

# A Tale of Two Projects: YPAR In and Out of School, Bounded versus Open Inquiry

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## Abstract

*This project examined the experiences of six Ethnic Studies students who simultaneously engaged in two youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects, one in school and one out of school. The in-school project was situated within an urban high school that had a predominantly Latinx student population. The research explored the relationship between program context and student experiences of YPAR and was guided by the following question: How do students who are simultaneously involved in two YPAR projects experience an in-school YPAR endeavor along with an afterschool YPAR project, and what are the possibilities and limitations of such interventions? This qualitative case study utilized ethnographic methods, interviews, and a survey to better understand the youth experiences. Findings illustrated that students preferred YPAR to both an Ethnic Studies classroom and a traditional classroom. However, within YPAR, the students preferred the out of school endeavor as it offered more freedom to conduct their work. This research demonstrates the challenges of implementing YPAR within schools. Students noted how traditional classrooms reinforce hierarchical schooling, the in-school YPAR project operated as a form of bounded inquiry, while the out of school endeavor provided a space for open inquiry.*

*Keywords:* YPAR, high school, critical youth studies, ethnic studies

Over the past twenty years, there have been increased attempts of bringing Ethnic Studies and youth participatory action research (YPAR) into schools in hopes of making public schools more humanizing spaces, ones not steeped in Eurocentrism, deficit-orientations, or hierarchical practices (see Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Cammarota, 2017; Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Ozer et al., 2013). Ethnic Studies and YPAR are two approaches that scholars and teachers utilize to challenge Whiteness<sup>2</sup> and white hegemony (e.g., the centering of white middle class ways of knowing/being/doing as if those are the default for all), while elevating and tapping into the lived experiences of communities of color (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Buttimer, 2018; Cabrera et al., 2014; Winkler-Morey, 2010). The knowledge of communities of color often goes untapped and untold in “mainstream curricula,” those curriculums that often exclude the experiences and narratives of marginalized communities (De los Ríos et al., 2015, p. 87). Simply put,

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<sup>2</sup> I capitalize Whiteness as the term refers to the system of racial domination/oppression and economic exploitation, which works in service of white supremacy (see Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2009; Lipsitz, 2006). When utilizing whiteness (with a lowercase w), I am discussing the social construction and referent for a racialized identity of an individual or group.

Ethnic Studies approaches education from the bottom up, centering the histories of marginalized people rather than top-down nationalist narratives.

The fight for more equitable and humanizing educational spaces has not been uncontested. In the United States (U.S.) state of Arizona, both conservatives and state legislatures worked against Ethnic Studies (e.g., Arizona' HB 2281 withholding funds to districts offering Ethnic Studies) (Cabrera et al., 2014). However, Ethnic Studies advocates persist in fighting for more equitable and humanizing education (see Curammeng, 2022). Ethnic Studies courses “hold a steadfast promise in building more decolonial, equitable, and humanizing visions of schooling...in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (De los Ríos, 2017, p. 22). Ethnic Studies practitioners work to humanize oppressive educational spaces (Green et al., 2020).

Like Ethnic Studies, YPAR aims at creating more humanizing learning environments. YPAR is a “pedagogy of resistance,” offering youth space to “engage transformational resistance” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 4). There are three guiding principles of PAR: (a) collective study of a problem, (b) trust and belief in local/indigenous knowledge to understand the issue, and (c) an aspiration to take action (individually and collectively) to address the concern (McIntyre, 2000). Within YPAR, youth both create and hold knowledge (Ayala, 2009; Fox, 2019). This framing of education radically departs from traditional mainstream education that invokes the banking method, which positions youth as passive recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Banking education is one traditional framework within schools that supports schooling as a form of social regulation and reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Patel, 2016; Vaught, 2017). YPAR can be implemented to encourage and support youth agency while pushing against schooling as social regulation and reproduction (Filipiak et al., 2020). Ethnic Studies and YPAR spaces are places where dominant ideologies can be challenged and more expansive framings of education, counternarratives, can emerge. These counternarratives do not center deficit narratives, but rather the stories, experiences, histories, aspirations, and knowledges of marginalized communities (Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

In what follows, a case study was utilized to explore the experiences of one cohort of youth involved in both an in-school Ethnic Studies YPAR project (i.e., a YPAR project that lived within one Ethnic Studies classroom within the traditional school day) and an afterschool (afterschool is used interchangeably with out-of-school) YPAR project, along with examining how they perceived the two projects. Both projects were situated within the larger Ethnic Studies programming of the urban district. First, the literature on YPAR (outside of schools, in schools, and in Ethnic Studies classrooms) is discussed. I then introduce the research site, context, and methodology used to explore the two sites and students' experiences. The findings illustrated that the in-school project functioned as a place of bounded inquiry and the out of school project offered room for open inquiry. The article concludes with implications for future practices of YPAR.

## **Youth Participatory Action Research**

### **YPAR Outside of Schools**

As noted, YPAR spaces are meant to challenge the traditional hierarchies of schools. These spaces emphasize horizontal relationships, collaborative action, and trust in youth

as knowledge holders/producers (Ayala, 2009; Fox, 2019). In a scoping review of out-of-school YPAR projects, Malorni et al. (2022) noted three interconnected practices: facilitating dialogue, sharing power, and developing a collective identity, which supported the promotion of critical consciousness development. YPAR spaces are where youth can “exercise their political voice” (Bertrand & Ford, 2018, p. 191). For example, the “The Fed Up Honeys” project was where young women of color challenged neoliberalism, gentrification, and negative stereotypes of working-class women of color (Cahill, 2006). Also working with young girls of color outside of school, Evans-Winters and the Girls for Gender Equity (2017) found that “the girl researchers’ knowledge and voice became a viable threat to school officials...the research process itself became a politicized tool to fight against racial and gender injustice” (p. 421). Similarly, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) found that youth were able to use their out-of-school YPAR project as a site of resistance to narratives around why their school was closed, and advocate for equity-based school reform. Out-of-school YPAR afforded youth the opportunity to express themselves in ways that schools often suppress. YPAR in afterschool programming illustrates how youth use these spaces to advocate for themselves, their communities, and challenge various modes of domination (Cahill, 2006; Fox, 2019).

### **YPAR in Schools**

Bringing YPAR into schools is complicated. Schools are often sites of harm, especially for students of color (Dumas, 2014). However, there have been successes in bringing YPAR into schools. YPAR in schools can create greater opportunities for power sharing and developing relational power (see Domínguez et al., 2022). Youth have noted gaining increased confidence, research skills, and enhanced academic interest via participation in YPAR projects (Smith et al., 2018). Within Ozer and Wright’s (2012) YPAR work, the process challenged and shifted teacher mindsets around student abilities. Bringing YPAR into schools also challenges the hierarchy of schooling (Irizarry & Brown, 2014). However, this work is complex as the act of challenging hierarchy, destabilizing teacher-student roles, and taking action often run counter to the foundations of schooling.

One major issue in connection to schools and YPAR is that YPAR in school can operate as a form of bounded empowerment, “students’ experience of ownership and meaningful control in the context of significant constraints of power” (Ozer et al., 2013, p. 19). Similarly, schoolification can emerge where inquiry and action processes are changed from “internally motivated and holistic to a series of graded assignments” (Rubin et al., 2017, p. 184). Traditionally, schools are hierarchical spaces and grades represent the outcome or reward for the work produced. This epistemological orientation runs counter to YPAR’s emphasis on horizontal relationships, collaboration, and action.

