Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in Schools: An Analysis of the Experiences of Two Public School Teachers Conducting YPAR With Their Students

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Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in Schools:

An Analysis of the Experiences of Two Public School Teachers Conducting YPAR With Their Students

Qualifying Paper

Submitted By

Christopher J. Buttimer

May, 2015
Acknowledgements

This paper represents more than four years of my life, and at several points I wasn’t sure it was going to happen. There are many people whom I would like to recognize for helping me to complete this work. First and foremost, I want to thank my mother and father who have supported me unconditionally in all of my endeavors, including this doctoral program. In addition, I want to thank my partner Laura for believing in me and convincing me – repeatedly and just when I need it most – that I can complete this paper and eventually this program, even though it’s taking me substantially longer than her. She’s also a wonderful thought partner and editor.

Next, I want to thank the two teachers in my study – “Adam” and “Gloria” – as well as their students who were so generous in allowing me to enter their classrooms, welcoming me as if I were a member of their community. I have tried my best to honor their amazing work and represent them well. Teaching is the hardest job in the world, and Adam and Gloria do it with incredible passion, skill, and empathy in some extremely difficult conditions. I would also like to thank the administrators and staff at their schools for allowing an outsider like me to conduct research in their schools. Finally, I want to thank the parents and family members at both schools for agreeing to allow me to work with their children and trusting that I had their best interests in mind when conducting research.

I realize I may not be the first to say this, but I think I have the best QP committee in history. It is a true joy teaching and learning under Karen Brennan in her T-553 course at HGSE, and she has brought both her design-based mind and critical lens to the feedback she has given me. I am honored that Kristen Buras joined my committee, and she has shared with me her deep knowledge of critical pedagogy and her fierce critique of neoliberal education reform that has informed the inspiring work that she has done for over a decade for the city that she loves. Finally, I cannot say enough about my advisor, Meira Levinson. Meira has gone way above and beyond the call of duty for an advisor to ensure that I not only get through the program but that I do high-quality work in the process. She has never let me take the easy way out, and I have become a much better researcher and scholar in the process, and for that I am tremendously grateful.

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“I came across YPAR at last year’s [conference at a local university]. I heard about this conference from some of my colleagues . . . and was told it should not be missed. Ernest Morrell was the featured speaker and he spoke about the work he was doing with high school students in Los Angeles. The social justice aspect of the work captivated me and I was eager to try YPAR in my own classroom.”

– Adam', 6th grade English Language Arts teacher, on how he became inspired to try YPAR with his students

“It’s hard to do [YPAR] to a degree that I think is effective and more authentic – where there are presentations and there’s actual change happening – within a 3-week or 4-week curriculum . . . . It takes a lot of work and a lot of time, so you need to have that flexibility within that curriculum . . . . It’s difficult to do in schools though.”

– Adam, toward the end of a full-year YPAR project

Introduction

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach to research that includes those who have traditionally been left out of the research process – the youth – and is designed to create social change. YPAR comes out of the critical research tradition that seeks to link reflection (i.e., research and analysis) with practice (i.e., action) in what Freire (2000/1970) referred to as praxis. Young people who engage in YPAR, frequently with adult co-collaborators, examine various causes of oppression in order to take action to create a more equitable and just world. Ginwright (2008) refers to YPAR as “emancipatory research which is unapologetically engaged and committed to distribution of power in order to improve the quality of life for marginalized communities” (p. 21).

1 One of two public school teachers who are the subject of my study; pseudonym.
An increasing number of university researchers are engaging in YPAR with adolescent youth and documenting the often-inspiring results in educational journals. These scholars have captured stories of young people interrogating their in-school and out-of-school experiences, presenting rigorous research in front of city councils and at prestigious conferences like AERA, and even influencing changes in unjust policies and disrupting the neoliberal assault on urban schools and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fox & Fine, 2013; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). Academics who have conducted YPAR projects with youth often present their work at education conferences around the country that include public school teachers in the audience. After reading about this amazing work and hearing from scholars such as Ernest Morrell who have empowered young people to do high-quality research and to create change in their communities, it is hard not to have a similar reaction to Adam in the first quote at the beginning of this paper. Indeed, I was inspired to focus my doctoral work on YPAR after watching another YPAR advocate Jeff Duncan-Andrade speak about *Doc-Your-Block* documentaries that young people created as part of a YPAR project, and then reading the book he co-wrote with Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy* (2008).

Because of the justified evangelism about the power of YPAR from scholars like Morrell, Duncan-Andrade, Eve Tuck, Wayne Yang, Michelle Fine and an increasing number of other scholar-activists over the past decade, YPAR is gaining the attention of teachers in public K-12 schools who want to replicate this
work with their own students. However, the majority of the YPAR projects in the literature are implemented by highly trained university researchers in non-standard contexts with access to relatively greater resources and autonomy than most if not all classroom teachers. In most cases, for example, these academics conducted the projects with youth outside of formal school settings – e.g., in an after-school, community-based setting or during a summer program – or in partnerships with teachers in public schools during non-core classes (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). The experiences and outcomes of YPAR conducted in such settings may not generalize to ordinary classrooms in core subjects where teachers may have 50 to 150 or more students they are responsible to teach. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) themselves write that the YPAR summer programs they ran for high school students took place outside “the time and logistical constraints of the K-12 classroom, which is not conducive at all to the research process” (p. 110).

