are new, ‘old’ figurines that speak to the area’s racist past and present. We wonder what Camden,¹ as the only African American student in our class, thinks of these figurines, or if he’s noticed them. A few houses down, we see an expansive yard that boasts two large signs: a “Choose Cruz” official campaign sign, next to another, homemade Cruz sign that says “Cruz will abolish the IRS!” So many potholes—this road could use some tax dollars. There is another dirt

1. All names are pseudonyms.

road that has been gated off, with multiple flood lights perched at the gate's closure. Perhaps they are lit up at night? As we make the turn into the school's parking lot and stop the car, we see David drive up in his huge truck with the CB antenna out the back. He has a "Salt Life" sticker on the back of the truck, with some other hunting logos. When we first interviewed him last week, he talked about hunting and fishing with his buddy, Howard. (Field Notes, 2016)

This excerpt from field notes, taken in spring of 2016, provides a snapshot of the day-to-day setting of the school, and sets the stage for our work implementing Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) programming at an alternative high school in rural Alabama. The purpose of this paper is to detail an empirical study that explored the implementation of YPAR projects at the school. Explicitly, we worked to understand youth perspectives about the nature of community and community engagement as reflected in their contributions to class and their research projects. Implicitly, we explored the ways that critical research and pedagogy intersected in our work (Lozenski, 2016). Namely, we queried our efforts to implement and facilitate YPAR in an atypical school context, with particular focus on engaging students in meaningful research and action in and about their communities. In the following sections, we first review the literature regarding YPAR and its implementation. Next, we describe our positional and epistemological orientations to the project and the students. Finally, we detail the ways in which our students differed from those usually described in the YPAR literature, how they viewed community involvement, and the challenges that we encountered during this work.

Related Literature

YPAR is a research model framing youth expertise and perspectives as vital resources for communities, positioning youth themselves as change agents (McIntyre, 2000; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR has its roots in critical pedagogy and praxis (e.g. Freire, 1970) and Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is guided by several core principles: a focus on collective, rather than individual investigation; a privileging of insider knowledge, and inclusion of voices traditionally silenced in research; and the willingness to engage in action to address a community problem (McIntyre, 2000). Further, YPAR engages youths not only as participants in the research, but also as the researchers, with an emphasis on collective action to address sociopolitical issues that affect their everyday lives (Camarota & Fine, 2008). There is robust emerging literature surrounding YPAR and its promise for supporting students' academic and social engagement, motivation, and achievement. For example, research suggests that students who engage in YPAR projects experience positive academic outcomes, such as increased test scores, graduation rates, and school engagement (Cabrera et al., 2014), and that YPAR projects support the development of youths' community-based intergenerational networks (Mitra, 2005), networks among diverse groups (Flores, 2007), and professional networks (Rubin & Jones, 2007). Proponents of YPAR have demonstrated its value in contemporary schools by mapping its goals to national standards (Kornbluh et al., 2015), and situate YPAR spaces as potential sites to develop students' academic literacies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) and preparedness to participate in school reform (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). Finally, YPAR affords youth the opportunity and the agency to critique schools and systems that disenfranchise and disempower students from disparate backgrounds (e.g. Tuck et al., 2008).

YPAR projects are often based in community settings (for an anthology of these projects and further theorizing about YPAR, see, for example, Cammarota & Fine, 2008), but have been increasingly instituted as part of regular school curricula. For example, Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, and Kirshner (2015) reported various YPAR projects undertaken by students whose middle and high school teachers were participating in courses at UC-Berkeley and the University of Colorado Denver. Students' projects included a focus on improving teachers' culturally responsive instruction with the goal of increasing graduation rates at their schools, increased access to sexual health education, and exploration of school-based policies to promote student diversity (for other examples, see Giraldo-García & Galletta, 2015; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012). School implementation may have the potential to engage more groups of students than YPAR programming in extracurricular, outside settings (Kornbluh et al., 2015) since an estimated 40% of students do not participate in after-school or community-based activities, often due to inequitable access or resources (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006, p. 3). YPAR is often implemented with groups of adolescents who are frequently labeled as 'at risk' of academic failure and exclusion from school contexts (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ozer & Wright, 2012). Indeed, much of the YPAR literature problematizes those labels that position students as deficient and frames YPAR as a way for youth who are often labeled and disenfranchised from school contexts to become empowered and challenge those deficit perspectives (e.g., Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). School-based YPAR provides opportunities for cultural change within schools (Mitra, 2005), which generally omit student voice in decision or policy-making processes (Langhout, 2005; Kornbluh et al., 2015).