Within schools, Kornbluh et al. (2015) found: (a) embedded hierarchies, (b) teacher resistance to politically sensitive topics, (c) time and resources, and (d) structure and capacity building as impediments to their YPAR project. Kohfeldt et al. (2011) acknowledged three issues in their school-based endeavor, “(a) assumptions about youth, (b) structural challenges, and (c) conflicting theories of change” (p. 34). Similarly, external directives, administrative expectations, and a lack of outside support impeded Ozer et al.’s (2013) work. Likewise, Call-Cummings et al. (2022) noted tensions in participation

around inclusion, democratic participation, individual versus collective knowledge generation, and larger issues around ownership and voice. Within schools, an overarching question lingers of whether YPAR endeavors will be co-opted for neoliberal agendas and social regulation or live up to the possibilities of being a transformative pedagogy.

### **YPAR in Ethnic Studies**

YPAR initiatives within Ethnic Studies programming have demonstrated promising possibilities. For example, YPAR in Tucson, Arizona's Ethnic Studies program operated as a bridge between students' lives and curriculum (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Through YPAR, youth can become critical action researchers exploring their lives and address issues in their schools and community (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015). Those involved in the YPAR projects within the Ethnic Studies program in Tucson created action projects that led to structural and individual transformation, and students involved in the YPAR projects outperformed students not involved in the programming on standardized testing (Cammarota, 2016). YPAR, in the Ethnic Studies programming, offered youth a "pedagogy of resistance" where young folks could construct knowledge, have their voices heard, and work to improve their school (Cammarota, 2017). However, the Ethnic Studies program in Tucson, like many other Ethnic Studies programs, was met with resistance via a 2010 state law that eliminated programming (Cabrera et al., 2014). In 2017, the Supreme Court found the 2010 law unconstitutional. This instance illustrates the difficulty of trying to do emancipatory work in spaces not built for such programming.

Ethnic Studies pedagogies and YPAR have multiple intersections and overlaps. Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2015) articulated an Ethnic Studies pedagogy that emphasizes access to equitable education, that is relevant and connected to students' lived experiences, and that connects formal education (e.g., in schools) to broader community connectivity and impact. Ethnic Studies, as Cabrera and colleagues (2013) noted, presented curriculums connected to students' lived experiences, were culturally relevant, and supported student activism/agency, which overlaps with the aforementioned components of YPAR. Similarly, Kwon and De los Ríos (2019) noted how the usage of digital media and mapping helped to create communal change, enhanced critical civic literacies, and supported youth engagement in critical inquiry that disrupts banking methods of rote memorization. Like YPAR, Ethnic Studies centers the knowledge of communities of color, which is often lacking in traditional curriculum(s) (see De los Ríos et al., 2015; Jocson, 2008). Like YPAR, Ethnic Studies challenges dominant paradigms while focusing on change (Cabrera et al., 2014; De los Ríos, 2017). Ethnic Studies and YPAR are spaces that embrace and uplift multivocality (see Ayala, 2009; De los Ríos, 2013; Fox, 2019).

YPAR interventions can provide benefits of enriching critical thinking and academic achievement, sociopolitical development, social networks, and youth voice in decision-making (Kornbluh et al., 2015). YPAR helps bolster academic growth and civic competencies (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Kornbluh et al., 2015; Scorza et al., 2017). However, scholars fear that YPAR will be co-opted for the use of improving standardized academic outcomes within schools (Ayala, 2009; Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018). When it comes to YPAR interventions, as Brion-Meisels and Alter (2018) acknowledged, many of the publications center out-of-school programming with few focusing on projects within a

school or district. As the previously mentioned literature illustrated, there are tensions of bringing YPAR into schools (e.g., embedded hierarchies, grades, school/class time). Schools are also ripe with possibility as they are publicly funded and youth attend them for a sizeable amount of their day. However, schools are public institutions and work in service of the state (Vaught, 2017), so one may assume there are more limitations within an in-school YPAR setting than those outside of school.

YPAR projects positioned outside of school are less likely to be under the purview of the state. Also, outside of school, there may be more flexibility in relation to adult/youth relations, accountability (e.g., no need for grading) and project time (e.g., no regular structured class/bell time). We have yet to see data on youth simultaneously experiencing both in- and out-of-school YPAR projects. The current study adds nuance to the field by looking at the challenges, constraints, and possibilities of conducting inquiry for one group of students who were both engaging with YPAR in an Ethnic Studies classroom and an out of school space.

### **Research Site and Context**

This study explores how a group of six ninth grade Ethnic Studies students felt about their opportunities within two different YPAR settings, while also attuning to their ability to engage with inquiry. There were four young women and two young men who participated, who made up the afterschool program. The six students all identified as Latinx. Similar to the afterschool space, the majority of the high school students identified as Latinx. Over 80 percent of the high school's roughly 1,500 students also identified as Latinx (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). These six students were the only students who participated in both the in-school and afterschool YPAR projects. Though all of the 100 plus students in Ms. Davis's<sup>3</sup> Ethnic Studies classes participated in the in-school YPAR, those who did not participate in the afterschool project were not a part of this study's focus. The six student participants of this study opted into the afterschool project, and this has potential implications with regard to their motivations in relation to YPAR. The students represented a variety of educational experiences and academic backgrounds that, like the larger student populations in the Ethnic Studies courses of Ms. Davis, were diverse. Some participated in the afterschool project because they enjoyed the learning in the Ethnic Studies program in school. Other students joined the afterschool project who did not feel the same types of success or joy in school.

These two YPAR endeavors were situated in a socio-politically tense school context. Kodi High is an urban public high school in a western Massachusetts town. Similar to many discussions of schools, a recurring theme from the conversations with the youth in this project were issues/notions of standardization and limited opportunities for students to assert agency in their classrooms. As an ethnographer in the school, I often observed how the school operated as a schooling space that reproduced oppressive modes of social regulation and reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Vaught, 2017; Wozolek, 2023). For example, students' dress, speech, and actions were heavily surveilled and policed. One Ethnic Studies teacher noted that there was a culture of racism in the school, and that her

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<sup>3</sup> All proper nouns are pseudonyms.

colleagues (outside of Ethnic Studies) used racially coded and loaded language (Albright, 2023b).

In 2015, the state placed the school under state receivership due to what the state determined as poor academic performance (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2015). With the receivership, the district implemented sweeping changes to the academic structure. Along with this shift, the administration heavily emphasized improving student performance (e.g., state testing) to meet state requirements. The state receivership, along with divergent teacher dispositions, furthered tensions within the school. For example, the year before this project, the only teacher of color within the Ethnic Studies program, Ms. Sparks, quit at the end of the year due to the lack of respect for the Ethnic Studies program and her colleagues in the history department undermining her work. Ms. Sparks stated, “what pushed me out was the complete dysfunction and complete lack of respect for the discipline of Ethnic Studies and teachers of color.” Ms. Sparks went on to state, “It was extremely toxic in the building and the staff were very much divided.” Students of color at Kodi High felt the brunt of this division. The students involved in Ethnic Studies and the restorative justice programming were some of the most vocal in challenging the school’s racialized practices. These tensions are significant as they aid in understanding the school context, the Ethnic Studies program within the school, and the larger schooling entanglements the students in this project navigated.