Additionally, they write:

The summer seminar exists literally and ideologically outside of the space of schools, which allows for a different (and more empowering) set of relations between teachers and students, between students and texts, and between students and their world, since the seminar largely centers around critical research in local community contexts. (p. 111)

Furthermore, university researchers who facilitate YPAR projects are able to draw on their own professional expertise in research methods in order to teach students how to conduct research. Most public school teachers, however, have no
research doctoral training, and even their masters degrees were likely focused on content and pedagogy that is not critical or research-oriented (Macedo, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In addition, these YPAR projects are often conducted with teams of trained researchers, drawing on the support of university-level methodologists to assist in complex analyses in some cases (Fox & Fine, 2013) and/or the support of multiple graduate students being trained as researchers in others (Mirra, Morrell, Cain, Scorza, & Ford, 2013). These supports to which most public school teachers lack access can help substantially with both the technical and logistical aspects of implementing YPAR. Without training or support, many teachers who attempt to conduct YPAR in public school classrooms may experience similar frustration to Adam, who expressed the difficulty of implementing YPAR in schools in the second quote at the outset of this paper. This could potentially cause public school teachers to abandon YPAR prematurely and unnecessarily.

To be clear, none of what I have written thus far is meant to undermine or call into question the work of academics and the youth researchers with whom they work who have done incredible work that has had tangible, positive effects on their communities. Instead, I want to be part of a movement that seeks to expand YPAR from the spaces where it is most commonly being done at present into core subject classes in public schools. In turn, we need research that reveals whether, how, and to what extent YPAR processes and outcomes can be achieved in regular public school classrooms with teachers who often do not have the resources, the
autonomy, or the training to implement YPAR in the way that university researchers and others outside the constraints of traditional school settings can. It is therefore essential that YPAR scholars study classroom teachers who initiate and conduct YPAR projects more or less on their own in regular school contexts.

In fact, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) themselves acknowledge as much:

> [W]e urge critical educators across the K-12 spectrum, and across all major content areas, to initiate and document their action research projects with urban youth. . . . There should be whole book series, special issues of journals, and working conferences dedicated to the investigation of the practical applications of participatory action research to urban education. (p. 131)

In this spirit, I set out to illuminate the obstacles two public school teachers faced when implementing YPAR in core classes, the supports they drew upon, and the successes – and failures – that resulted from the process.

In order to provide guidance to classroom teachers in public schools who want to do this work, we need a new research base that clarifies the challenges and possibilities of YPAR in traditional classroom contexts without robust university partnerships. My paper thus seeks to answer the following research questions:

*What are some of the consistent challenges and opportunities of YPAR for two teachers dedicated to social justice teaching in traditional urban schools? In what ways do their experiences converge with and diverge from the YPAR research literature?* I will conclude by drawing implications for teachers who want to conduct YPAR in core classrooms in public schools, and provide direction for future research on this work.


**Literature Review**

**Guiding Principles of YPAR**

While there are subtle differences and nuances in the YPAR principles espoused by advocates in the literature, in general most fall under the following three guiding principles: (1) YPAR is critical in nature and situated in the lived experiences of youth; (2) YPAR requires robust youth participation in an inquiry-based process that draws upon students’ indigenous knowledge; (3) YPAR leads to collective action that seeks to raise public awareness and create social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2010; McIntyre, 2000; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). These principles inform the stance that YPAR practitioners take when approaching the work with youth, and also drive the practices of YPAR that will be outlined in the next section. YPAR emerged from a critical research tradition that places power, oppression, and resistance at the center of any inquiry process, and thus youth are asked to choose as their research topic an issue in their community that they wish to understand in greater depth, with the ultimate goal of creating transformative change that improves their lives and their community (Ginwright, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Torre, 2009). YPAR is participatory in that it eschews the traditional role of young people as *objects* of study and instead situates them as full participants, or *subjects*, in the research process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970/2000). In doing so, YPAR works to re-envision youth as valued knowledge producers and scholars – youth who are too often viewed by adults in “academic”
spaces like schools as anti-intellectual with little to offer (Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2010). Because young people are often directly affected by the issues they choose to study through YPAR, they also frequently hold insider knowledge about these issues (Fine, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Students can then draw upon this indigenous knowledge and expertise to guide their investigations. Finally, the main objective of any YPAR project is to take action. Based on the research that they have collected on a real-world issue that matters to them, young people take collective action toward social change with the goal of improving their lives by disrupting and transforming unjust and oppressive conditions (Ginwright, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

**Practices of YPAR**

Though the YPAR process is fluid, contextualized, and non-prescriptive by design in order to meet the needs of the participants and their communities, some common practices do emerge from the YPAR projects documented in the literature. In virtually all YPAR projects captured in academic journals and books, youth who engage in YPAR do so with adult collaborators trained in research methods, which typically includes one or more university professors and often their doctoral students. Adult collaborators who abide by the guiding principles of YPAR believe strongly that young people can conduct high-quality research and effect tangible change. As such, they engage youth in the same rigorous inquiry process as professional action researchers: choose a research question and generate
a hypothesis, read relevant literature, develop research tools, gather and analyze data, create an action plan based on the findings, and take action (Akom, 2009; Freire, 1970/2000; Sabo Flores, 2008).