Our contribution to the YPAR literature is two-fold: first, we report our findings from implementing YPAR with a group of working and middle-class students who were predominantly ethnoracially white² and attending a rural alternative school; next, we describe the messiness of our implementation, and the students' critique of expectations for community involvement and, to some extent, the YPAR model. Specifically, our interactions with the students at the school and our reflections about the project in its beginning stages quickly prompted us to (re)consider this work not only as an outreach project, but also as a meaningful scholarship endeavor that filled several gaps in the extant literature about YPAR, which we address again in the 'Positionality' section below. Specifically, there is little to no research that reports on YPAR implementation with students who live and attend school in rural contexts and who are predominately ethnoracially white. Further, very little has been written about the initial stages of implementation of YPAR. For example, Anyon and Naughton (2003) described challenges and "barriers to full participation" (p. 3) that their students faced in completing YPAR projects, such as eviction, community violence, and truancy. And, Ozer, Newland, Douglas, and Hubbard (2013) described "constraints" (p. 19) on the degree to which students are empowered within school-based YPAR implementation; those constraints occurred particularly in 'issue selection' and 'taking action' phases of YPAR. But, there is a dearth of literature that reports on what YPAR programming 'looks like' from curricular and relational perspectives at its initial stages with students who are academically disengaged. While some YPAR literature explores students' descriptions of marginalization in school contexts (e.g., Tuck et al., 2008), no empirical studies to date report on YPAR in alternative educational contexts or non-traditional high schools. This struck us as a significant gap in the literature considering students in alternative schools often have less freedom and participation than those in typical school settings (Khalifa, 2011). And, the benefits of YPAR participation may be more

2. In this paper, we are intentional about the usage of a lowercase "w" to indicate our resistance to white supremacy and our commitment to anti-racist work.

marked for students placed at risk who have otherwise limited access to positive adult interactions and of whom expectations for achievement are low (Anyon & Naughton, 2003).

Methods

Site: CFL

With this understanding of the literature, we began our YPAR instruction at the Center for Learning (CFL, pseudonym). CFL was situated in a geographically remote location, removed from students' home schools and their neighborhoods, which were in rural areas of the county. County leaders designed CFL in 2015 to meet the needs of students for whom traditional high schools were not a good fit, as deemed by both the students and their school leaders. For example, students at CFL had failed many classes at their home high schools, and described having high levels of social anxiety at their schools. They also described experiences of persistent bullying and a history of bad relationships with teachers that resulted in a desire to manage their own learning time and set their own learning pace. Indeed, students had the flexibility to set their own schedules at the school. Further, CFL was not a typical alternative context in that students were required to apply for admission (all applications had been accepted to date), and their curricula were delivered online via credit recovery modules. The school was comprised of about 25 students, situated across two computer labs and a larger, open room where students ate lunch and met with us during our weekly YPAR sessions. The school staff included a building principal and a former high school football coach who helped with logistics, such as lunch distribution. We offered a YPAR class that was available to all students at the school for one elective credit.

Participants

This project focused on participatory methods with youth who inhabited marginalized spaces, both as residents of rural communities in the Deep South and as students who chose an alternative school in lieu of their more traditional high school. In this project, our students were predominately white and from rural communities; they were also at the very margins of public schools, at the literal and figurative 'last stop' before dropping out of school altogether. Our work to support these students' efforts to conduct participatory action research afforded us an opportunity to explore their ideas about community and the ways in which they were, and were not, empowered in educational spaces. Students volunteered to participate in both the class and the study; we made explicit that they were able to earn credit for the class even if they chose not to participate in the study.

The class had an enrollment of nine students (eight boys and one girl), and all nine assented to participation in the study, subsequent to the active consent of their parents/guardians. See Table 1 (next page) for demographic information.

