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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/411950pk>

Journal

Youth, 4(2)

ISSN

2673-995X

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Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.3390/youth4020046

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Peer reviewed

Review

Examining the Intersection of Sociopolitical Development and Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach in Youth Participatory Action Research

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Abstract: Young people need opportunities that support their well-being while enabling them to take meaningful action. There has been strong interest in youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a form of sociopolitical action for marginalized youth seeking to address inequities that undermine individual and community well-being. The rapid growth of the YPAR literature in the last decade has involved studies analyzing the impact of YPAR on dimensions of youth empowerment, sociopolitical development (SPD), and well-being. The relatively new framework of Transformative Social Emotional Learning (tSEL) is potentially fruitful in identifying relevant constructs, skills, and strategies to support well-being during the YPAR process. This article seeks to advance our integrative conceptualization and analysis of the impact of YPAR by (1) considering the overlapping and unique dimensions of SPD and tSEL: agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, identity, societal involvement, and worldview and social analysis; and (2) applying this integrative lens to the analysis of novel data from an updated systematic review of U.S. and international YPAR studies (2015–2022). We summarize youth outcomes reported in 25 studies to assess the evidence for YPAR as an approach for promoting youth SPD and tSEL outcomes, identifying limitations and next steps for advancing our understanding of these impacts.

Citation: Nash, A.; Kennedy, H.; Abraczinskas, M.; Ballonoff Suleiman, A.; Ozer, E.J. Examining the Intersection of Sociopolitical Development and Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach in Youth Participatory Action Research. *Youth* **2024**, *4*, x.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/xxxxx>

Academic Editor(s): Name

Received: 16 January 2024

Revised: 4 May 2024

Accepted: 9 May 2024

Published: date



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Keywords: youth participatory action research; sociopolitical development; transformative social and emotional learning

1. Overview

Young people face challenges that impact their mental health in today's society, such as ongoing war, racial injustice, adultism [1], and increased social isolation and time spent online since the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. Minoritized and marginalized young people often face additional challenges to their mental health related to their experiences of systemic inequities (e.g., school tracking, redlining), racism, and discrimination in their day-to-day lives [3,4]. Some young people may feel immobilized or powerless to make change, which can further lead to feelings of hopelessness.

Young people can engage in a wide range of sociopolitical actions to empower themselves and promote change in their schools and communities, from participating in more traditional forms of school and community leadership roles, to processes focused on changing the settings themselves, such as youth organizing and youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) [5]. Active participation in investigating and initiating change is connected to well-being [6,7]. In considering the relationship between sociopolitical action and well-being, we focus the present review on the literature about YPAR, a widely used participatory approach that engages youth as researchers to identify issues relevant to their lives, collect data, and advocate for change to address systemic issues impacting their well-being [6,7]. As part of the YPAR process, youth engage in a critical reflection of systemic inequities and their impact on their lives, often described as part of critical consciousness building or sociopolitical development [8]. As youth engage in research to inform critical action to change inequitable systems, policies, and practices, YPAR can

increase their feelings of agency [5]. Over the last two decades, the field has experienced a rapid growth in publications dedicated to documenting YPAR's impact. Here, we examine the relationship between sociopolitical action and socio-emotional learning in the YPAR literature.

In setting the stage for our present review, we consider the scope and strengths of prior reviews for what is known about outcomes for youth participating in YPAR as a form of social action. There have been two systematic reviews that have sought to summarize YPAR's impact at the level of youth participants across settings, the most recent of which included research up until 2015. These reviews vary in focus and scope. Shamrova and Cummings' (2017) review of 45 international, qualitative studies published between 2000 and 2016 examined the methods and outcomes of participatory action research with youth participants, organizations, and communities [9]. Youth outcomes included increases in social justice awareness, social-emotional and cognitive development, perceptions of youth as change agents, and stronger relationships with adults and the broader community [9]. This research provided initial insights about the methodology, characteristics, and outcomes of YPAR. It suggests that although the degree of youth involvement can vary across studies, participation may be associated with selected positive developmental outcomes.

Anyon et al. (2018) summarized the findings of the YPAR literature published between 1995 and 2015 in the U.S., examining study methodology, youth outcomes, and YPAR principles and project characteristics [10]. Across the 63 articles in the review that reported youth outcomes, the key findings included that the YPAR literature is predominantly composed of qualitative studies, and that the most common outcomes associated with participation in YPAR are those related to agency and leadership (e.g., self-determination, empowerment; 75%), followed by academic or career (56%), social (e.g., connectedness, social support; 37%), interpersonal (e.g., communication skills, empathy; 35%), critical consciousness (i.e., the ability to recognize any injustices or inequalities in society; 31%), and cognitive (e.g., problem solving, decision-making; 23%) outcomes. They were unable to identify any published studies that report on youth emotional outcomes, which they define as stress, symptomatology, the ability to identify and express emotions, regulate emotions, or manage anger. Beyond these broad categorizations, however, the authors did not report on the nature and strength of the evidence (quantitative and/or qualitative) for the youth outcomes reported in the literature. As part of the same study team, Kennedy et al. (2019) identified environmental outcomes from a subgroup of 36 of the 63 included studies [11]. The authors reported environmental outcomes including policy development (14%), program/service development or improvement (53%), practitioner growth (33%), research benefits (39%), and changes in peer group norms (6%). Authors conducting research on youth inquiry approaches that utilized advocacy to create change, targeted decision-makers as the audience for the youth's work, and convened for a longer duration were more likely to report environmental outcomes.

We observe that several of the youth outcomes such as agency, empowerment, and interpersonal skills reported in prior YPAR reviews align with sociopolitical and social-emotional development outcomes. While the extant findings discuss broad categorizations of social and interpersonal youth outcomes, they do not provide analyses of specific sociopolitical or social-emotional dimensions. Another key limitation of the existing reviews is that they did not report on the nature and strength of the effects found for the relationship between YPAR participation and youth outcomes. The present study seeks to address these gaps and further advance our understanding of the operationalization and measurement of socio-emotional learning and sociopolitical development within YPAR. Below, we discuss our conceptual orientation of these theories, emphasizing an integrative perspective that draws from the multiple disciplines and fields in which we practice and study YPAR.

2. Conceptual Model

Below, we provide a conceptual model to display the overlap between sociopolitical development (SPD) and transformative social and emotional learning (tSEL) frameworks (see Figure 1). Before applying this conceptual model to our systematic review of the YPAR literature, we provide an overview of the frameworks and dimensions of SPD and tSEL.