Ms. Davis, a ninth grade Ethnic Studies teacher, designed and implemented the in-school project with her Ethnic Studies classes. Ms. Davis, a teacher of color, took the position that was vacated due to the exit of Ms. Sparks. Ms. Davis had previous experiences incorporating YPAR into her classrooms, and the YPAR project in Ms. Davis’s class emerged out of her drive to push for social change and elevate student voice within the school. She often started class with a circle process where youth discussed both personal and educational issues. Ethnic Studies was Ms. Davis’s primary training and she and brought those orientations to her classes (see Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015). Community, criticality, personal and communal relevance, along with fostering an educational space that emphasized critical consciousness development were central to Ms. Davis’s classes. Each class session emphasized connecting the students’ lived experiences to larger social justice issues both in the local and global context. Ninth grade students could choose between an Ethnic Studies social studies course and an Ethnic Studies language arts course, both of which emphasized reading culturally relevant material that focused on agency and possibility. For example, students wrestled with issues of colonialism, cultural imperialism, racism, environmental racism, classism, patriarchy, and other forms of domination.

During the school year there was a strict rule of no du-rags. Students, and a few faculty, vehemently disagreed with the policy and thought it was racist. Ms. Davis refused to enforce this rule; she saw it as a racialized policing of student bodies. Some of the students in her classes used their YPAR projects to study the du-rag policy and created platforms to push for change. Ms. Davis encouraged the students to advocate for what they viewed was right. At the end of the year, the du-rag policy was rescinded. However, this work was political and had consequences. Ms. Davis was in her first year of teaching at the school. At the end of the year, Ms. Davis was given a pink slip and was not rehired for the upcoming school year. Students were furious and created a petition advocating for the

rehiring of Ms. Davis, staging a protest outside of the school. However, this fell on deaf ears and the administration took no action. Ms. Davis did not return to the school. Kodi High lost two teachers of color in two years. This information is helpful in understanding the school context, Ms. Davis's relation to the school, and the political structures within the site.

Ms. Davis's YPAR projects were conducted in her classroom as a four-week unit near the end of the school year. Youth primarily used interviews and surveys to conduct their research. Every day the youth worked on different components of their projects. While the youth were working together, pushing for social change within the class and school, they worked in groups of two, three, or four on projects they chose. Students looked at issues ranging from racial bias in the dress codes to policing in school.

The afterschool endeavor was the continuation of the annual Ethnic Studies ninth grade YPAR project. A year prior, the District Coordinator of Ethnic Studies, Ms. Jones, a white female educator with over fifteen years of teaching experience, had heard about my YPAR work through a mutual colleague and approached me to support the inclusion of YPAR within the Ethnic Studies program. She asked for my help in developing the afterschool initiative. Ms. Jones visited classrooms inviting ninth grade students to join the project. In her classroom visits, Ms. Jones emphasized that the project would be a student-driven initiative focused on things that were important to them. This project was entirely voluntary. There was no requirement or prerequisite for participation. The emphasis was that this would be student-driven; if the students were interested, they should come, and if not, that was totally fine.

The six students who chose to participate in the project came to an initial meeting where we talked about what YPAR was, what our hopes were in supporting the youth, and then discussed their interests, hopes, and dreams for their school and local community. During the early stages of the project, we spent a great deal of time focusing on relationship building and emphasizing non-hierarchical relationships via different activities that centered collaboration and distributed leadership. The afterschool program was not connected to the in-school project, but rather was positioned as afterschool programming meant to support student learning outside the confines of school. Ms. Jones wanted to offer afterschool programming that was not directly connected to the work of the school. Other than the afterschool project being youth led, there were no incentives (e.g., grades, credits, financial, etc.) for the students to participate in the project.

The students chose if and how they wanted to participate, and they had the opportunity to exit the project at any time they wished. This issue of choice and opportunity is important when thinking about the students' motivations. As noted, six students chose to participate in the project for the entire year. The students within the afterschool program chose the aims of the research endeavor. The six students chose to participate as one unit, but they often broke into groups of two to conduct research on components of the study. Together, these students investigated the role of Ethnic Studies in the school hoping to better understand the student experience within the school, and more specifically how Ethnic Studies impacted the students. These six students experienced both the in-school and out of school project. The following question guided the research: How do students who are simultaneously involved in two YPAR projects experience an in-school YPAR

endeavor along with an afterschool YPAR intervention, and what are the possibilities and limitations of such interventions?

### **Theoretical Framing**

My theoretical framing was influenced by mobilizations of counternarratives and Cammarota's (2017) pedagogy of transformational resistance. Counternarratives center the knowledge and experiences of those most marginalized (Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rosiek, 2019). Within schools, youth of color are often marginalized via adultism (i.e., biased assessments that adults are more credible and knowledgeable than youth; Bettencourt, 2020) and various intersectional forms of racialized violence. Counternarratives align with YPAR onto-epistemologies, as YPAR projects center youth within research processes and production, destabilizing traditional notions of who can participate in knowledge production and articulation (Bautista et al., 2013). The usage of counternarratives and their emphasis on the expertise, histories, experiences, and knowledge of marginalized communities allowed for the youth's knowledge to not be marginalized, but centered and uplifted, and also functioned as a re-positioning of the youth, which challenges traditional school practices that emphasize youth as either fragile or not knowledgeable due to adultist framings (Bettencourt, 2020; Kirshner, 2015). Counternarratives are not solely stories, but can be instruments for challenging dominant narratives, discourses, and racist ideologies (Delgado, 1993; Rosiek, 2019).

Counternarratives, as the literature suggests, can be tools for building community, help in challenging/transforming belief systems, providing expansive views of histories, and driving toward a more just world (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The students' experiences, wisdom, and narratives in this project were helpful in better understanding how YPAR was mobilized in and out of school, and what forms of inquiry operated in such spaces. The youths' counternarratives are direct challenges to deficit orientation of youth of color, hierarchical schooling, and adultist framings of young folks. Cammarota (2017) coined the term pedagogy of transformational resistance which can "lead to resistances that have the potential to transform young people's subjectivities while allowing them to envision ways of learning to counteract oppressive and reproductive schooling" (p. 189). This paper positions the young people's counternarratives and mobilization of inquiry as tools informing their enactments of transformational resistance. Counternarratives helped both to challenge adultism (Bettencourt, 2020) and center the students' lived experiences as expertise. The youth's work illustrated complexities of how inquiry comes to materialize under different constraints and possibilities.

### **Methodology**

Ethnographic methods helped to better understand the experiences of the youth in both the in-school and out-of-school contexts (Hong, 2011; Madison, 2011). Ethnography offers an orientation where "one must understand and represent knowledge of the present world from the ways of being of the people studied" (Tunstall, 2008, p. 218). Critical ethnography takes this further as "it suggests that power can be mapped across complex dimensions of social context." (Vaught, 2017, p. 4). Using an ethnographic approach allowed me to study the participants in their everyday lives (Emerson et al., 2011).



Influenced by Hong's (2011) notion of layered ethnography, I was attentive to what was happening in the field while also being attuned to my relationships with the participants (e.g., the youth, teachers, and administrators) in the school. Critical ethnography helped me to stay attentive to issues of power and domination (Madison, 2011).

Participant observations were used in both the afterschool YPAR endeavor and in-class in-school YPAR project during this eight-month participatory ethnography. This was my second year of working with the Ethnic Studies program. The previous year, I facilitated a YPAR professional learning community and supported students during another instructor's implementation of YPAR within her classroom. Having previously conducted YPAR both in and out of school, I was aware of the difficulties of bringing YPAR into schools.