Table 1
Students' demographic information

	Age	Ethnoracial Status	Interests
Henry	16	white	Movies, taking photos, making Instagram videos and Snapchats
Bryan	17	white	Masonry, "fixing stuff," football
Rodney	17	white	Sports, interested in becoming a coach when he turned 18
Howard	17	white	Hunting and fishing, riding dirt roads, hanging out with friends
Collin	16	white	Hanging out with friends, riding around, liked to "chill"
Brooke	16	white	Fashion, "doing hair," sang in a band at church, interested in pursuing nursing
Camden	17	African American	Basketball, fixing bikes, giving advice to friends
Mark	17	white	Wrestling, football, baseball, welding
David	17	white	Competitive fishing, working on cars

Description of YPAR Course at CFL

The course featured a combination of weekly whole-group and individualized instruction with the nine students. We tailored lesson plans from existing YPAR curricula, such as those available online (Ozer, Tam, Hubbard, & Piatt, 2015), and materials that we had collected during presentations at national education research conferences (e.g. IUME, n. d.). We also recruited a graduate student to assist with development and implementation of the lessons. During instruction led by the graduate student, we focused on data collection (field notes) and instructional support with individual students during group and independent activities. Throughout the semester-long implementation of YPAR programming, our guiding research question was: *How do alternative school students describe their communities and make sense of community engagement in the context of a YPAR initiative?*

Data Collection/Instruments

Since these students are not often represented in the extant YPAR literature, we wanted to capture the ways in which the experience shaped their views about community engagement; thus, we began by administering the Active and Engaged Citizenship Scale (AECS, Bobek, Zaff, Li, & Lerner, 2009), which was developed to examine emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components

of citizenship engagement. For the purposes of our study, we used these items as a way to explore youths' perceptions about problems in their communities and their sense of responsibility for community membership. After students completed the measure, we conducted a semi-structured focus group interview where we honed-in on one or two broad items on the measure related to each of the three components of engagement, and asked students to talk out their responses, with our probes (see Appendix for protocol). Then, we formally began instruction with the students and began to problematize some of their concerns about their communities, such as feeling uncared for at school and feeling unsafe in their communities.

During the instructional period of 14 weeks, we generated field notes during each class session, totaling approximately 50 hours of participant observation. We also collected artifacts of students' work, including their in-class brainstorms and writing, and their final presentations. After the instructional period, we again administered the AECS with concurrent cognitive appraisal interviews (Silverman, 2010) with individual students. In this study, we used cognitive appraisal interviews to explore students' sense making about specific items on the AECS, and to assist us in "how to appropriately interpret findings" (p. 11) after they self-reported on the AECS. See Table 2 for a chronology of all data collected during the study.

Table 2
Summary of data sources and time points

	Active and Engaged Citizenship Scale (AECS)	Focus Group Interview	Observational Data	Cognitive Appraisal (Individual) Interviews	Student artifacts
Time point: beginning of semester	x	x	x		x
Ongoing			x		x
Time point: end of semester	x		x	x	x

Analysis

We transcribed focus group and individual interviews, and constructed a frequency table to review the AECS items in aggregate and to look for trends and themes across all students' responses. Data analysis began by considering initial focus group data and individual cognitive appraisal interview data in conjunction with both AECS responses and observational notes. We generated data-driven, holistic codes (Saldaña, 2016) from the interview data, and viewed aggregate responses on specific items on the AECS that corresponded with our interview protocols (focus group and individual). For example, our interview protocol included the question: *How important is it to you to contribute to your community?* When analyzing our focus group and individual interview data regarding this question, we triangulated those data (Denzin, 1978) with students' responses in conjunction with survey items that were intended to explore students' sense of civic duty. We used peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) throughout data analysis, and crafted

positionality statements to explore the assumptions that undergirded our process of teaching and learning with students in the context of YPAR. Finally, we journaled (Schön, 1983) after meeting with students in order to reflect on our instruction and students' participation, and to document our sense-making of our observational field notes.