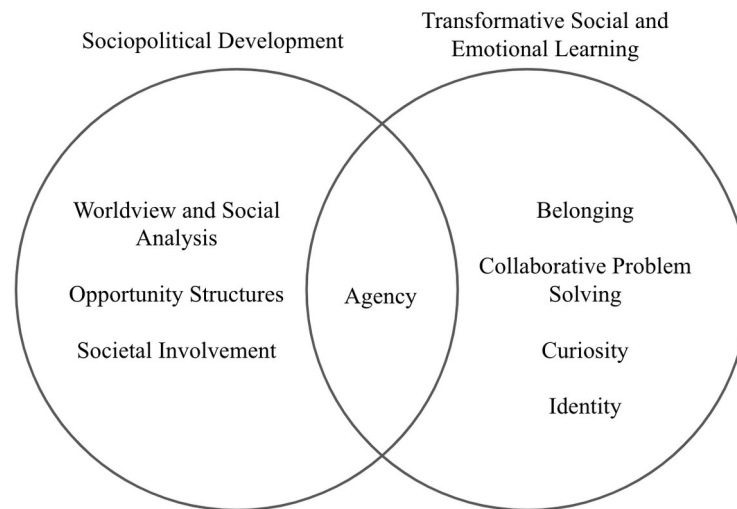


Figure 1. Conceptual model and integration of SPD and tSEL components.

2.1. Sociopolitical Development

We draw on Watts et al.'s (2003) key framing of sociopolitical development as an understanding of the cultural and political forces that shape one's status in society and a "process of growth in a person's knowledge, analytical skills, emotional faculties, and capacity for action in political and social systems" [12] (p. 185). The SPD framework emphasizes liberation and includes four concepts: (1) worldview and social analysis, (2) sense of agency, (3) opportunity structure, and (4) societal involvement behavior [13]. Worldview and social analysis involve beliefs about the relative contributions of personal behavior and social forces on social conditions, which include critical consciousness [13]. The concept of critical consciousness refers to the understanding of systemic inequities through iterative dialogue, reflection on the impact of inequities, and learning and implementing social action strategies [8]. The principal outcome of interest of sociopolitical development is societal involvement, including community service and civic engagement in social and political institutions [13]. Watts and Flanagan (2007) proposed that a sense of agency served a moderating role between social analysis and societal involvement behavior [13]. Agency can include collective, personal, or political efficacy or empowerment. In the empowerment literature, Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) defined agency as "a combination of self-acceptance and self-confidence, social and political understanding, and the ability to play an assertive role in controlling resources and decisions in one's community" [14] (p. 726). Opportunity structures—the people and setting resources available to influence action—serve as another potential moderator of the relationship between social analysis and societal involvement behavior.

2.2. Transformative Social and Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" [15]. The CASEL framework for systemic SEL applies an ecological approach that recognizes families, schools, and communities as part of broader systems that shape learning, development, and experiences [16]. Across these systems, inequities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors influence SEL. Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) introduced the concept of tSEL to mitigate educational, social, and economic inequities [17]. The authors propose that in order for SEL to adequately serve and promote positive developmental outcomes for youth from underrepresented communities, youth must have the knowledge and skills required for a critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequities, and collaborative action to address root causes [17].

tSEL includes five focal constructs: (1) agency, (2) belonging, (3) collaborative problem solving, (4) curiosity, and (5) identity. When young people experience agency, they feel empowered to make choices and perceive and experience a capacity to effect positive change through purposeful action. Belonging involves experiences of acceptance, respect, connectedness, and inclusion within a group or community [18]. A transformative form of belonging involves

relationship-building, as well as people authentically partnering in co-creating an equitable community [17]. Collaborative problem solving requires relationship skills and working together to solve a problem through building a shared understanding with others and pooling knowledge, skills, and efforts to reach solutions. Next, curiosity emerges when young people pursue different perspectives and new experiences to generate knowledge about oneself in relation to others and the world. It contributes to the attention, engagement, learning, and informed decision-making that sparks critical self and social analysis [18]. Lastly, identity refers to how an individual views themselves as part of the world around them [16]. Identity is multi-dimensional, including culture, gender, race or ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and values.

Figure 1 presents our conceptual model, which displays both the overlap and unique concepts of SPD and tSEL. We highlight that agency—the belief that one has the capacity to understand and effect community change through their own actions—in both frameworks. In their introduction of tSEL, Jagers, Rivas-Drake, and Williams (2019) emphasized political agency or efficacy, which refers to an individual's belief in their own knowledge and skills to act socially and politically [17]. The overlap of agency between SPD and tSEL is that people are more likely to take social or political action when they believe that their voice and action can make a difference.

3. Current Study

Advances in our conceptualization of tSEL [17], and emerging conversations about YPAR, provide a rich context for enhancing both SEL [5] and SPD [19]. In this review, we systematically examine youth social and emotional learning and sociopolitical development as it relates to participation in YPAR. We expand the conceptualization and assessment of SPD and tSEL outcomes, acknowledging the significant overlap between SPD and tSEL, specifically with agency.

In this study, we offer a unique, theoretically driven analysis of SPD and tSEL outcomes with respect to the following concepts: agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, identity, societal involvement, and worldview and social analysis. Using data from our systematic review of YPAR studies, we examine the evidence base of YPAR as an approach for promoting youth SPD and tSEL. We argue that both theoretical frameworks can be enhanced by the other: YPAR that utilizes an SPD framework can benefit from the integration of the measurement of concepts related to individual and peer skill building, and YPAR using a tSEL framework can be enhanced by the measurement of outcomes that capture the interaction of individuals with structures and systems. Utilizing outcomes across these frameworks can lead to a more robust measurement of YPAR by capturing both the individual and collective aspects of YPAR's impact.

4. Methods

We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. We focused on the YPAR literature published in the U.S. and internationally in English between December 2015 and June 2022, extending Anyon et al.'s (2018) systematic review of YPAR in the U.S. through 2015 [10]. Working in collaboration with a key member of Anyon et al.'s team, we replicated the initial phases of the methodology of the prior study to enable comparisons, as feasible, while expanding our scope beyond research in the U.S.

4.1. Authors' Connection to YPAR and Epistemology

All of the authors involved in this review have extensive experience in co-designing and facilitating YPAR in urban or rural contexts. We provide an overview of our diverse perspectives and practice experiences here to provide context for how we approach the YPAR literature in its complexity and nuance. The lead author is a public health postdoctoral researcher and has provided consultation for YPAR for adult facilitators and student researchers in urban high schools for four years. The second author is a public health social worker and has conducted research on PAR with youth in afterschool programs for three years, has coached adults in YPAR, and currently leads multiple statewide youth engagement offerings. The third author is a community-clinical psychologist who has led grant-funded YPAR and other youth-engaged work with middle-school-age youth through to young adults in schools, communities, and virtual settings, most recently with youth who have experienced parental incarceration. The fourth author is a transdisciplinary adolescent developmental scientist with a background in public health, YPAR, and youth engagement. The senior author is a clinical-community psychologist in public health that has been engaged in supporting and studying YPAR in a community partnership for two decades. Our research team includes individuals who align with post-positivist, constructivist, and critical ways of knowing. These epistemologies raised questions for intentional consideration in our systematic review of this literature. For instance, we overtly discussed our epistemology

when considering our inclusive approach to identifying outcomes and findings, as well as considering the trustworthiness of those findings, across a broad range of research designs and methods grounded in multiple disciplines. In these discussions, we aimed for balance and engaged in ongoing critical reflection regarding the ways in which our epistemologies impacted our methodology and results. As the core values of YPAR focus on the generation of multiple forms of evidence from youth in highly diverse contexts, it was particularly crucial for our work to remain open and respectful to the wide range of approaches to research and evidence generation in the YPAR literature.