### **Author Positionality**

As a white male early career scholar, I was viewed as having certain expertise that was reinforced by white hegemony. My academic background of being trained in African American Studies, social justice education, and social movement history heavily impacted my actions within the two YPAR settings. These orientations influenced my interpretive apparatuses and explorations of issues of power and domination. Both my racialized identity and academic training impacted my participation and interactions in the spaces. For example, recognizing my positionality as being adult, white, and male, I often moved in ways that challenged traditional hierarchies in school. I did not assert myself as a knower, teacher, or as the lead in our work. Rather, each of my actions emphasized collaborations and democratic deliberation. I followed the lead of the youth.

My participation in the two spaces varied upon the need. For example, Ms. Davis had me operate as a participant-observer and support students as they needed. I did not facilitate any portion of that project. Ms. Davis facilitated the space by herself, and students would come to me if they felt I could support them in any way. Ms. Jones and I co-facilitated the afterschool program. However, we intentionally and strategically stepped back as youth led the project's research trajectory. As an ally, I supported youth in thinking through research protocols. I talked with them about how and why different research tools might be utilized. The youth created the tools they used (e.g., surveys and interviews).

Within the afterschool program, I started with centering the hidden curriculum that is not often discussed during the traditional school day. For example, in our first few meetings, I brought forward the conversation about race and adultism within the school. I noted how the folks often doing the harm within the school were similar to me as they were white adults. We then had deep discussions of how racism played out at the school (e.g., policing and surveilling of Black and Brown students' dress, languaging, and actions), and how adultism was a driving force in the school. From these conversations, we agreed to continually check how race and adultism were at play in the space. We collectively checked one another with regards to who was putting forward ideas, leading conversations, and how those ideas were challenging or buttressing the pervasive racial and adultist issues within the school. For example, during the research project idea generation, I did not participate in the putting forward a project idea, but rather asked

clarifying questions to seek a deeper understanding of what the youth were interested in. As a YPAR scholar-practitioner, I forwarded the epistemological orientation that these young scholars were my colleagues and co-researchers in the project they wanted to drive. This epistemological orientation also reminded me that the youth were the experts on their lived and schooling experiences. I followed their expertise in our collective work.

### **Data Collection**

Participant observations afforded the opportunity to see connections between people's words, beliefs, and actions. These participant observations allowed for examining participants, their interpersonal interactions, and the wider settings. During the sessions, fieldnotes and jottings helped me document key words, utterances, and phenomena that occurred in the two YPAR contexts. The primary goal of taking fieldnotes and jottings was to capture a description of what happened prior to deeper analysis (Emerson et al., 2011).

Interviews were utilized to more comprehensively understand the participants' experiences in these spaces. In the interviews, the youth discussed the experiential knowledge that emerged from both the in-school and out-of-school endeavor. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to drive the conversations. This work was positioned within a humanizing framework where relationships between researcher and participants were built on dignity and care while being dialogic (Paris, 2011). Interview questions concentrated along three lines: (a) knowledge of YPAR, (b) feelings about YPAR, and (c) comparison of the two YPAR contexts and projects.

The interviews provided critical insights into the perspectives and beliefs of the individuals. The survey allowed for more direct comparison of perspectives across the group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For example, how did the entire student group feel about the spaces they were working in? The survey, using 21 closed-ended questions, focused on student knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. There were three central components to the survey: (a) YPAR (understandings, beliefs about, and preference for YPAR or traditional classrooms), (b) the in-school YPAR program, and (c) the afterschool YPAR project. The questions on in-school and afterschool YPAR focused on student agency, student voice, and power relations within those contexts. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The survey was completed at the end of the school year. A portion on traditional classrooms (e.g., those classes that do not take an Ethnic Studies approach to teaching and learning) was included as the students often talked about there being quite a bit of difference between their Ethnic Studies classes and their non-Ethnic Studies classrooms. The students called their non-Ethnic Studies classes traditional classrooms. The Institutional Review Board of the researcher's academic institution approved the usage of participant observations, interviews, and the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic coding afforded opportunities to identify and investigate thematic patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis was done inductively; the themes emerged from the coding of the data sources (i.e., surveys, participant observations, and

interviews). The analysis started with open coding data which led to focused coding and taking a more in-depth “fine-grained” look at the data sources (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). Analysis was informed by exploring how the youth were engaging with pedagogies of transformational resistance (Cammarota, 2017), where youth emphasized learning, working against banking methods and oppressive schooling. A three-tiered coding process (i.e., grandparent, parent, and child codes) was used to organize the coding patterns. For example, I was attentive to language around “care,” “community,” “freedom,” “control,” “constriction,” “inquiry,” “openness,” “purpose,” “preference,” “frustrating,” and other keywords that focused on the flexibility or constrained nature of the different learning environments the youth discussed. These keywords, and others, emerging from the open coding were then sorted into larger thematic codes tied to constructs of banking methods of education, inquiry and learning via YPAR framings (e.g., learning as unpredictable, dialogic based versus hierarchical banking communication, inquiry as open versus overly constrained), and learning environments (e.g., physical make-up via size, timing, etc.; organizational parameters like schooling, grading, out-of-school spaces not tied to the same institutional requirements, etc.).

My coding was guided by questions that saw to better understand how the youth were experiencing the different environments, and how those spaces afforded youth certain possibilities or constrained their abilities to assert agency in their inquiry. The survey, participant observations, and interviews were put into conversation to better analyze the two projects and generate themes. I had a critical friend, a senior scholar in my academic department, and the student participants look at the data and narratives to provide critical feedback.

### **Findings: Contexts of Bounded Inquiry and Open Inquiry**

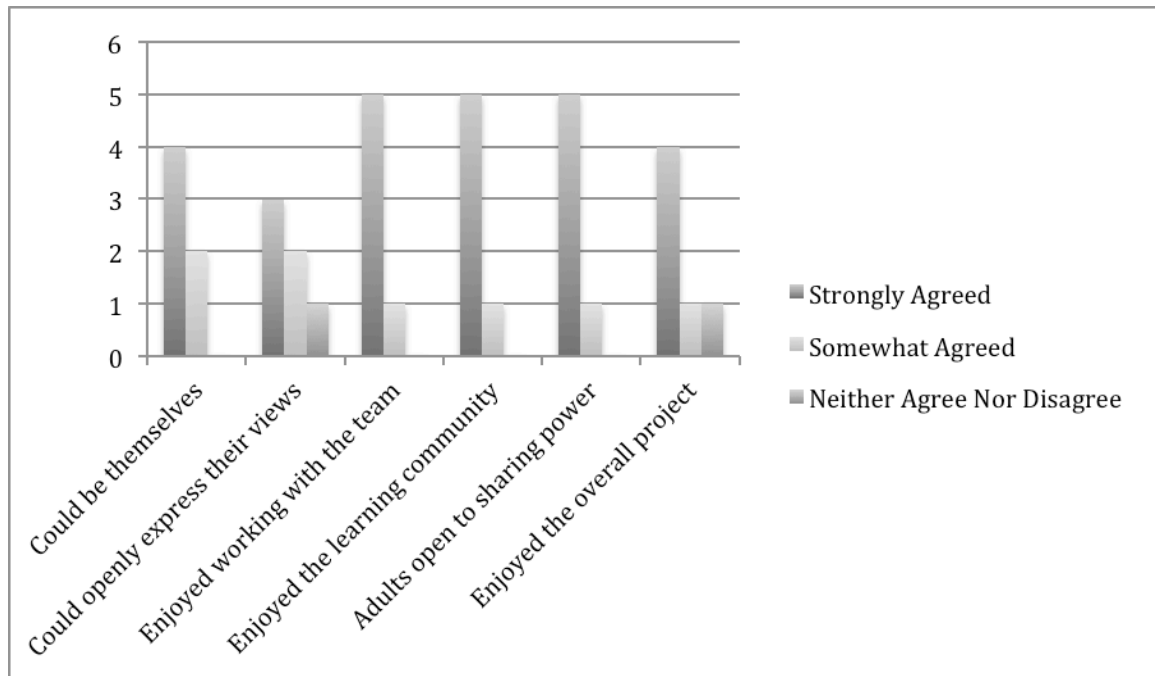
Too often in schools, youth are either framed as “dangerous or vulnerable” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 3). This is reinforced through schooling processes that position youth as “citizens-in-the-making or citizens-in-waiting” (Vaught, 2017, p. 113). However, in this project, the students’ stories, knowledge, and wisdom operated as counternarratives to those framings by illustrating how they were experts in their lived experience, agents of change, and critical scholars. As the following findings illustrate, the youth were not passive participants in the classrooms, Ethnic Studies YPAR projects, or their afterschool YPAR project, but rather were critical in examining/articulating how and when different forms of inquiry could be mobilized, and to what extent those forms of inquiry offered different opportunities/possibilities.