On Positionality and Epistemological Assumptions

Our work with the students at the alternative school began as an outreach project, and we acknowledge several assumptions that guided our work as we entered the school context. First, we knew the alternative school principal, and she had expressed interest in having her students at the school get more 'face time' and interaction with both adults and their peers, as all of their instruction at the school was computer-based and delivered as a series of videos and quizzes. Thus, we were interested in using part of our institutional outreach allocation to work to meet this expressed need of a school leader in our area. Next, we were confident that we could interact with adolescents in meaningful ways, based on our experiences as K-12 teachers, and looked forward to the sense of grounding we both felt when working with students in area schools. At the time of the study, we were both instructors of research methods at our institution, so we felt prepared to translate the principles and practices of research and scholar-activism, including the sense of agency that can stem from both conducting research and presenting findings, into valuable instruction for high school students who were interested in YPAR.

As we began this work, we were intentional about positioning our students in the YPAR class as empowered knowledge creators rather than as objects of study (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ozer, 2016). Based on our experiences working with adolescents, we anticipated working with students who were far smarter than their academic records might have indicated. We wanted to engage in work that centralized and honored students' intellectual capacity, especially since the students in our group carried the burden of repeated academic failure in their prior school contexts; the attribution we made about that failure was inherent in their school systems and teachers, not localized to them as individuals.

As previously stated, the population of students with whom we were working were atypical of those described in the YPAR literature. Our students were predominately white, and came from rural and working and middle-class families; thus, we did not presume that their experiences would be similar to those students who are systemically marginalized because of perceptions about identity markers and who often engage in YPAR around issues of marginalization and disempowerment (i.e., collective action to address experiences of racial discrimination in public and social contexts, such as school). Further, we were conscious of our desire to have students name their own experiences, albeit as members of a relatively privileged social position.

We wanted to begin the conversation with something concrete, so we chose the Active and Engaged Citizenship Scale (AECS) as a platform around which to engage in conversations about citizenship and what it means to be a member of a community from a dominant, empowered perspective (i.e., *I often think about doing things so that people in the future can have things better; I help to make my city or town a better place for people to live*). It should be noted that this measure is not directly related to participatory models; however, we chose it because it provided us with a benchmark around which to generate conversations with students that detailed perspectives on what community involvement might look like. As we worked through conversations about expect-

tations for what being a “good citizen” entails, from dominant perspectives, we began to understand that the students in our class did feel marginalized and disconnected from school and from each other as members of a cohesive community.

Juxtaposing their stances against dominant ideas of engaged citizenship gave us an entrée to how to explore the ways in which our students rejected those dominant ideas as futile or inaccessible. Therefore, as we moved forward with our YPAR implementation, we operated under the assumption that our students were in fact from marginalized communities in rural Alabama; further, their desire to attend the alternative school indicated a second level of marginalization in that they indicated feeling excluded from the social and academic contexts of the traditional schools for which they were zoned. It also indicated they had the agency to pursue a different school space, suggesting they were “doubly” marginalized *and* also empowered to some extent. Taking all this into account, we felt an obligation to facilitate genuine relationships and create spaces for them to voice their truths and engage with topics of personal import.

Findings

We organize our findings along two domains. The first details our findings related to our overarching research question, including how students at the school described their communities and made sense of community engagement in the context of YPAR implementation. The second includes our reflections on the development and implementation of YPAR programming with the students and explores how this implementation aligns with the existing literature on YPAR.

Students’ Perspectives within YPAR

In this study, we collected observational data during YPAR implementation, focus group, and individual interview data from students. After analyzing these data sources, we recognized patterns in the data that manifested as conceptual tensions. We defined tensions as competing, sometimes irreconcilable ideas that coexisted in students’ articulations of their perspectives about community. In the following sections, we explore these tensions: students’ ideas about economic and service-oriented contributions to community; altruism and cynicism; and violence as a community problem and solution. These tensions existed both within and among participating students’ perspectives.