4.2. Search and Sampling Strategy

We selected and searched four databases for their relevance to YPAR: PubMed, ERIC, Social Service Abstracts, and PsychInfo. In order to identify relevant publications, we entered search terms using the Boolean operators AND/OR and asterisks to truncate the search terms. We included the following search terms associated with the study population (separated by OR): student, emerging adult, youth, high school, middle school, minor*, juvenile*, adolescent* and teen* AND the following search terms associated with intervention (separated by OR): community involvement, youth voice, student voice, youth organizing, student organizing, youth activism, student activism, youth empower*, youth leader*, youth civic, youth advoc*, student advoc*, youth decision-making, student decision-making, social change, participatory action research, youth engage*, youth advisory board, youth advisory council, youth action board, youth action council, youth community development, youth involvement, youth led, youth council, youth coalition, youth outreach, student council, youth adult partner*, youth commission AND the following search terms associated with study methods (separated by OR): evidence-based, effective*, treatment*, intervention*, outcome*, experimental stud*, quasi-experiment*, case stud*, case-control stud*, cross-sectional, cohort stud*, observational, promising practice*, randomized control trial*, interview*, qualitative, survey, focus group, pre-experiment*, and evaluation.

4.3. Eligibility Criteria

We developed eligibility criteria focusing on five key elements: (1) study characteristics (empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals, published in English); (2) population (at least 50% of the program participants comprised youth 25 years or younger; we excluded studies if they consisted only of undergraduate or graduate students in order to have a more homogeneous sample of youth in similar developmental stages); (3) scope of youth engagement (at a minimum, youth engaged in data collection and at least one additional component of the research process, such as data analysis or dissemination of findings); (4) youth tSEL outcomes (authors reported on the experiences, outcomes, or impact of YPAR for the youth participants related to agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, and/or identity); (5) explicit description of systematic methods for data collection and analysis of reported tSEL outcomes.

4.4. Study Selection

We designed a multiphase systematic search process led by one postdoctoral student, two doctoral students, two masters students, and two undergraduate students, who consulted weekly consultation with the PhD-level co-authors. All researchers discussed the eligibility criteria and were involved in searching, screening, and coding the studies. After conducting electronic searches using the databases and search terms described above, we prescreened the abstracts to determine whether they met the initial criteria. As shown in Figure 2, our search resulted in 2023 studies. We removed 419 duplicates and screened 1604 abstracts, removing 934 because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. In cases where the abstract lacked sufficient detail to determine eligibility, we retained them for the next phase. In the next phase, we fully assessed 599 full-text articles. We excluded 574 studies because they were not empirical ($n = 48$); did not include youth as participants ($n = 63$); did not engage youth in various phases of research ($n = 383$); did not report youth tSEL outcomes for youth participants ($n = 69$); or did not describe systematic methods for data collection or analysis of reported outcomes ($n = 11$) (refer to Figure 2).

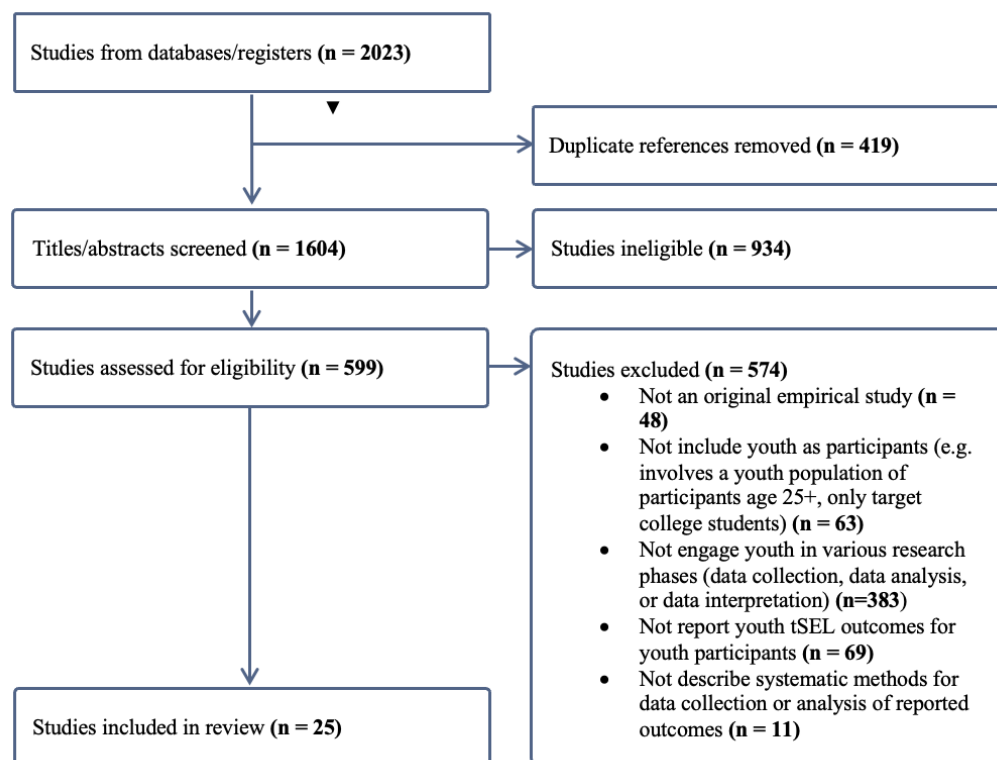


Figure 2. PRISMA chart—identification, screening, and eligibility of the review sample.