The youth researchers read relevant literature from fields such as sociology, critical theory, and critical race theory, and they are expected to employ methodologies and develop research tools that experienced, critical action researchers use, such as surveys, ethnographies, interviews, and focus groups (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Sabo Flores, 2008). Under the guidance of adult collaborators, youth researchers learn to conduct qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data they collect that are often sophisticated in nature. The research team then puts together an action plan based on their research findings, and virtually all YPAR projects culminate with arguably the most important piece of YPAR and the aspect that separates it from traditional research projects: action. Typical actions portrayed in the literature include creating and disseminating research reports, and presenting in front of authentic audiences made up of peers, teachers, policymakers, and community members as a means of effecting policy changes, usually at the local level (Berg Powers & Allaman, 2012; Levinson, 2012; Mirra et al., 2013).

Though not always the case, in many of the YPAR projects in the literature youth conduct research together, either as a collective or in groups of research teams, and interrogate either a single issue or several different issues that fall under the same overarching topic, e.g., “the Opportunity Gap”, “Language, Youth
Culture, and Transformational Resistance in Urban Schools”, or mental health issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Schensul, LoBianco, & Lombardo, 2004). Most of the research collectives, particularly those outside of school settings, come together for a few months to a year, though some adult researchers loop with young people over multiple years, going through several cycles of inquiry (Morrell, 2008; Mirra et al., 2013; Yang, 2009). Though the fine-grain particulars of a typical day in a research collective are often left out of the literature, it appears that in at least some cases the youth researchers spend multiple hours at a time digging into the research process in spaces dedicated to doing research, e.g., university facilities or community research centers (Fox & Fine, 2013; Morrell, 2008).

**Outcomes of YPAR**

Researchers have documented positive outcomes of YPAR, many of which are related to engagement and motivation, as well as positive identity development. Advocates argue that YPAR often leads to increased motivation and engagement among youth because the subject matter is relevant to their lives, the process is participatory and democratic, and students are able to take action that can have positive effects on their communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In addition, when students reimagine themselves as both scholars who conduct rigorous research and activists who can create change in the world, they demonstrate positive identity development
For example, in YPAR projects conducted with predominantly Latinx high school students in a program called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), Cammarota and Romero (2009) write: “In many ways, PAR represents the method for social justice youth development such that young people’s inquiries and attendant actions promote healthy, positive identities; community activism; and empathy for others’ struggles” (p. 63).

Additionally, scholars who conduct YPAR, particularly in school settings, have highlighted outcomes that many would consider to be more “academic” in nature. YPAR advocates contend that students who engage in YPAR tend to develop literacy, numeracy, research, and presentation skills by reading rigorous texts, analyzing data using complex methods, and presenting findings in front of authentic audiences (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Cammarota & Fine; 2008). While the immediate impact of YPAR projects on individual youth is sometimes difficult to measure in part because “there is no predetermined list for what it is participants must learn” (Cannella, 2008, p. 191), examples of academic gains do exist in the literature. For instance, at the end of a YPAR project, Yang (2009) found that students improved their scores on the SATs and on statewide standardized tests, and that 75% of the students passed assessments of remediated topics. In addition, Van Sluys (2010) documented positive literacy outcomes as a result of a YPAR project in the following four categories: redefining reading, writing, and research; reconsidering languages; rethinking literacy practices; and
repositioning selves. Finally, a group of researchers from the University of Arizona conducted a rigorous quantitative analysis of a scaled-up version of the previously mentioned SJEP program in Tucson called *Mexican American Studies* (MAS) and found that students who participated in the MAS program had significantly higher passing rates on the statewide standardized tests and higher graduation rates than students who hadn’t participated in the program (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014).

**Challenges of YPAR**

Several scholars have written about the epistemological challenges of conducting research with youth who are novice researchers, compellingly addressing and defending the rigor, objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability of YPAR (Fine, 2008; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Kirschner, 2010). While interrogating and defending the practices of YPAR is important, for the purposes of this paper – which is an examination of the opportunities and challenges of doing YPAR in schools, as opposed to presenting and defending the outcomes of a YPAR project – it is more important to focus on the structural and procedural challenges that can prevent adult collaborators and youth from conducting effective YPAR.

A common structural challenge that exists in the literature, particularly for YPAR projects done in schools, is the existence of hierarchical systems of power in which those at the top do not support and, in some cases, seek to shut down
YPAR projects that often call into question those very same systems from which those in power benefit. The YPAR literature includes stories of collaborating teachers conducting other school work in the back of the room instead of providing support on the YPAR project (Schensul, LoBianco, & Lombardo, 2004), a principal who “did not want the students to focus on negative things” in their YPAR projects (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011), and in the most egregious and unjust instance, state legislators outlawing and dismantling the highly successful MAS program in Tucson that included YPAR as a key component (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). Another structural challenge when doing YPAR in schools is convincing stakeholders like administrators and teachers to create space in the curriculum for YPAR, a challenge that has only been exacerbated by high-stakes testing and the requirements imposed by state standards (Cannella, 2008; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Phillips, Berg, Rodríguez, & Morgan, 2010). This is likely why almost all school-based YPAR projects in the literature have been conducted within elective blocks or after school. In addition, engaging in YPAR projects in schools is limited to short chunks of time (45- to 90-minute blocks in most schools) relative to many out-of-school projects that allow for multiple-hour blocks of time to engage in the work (Morrell, 2008). School-based projects are almost always bound by hard deadlines, e.g., marking periods, which can lead to inauthentic time frames for research projects, causing them to end when the
semester ends, for example, rather than when the research process is complete (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010).