There were four learning environments the students discussed: their traditional classrooms (non-Ethnic Studies), their Ethnic Studies classroom (Ms. Davis), and the two YPAR spaces (Ms. Davis’s in-school and the afterschool space). When it came to preference for learning style and environments, all of the students favored YPAR to their traditional classrooms and their Ethnic Studies class. When comparing their YPAR learning environment to their traditional classroom, three strongly preferred YPAR, and three slightly preferred YPAR. However, when comparing their daily Ethnic Studies classroom to YPAR, one student strongly preferred YPAR and five slightly preferred YPAR. When comparing the data between the in-school (Figure 1) and afterschool (Figure

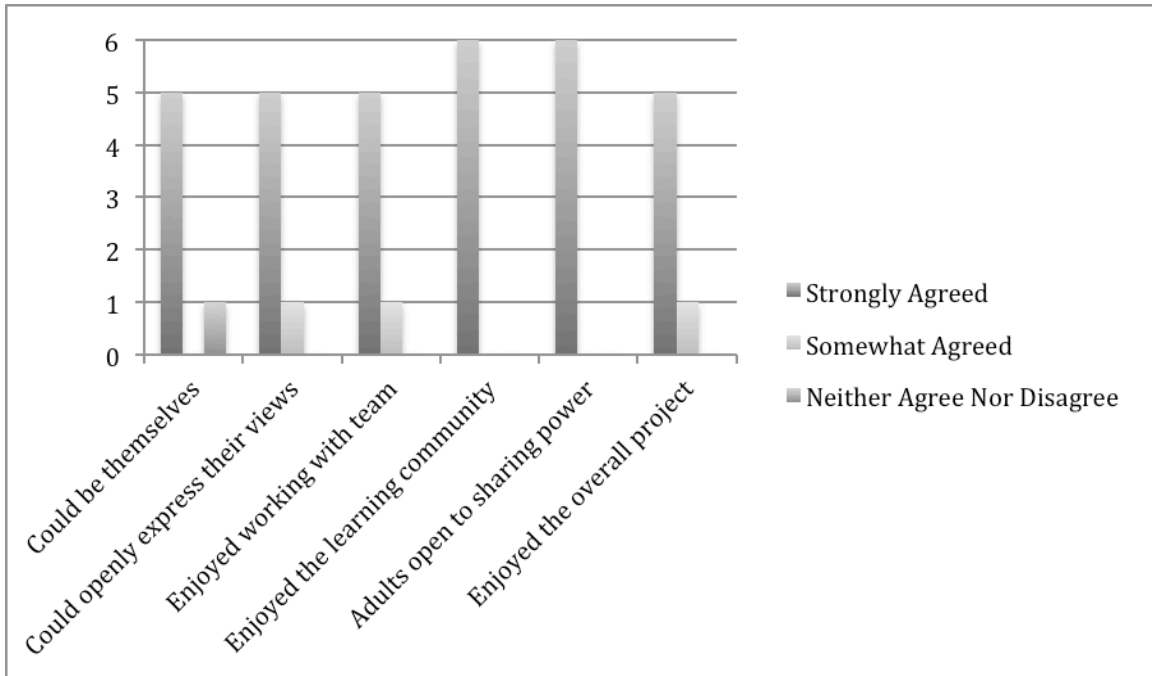
2) YPAR experiences, the six students preferred the afterschool YPAR project on every measure except for a question on enjoying working with their team and team members, which was scored evenly across the figures. When it came to being able to openly express their views, five strongly agreed that they could in the afterschool but only three strongly agreed to this in the in-school YPAR project. While the students preferred their afterschool YPAR to both their traditional classrooms and their Ethnic Studies classroom, they held their Ethnic Studies classes in higher regard than their traditional classrooms.

The survey illustrated the following order of preference for learning spaces: (a) afterschool YPAR, (b) In-school YPAR, (c) Ethnic Studies, and then (d) traditional classrooms. This order of preference is significant when thinking about relationships between learning environments, hierarchy, agency, collaboration, and inquiry. As the findings will illustrate, programming with less hierarchical, more collaborative relationships between/amongst youth and adults that were student-centered (e.g., providing space for youth to assert their agency), and offered an inquiry focus provided more opportunities for youth to both express and optimize their learning and joy. Programming that offered more opportunities for individuals to both assert agency and democratically participate enhanced student preference for learning environments. The next section discusses the students' beliefs about YPAR and student agency prior to taking a deeper dive into how the students experienced YPAR in the Ethnic Studies classroom and the afterschool YPAR project.

**Figure 1**  
*In-School YPAR Student Experience (n = 6)*



**Figure 2**  
*Afterschool YPAR Student Experience (n = 6)*



The students noted that YPAR projects were about collective endeavors stressing action on issues within the local community. The following points illustrate how the youth were not operating as passive individuals, but were acting as critical social and civic agents, countering those notions of passivity or not being ready to be active citizens. For example, Maria stated, “YPAR is a group of young people coming together to solve issues within our community...we do the work that we do because we care and we’re the ones that have to live in the world we create.” Daniela noted YPAR is about “seeing how they [youth] can make their community better...YPAR encourages young people to be active.” Diego asserted, “I would say that YPAR is working on things, and we find our own problem, something in our community, and we take action.” Susana reiterated Daniela and Diego’s point on the action component of YPAR as she indicated it was not just about studying a social problem within their community but also taking action to address oppression. The students emphasized that the problems investigated were tied to their community and that they cared about making a positive impact on systemic change. This was illustrated through some of the students’ work that challenged the school’s aforementioned racialized dress code.

When it came to the need for student voice in school, Xochitl declared, “just because we’re kids doesn’t mean we can’t have our voices be heard...we are oppressed.” Diego went on to claim, “as youth, we notice things that I don’t think other people do, and we live in a different world.” Having more youth voice in schools, as Susana suggested, “gives us [youth] a chance to impact the world we live in.” The students indicated that they had

knowledge and perspectives that adults did not and that those perspectives were important in addressing social ills. YPAR offered youth a space to conduct inquiry and challenge modes of domination.