4.5. Data Extraction Process

4.5.1. Phase 1. Adapt Codebook and Code Included Articles

We iteratively developed a detailed codebook for our analyses based on the principles of YPAR and the PRISMA guidelines, building on the systematic review of YPAR in the U.S. conducted by Anyon et al. (2018) [10]. To examine the relationship between YPAR and tSEL outcomes, we adapted the Anyon et al. (2018) [10] codebook to include more differentiated information regarding the studies including (a) study characteristics (e.g., systematic analysis of qualitative or quantitative data); (b) YPAR project characteristics (e.g., training of youth researchers in YPAR research skills, training of adult facilitators, process evaluation, and identified facilitators and barriers to YPAR); and (c) youth outcomes related to tSEL. We specifically examined the ways in which study authors measure and report tSEL outcomes of YPAR, and we deductively recorded and applied a theoretically driven conceptualization of tSEL by coding outcomes into the focal constructs of agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, and identity. Our research team also coded the direct language and text from the articles related to the specific youth outcomes. We did so to make sure we were inclusive of the wide range of language that might be used in the text to report youth outcomes, and in recognition of the high degree of inference and consensus coding needed to analyze this text. For qualitative data, we included the specific themes reported; for quantitative data, we included the measures used and effect sizes reported.

We coded all included articles in Covidence, an online systematic review management software, to promote consistency in coding. First, two research team members used the screening criteria and codebook in Covidence to code articles independently. The researchers met weekly to discuss discrepancies and addressed them through consensus discussion. If researchers were unsure whether a study met any of the criteria, the entire research team reviewed and discussed it during weekly meetings.

4.5.2. Phase 2. Identify Evidence for Outcomes

We added an inclusion criterion to identify studies that provided a description of how they analyzed data (qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods) to generate their claims regarding the youth outcomes reported in the study results. We used a highly flexible approach in order to be consistent with the spirit of our inclusion criteria for empirical findings regarding YPAR outcomes, and to exclude from our analysis comments or anecdotes about YPAR outcomes that did not have what we deemed to be trustworthy empirical evidence for those claims. For example, we excluded articles at this phase if the results did not report any youth outcomes or if the authors discussed potential youth outcomes but did not report how they identified or analyzed those youth outcomes. Two research team members reviewed each article carefully to identify any information regarding study design and methods, as well as any reported evidence regarding youth outcomes. All members of the research team reached consensus about the final list of articles for inclusion at this phase of the review.

In this review, we aimed for systematic investigation while acknowledging the nuanced and contextualized nature of PAR with youth. We carefully categorized and discerned patterns, examining both commonalities and divergences in the literature, while honoring its contextual complexity.

4.5.3. Phase 3. Code Youth Sociopolitical Development Outcomes

Based on our research aim to operationalize and measure tSEL and SPD within YPAR, we added codes for youth SPD outcomes at this later phase. In order to identify SPD outcomes, the first author and another member of the research team re-analyzed the categorically coded youth outcomes and direct quotes to identify outcomes that were concepts of the SPD theoretical framework [13] previously described. In this analysis, we applied a theoretically driven conceptualization of SPD by coding outcomes into the components of agency, worldview and social analysis, and societal involvement. We operationalized societal involvement as a process characteristic, unlike the other tSEL and SPD domains coded in this review. We coded this when authors described in either a Results or Discussion section behaviors where youth (a) engaged with social and political institutions by disseminating their research findings, or (b) proposed or enacted change to systems or policies. We intentionally did not include or analyze the opportunity structure component of SPD as it is a process characteristic with a moderating role between social analysis and societal involvement behavior. Two research team members completed coding at this phase; using consensus to address discrepancies.

5. Results

In Table 1, we provide a summary of the YPAR study setting, youth sample size, data collection methods, and tSEL and SPD outcomes. The most common SPD and tSEL outcomes reported for participation in YPAR were societal involvement ($n = 22$; 88%), agency ($n = 17$; 68%), belonging ($n = 11$; 44%), worldview and social action ($n = 9$; 36%), collaborative problem solving ($n = 7$; 28%), identity ($n = 4$; 16%), and curiosity ($n = 1$; 4%). Below, we report the outcomes in order of prevalence in the review. We describe how these youth outcomes are qualitatively and quantitatively reported in the literature, as well as the strength of the effects and the design of the quantitative studies.

5.1. Societal Involvement

Societal involvement was the most commonly reported domain in our review across a range of study methods and designs ($n = 22$; 88%). Across these studies reporting societal involvement, 22 (100%) described youth disseminating their research findings, a hallmark of YPAR efforts. The most common forms of the dissemination of findings were art/photo exhibits [20,21] and presentations [22–32]. Dissemination occurred in different settings, including staff meetings [31], assemblies [24], town halls [33], community art shows [34], university symposia [32], conferences [20,27,35], and national community conventions [28]. The dissemination strategies that did not describe formal presentations or settings disseminated findings via a deliverable, such as a school anti-bullying poster campaign [36], video documentary [37,38], or report [39]. There were three studies that did not report enough information to conclude whether or not youth researchers disseminated their findings [40–42].

Additionally, there were a range of social and political institutions that authors reported as sites for youth researcher engagement. Most commonly, youth engaged with stakeholders in their schools including school administrators and principals [22,25,29,31,34,38], teachers [22,27,34,38], and student peers [24,36,38]. In the broader community, youth engaged with

community members [20,23,25,28,33], community agencies [21,26,43], university academics and researchers [21,32,35,43], police [44], journalists [25], and environmentalists [25]. In several studies, youth researchers shared their findings with state and national decision-makers [25], such as state senators and congressional representatives [20], parliamentarians in Spain [35], and representatives of European Union institutions [27].

The second form of societal involvement that we coded for entailed youth proposing or enacting change to systems or policies. Across the studies in which youth disseminated research findings, 15 (60%) described the proposing of recommendations for systems-level change from youth. Examples of specific community-level recommendations proposed were to change dynamics between youth and police [44]; expand community partnerships [26]; promote community gardens [26]; and change public transportation [20]. Youth also proposed specific policies for new education reform opposing racial prejudice [32] and to enforce environmental laws legally banning people from throwing garbage and sewage water in the ocean [25]. Of these 15 studies in which youth proposed systems-level change, six described the enactment of changes based on youth research and recommendations. Examples of enacted community-level change included the development of community gardens [26,44] and weekly community cleaning campaigns funded by the local council [25]. Additionally, two YPAR studies reported that youth themselves enacted school-level policies, e.g., to improve the physical activity environment by giving all students a recess break at the end of the day, create an after-school dance team, and fix a high ropes course [22]; and to give students more choice in their dress code, change school hours to accommodate transportation routes, and implement a peer mediation program [31]. Nine additional studies described that youth made proposed changes to systems or policies, but did not provide enough information for us to conclude whether these changes were enacted.