Most of the YPAR projects that take place in non-traditional settings outside of schools, i.e., the majority of YPAR projects, avoided many if not all of these structural issues because they existed outside the constraints of schools and schooling. Instead, these projects tended to grapple more with procedural issues having to do with social dynamics, such as power-sharing issues between youth and adults (Kirshner, 2010), the democratization of knowledge production (Fox & Fine, 2013), and peer-to-peer tensions (Tuck, 2008). Of course, in-school projects must also wrestle with these procedural challenges. To my knowledge, no one has written about the challenges – structural, procedural, or otherwise – faced by YPAR projects enacted by public school teachers in core classes without robust university partnerships.

Methods

The Context

Adam and Central Middle School²

In 2011-2012, I worked with “Adam,” a 6th grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher whom I met and organized alongside through a teacher organizing group. At the time of the study, Adam was in his fourth year of teaching at a

² Pseudonyms will be used for the names of all teachers and schools in my study.
Level-4 urban public middle school, which I will call “Central Middle School”, or CMS. Adam identifies as a White male and was in his late-twenties when I worked with him. He is certified by the state to teach secondary English, and holds a masters degree in education from a local university. Because of persistently low state test scores, CMS had undergone a “turnaround” two years prior to my study in which administration was replaced along with a large portion (>50%) of the teaching staff. The school’s population during the 2011-12 school year was: 90% students of Color (65% Black; 20% Latinx; 2% Asian American; 1% Native American), 80% students from low-income backgrounds, 25% students requiring special education services, 15% students designated English Language Learners, and 25% students who speak a first language other than English. All of these statistics exceeded those of the district, with the exception of English Language Learners (15% versus 30% for the district) and non-native English speakers (25% versus 45%). While the school has a substantial amount of autonomy in terms of curriculum because it and several other schools have been granted a special designation by the district, administration and staff, including Adam, felt substantial pressure to raise test scores in order to move the school out of its Level-4 status.

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3 The state board of education uses five levels of categorization for its accountability system, with level-4 being the lowest level before the state board of education takes control of the school, i.e., level-5.
4 I avoided using exact numbers in an effort to anonymize the school; no percentage is more than five percentage points from the actual percentage.
5 Schools with CMS’s designation are still unionized and non-charter.
As seen in the quote at the outset of this piece, Adam was inspired to undertake YPAR after seeing Ernest Morrell speak at a local university. At the end of the 2010-2011 school year, Adam implemented what he called a “mini-YPAR unit” as a month-long pilot to see if he could implement and perhaps replicate the YPAR projects he saw Ernest Morrell showcase in his talk. At the end of the mini-YPAR unit, Adam felt that his students had enjoyed and found success with the project, and he decided to attempt a full-year YPAR curriculum the following year. I asked Adam if he would be willing to allow me to observe his implementation of YPAR with his students for an action research course I was taking, and he agreed. Adam implemented YPAR with his four, yearlong sections of 6th-grade ELA that he co-taught with a special educator, “Nancy”. The class sizes averaged about 20 students, so Adam and his co-teacher were responsible for teaching approximately 80 students in total. Adam’s content area, ELA, and grade level, 6, were and continue to be subject to yearly statewide standardized testing, as well as frequent district-mandated testing.

**Gloria and Judith Jamison High School**

During the 2013-14 academic year, and again in the 2014-15 academic year, I partnered with “Gloria”, a high school humanities teacher in a public arts-based school in the same public school district as Adam’s school. Gloria is a friend of Adam’s wife, who told her about the YPAR work Adam had done with

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6 As is common in many urban schools, the class sizes changed frequently throughout the year as students left and entered the school.
his students. After hearing about Adam’s work, as well as speaking with another colleague in the district who had been inspired to try YPAR by attending the same Ernest Morrell talk, Gloria reached out to me because she knew I had worked with Adam. Gloria talked with me about substituting YPAR for the current final project in her sophomore humanities course, which was a more traditional civics project: in-class debates about controversial topics where students take on the roles of various government and community actors. Gloria decided she wanted to try YPAR, and she agreed to allow me to observe her classroom. Gloria’s courses lasted one semester ending in early January 2014, and she implemented her YPAR unit during November and December 2013. She decided she wanted to do YPAR again the following year, and invited me to come back. In sum, I observed and worked with Gloria in two consecutive academic years: 2013-14 and 2014-15. To differentiate the two years in the rest of my paper, I will refer to the 2013-14 academic year as Year 1 and the 2014-15 academic year as Year 2. See Appendix 1 for a visual representation of my work with Adam and Gloria.