Altruistic and Capitalistic Participation as Contributions to Community

We began our work with students by initiating conversations about community—what their communities “looked like,” the different types of communities of which they were members, and how they made meaningful contributions as members of those communities. We started these conversations by asking students about what types of places they considered to be sites of communities. Some identified general places such as their “town,” “church,” and “school.” Others referred to specific people: their families, people who “help each other in times of need” such as after the death of a loved one, teammates and coaches, or those with whom you share other activities like hunting or fishing. We found many of their responses to be very school-focused, including comments about kinds of students (i.e., cliques) at different schools. Several students who shared the same home high school mentioned the “Dollar General” as the only site near them to meet friends, buy food, and shop for household necessities or extras, and described their community as

“the houses on my road.” To further scaffold these conversations, we used items on the AECS to explore students’ perceptions of communities as they aligned (or did not) with dominant conceptions of community engagement, (e.g., *How often do you help make your city or town a better place for people to live?*). Initially, students’ responses aligned with these conceptions about the service-oriented nature of contributing to the community. For example, Camden spoke about contributing to his community by “picking up trash” in his neighborhood or on the side of the road. Some participants, however, were clear that making a contribution to their community meant being gainfully employed. Collin evidenced this belief when he stated, “Well pretty much really, you got a job, you’re pretty much contributing to the community already.” Some classmates echoed this sentiment during the focus group, and after this idea was introduced we had considerable difficulty in prompting a conversation about what contributions might “look like” other than jobs. In addition, some students expressed that contributing to communities in the ways conceptualized and defined by the AECS (e.g., *volunteering, helping make your city or town a better place for people to live, helping to reduce hunger and poverty*) were only somewhat important to them. Instead, having a job appeared to resonate with most of the students as the first and foremost contribution to any community. During these conversations, some students made harsh comments about the homeless and jobless and situated these issues as related to morals, personal “choice,” or failure. Many students appeared to have internalized capitalist notions of community and equal opportunity, and their comments appeared to reflect an ideology akin to “taking care of me and mine.” The differences in views about what ‘service’ to community looks like posed a contradiction in an educative space that was intended to encourage empowerment. These views were also in some ways incongruent to the aims of YPAR as it is usually conceptualized in the literature; that is, goals of YPAR often include problematizing and becoming action-oriented as a collective (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Altruism and Cynicism

Although much of the content of students’ discussion about contributing to their communities was focused on actions (i.e., doing volunteer work or staying employed), they also discussed competing ideas about the importance and impact of their efforts; they were at once altruistic and cynical. Some students in the focus group spoke multiple times about a desire to make a positive difference in their communities and in the world, and feeling capable of doing so via grassroots efforts; we interpreted such comments to be evidence of altruism. For example, Mark said, “So if you get one person to stand up, you can get a bunch of people to stand up.” Despite agreement with this sentiment, some students remained skeptical about the degree to which their efforts would be persuasive to those in positions of authority or power. David commented, “I mean we have a say so, it’s just limited.” Bryan repeated this idea when he said, “Limited say so, let’s put it that way.” Students also described multiple barriers that may impede their altruistic efforts; survey responses pointed to the existence of these barriers, as none of the students agreed with the item, *Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say*, at either administration of the AECS. During the focus group, students explained that their age prevented them from being taken seriously when they tried to speak truth to power. Collin further crystallized this point: “They see us as, ‘man, somebody tell that kid to shut up.’”

Students identified another barrier when they indicated that they had few opportunities to participate in altruistic volunteering and contributing. For example, a section of items on the AECS asked students about how many times in the past month they had participated in service-

oriented activities in their community. Many students chose “never” as their response; when asked to explain their answers, some described the types of volunteer efforts in which they would like to engage. For example, Brooke indicated that she would like to volunteer in a hospice environment if she could. Similarly, Camden remarked that, if given the opportunity, he would like to “go visit sick people” and help out with kids at daycare centers. Despite their desire, students made it clear that they had never had the chance to participate in these kinds of service activities, and/or were not sure how to initiate participating in them.

Students also expressed cynicism about the effectiveness of policy-based solutions to community problems. This cynicism was evidenced by Rodney: “Like, just say like they pass a law, or something like that, saying we have to treat everybody equal, there’s gonna be those people that don’t, cause, people are gonna do what they wanna do.” Brooke, Collin, and Brian all spoke of adults in their community who did not abide by laws in their neighborhood; they reported adults speeding and littering in their neighborhoods despite signs that were posted. We interpreted this cynicism as yet another barrier to students’ engagement in service-oriented community contributions.