5.2. Agency

5.2.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Agency, the overlapping construct between SPD and tSEL, was one of the most commonly reported domains in this subset of the YPAR literature, with 17 studies describing outcomes related to efficacy and empowerment to make choices and take actions. These studies used a range of methods and social action approaches. A majority of these studies used qualitative methods to report agency outcomes and occurred in school settings. Two authors reported youth experiencing increased responsibility to take action: Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2016), with Filipino youth who performed a cultural show for community members addressing racism [34]; and Hayik (2021), who engaged Palestinian–Israeli high school students in Photovoice [25]. Two studies specifically reported agency in reshaping curricula to honor youth’s experiences [32,36]. In Sprague Martinez et al. (2020), youth researchers of color reported an increased sense of agency, confidence, empowerment, and ownership over the YPAR project when adults shared power throughout the research [28]. Youth of color in three YPAR studies in Ecuador, South Africa, and the U.S. conducted in school settings reported increases in the sense of leadership, resulting in the confidence to share their knowledge with adults and take action [31,39,43]. Youth engaging in research on topics such as homelessness and sexual and reproductive health in community settings also reported agency outcomes such as self-efficacy, confidence, enhanced self-worth, and belief in the importance of youth voices [21,23,35].

5.2.2. Quantitative Outcomes

Five studies reported quantitative measures of an increased sense of agency as a YPAR outcome. Zimmerman et al. (2018) utilized a quasi-experimental design, randomly assigning youth participants to the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) program ($n = 249$) or usual after-school programming (control) ($n = 118$) [42], reporting that youth who received more components of the YES curriculum reported stronger psychological empowerment. Abraczinskas and Zarrett (2020) used a two-group design comparing YPAR ($n = 30$) with a combined YPAR + physical activity (PA) Photovoice intervention ($n = 43$) [22]. They found relatively robust effects for increased perceived control (YPAR+PA: $t = 2.33$, $p = 0.03$) for the combined program but no significant effects for YPAR only; they found no significant improvements in motivation to influence systems-level change (YPAR+PA: $t = 0.52$, $p = 0.61$). Bender et al. (2017) used a small ($n = 22$) pre–post design and paired sample t-tests to assess outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness who participated in a Photovoice intervention, reporting a significant increase in resilience ($t = -2.26$, $p = 0.05$) but not in self-efficacy or self-esteem [21]. Stoddard et al. (2020) employed a pre–post survey ($n = 43$) and reported that youth who display early warning signs for school disengagement experienced significantly increased levels of leadership efficacy (Cohen’s $d = 0.42$, $p = 0.02$) and sense of control over their lives and potential problems (Cohen’s $d = 0.43$, $p = 0.02$), but not in leadership behavior (Cohen’s $d = 0.07$; $p = 0.70$) [29]. Anyon et al. (2018) used

a pre–post design with a comparison group and reported that YPAR participants increased their youth voice score from 2.97 to 3.27 over the course of the program ($p < 0.01$) [44]. In addition to the qualitative agency outcomes Halliday et al. (2019) reported in their mixed methods study, they reported no significant difference in self-efficacy between their quantitative independent sample t-tests ($n = 10$) between the participatory action research group and control groups ($t = -0.524$, $p = 0.607$) [24].

5.3. *Belonging*

5.3.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Eleven studies reported belonging outcomes related to youth experiences of acceptance and inclusion within their school or broader community; the majority used qualitative methods. Four of these qualitative studies reported belonging outcomes in school settings [24,31,34,37]. In community settings, youth reported enhanced belonging through discussing and addressing racial segregation [20], creating a support network of Senegalese youth [23], and in psychiatric treatment where their opinions were heard and respected [41].

5.3.2. Quantitative Outcomes

Five studies used pre–post designs to report quantitative belonging outcomes. Bender et al.'s (2017) Photovoice study with youth experiencing homelessness ($n = 22$) reported a statistically significant improvement in social connectedness ($t = -4.47$, $p = 0.002$) [21]. Zimmerman et al. (2018) found that psychological empowerment mediated the relationship between youth empowerment program activities and community engagement (estimate = 0.65, $p < 0.001$), school engagement (estimate = 0.59, $p < 0.001$), and adult mentorship (estimate = 0.25, $p < 0.05$) [42]. Stoddard et al.'s (2020) small, pre–post, one-group design ($n = 43$) reported no significant difference in school bonding ($d = 0.04$; $p = 0.82$), school engagement ($d = -0.03$; $p = 0.86$), or social support ($d = -0.04$; $p = 0.79$) [29]. Anyon et al. (2018) used a pre–post design and reported that the participants experienced an increase in adult support (from 3.44 to 3.87, $p < 0.001$) by the end of the YPAR program [44]. While Halliday et al. (2019) reported qualitative belonging outcomes in their mixed methods study, independent sample t-tests with a very small sample size ($n = 10$) did not detect a significant difference between the participatory action research group and control groups in terms of connectedness ($t = 0.278$, $p = 0.784$) [24].

5.4. *Worldview and Social Analysis*

5.4.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Nine articles reported SPD outcomes associated with changes in worldview and social analysis relating to youth's beliefs about the relative contributions of personal behavior and social forces, such as laws and policies on social conditions. This also included explicit mentions of the term critical consciousness. Three studies reported critical consciousness raising as a youth outcome, specifically, one using Photovoice [20] and two using other arts methods [30,34]. Authors reported that youth increased their awareness by self-critical investigation, destigmatizing their existence, and analyzing their own reality using Photovoice [21], participatory video [35], and presenting their findings to adults [38].

5.4.2. Quantitative Outcomes

Two studies reported quantitative findings for worldview and social analysis outcomes. Abraczinskas and Zarrett (2020) reported relatively robust effects for increased sociopolitical skills and understanding of systems' influences on participants' physical health in the physical activity + YPAR program but no significant effects for YPAR only [22]. Prati et al. (2020) reported a large effect for increased political institutional trust (Partial $\eta^2 = 0.13$) and a medium effect for decreased political alienation (Partial $\eta^2 = 0.05$) for the YPAR group [27].

5.5. *Collaborative Problem Solving*

5.5.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Seven studies included collaborative problem solving outcomes related to working together to come to solutions. The majority of these used qualitative methods and reported skill development. Three school-based studies described the development of communication skills that facilitated collaboration [21,24,26]. Three community-based studies reported skill development amongst youth of color, related to interpersonal, organizational, power sharing, and research skills, which were necessary to facilitate collaborative problem solving [23,28,31].

5.5.2. Quantitative Outcomes

One additional study reported quantitative outcomes related to collaborative problem solving. Zimmerman et al. (2018) reported estimates through an adjusted model of their quasi-experimental data, which indicated that psychological empowerment mediated the relationship between youth empowerment program activities and responsible decision-making at the end of the YPAR program (estimate = 0.57, $p < 0.001$) [42].

5.6. Identity

5.6.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Three articles reported identity outcomes based on qualitative methods related to how youth viewed themselves as part of the world around them: a common national identity [33], racial and gender identity within the YPAR group [40], and social identity within a broader community [21].

5.6.2. Quantitative Outcomes

Only one study reported quantitative data regarding identity outcomes: an Italian study by Prati et al. (2020) reported a small effect for increased active identification as European citizens for a small quasi-experimental evaluation of YPAR with an adolescent school-based sample (partial $\eta^2 = 0.01$) for the YPAR intervention group [27].