When I first partnered with Gloria in Fall 2013, she was in her fourth year of teaching. Gloria identifies as a Black/biracial female, and she was in her mid-twenties at the time of the study. She possesses a masters degree in education and state certification to teach secondary history. Gloria works at a Level-3, public high school focused on the arts, which I will call “Judith Jamison High School”, or JJHS. JJHS possesses the same designation as Adam’s school, which means it has significant autonomy over its curriculum. Students at JJHS spend approximately
half of their school day taking *academic* courses such as math, science, humanities, and a literature and writing course. The other half of the day, they take classes in one of their four arts majors – visual arts, music, drama, or dance – where they are intensively and rigorously trained with the intention that they can become professional artists, often pursuing their craft in arts-based post-secondary schools. The mission and structure of the school is clearly different from regular public schools in some key ways; however, the core academic classes such as Gloria’s humanities classes would look nearly identical to core classes in most public schools.

An additional difference from most public schools and JJHS is that students are required to apply in middle school by submitting a portfolio of work in their desired major. However, admissions are “academic-blind”, meaning the admissions committee does not take students’ prior grades or test scores into account when deciding if they will be accepted; they only focus on their artistic potential and passion. As such, the student body looks very similar to that which you would find in many urban public schools, including those in JJHS’s district. The school’s demographics over the two years of observations were fairly stable: 85% students of Color (40% Black; 40% Latinx; 3% Asian American; 1% Native American), 80% students from low-income backgrounds, 15% students requiring special education services, 5% students designated *English Language Learners,*
and 35% students who speak a first language other than English. The racial demographics closely mirror those of the district, though the number of special education students is about 5 percentage points lower than that of the district and the number of *English Language Learners* is dramatically lower the district’s: 5% versus 30%, respectively. However, the number of non-native English speakers is closer to the district’s: 35% versus 47%. An argument is sometimes made by educators in JJHS’s school district that because JJHS students are motivated to do well in the arts, they are more likely than typical students in the district to be motivated to do well in academics, too. Having worked with hundreds of students as a former public school teacher and observed dozens of classrooms in my role as a literacy coach, I feel comfortable stating that I did not perceive any difference in JJHS students’ motivation to study core academic subjects than any other group of students I have taught or observed.

In general, the staff and the headmaster at JJHS are averse to conforming to the demands of standardized testing and curricula, and the school has an excellent reputation among many in the district despite its *Level-3* designation. However, new district- and state-level regulations proposing to give “turnaround” powers to *Level-3* schools that had previously been reserved for *Level-4* schools, as well as regulations that require evaluating teachers based at least partly on test scores, have put increased pressure on everyone at JJHS to either improve test scores or open themselves up to the potentially punitive measures that Adam’s school went.

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7 Again, percentages are changed slightly in an effort to protect anonymity.
through. Gloria does not teach in a tested subject area, but she does teach at a tested grade-level (10th) and stated that she is feeling pressure to prepare her students for the new Common Core-aligned tests, which are said to include various historical documents. Gloria had no full-time support with class sizes that averaged 25 students per class in Year 1, but she had a masters-level teaching candidate named “Tara” in her classroom nearly everyday during Year 2, where she again averaged 25 students per class, or 50 total in her two sections of sophomore humanities.

**Gloria’s and Adam’s Pedagogical and Activist Stances**

Both Gloria and Adam express and exemplify a strong commitment to social justice, inside and outside of the classroom. In English class, Adam is committed to incorporating critical literacy as part of a critical pedagogy approach the flows throughout his curriculum. Gloria, an Africana studies and visual arts major in college, takes an ethnic studies approach to teaching humanities and history, as well as a critical pedagogy approach. Adam and Gloria engage in the work with the seriousness of purpose, sense of duty, and critical consciousness outlined by Duncan-Andrade (2007). They not only teach for social justice in school, but they also fight for it after the school day ends, similar to Picower’s (2012) teachers who “practice what they teach” (p. 86). They live in and are extremely active in the community where they teach, participating in various organizing and activist groups comprised of teachers, youth, and other community members. As such, both have a strong desire to see YPAR succeed because they
view it as a pedagogical tool that can empower their students, most of whom come from oppressed groups, to create positive change in economically isolated communities.

**Data Collection Methods**

During the 2011-12 school year, I visited Adam’s classroom approximately one day a week in order to observe his implementation of YPAR with his four 6th-grade ELA classes, which lasted the full year and contained approximately 20 students each. I took field notes on Adam’s implementation of the YPAR curriculum, as well as instances when he was unable to do so. For much of the year, I simply took notes at the back of the room, but towards the end of the project I began working with students in small groups to support their YPAR projects. In addition, I took notes on occasional instances where I supported Adam in developing the YPAR curriculum (e.g., finding readings related to students’ YPAR topics), and I collected some exemplar student work (e.g., completed YPAR papers). I also conducted three semi-structured interviews with Adam at the beginning, middle, and end of the YPAR unit in order to learn about his experience engaging in YPAR with his students, including his approach to conducting YPAR and his perceived successes and challenges (see Appendix 2).