### **YPAR in School: Bounded Inquiry**

The students reported that YPAR in school offered them more opportunity to assert their agency than their traditional classrooms. As a participant in the school, I noticed how the youth could more widely participate in a democratic nature (e.g., develop and work in teams to explore their projects) and assert their agency (e.g., the ability to choose their research project and method) in YPAR than that afforded in the traditional classes. Carlos felt “it was different than a normal class, it felt interactive. It was fun and productive.” Maria stated that YPAR in school felt similar to the “transformative out of school experience,” but that it had limitations and students had to “filter” themselves in school. There were multiple times where I noticed youth being frustrated with having to filter their emotions via “school appropriate responses.” This was most noticeable when youth were talking about their frustrations with faculty using racially loaded language or when discussing the dress code policy that many felt was racist. Rather than a traditional lecturing or banking process, the students worked individually or in pods discussing their projects, aspirations, and methodological decisions as they sought to address their research questions.

One difficulty of conducting YPAR in the Ethnic Studies class was the class size. Ozer et al. (2010) found a large class size limited “effectiveness of efforts to meaningfully engage less receptive students in the PAR project” (p. 157). For Carlos, his large class size operated as a distraction: “I get distracted like there’s too much conversation. I can’t find my own thoughts because they’re [students] louder than my head. It’s like it’s really awful to be working in that circumstance.” Daniela seconded this. She felt the class size distracted her, as “sometimes you can’t focus on what you’re trying to do with all the voices in the space.” While sitting within the classroom, I also recognized how loud the space would get when there were thirty students working in groups of two, three, or four, in a confined classroom space. The sounds were quite vibrant with open dialogue, discussion, and disagreements, but those lively discussions had the potential to be distracting or frustrating for those needing a quieter space. Pragmatically speaking, Maria indicated, “there’s only one teacher with all these students.” The large classes not only operated as a distraction for some students, but it also stretched the teacher who was trying to support the vast number of students. All too often, I saw Ms. Davis running from group to group trying to support them, but there just was not enough time per class to support each group.

Another difficulty of trying to bring YPAR in schools is the nature of schooling, as there is no opportunity to opt out of the projects. Without being able to opt out, as Maria noted, “you have people who don’t know what they’re doing because they don’t want to know what they’re doing.” Students were essentially forced to participate in the endeavor, which stripped their agency. Students were able to choose their project and their partners, but they could not choose to not participate. Being forced into a project has the potential of impeding student buy-in and their ability to truly invest in the project. Diego noted those not interested in YPAR did not take it seriously. There were multiple occasions when I

noticed Ms. Davis needing to have one-on-one conversations with groups or individuals who appeared frustrated or disengaged, as they were not participating in the daily activities of the space.

The in-class YPAR was more adult-driven than the out of school project, and Xochitl believed this impacted the in-class work. Susana also felt it was more adult-driven as “in school, we were somewhat told what problems to look at.” Being an in-school project also places the work within a larger school structure, and one influential factor is the school’s culture. As Maria revealed, “there is bad energy here...I mean kids don’t want to be here.” The students felt the negative energy influenced the in-class work. This was noticeable as students often came into class irritated from schooling interactions (e.g., being surveilled by teachers and administrators in the hallways), which could either spark motivations for their projects or lead to larger dialogues surrounding frustrations with the school and adults in the school.

Along with no opportunity to opt out, students were graded. Xochitl felt the grade hanging over her head put a lot of pressure on her as she asserted, “in the teacher’s class we had to fill out a bunch of papers, have our research done by certain time...it was stressful.” This notion of grading the YPAR project illustrates a form of schoolification where the process moves from being internally motivated to graded work (Rubin et al., 2017). Diego claimed that when the activities are graded, “kids will see it as a grade...it will just be like regular schooling. Everyone is going to be pressured. Some people are just going to be like, all right, let’s just get this over with.” For Diego, the grading of YPAR reflected traditional school practices and diminished student interest, as internally motivated projects were changed to graded assignments. Grades raise the question of how students can authentically engage with their research when the larger issue of grading looms over their heads.

The school day’s traditional structure of class time also impeded the organic nature of YPAR. Xochitl felt stressed “because we had to get it done in such a small amount of time.” Diego expanded upon the stress of the project by indicating, “I felt rushed. We did not have enough time to work on anything.” This limited amount of time, as Susana suggested, “made it feel like we weren’t able to put our best forward because it had to be quick and we weren’t able to think outside of the box because it was rushed.” On multiple occasions, I noticed youth starting rich dialogues about how to proceed with their work, but those conversations were cut short by the bell ringing. The nature of the school’s time structure and class period timing impacted the youth’s work. Daniela felt that she did not have the time to dig into her project; “Yea, you get to research, but you don’t research what you’re using to research.” Daniela indicated that she was doing the research, but she felt she did not get the time to do the reading and research on the methods she was using. Daniela wished that her class took more time to really learn the research methods (interviews, surveys, etc.) or do research on how to research.

YPAR in school, as Diego indicated, “felt like it was a curriculum that we had to do and accomplish...it felt more like I had to go to this class to get this grade.” Maria remarked, “with YPAR in school you would have to filter your project in a way.” Xochitl also felt that her voice was constrained in the in-school project. Large class sizes, no opportunity to opt out, the rushed nature of the project, limited class time, schoolification,

grades, and students feeling like they had to filter themselves cumulatively operated as a form bounded inquiry. Bounded inquiry is characterized by students having the opportunity to investigate social ills plaguing their communities, but their research support/training, research methodologies, research artifacts, voices, actions, and opportunities are constrained and bounded via the teacher, school, and larger social regulatory processes of schooling.

### **YPAR out of School: Open Inquiry**

Maria noted there were similarities between the in-school and out of school project, but in the out-of-school project “we can come in and give our ideas straight up, we didn’t have to filter ourselves.” Ms. Jones and I decided that there would be no filtering of youth language or actions, unless it proposed a danger to the learning environment. Diego agreed with Maria expressing that he could be himself and state his mind in the afterschool project. In the in-school project, Diego felt that students were surveilling him, as compared to the afterschool project, about which he stated, “I could say my thoughts and people could understand it and not judge me based on what I thought and how I felt. But in class I felt like with some people, it was the opposite.” As Xochitl similarly remarked, “I didn’t have to be so proper.” Carlos furthered this idea by articulating, “it’s more free after school to be able to talk, have conversations because there’s not a teacher saying be quiet every time we talk.”

With the limited size of the afterschool programming and more intimate setting, there were more direct dialogues and community building that built upon each other than in the larger in-school projects. For example, without the confines of a fifty-minute period, the youth in the afterschool project were able to sit with one another, eat snacks/food, and have conversations about life, their days, or other things impacting them prior to jumping into their work. Students often spent the first fifteen minutes of the afterschool program eating pizza, telling jokes, laughing, venting, etc. However, as Daniela noted, “in school you get to do YPAR each day of the week versus outside of school you meet like once or twice a week and it’s kind of hard to keep track and keep everything on schedule.” Daniela makes a point of the limitations of the out of school project and the importance of continuity for the work, cohesion, and dialogue.

Maria suggested that the afterschool space focused on critical thinking, “because there were so few of us, we actually focused on the conversation and focused on what each other were saying rather than pushing along the ideas and not really engaging with the ideas.” Xochitl enjoyed the afterschool YPAR project mentioning: “I really enjoyed it because I got to meet new people...I got to hear about their experiences.” Diego asserted that everyone seemed to be on the same page “all of us wanted to do this...we really wanted to make a change together.” As Maria declared, “when I step into our YPAR space, each one of us are different and we bring something different to the table and that’s ok.” The students focused on community by learning from and with one another viewing their differences as an asset to the team.