5.7. Curiosity

5.7.1. Qualitative Outcomes

Only one study reported outcomes related to curiosity, defined as an increased interest in continually gaining knowledge, understanding different perspectives, and integrating these new insights into decision-making. Maker Castro et al. (2021) described how emerging bilingual, immigrant-origin students used a story-telling app, which encouraged empathetic listening and perspective-taking skills with peers [37]. Students with more temporal distance in their generational status who participated in the immigration story-sharing aspect of the project described a renewed curiosity in learning from and about their peers' immigration experiences, as well as about their own immigration stories [37].

5.7.2. Quantitative Outcomes

No studies reported quantitative outcomes related to curiosity.

6. Discussion

We aimed to conduct an updated analysis of the impact of YPAR, informed by the frameworks of SPD and tSEL. We systematically reviewed the YPAR literature and identified 25 studies that reported youth tSEL outcomes (i.e., agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, identity). Applying the SPD framework, we coded the studies for other unique outcomes (i.e., agency, societal involvement, worldview and social analysis). Our findings indicate that there is a strong focus on SPD in articles reporting tSEL outcomes in the YPAR literature published since 2015, which contributes to the evidence base of YPAR as a promising approach for promoting youth SPD and tSEL outcomes. Further, most studies reported outcomes from both frameworks; in fact, all but three of the articles that reported a tSEL outcome also reported at least one SPD outcome (as shown in Table 1). We interpret this pattern as suggesting that both SPD and tSEL can be promoted simultaneously in the context of YPAR, aligned with recent calls to explore the integration of YPAR and SEL (e.g., Ozer, Shapiro, and Duarte (2021) [45]).

Across the two frameworks, the articles most commonly reported on the domain of societal involvement ($n = 22$; 88%). This finding is expected since one of the key tenets of YPAR is that it is transformative, and that youth use findings to take action for systemic change [6]. Our conceptualization of societal involvement included behaviors where youth (a) engaged with social and political institutions by disseminating their research findings, or (b) proposed or enacted change to systems or policies, which is much broader than prior reviews that explore environmental outcomes more narrowly. The next most commonly reported outcome is the overlapping SPD and tSEL domain, agency (68%; $n = 17$), which is consistent with Anyon et al.'s (2018) findings that 75% ($n = 39$) of studies published before 2015 describe agency and leadership outcomes [10]. This finding also aligns with expectations due to common theoretical descriptions of YPAR focusing on empowerment as a key concept [46,47].

Both in the U.S. and across the globe, there have been numerous calls to action to address increases in adolescent depression, hopelessness, and feelings of disempowerment [48,49]. Given the ways that COVID-19, racial injustice, deepening mistrust in our government, and war impact

young people in the world today, we urge the development of integrated approaches that maximize the socio-emotional benefit of YPAR while offering youth opportunities to engage in meaningful action. YPAR scholars can look to the SPD and tSEL literature to identify relevant constructs, skills, and strategies to support well-being and healing during the YPAR process. In YPAR implementation, there is a need to take a holistic approach to support youth development and opportunities for meaningful action. We argue that today's young people need approaches that incorporate SEL into YPAR to offer emotional support that youth need.

6.1. Measuring SPD and tSEL Outcomes

In this review, we extend previous YPAR systematic reviews reporting youth outcomes by examining how SPD and tSEL youth outcomes are qualitatively and quantitatively reported in the literature, as well as the magnitude of the effects and the design of the studies [9,10]. We further strengthened the contribution of our review by basing it on findings for which authors provided information regarding their data analysis and claims regarding youth outcomes, noting that we were intentionally inclusive of the disciplines and forms of qualitative and quantitative evidence represented in our review. We note that this is a general novel contribution over and above the prior reviews of YPAR that did not make this distinction. The majority of the studies reporting SPD and tSEL outcomes of YPAR used qualitative methodologies ($n = 15$; 60%) to assess youth outcomes and relatively few studies used quantitative ($n = 2$; 8%) or mixed methods ($n = 8$; 32%), which is consistent with the state of the YPAR literature as reported by Anyon et al. (2018) [10].

In particular, given our positionality as multi-method scholar-practitioners, we recognize the value of qualitative and quantitative methods in the study of the YPAR process and impact. From a measurement perspective, many intensive YPAR projects engage small groups of youth that might challenge the reliable estimation of quantitative effect sizes. Qualitative methods also offer affordances with respect to identifying themes related to the nuanced SPD and tSEL components. Aligned with Anyon et al.'s 2018 prior claim, we still see a strong need for more consistent reporting of YPAR projects and research to promote trustworthiness and cross-learning within the YPAR literature. Key dimensions include the roles and relative power of adults and youth, how authors collected and analyzed their qualitative data, and the use of member checks or other kinds of feedback on analytic processes and claims [50]. The 21-item checklist offered by O'Brien et al. (2014) for standards of reporting qualitative research may also serve as a useful resource for the YPAR field [51] to enable cross-learning and knowledge-sharing regarding outcomes across the diverse disciplines engaged in YPAR.

Similarly, for the small subset of YPAR studies that employed quantitative methods, there is also room to strengthen measurement and reporting to inform the field. Although ten studies report quantitative outcome measures, only three studies report effect sizes. We found that the majority of the statistically significant quantitative outcomes were related to agency [21,22,29], a domain that has had a strong methodological interest in the community psychology and education fields, with respect to the development of quantitative measures informed by both empowerment-focused theory and practice, e.g., [52–54]. Given the nuance of SPD and tSEL outcomes, the development, adaptation, and application of quantitative methods calls for close attention to practice as well as to existing assessment resources [55].

6.2. Study Design

The most common study designs reporting SPD and tSEL outcomes we identified in our review were case studies and one-group designs with pre- and post-assessment. A limited number of studies employed quasi-experimental or experimental designs. Building on these existing studies, further exploration of SPD and tSEL outcomes in YPAR could include evaluating YPAR programs by using “waitlist control” and other creative approaches to provide quasi-experimental and experimental contrasts while staying true to the inclusive spirit of YPAR partnerships [21,22,27,42]. Waitlist control designs can broaden participation and maximize facilitators' capacity to offer YPAR programming in a setting across multiple groups at different timepoints.

For some, YPAR has promise as a multi-level approach to youth engagement aimed at both youth and systems-level outcomes, and may seek funding from governmental and/or NGO funders that prioritize the quantification of impact using experimental or quasi-experimental designs. If quantitative measures are used to capture the outcomes of YPAR, we recommend more attention to statistical power and to the consistent reporting of both measures of effect sizes and statistical significance (p value), which are both essential results [56]. It is important to acknowledge that most of the sample sizes reported in the YPAR literature and summarized in this review were very small, making most studies unlikely to be sufficiently powered to detect effect sizes. Thus, it is important to note that “no evidence of effect” is not equivalent to “evidence of no effect” [57]. YPAR scholars and evaluators seeking to evaluate tSEL and SPD outcomes may consider creative

collaboration across sites and projects as feasible to enable increased sample sizes to promote the likelihood that studies are sufficiently powered to detect small- to moderate-sized effects, while maintaining the small and intensive nature of many YPAR practice models.