With Gloria, I took on more of a co-planner and support role than I had with Adam, where I was more of an observer until the end of the project. I began observing Gloria’s semester-long, sophomore humanities classes one day a week
starting at the beginning of the 2013-14 school year because I wanted to see how she established classroom culture. I also wanted to begin to develop relationships with the students because I predicted I would be working with them in a similar capacity as I did with Adam’s students toward the end of the project, e.g., supporting them individually and in small groups with their research. Once the YPAR project started, I took field notes on Gloria’s implementation of YPAR, again focusing on the challenges and successes of conducting YPAR in a core subject. I also gathered notes from planning meetings we held once a week during the YPAR unit, for a total of six meetings between November and December. In addition, I collected Gloria’s lesson plans and other teaching materials, as well as examples of student work, including the students’ final research papers and their end-of-project reflections. At the end of the YPAR unit, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Gloria in an effort to determine what she believed to be the successes and challenges of the project (see Appendix 2). I only conducted one interview with Gloria as opposed to the three I conducted with Adam because I did not feel comfortable burdening Gloria with multiple interview requests over the relatively short time frame of the unit (six weeks). Finally, I conducted a semi-structured focus group with two of Gloria’s students to determine whether they felt successful and empowered after engaging in YPAR (see Appendix 3).

In my second year with Gloria, space cleared up in my doctoral program to do intensive fieldwork so I increased the frequency of my observations and planning meetings, which allowed me to gain a fuller picture of Gloria and her
students’ experiences. I met with Gloria on three occasions in Summer 2014 to plan the YPAR unit, attempting to learn from and build on the previous year’s work. I took field notes during each planning meeting. For the same reasons as the previous year, I began observing Gloria’s classroom and taking field notes one day per week at the start of the 2014-15 school year. When the YPAR unit began in November, I conducted observations and took field notes three days a week on average, focusing on the same aspects of Gloria’s YPAR implementation as the previous fall. Given the number of holidays and professional development days that occurred in November and December, I was able to observe 18 of the 25 school days that Gloria spent on the YPAR unit. I did not interview Gloria or her students at the end of the project because I had not received IRB approval to do so at the time.

The focus of my study is public school teachers attempting to implement YPAR in core classes without robust university partnerships. Since I only visited Adam’s classroom one day a week, providing occasional logistical support as opposed to coaching or co-teaching support, I argue that Adam’s experience certainly qualifies as YPAR implementation without robust university support. I did provide greater feedback and co-planning support to Gloria in Year 1 via the weekly planning meetings during the YPAR unit, but again I was only in her classroom one day a week. The last year of my study in which I co-planned with Gloria during the summer and throughout the unit and provided in-class logistical support multiple days a week more closely resembles some of the YPAR projects
in the literature. However, I was still only a researcher in training who lacked any material support from my university, and even with my increased presence and support Gloria and her students struggled to implement YPAR in a core classroom, which I will show in my upcoming analysis. Therefore, teachers looking to implement YPAR completely on their own will likely face even greater challenges than the teachers in my study. All that said, it is important to note that in every year of my study the impetus to conduct YPAR came from the teachers themselves, and they were responsible for the vast majority of the implementation of YPAR, including the creation and execution of lesson plans and the support and feedback provided to students.

Analytic Strategy

I set out to identify the consistent challenges and opportunities of YPAR initiated by two teachers in core classrooms in urban public schools, and the ways in which their experiences converge with and diverge from the YPAR research literature. I used several strategies to accomplish this. I began by examining data from my field notes from observations and planning meetings, as well as from my interviews with Gloria and Adam, to determine whether their approaches to the work aligned with the literature on the guiding principles of YPAR, as well as whether they were able to implement the practices of YPAR and achieve the outcomes contained in the literature. I then used student data in the form of student work (e.g., completed research papers), written and verbal student
reflections, and statements made by the two students in my focus group to confirm or challenge Gloria and Adam’s as well as my own assertions about their implementation of YPAR. In instances where Gloria and Adam failed to adhere to the principles, implement the practices, and achieve the outcomes captured in the literature, I first used Gloria and Adam’s own interpretations and explanations for why they were unsuccessful that were captured in statements from interviews, planning meetings, and other conversations. Then, given my position as a researcher in training who is versed in the YPAR literature as well as a former public middle school ELA teacher and current literacy coach, I identified challenges Gloria and Adam faced that they did not articulate in my data, and I provided my own interpretations of why they felt stymied and unsuccessful at times. I grounded my analysis in the literature on challenges faced doing YPAR and, when necessary, I identified new challenges that were a function of the unique settings in which Gloria and Adam taught.

I developed codes based on the YPAR literature and applied them to the various pieces of data, including my field notes, interview and focus group transcripts, and student work. First, I created codes based on the guiding principles of YPAR (e.g., critical in nature), the YPAR practices found in the literature (e.g., open-ended research questions and authentic actions), and the three types of YPAR outcomes most commonly found in the literature: engagement/motivation; positive identity development; improved academic skills. Next, I created codes for the challenges of YPAR that have been established in the literature, e.g., time and
testing. However, given the sparse literature on YPAR projects done in regular school settings, and the virtually non-existent literature on teachers implementing YPAR projects in core classes, I created new codes for challenges that emerged from the data that have yet to be captured in the YPAR literature, e.g., a lack of research training. Finally, I created codes for supports that Gloria and Adam drew upon to implement YPAR. For a full list of codes, please see Appendix 4.