Violence as a Problem and a Solution

Throughout the semester, we were surprised by the prominence of violence in participants’ descriptions of their experiences and their communities, though we were aware of the literature that documents students’ concerns about violence (e.g., in urban communities, McIntyre, 2000). None of our interview prompts or AECS items specifically mentioned violence, but instances of violence, especially gun violence, came up repeatedly in the focus group, our normal weekly class routine, and students’ exit interviews. For example, during class one week, Mark said, “A girl got killed in our neighborhood like a week ago.” This comment clearly pointed to violence as a problem, but students also mentioned the safety provided by the presence of guns, the need for more guns, or hypothetical situations in which they believed guns, and by extension, violence, would be beneficial. Bryan made a comment that was indicative of this theme: “Well my neighborhood watch is a whole bunch of different rednecks with shotguns, so, I think we’re good.” It appeared that some students believed that guns could prevent violence, without realizing the contradiction that guns are a means of inflicting violence (even if that violence is supposedly defensive in nature). We saw this as a natural contradiction in a space where children were learning that “killing is bad,” but “killing bad people is good.” We know that students receive these messages in neo-conservative spaces and elsewhere, and that these messages perhaps naturalize this contradiction.

Some students appeared to be grappling with this tension throughout the course of our class. For example, Mark was asked during his group’s final presentation about community safety whether he thought that guns made people safer. Put on the spot, he hedged and said that the presentation was not about his opinion, but was instead an opportunity to present the data they had collected regarding their topic. His classmates pressed him, but Mark did not disclose his personal thoughts. We reflected that Mark had met a learning goal in his understanding of research; but we also interpreted his reluctance to express his own opinion about guns in front of his classmates as indicative of the ways in which he was struggling to reconcile the competing notions of guns as problems and guns as solutions.

Reflections on Implementation

In addition to the formal data we generated with the students enrolled in the YPAR class, we also situated ourselves as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) regarding our dual roles at the school. That is, we were there as researchers, and we were there as YPAR instructors and facilitators. In the latter role, we were committed to ongoing reflection to better understand and improve our practice. What follows are our insights about YPAR implementation that resulted from that reflective work.

YPAR and its Pedagogical Aims

At the onset of the project, we acknowledged and aspired to the notion that “YPAR can be seen as a strategy to help young people develop critical capital and share their knowledge with society in order to agitate for social justice” (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016, p. 25). After one semester of implementation, we were definitive in our assessment that we had not facilitated development of students’ capacities to become empowered and feel confident to affect change in their communities, however those were defined. Further, our semester consisted of progress in “fits and starts” that resulted in student projects that felt decidedly “academic”; these projects were a model of the other schoolwork students had been asked to do before coming to the alternative school. That is to say, students reluctantly presented posters about their chosen topics of inquiry for the semester (perceptions about teacher care and community safety) to a small group of stakeholders at the school. Students expressed pride that their presentations had cultivated interest, as evidenced by attention and questions from stakeholders; however, students were unwilling to discuss what impact their projects may have beyond the formal presentations for school credit. They were adamant that they not be compelled to share their work again beyond the classroom setting.

Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) posited that “development of and engagement with one’s “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970) is a key prerequisite to engaging in the research process” (p. 59). Although data suggested that our students were capable of thinking critically about the world and their places within it, students were not used to being asked to articulate those critical perspectives, or to think critically in academic contexts. This was evident at the beginning of the semester when our efforts to facilitate conversations about topics of concern were stunted and generally limited to ideas that replicated projects about which we had viewed videos. For example, we watched a video about middle school students engaged in YPAR projects around school lunch, and our students became fixated on the quality, or lack thereof, of their school lunches. In addition, many of our students struggled to move beyond their own answers to the research questions they ultimately developed, and that struggle was ongoing, even after they had collected data and were working to analyze it.

Moreover, our students were not used to being acknowledged as having a voice that “matters.” Many of them expressed doubts about the degree to which adults would listen to kids. Others expressed having explicitly been told to shut up when they tried to voice concerns. When we thought about these expressions alongside the students’ chosen topics and projects as well as their reluctance to voice original topics, we wondered about how reasonable our expectations were that students were motivated to express original concerns. After reflection, we wonder if our students expressed reluctance to bring up original concerns because their voice had not mattered in the past, and their prior efforts to speak about concerns were a part of the narrative that brought them to

alternative school. That is, not only had they been silenced, but they had perhaps been punished for their attempts to express themselves. As we read the YPAR literature, there are few stated barriers in eliciting topics of concern from students, beyond those that are external to the student (Ozer et al., 2013). As a result, there is little or no acknowledgement that expressing concerns is risky, especially for a population of students who have been penalized for doing so. Our students, many of whom had experienced negative consequences for taking that risk in the past—however improvisational and emotionally-laden—required a great deal of scaffolding, and the scaffolding we had to do to initiate students’ identification of topics of concern felt inauthentic to YPAR as it was described in the literature.