6.3. Limitations and Future Directions

While we have engaged in this review with intentionality, transparency, and a systematic approach, there are several important limitations related to societal involvement, YPAR research methodology, potential for bias, and mitigating harm, that point to future directions for YPAR practitioners and scholars. First, although the dissemination of research findings and social action are both integral phases of YPAR, we found that not all of the studies reported societal involvement. The three studies that did not report the dissemination of findings [40–42] focus on the youth outcomes of YPAR. Similarly, of the 15 studies that describe proposed recommendations for systems-level change from youth, the majority did not report enough information on changes to systems or policies, with only six reporting enacted change. Possible explanations are as follows: (1) for YPAR studies that report youth outcomes, it may not be in the study's scope to describe the dissemination of youth research, which is often more of a process characteristic of YPAR; (2) misalignment between the YPAR project and the publication timeline in order to report on the social action that resulted from youth-led research, since this often takes time; (3) adult researchers may not have specific training for how to facilitate policy advocacy with youth; and (4) YPAR resources do not always include specific activities related to researching potential policy actions, co-developing policy language, working with stakeholders to support a policy, or the specific process of how policies are enacted in certain communities. All of these would contribute to the underreporting of the dissemination of research findings and enacted systems-level change in the YPAR literature. We cannot assume that these phases of research did not happen; there is just not enough information provided in the article to conclude that they did happen. Other research on the environmental outcomes of YPAR found that projects were more likely to report systems-level change if they lasted longer than a year and included advocacy and organizing as part of their model [11]. Transformative change takes time; scholars should allocate the appropriate amount of time to ensure youth have an opportunity to collaborate with decision-makers to suggest potential changes to policies, programs, or practices. We recognize a potential model is to pair YPAR with youth organizing to ensure youth are supported in achieving their transformative change goals [58,59].

Table 1. Study methods, YPAR project characteristics, and reported SPD and tSEL outcomes by study reference.

Reference	Methods	Design	Country	YPAR Project Setting	Sample Size	SPD Outcomes	tSEL Outcomes
Abraczinskas & Zarrett (2020) [22]	Mixed methods	Pre and post; quasi-experimental	USA	School (out-of-school time)	64	Agency Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Agency
Aldana, Richards-Schuster and Checkoway (2021) [20]	Qualitative	Case study	USA	Missing/not enough information provided	9	Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Belonging
Anyon et al. (2018) [44]	Mixed methods	Pre and post; quasi-experimental	USA	Other	33	Agency Societal involvement	Agency Belonging
Bender et al. (2017) [21]	Mixed methods	Pre and post; quasi-experimental	USA	Shelter	22	Agency Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Agency Belonging Collaborative problem solving Identity
Bertrand (2018) [38]	Qualitative	Ethnography	USA	School (out-of-school time)	15	Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Missing/not enough information provided
Boni and Lopez-Fogues (2020) [35]	Qualitative	Case study	Spain	Community center/organization	11	Agency Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Agency
Duke and Fripp (2022) [40]	Qualitative	Case study	USA	School (during school/classroom-based)	8	Worldview and critical social	Identity
Fortin et al. (2022) [23]	Qualitative	Case study	Senegal	Missing/not enough information provided	12–20	Agency Societal involvement	Agency Belonging Collaborative problem solving
Halliday et al. (2019) [24]	Mixed methods	Case study; quasi-experimental	Australia	School (during school/classroom-based)	10	Agency	Agency Belonging

							Collaborative problem solving
Hayik (2021) [25]	Mixed methods	Case study	Israel	School (during school/classroom-based)	82	Agency Societal involvement	Agency
Koudelka (2021) [36]	Mixed methods	Case study	USA	School (during school/classroom-based)	10	Agency	Agency
Liegghio (2020) [41]	Qualitative	Case study	Canada	Clinic (hospital- and community-based mental health/health centers)	7	Missing/not enough information provided	Belonging
Maker Castro et al. (2021) [37]	Qualitative	Ethnography; grounded theory	USA	School (during school/classroom-based)	20	Agency Societal involvement	Agency Belonging Curiosity
Marco-Crespo et al. (2018) [39]	Qualitative	Pre and post	Ecuador	School (during school/classroom-based)	13	Agency Societal involvement	Agency
Mosavel, Gough and Ferrell (2018) [26]	Mixed methods	Case study	USA	Community center/organization	13	Societal involvement	Collaborative problem solving
Nation and Duran (2019) [33]	Qualitative	Ethnography	USA	Community center/organization	7	Societal involvement	Identity
Prati et al. (2020) [27]	Quantitative	Quasi-experimental	Italy	School (during school/classroom-based)	35	Agency Societal involvement	Identity
Sprague Martinez et al. (2020) [28]	Qualitative	Case study; pre and post	USA	Community center/organization	35	Agency	Agency Collaborative problem solving
Stoddard et al. (2020) [29]	Mixed Methods	Pre and post	USA	School (out-of-school time)	43	Agency Societal involvement	Agency Belonging
Tang Yan et al. (2022) [30]	Qualitative	Case study	USA	Community center/organization	10	Worldview and critical social	Missing/not enough information provided
Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2016) [34]	Qualitative	Case study; grounded theory	USA	School (during school/classroom-based)	25	Agency Societal involvement Worldview and critical social	Agency Belonging
Voight and King-White (2021) [31]	Qualitative	Case study	USA	School (during school/classroom-based)	13	Agency Societal involvement	Agency Belonging Collaborative problem

							solving
Warren and Marciano (2018) [32]	Qualitative	Phenomenology	UK	Missing/not enough information provided	15	Agency Societal involvement	Agency
Wood (2021) [43]	Qualitative	Case study	South Africa	Community center/organization	6	Agency Societal involvement	Agency
Zimmerman et al. (2018) [42]	Quantitative	Case study; quasi- experimental	USA	School (out-of-school time)	249	Agency	Agency Belonging Collaborative problem solving

Another challenge we navigated in our systematic review is the conceptual overlap and non-overlap in outcome categories. For example, identity (a domain from tSEL) and worldview and social analysis (a domain from SPD) are related but also distinct in ways that create challenges for coding in our systematic review. In YPAR, identity development processes at the individual and systems level are intertwined through discussions about systemic inequities and the development of critical consciousness. In this study, the sociological conceptualization of identity, viewed as relational, collective, and focused on behavior, overlaps with the worldview and social analysis domain of SPD, which is defined as “beliefs about the relative contributions of personal behavior and social forces on social conditions, which include critical consciousness.” This conceptualization of identity aligns with the YPAR principle of critical reflection. The youth outcomes that were coded as identity were at the intrapersonal level and related to “how an individual views themselves as part of the world around them.” Since YPAR tends to focus on critical consciousness development rather than other aspects of identity, this may be one of the reasons why identity was one of the least frequently reported domains ($n = 4$, 16%), and worldview and social analysis was more frequent ($n = 9$, 36%), as it aligned with critical consciousness building. A robust review of the relationships between these constructs is beyond the scope of this paper, but more conceptual distinctions are needed to be able to apply these concepts more reliably.