A Note About Positionality

As I revealed in the introduction to this paper, I am a strong supporter of YPAR because I believe it has the potential to be effective, empowering, and liberatory pedagogy for teachers and students who want to fundamentally transform society to make it more just and equitable. In addition, as a former public school teacher who feels comfortable working with teachers and students, and as a researcher who values action research (Lewin, 1954; Stringer, 2005), I intervened when asked in all three YPAR projects in order to help them succeed. Therefore, I make no claims of objectivity or neutrality in my study. However, I am not attempting to show the effectiveness of implementing YPAR in schools over another form of pedagogy, nor am I trying to make any generalizable claims in my study, both of which would require a greater attempt at objectivity and neutrality, not to mention a different study design. Furthermore, despite my belief in the power of YPAR and its alignment with Gloria’s and Adam’s beliefs, both teachers still experienced substantial challenges in implementing YPAR in core
classes in public schools. These obstacles and, in some cases, instances of failure raise some important questions for me about whether and how YPAR can be done fully and effectively in core classes in public schools. Furthermore, I agree with Brown and Rodríguez’s (2009) claim that YPAR project write-ups are sometimes “overly rosy” (p. 4), and I have attempted to counter that by revealing in full the challenges and failures in my Findings and Discussion section. In short, I cannot claim neutrality or objectivity in my approach; however, in laying out my stance toward YPAR, my involvement in the project, my methods, and the full spectrum of the experiences of these two teachers and their students in detail, I believe I have avoided presenting YPAR uncritically, having fulfilled Brown and Rodríguez’s call to YPAR researchers: “What seems important is that PAR researchers (like all other researchers) are clear about their study objectives, their methods, and the nature of power and participation among the researchers and how all of this is important to the study” (p. 4).

**Findings and Discussion**

Gloria and Adam, two certified, experienced teachers who have a strong commitment to social justice inside and outside of school, chose to implement YPAR in their core classes in urban public schools. This pedagogical method was not imposed on them, but rather they sought it out and wove it into their core curriculum because they had relative autonomy to do so. In addition, both have shown a strong commitment to ensuring that their students succeed, and to
fighting for justice for the oppressed communities in which they and their students live. It follows, then, that Gloria and Adam had numerous incentives to make YPAR work, in hopes of mirroring the inspiring stories of youth empowerment that have been captured in the YPAR literature. That said, if they were unable to find success in conducting YPAR with their students, it raises questions about how, and perhaps even whether, YPAR can be done in core classrooms in urban public schools.

In the following section, I will first determine whether and how Adam and Gloria were able to implement YPAR in their classrooms. I will first lay out examples of where Adam and Gloria took a stance toward conducting YPAR that is consistent with the guiding principles of YPAR. Then, I will identify instances where Adam and Gloria were successful in implementing the practices and achieving the outcomes contained in the YPAR literature. Finally, I will detail instances in which Gloria and Adam faced challenges in their implementation of YPAR. Throughout my analysis, I will weave in Gloria and Adam’s interpretations as well as my own. I will also discuss the ways in which their experiences were consistent with and divergent from the YPAR literature in order to explain why their experiences, particularly their challenges, were largely a result of the unique settings in which they taught.
Successful Implementation of YPAR in a Middle and High School Classroom

A critical stance grounded in students’ lives

One of the ways that Gloria and Adam successfully implemented YPAR in their core classes was their embrace of a key principle of YPAR, that it should be critical in nature and situated in the lived experiences of youth. Gloria and Adam both consider themselves critical educators who place issues of power, oppression, and resistance at the center of their teaching. In turn, YPAR was in many ways a natural fit for what they were already doing. In her sophomore humanities course, Gloria is responsible for teaching US history organized around the sociological concepts of race, gender, class, and citizenship. She teaches from an ethnic studies stance, ensuring that the stories of oppressed groups are told alongside the “master narrative” (Takaki, 2003). The overarching question for her sophomore humanities course is: “Who has power in the United States and why?” In addition, Gloria consistently weaves in current events that are relevant to her students’ lives, e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement, student protests against standardized testing, and street harassment of women. In speaking about her approach to teaching her course, Gloria states:

I’m really interested in students developing a critical and creative perspective about the world they live in – particularly U.S. society – and that means looking beyond just individuals and understanding systems…. So, I think one central goal is for students to really understand how their lives are shaped by systems of power and privilege and oppression, and with that understanding to develop a
consciousness around transformation to see themselves as actors of change in this capacity….And especially for the young people I work with who are coming from oppressed communities – things are not just being done to them, but they also have agency in trying to shift those realities. So those are my two central goals [for my students]: to critically understand, but then the creative piece is to imagine something different, for young people to see themselves as being able to enact those changes and to be inspired to do that.

Gloria’s overarching goals coupled with her essential question for the course demonstrate her belief in a critical stance toward learning history, and her attempts to bring in issues that matter to her students through the use of current events affecting young people ensure that the learning is tied to their lives. In turn, when it came time to select YPAR topics, the students choose topics that mattered to them and that they felt they could change through action, e.g., standardized testing, police brutality, and gender-based oppression.