YPAR and Context

The context of the alternative school where we worked with students on YPAR projects was an atmosphere focused almost exclusively on making measurable progress toward earning credit. Students kept graphs at their work spaces that showed how much progress they had made toward their credit goal for the week, month, and semester. Several of our students spoke about the freedom and opportunity to earn credit very quickly as a key reason they had chosen to attend the alternative school. This environment meant that students expected to have clear benchmarks for making progress and earning credit for the course. We found that this expectation, although well-aligned with prepackaged YPAR curricula, was not conducive to authentically engaging in YPAR.

In developing our lessons for YPAR implementation, we closely examined existing YPAR curricula. We did not anticipate using existing lessons exactly as written, as we are well aware that context matters and that curriculum should be transformed across contexts and be responsive to students (Greene, 1995; Ketsman, 2013). But, we found that many of the lessons we explored appeared to be formulaic, or recipe-like, in that they presented YPAR as a series of linear steps to be completed. Many of the lessons took for granted skills such as reading, skimming, summarizing, technological literacies, and thinking critically—skills that some of our students simply had not developed during their time in public schools. And, the task-focused nature of the prepackaged curricula contributed to a particular mindset around “work”; that is, when we implemented some of the lessons, even with substantial modifications, students often asked about the “work” they needed to complete that day, or “so what do I need to do before our next class?” to keep them on the path to progress for earning course credit. Because all of their other coursework was housed online with no expectation that they would work on assignments outside of school hours, our students also were not accustomed to keeping up with hard copies or digital copies of materials such as data, nor were they accustomed to doing work outside of school. This was a significant limitation in terms of their collecting data. In sum, we found it difficult to engage students in authentic learning that was intrinsically motivated when we employed lessons from existing curricula.

Despite these critiques of our implementation process and the outcomes of the semester, there were features of YPAR that we were able to realize with our students. As earlier stated, core principles of YPAR include collective investigation of a community problem, an emphasis on insider or “indigenous” knowledge and inclusion of marginalized voices, and motivation to collectively engage in action (McIntyre, 2000, p. 128). We feel we were able to realize the first two principles. First, the students collaborated with each other and with us to explore topics of concern (e.g., teacher care and community safety). We were able to engage these students with us, with each other, and with content in ways they would not have otherwise been engaged at this school.

Since all of their other curricula were delivered online, no two students were working on the same content at the same pace. That is, they had no other opportunities for collaborative work with peers or adults. During our group instruction, students listened to each other and us as they worked to grapple with explanations about community engagement and their roles as adolescents in those communities. Second, students engaged in conversations with people in their lives in ways that this school had not previously asked them to do, and their projects included the voices of their classmates, neighbors, and family members. Students conducted short interviews and distributed brief surveys that asked respondents questions about school experiences and perceptions about community safety, violence, and guns; by collecting data from the members of their immediate families and neighbors, students were able to engage in a meaningful activity for school credit and to create space for members of their immediate communities to share their own experiences and perceptions.

With regard to the third principle—a desire and willingness to take action—our work fell short. As already mentioned, our students were unwilling to share their work beyond what was required for credit in the class, and their cynical views about their own agency and power overshadowed any desire they may have had to do something about the problems their communities faced.

Some of our critiques and concerns may seem to be pointed at our students. We want to be clear that we have no desire to cast these students in a pejorative light. In fact, we liked and respected them very much. We thought they were smart, funny, interesting, and capable well beyond what their school work and record demonstrated. We felt genuine fondness for them, talking about them often and missing them when we had not seen them in a while. Instead, this work aims to shed light on the challenges of YPAR implementation and their particular nature in rural, alternative school contexts. We also want to be clear that what may sound like critiques of our students are really critiques of the school systems that had heretofore not served them well.