The afterschool endeavor provided a space for youth to find their way in conducting their work. As Xochitl suggested, “it feels different because we weren’t graded on this and all that.” Diego seconded this feeling “I felt like I was doing something I like, and it doesn’t have to be graded...I can put in my opinion and not get graded for having a bad opinion



or thought.” This freedom from grading helped Daniela as she asserted, “I can be more independent and I could do what I want without getting penalized for it.” All of the students emphasized how the out of school space allowed for them to conduct inquiry without the fear of grades influencing their projects or research methods.

Susana indicated that in the afterschool space “we came up with our own tools...it was open...there weren’t any limitations.” The students could take on any research topic and use any research method to address the social ill they chose. As Daniela noted, “you get to control what you want to do.” Interestingly enough, the students chose the same methods both in school and out of school. However, within the in-school project, the students explored issues regarding the dress code, but in the out-of-school space, they explored student perceptions on the need for Ethnic Studies.

Through collaborative dialogues, the youth noted that surveys and interviews were the best tools to collect as many diverse student voices as possible for their projects. Within the afterschool space, we talked about the types of questions to ask and how to create open-ended questions rather than those that are leading (e.g., “how do you feel about your Ethnic Studies classes?” versus “why do you like Ethnic Studies so much?”). We bounced ideas off of one another and collaborated on question generation and question review. With this autonomy, Xochitl stated, “I felt productive because it was me doing it. I didn’t have to be controlled by an adult. It was my choices, what I wanted to do.” The freedom of choice helped Daniela get into what she called the zone: “I get in the zone where it’s like ‘oh, I know what I am doing,’ and like ‘I know what these other people are doing.’” This freedom was also important for Susana, “because we get to learn about our world and we get to study problems we face and we are working on solutions...the out of school space was more impactful for making change in the world.” Without a grade looming over their head or an adult directing their actions, this non-restrictedness supported freedom of expression and knowledge generation.

Maria noted that during the work, “we got things done because we cared.” Maria went on to say:

So when we get the power to look for, when we have the power now to go and do things ourselves and where the facts aren’t hidden from us, then I think it makes it more interesting and kids actually want to change the world.

When it came to enjoyment, Diego acknowledged, “It was our choice. We all wanted to do this because we wanted to do it, and it felt more like we gathered together, as friends.” For Diego, this was the first time he was involved in any extracurricular activity at the school. Gathering together as friends created a community of care. Students could be their authentic vulnerable selves. For example, Maria stated:

It's acceptable to do things [here] where I would get weird looks at in school. I feel comfortable. YPAR out of school makes me feel more comfortable for what I have to say because we're all moving towards the same thing...we started talking about these amazing ideas and these giant concepts. We're trying to change the world and we're genuinely trying to do better and I feel like when everyone has that energy, it makes me way less anxious.

This community-centered care allowing for the students to be comfortable and vulnerable. In the afterschool project, the youth talked about more personal experiences (e.g., familial issues, emotional struggles, things troubling them, etc.) than they did in the in-school space. The positive energy, collaborative inquiry, and focus on changing the world helped Maria feel less anxious and part of the learning community.

Carlos noted that the freedom of choice excited him. Along with choice, the lack of restricted time played a key role as the afterschool project gave Carlos “more time for my mind.” Elaborating upon this, Carlos noted that he had more time to sit with his thoughts and process. The lack of a restrictive time structure helped Diego not feel rushed as he remarked, “in YPAR [out of school] we took our time. We wanted to make sure what we were doing was right.”

Another component of doing the work was authentic open inquiry. The youth studied topics of their interest. Beyond being able to conduct research, they learned how to research. Daniela noted that “in school you’re researching on your own, you’re diving in, but after school you get to do the certain steps and processes. You get to go bigger.” Another component of inquiry was that students developed skillsets that they could use to shape their thinking rather than having someone shape it for them. Diego asserted that inquiry was “a new way to think differently.” For Diego, inquiry provided a tool to better understand issues without basing them solely on opinion. These dialogues on open inquiry operate as counternarratives to practices of adultism and hierarchical relationships often present in school spaces. The youth, when given the opportunity to engage in non-hierarchical, collaborative inquiry, took the lead in exploring social issues plaguing their community.

The out-of-school project operated as a space of open inquiry. Critical thinking was central, and the students saw their differences as an asset to the overall project. The students created a community that centered care because they wanted to be there; it was their choice. The students not having to filter themselves, the project not being graded, and youth having the freedom to choose their avenues of inquiry, research methods, and action agendas, cumulatively allowed students to authentically engage in open inquiry while addressing social ills in their community. Maria used the following metaphorical narrative to illustrate the significance of inquiry as a shield:

Inquiry is important because it seems like we’re being shielded from information, but it feels like they’re [teachers] trying to shield us with glass, you know what I mean?...I mean that at any moment we could find out something and our glass can completely shatter and we’re like, we can hear everything and we can see everything, but no one wants to tell it to us straight... We can hear and we can see and we can feel all these things about it, but no one’s giving us the choice to pick a different shield. You can’t expect us to shield ourselves with something so fragile, so teachers and people at school are just saying, ‘Oh, maybe you should watch the news, or do this, or that.’... But with inquiry and research, we get to pick what we want to study.... You shouldn’t be shielded from something that you want to know about. There is no perfect time for anything and if the shield shatters, I want it to be on my terms because I found out something, and I want it to be real because if it turns out that you’re just shielding me from something that I was

supposed to know...that's just going to a hurt a hundred, or more like, thousand times worse.

Maria's counternarrative indicates how schooling both shields youth from information and functions as an unstable shield for protecting herself. Inquiry within YPAR, as Maria indicated, offers her an opportunity to build a stronger shield to fight against social injustices. Schools and schooling processes often position youth as fragile or needing to be protected. However, YPAR positions youth as experts in their experiences (Fox, 2019). YPAR and open inquiry afforded youth a platform to create tools to better understand the world and protect themselves from oppression than that of schooling's thinly-veiled, glass shield.

When youth were able to work within a space that did not restrict their opportunities, or possible avenues of inquiry, but took an asset-based approach positioning them as experts in their own lived experiences, the youth were able to co-constitute deep learning. Maria's counternarrative discussing the notion of inquiry as a shield rather than schooling shielding her from vital information illustrates how YPAR and open inquiry offered opportunities for mobilizing pedagogies of transformational resistance (Camarota, 2017). For example, within the out-of-school YPAR space, youth were able to take on different subjectivities that counteracted the prescriptive, restrictive, and oppressive ways of knowing and being within schooling. The youth were able to freely express themselves in ways they felt authentic, explore research problems central to their lived experience, and conduct research and implement actions that were their choices. Not only could the youth envision new possibilities via the afterschool YPAR space and open inquiry, but they could also be different. They were actively co-constituting possibilities rather than being passive recipients of information.

### **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

As Maria indicated, inquiry operates as a tool that youth can utilize for personal and institutional change. However, as demonstrated, conducting YPAR in different contexts comes with different challenges. For example, with Kodi High being under state receivership, there were added state constraints due to requirements that emphasized student performance/learning narrowly constructed as improved state testing scores. Hence, interventions that take up class time, like liberatory practices of YPAR, may be overly policed or dismissed as not relevant to the constricted notion of student learning as tied to testing. The narrow framing of student growth as increased test scores runs counter to YPAR framings and orientations. Providing youth the space to conduct authentic youth-driven research in state institutions, like schools, can be quite difficult.