In our systematic review, we considered a broad range of literature, and coded information into SPD and tSEL categories to identify patterns in the outcomes. Initially guided by PRISMA guidelines, our approach was partially post-positivist; however, recognizing the complexity of YPAR, we adopted a coding framework embracing multiple epistemologies, intentionally inclusive and not privileging any singular form of knowing. This is aligned with prior major reviews of the YPAR field such as Anyon et al.’s framework and approach [10]. While this blend of epistemologies does not aim to highlight the distinctive qualities of each YPAR project, it enabled us to take a big-picture view across the highly diverse youth YPAR literature.

Importantly, tSEL was first articulated in 2019, and as a new area of literature, the boundaries of various focal constructs continue to evolve [17]. Depending on that evolution, our coding methods may prove to be overly inclusive or exclusive of tSEL concepts found in the YPAR literature. We propose, however, that our approach currently serves as an important starting point for research synthesis and further inquiry, and is transparently described to spark such efforts. The tSEL domains of curiosity ($n = 1$, 4%) and identity ($n = 4$, 16%) were the least reported domains in this review. Future studies may add more contextual descriptions of these constructs.

As with all research, we must also consider the possibility of potential publication bias towards the reporting of positive youth outcomes associated with participation in YPAR. The fact that we found multiple published papers that reported no significant findings offers some reassurance that papers do get published that report no effects. We also recognize that because YPAR is widespread in practice in schools and youth-serving organizations with little motivation or capacity to publish their findings, it is likely that there are numerous evaluations of YPAR that do not make it into the peer-reviewed literature.

As YPAR scholars and practitioners who have worked with thousands of youth engaged in this process, we are aware that inherent in the YPAR process is the engagement with often-painful lived experiences as youth examine problems and advocate to address inequities in systems that can be unresponsive to their efforts and/or were not designed to benefit or serve them. Neither our nor prior reviews have coded for negative outcomes explicitly. This is not to say that this constitutes evidence that there were no negative youth outcomes but rather that, of the quantitative studies reporting effect sizes, there was no evidence of negative findings. As noted earlier, most of the studies that employed evaluation designs with quantitative methods were not sufficiently well powered to detect an effect in either direction. Examining negative outcomes and experiences such as burnout, anger, anxiety, or apathy can help shed light on potential negative consequences, which can promote the tailoring of coping competencies to address them and support youths’ longevity in their efforts for change. Possible negative outcomes need additional attention and investigation in order to establish YPAR as an ethical epistemological paradigm. Although the YPAR process is often described and documented as empowering [60] and promotive of healing [61], the advocacy and discussion of inequities can also take an emotional toll [62,63]. Unpacking interlocking forms of oppression, discussing past traumas, or identifying neighborhood characteristics that are associated with inequity is highly emotional work and can open up wounds that need to be addressed skillfully. Missing from the YPAR literature are youth outcomes focused on individual coping. For these reasons, it is important to consider how young people can be supported during the YPAR process.

7. Conclusions

YPAR provides a rich context for enhancing both sociopolitical development and transformative social and emotional learning. The current study is a first step in the integration of concepts across the SPD and tSEL fields to move towards a holistic assessment of youth outcomes, rather than siloed conceptualizations. We contribute a unique, theoretically driven analysis of SPD and tSEL outcomes of YPAR studies published since 2015 with respect to the following concepts: agency, belonging, collaborative problem solving, curiosity, identity, societal involvement, and worldview and social analysis. We extend prior reviews of the YPAR literature by systematically examining SPD and tSEL outcomes, and reporting on the nature and strength of the effects found for the relationship between YPAR participation and youth outcomes.

Our findings suggest that there is a growing body of YPAR literature supporting youth development outcomes related to SPD and tSEL; however, there is a need for more consistent reporting of methodological and analytical information to support claims of impact and promote stronger methodological trustworthiness. Future directions of the YPAR literature can strengthen the evidence base and trustworthiness of findings through a range of study designs and qualitative and quantitative methods for assessing youth outcomes. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature and an opportunity to study youth outcomes specifically related to promoting curiosity and identity in young people. This is necessary in an increasingly diverse and politically polarized world so that youth can engage in a critical reflection of systemic inequities and their impact on their lives, as well as critical action to enact change regarding these inequities.

The integration of the tSEL and SPD frameworks has implications for bringing additional socio-emotional elements to SPD in the YPAR process, which is important due to the often emotionally taxing nature of discussing societal inequities and advocating for change, as discussed earlier. Further, rates of psychological distress have increased in young people since the pandemic, and youth who are made vulnerable by our systems (e.g., youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth) are most heavily impacted [48]. To address this, YPAR and other youth participation approaches can emphasize social and emotional learning and proactive coping to promote healing. Additionally, integrating tSEL elements into YPAR can provide marginalized youth with opportunities to enhance their sociopolitical development by understanding their identity and how it relates to societal structures, cultivating a critical worldview, and acting to change unequal distributions of power. All of these are associated with proactive approaches to coping, which lead to better mental health outcomes when compared to avoidant coping strategies [64].

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.N., H.K., M.A., A.B.S, and E.J.O.; methodology, A.N., H.K., and E.J.O.; software, A.N.; formal analysis, A.N. and H.K.; data curation, A.N. and H.K.; writing—original draft preparation, A.N.; writing—review and editing, A.N., H.K., M.A., A.B.S, and E.J.O.; visualization, A.N. and H.K.; supervision, A.N. and E.J.O.; project administration, E.J.O.; funding acquisition, E.J.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The information presented in it are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation or the reviewers. We gratefully acknowledge support to UC Berkeley, Innovations for Youth from the UC Berkeley Possibility Lab and the Life Course Intervention Research Network (supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under cooperative agreement U8DMC45901, and under award UA6MC32492) for Amia Nash. The information, content and/or conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government. The information presented in it are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation or the reviewers. The information, content and/or conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors on request.

Acknowledgments: In this section, you can acknowledge any support given which is not covered by the author contribution or funding sections. This may include administrative and technical support, or donations in kind (e.g., materials used for experiments).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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