Discussion

At the onset of this project, we anticipated that students would have an idea of a cohesive community that was clearly defined. Indeed, a majority of the YPAR literature to date has focused on students in urban communities, which may be more densely populated, and may have community centers that are easily accessed by youths. However, we found that students in this rural setting may have conceptualized their communities in different ways because theirs were more expansive—their interpersonal and geographic relationships to neighbors may have been different, and the hubs of their communities may have been more commercial (e.g., general or grocery stores, etc.) than communal (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA). That is, our students' concerns seemed disparate perhaps because they did not share a neighborhood. Even when they expressed the same kinds of concerns (e.g., neighborhood safety or litter on their street), they were not speaking about the same neighborhood, the same street. Further, adolescents' schools are often the most salient community with which they identify; but, as evidenced by their enrollment in an alternative school, our students had been marginalized or underserved by the schools most proximal to their homes. Thus, students' articulation of their communities was different from our own conceptions, and this forced us to spend considerable reflective time during and after instruction to: 1) examine our own class-laden, perhaps more urban or suburban expectations of communities; and, 2) prepare to scaffold our students for future discussions of community, how they may be a part of one or multiple

communities, how those communities are contextually bound, and how they might contribute to them as empowered researchers and members.

In this study, students held particular ideas about community, altruism, participation, and violence. They generated contradictions around these ideas that appeared to be natural to this particular context, as those contradictions were left unexamined, even as we pressed students to consider them. Students reported that many of their beliefs about community and what participation and citizenship “looked like” were learned from family members and teachers, suggesting that these conceptions about capitalistic participation were natural since they were voiced by authority figures. In a model like YPAR, with its aims towards liberatory education and empowerment of adolescents, an emphasis on capitalistic participation as an approach to community contribution generated contradictions that may indicate students in rural spaces need more scaffolding to engage with ideas that diverge from this neoconservative ideology. We anticipate that future work with students will include more foundational development of students’ critical consciousness around types of participation in a community that extend beyond notions of commerce, consumption of goods and services, and individual gainful employment. YPAR situates problematization of community issues in a framework where youth may become action-oriented; thus, we emphasize the importance of critical-consciousness development as integral to a process of collective empowerment for change instead of individualized, market-based notions of what it means to be part of a community. This work may be especially important and difficult for students in rural contexts, where decision-making about community involvement, and whether to stay in rural contexts, may be linked to perceptions about economic opportunity (Schafft, 2016). And, since many YPAR models engage students of color around critical consciousness about intersectionality, racism, and oppression (Camarota & Fine, 2008), this work may also be especially challenging with white students who do not readily identify systems of oppression and who embrace (the myth of) meritocracy and hard work as the primary avenue for access to economic opportunity (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

Thus, future directions in research about YPAR should explore how to support a sense of collective agency and action for students whose ideas about participation are not congruent with the aims of YPAR. In addition, further research is needed to explore how students whose only “collective” is at school make sense of YPAR. Topic selection and collective action appear to be components of YPAR that are most constrained in public school settings (Ozer et al., 2013). Inasmuch as those facets are known to be constrained in urban contexts, we posit that the particular nature of those constraints is different in rural contexts than in urban or suburban schools. Future inquiry should examine how these constraints manifest to better enable YPAR facilitators in rural contexts. In addition, future research should investigate the kinds of topics and actions that students perceive as risky in order to better enable facilitators to support students in navigating that risk, especially those students who have experienced consequences in risk-taking.

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Appendix: Focus Group and Cognitive Appraisal Interview Protocol

- 1) What community are you a member of?
- 2) How important is it to you to contribute to your community?
 - Probes about individual items related to community contributions (ie. volunteering, tutoring, mentoring, other things that students are interested in).
- 3) What kinds of problems do you see in your community?
- 4) If you found a problem in your community that you wanted to do something about, what would you do?
- 5) How much do adults in your community listen to what you have to say?
 - Probes: How do you know they're not listening?
- 6) How important is it to you to speak up for equality?
- 7) What have you learned in this class?³
 - Probes about conduct of project and about final presentations to stakeholders.

3. This question was only asked at the end of the semester.