In this project, youth felt that within the school, their work was a form of bounded inquiry. The students' research support/training, research methodologies, research artifacts voices, actions, and opportunities were constrained by the teacher, school, and larger social regulatory processes of schooling. Context matters. While the in-class projects were interactive and students could assert agency by working in groups of their choosing on topics they picked, they also felt they were constricted by the class size (e.g., feeling distracted with up to thirty students in the space), school timing schedule (e.g.,

fifty-minute periods), having to filter themselves, no opportunities to opt out of the project, and being graded. These issues in relation to time, grading, and the linearity of the work culminating in a finished project speaks to larger issues of schoolification (Rubin et al., 2017). Similarly, having the YPAR be in school during the school day also impacted the learning environment, as students do not tune out what is happening prior to coming to class, especially in relation to issues of the toxic climate of the school. We must be attuned to how domination in schools is reinforced by curriculums, adultism, prescriptive entanglements, discipline, and hierarchical relationships (see Albright, 2023a). Doing intergenerational collaborative work across lines of power, as Herr (2017) reminds us, “seem to be an inherent contradiction of schooling” (p. 455).

This project illustrated significant issues for teachers attempting to bring YPAR into their classrooms. The work is political; there are parallels between the political oppression experienced in Tucson and at Kodi, reminding us of the difficulties of doing humanizing work in dehumanizing spaces. Teachers may want to pause and deeply reflect upon the following issues. First, as teachers working within oppressive state institutions, we have to be honest with our co-researchers. Within schools, teachers have to navigate issues of curriculum, class sizes, class timing, grading, and issues of youth being forced to participate in schooling. These issues within school contexts matter. We must be honest about the parameters we are working within and against. For example, if we must have grades or a finished project (product/action/etc.), we should be honest and upfront about those parameters so that the youth are aware of what they are engaging with. Also, how will we make adjustments to meet the needs of the varying students based on the length of class time and the size of the classes?

If YPAR is to be student-driven and anti-hierarchical, there are two significant issues that teachers need to think through. How might the learning community (e.g., the teachers and students) come up with potential options for conducting the YPAR process while also providing an option for students to opt out of the endeavor? Schoolification can hinder both the project trajectory and student skill development (Rubin et al., 2017). Teachers also need to think about the role of grading within the project. Educators will have to think through options of either not grading the YPAR endeavor, if it is possible, or coming up with innovative community-driven grading processes. If grading of the YPAR project is required, the teacher might work with the students to create a grading process that is anti-hierarchical, collaborative, and uses nonconventional metrics. As these points indicate, conducting YPAR in state institutions, like schools, that function in hierarchical manners, can be quite complex.

The afterschool context was not constrained by the same issues that come with conducting YPAR in state institutions. The afterschool space provided youth the opportunity to engage with open inquiry. Youth did not have to filter their language, emotions, or mannerisms. Being out of school, there were different relations between adults and youth, as they worked together as co-researchers. There were no grades or outcomes that had to be presented to any adult, but rather the group was accountable to one another. This issue of accountability to one another, an openness to express one’s self in ways individuals saw fit, and opportunities to opt in or out of the project helped to create an intimate community of care. Similarly, not being constrained by the rigid schooltime structure allowed for participants to engage as they saw fit. Folks did not always have to

conduct “work,” but could socialize, vent, or just be. Without the time constraint, there was also more time to learn about research rather than having to jump right into researching. Without the larger issues of grading, there was a focus on critical thinking and collaboration rather than a product-driven orientation, or feeling like there had to be a right answer. Due to the nature of the afterschool project, the project team was constrained as they met less frequently than the everyday in-school project, which could cause issues of continuity and cohesion. However, without the bounding of the school environment, the youth in the afterschool project could come up with a project they wanted, using methods they chose, and produce any product/action/intervention they wanted. Open inquiry afforded youth the opportunity to lean into their brilliance, rather than being constricted.

As has been noted, Ethnic Studies and YPAR overlap in that they emphasize multivocality, uplift counternarratives, and push for social change centered in the local context. As Tintiangco-Cubales and colleagues (2015) illustrate, a major component of Ethnic Studies is engaging with the community. YPAR is one way of supporting the development of critical consciousness, community-centered leadership development, and larger ways of drawing connections between schools and communities by direct community engagement that does not reinforce a hierarchy of school over community knowledge. For example, one way of enhancing community connectivity in YPAR projects within Ethnic Studies classes is by incorporating communal voices in the classroom (e.g., bringing in community members, community organizations, etc.). Similarly, the curriculum and relationships in the space must move away from schooling’s traditional hierarchy and prescriptive entanglements, allowing for youth to both assert agency and flow with the unpredictability of learning. As Green and colleagues (2020) noted, Ethnic Studies is not just a teaching practice, but the embodiment of a critical orientation.

YPAR is also more than a practice or epistemology; it is a knowing-in-being and being-in-knowing (see Albright, 2023c). For YPAR to be successfully brought into schools, it cannot be an add-on to a class, but rather a knowing-and-being that must be intricately entangled with the class, as YPAR disrupts traditional notions of who and how knowledge can be generated, youth and adult hierarchical schooling relations, and the purpose of education (e.g., challenging individualism and centering community/systemic change). As previously mentioned, issues of hierarchical relationships and grading are always present in schools. Ethnic Studies educators not only have to disrupt hierarchical teaching practices in their classrooms, but they also have to disrupt those granular ways that reliance on hierarchy can emerge in students and teachers due to schooling’s pervasive knowing-in-being and being-in-knowing. Ethnic Studies educators need to create the conditions where youth feel and believe that they are co-constitutive leaders in the classroom, and authentic researchers in YPAR projects.

Returning to issues of grading, if the YPAR projects need a form of grading, educators can have the class come up with innovative ways of assessing the work. Furthermore, Ethnic Studies teachers can utilize processes that maximize opportunities and experiences of distributed leadership where the youth drive the work and the teacher is supporting and

learning along with the youth. What processes are being put in place so that students have the ability to engage in open inquiry?

It is significant here to think more about commitments and ways of knowing-in-being than practices: how are folks committed to one another, learning, community, and the like. As these critical traditions become more widely utilized, YPAR and Ethnic Studies orientations might potentially be co-opted into technocratic practices, hence why we must be weary of Ethnic Studies and YPAR spaces that do not center community. We must also think about creating more spaces for critical teacher development both in university teaching programs and with in-service teacher professional development (see Lyiscott et al., 2018; Sacramento, 2019), as YPAR and Ethnic Studies programming are not widely taken up in most teacher education programs.

### **Conclusion**

Findings illustrated the youth believed YPAR spaces, unlike traditional classrooms, are places where they can more freely express their views while taking on challenges impacting their lives, and that they preferred YPAR to both an Ethnic Studies classroom and a traditional class. Within YPAR, they preferred the out of school project as it offered more freedom to conduct their inquiry projects on their terms. Students also felt they could more freely be themselves and openly express their views in the afterschool project. However, we must also remember not to romanticize YPAR spaces as schooling ways of knowing and being can also emerge within such spaces (see Albright, 2022; 2023c). However, as Daniela succinctly stated, “either way, YPAR is the way to go.” This project demonstrated some of the challenges of implementing YPAR within schools. The students preferred educational spaces that offered more voice, collaboration, and open inquiry. As the students noted, the in-school YPAR project operated as a form of bounded inquiry and the out of school project provided a space for open inquiry.

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