Similarly, one of Adam’s main goals for his students is that they seek to understand their world and develop a critical lens toward systems of power and oppression, though he does so through more of a literacy-based approach. Early in the year that I followed Adam, he incorporated a critical literacy unit where students were asked to analyze images from popular media, including television advertisements. Adam taught concepts such as text versus subtext, and he asked students to look beyond the surface-level messaging of various media to determine the subtle, hidden messages that advertisers and producers aim at consumers, especially young people. In addition, Adam brought various community groups into his classroom, including a youth-led community organization that is fighting
for issues important to young people, e.g., a youth transit pass and cleaner fuel
emissions from city busses that are making people sick in the students’
neighborhoods. Like Gloria’s students, when it came to choosing YPAR topics,
many of Adam’s students gravitated toward issues they had been studying in class
and that often affected them directly, including transit and environmental justice.

A key factor that enabled Gloria and Adam’s students to research issues of
power and oppression that affect them and their communities was administrative
support for the projects. A barrier to YPAR projects sometimes found in the
literature is the reluctance by those in positions of power, e.g., school
administrators, to allow students to interrogate structures that they feel are
oppressive but that adults in power often believe are necessary, justified, and even
beneficial to youth. In Adam’s case, the principal was an audience member during
the students’ mini-YPAR unit presentations, and she even agreed to modify the
uniform policy based on the students’ recommendations. The following year, she
agreed to allow Adam to extend the project over the school year. Similarly,
Gloria’s principal gives Gloria and the rest of the staff a significant amount of
latitude in implementing their curricula. Though Gloria’s principal did not
actively participate in the YPAR project, and while Gloria’s colleagues conduct
more traditional civics final projects, no one objected when Gloria and her
students aimed their YPAR research projects the school in Year 1 – e.g., students’
perceived lack of relevant curricula and unfair discipline practices at JJHS – or at
issues outside the school that are often deemed controversial and even off-limits in
some schools in Year 2, e.g., police brutality, teen pregnancy, and justice for undocumented families. Because of the relatively laissez-faire approach of their administrators, Gloria and Adam faced no resistance in adhering to the principle of YPAR that requires it to be critical in nature and situated in students’ lives.

**Robust youth participation in an inquiry-based process guided by indigenous knowledge**

An additional guiding principle for effective YPAR is robust youth participation in all stages of an inquiry-based research process. This process should be guided and informed by the knowledge that young people possess by way of being uniquely positioned as youth affected by the issues they are researching. At the outset of all three YPAR projects, the students were informed that they would be researchers who will examine a problem they care deeply about and want to help change. At the start of his YPAR unit, Adam signaled to his students the participatory nature of a YPAR process by breaking apart the acronym, *PAR*, with his students, beginning with the *P* and asking his students: “What word do you hear in *participatory*?”, to which several of his students correctly responded “Participate!” In Gloria’s launch in both years, she drew upon my experience being trained as a researcher in a doctoral program, asking me to speak briefly to the students about the difference between traditional research done by adults from outside the community, and participatory action research done by youth who act as researchers and who hold expertise on the issues they study. In terms of student participation in all aspects of an inquiry-based process, Gloria’s
students’ projects were highly consistent with the examples of YPAR projects
captured in the literature. Adam’s unit, on the other hand, is slightly more
complicated by the approach he took with his students, which I will explain below.

As such, it is necessary to analyze Gloria’s and Adam’s cases separately.

Consistent with the literature on YPAR practices, Gloria’s students
participated in every step of an inquiry-based research process in both years that I
observed her classes. Students selected research topics that were important to
them that they wanted to change, developing open-ended research questions that
lent themselves to an inquiry approach. Students often demonstrated their insider
knowledge by choosing topics that they knew were affecting them and their peers,
e.g., the desire to major in two different arts at the same time, or the sentiment
shared by many students that certain groups of students are favored by teachers at
JJHS. Students then read literature related to their topic in order to create a
literature review. Next, students learned about the advantages and disadvantages
of using various research instruments, including surveys, interviews, and focus
groups, and they developed their own instruments that they felt were best suited to
their research questions. Again drawing upon their indigenous knowledge,
students tapped into their social networks inside and outside of school to find
peers who were willing and eager to have their voices heard by responding to
surveys and participating in interviews and focus groups. Gloria’s students
collected and sorted data, aided by tools like Google Forms, and pulled out the
most salient pieces of data that helped answer their research questions. In the final
steps of a traditional inquiry process, students made recommendations based on their findings in formal research reports. Consistent with the praxis required of YPAR, students also planned and participated in various actions related to their research projects. However, I will examine these actions in greater detail in the next section.

Adam’s students participated in many of the same steps of the YPAR process as Gloria’s, though they missed a few key practices, making their experience less congruent with the guiding principle that students should participate in an inquiry-based process. The students’ projects were guided by a topic of their choosing that affected them and their peers, but instead of asking his students to approach the research process with an open-ended research question, Adam instructed his students to stake out a position up front. The first section of the students’ papers was entitled “Thesis” in which they were asked to develop a thesis statement about their topic that needed to be proved. A sample thesis statement that is representative of the approach Adam’s students were instructed to take is: “Homelessness is an issue that is negatively affecting the community.”

Students were then instructed to seek out evidence to support that position, including via original research. From a purist standpoint, this violates the inquiry-based nature of conducting research that begins with an open research question where the evidence a research collects may complicate or even stand in direct contrast to what she believed at the start of the research process. However, from a K-12 pedagogical standpoint, Adam’s students engaged in a learning process that
was guided by a topic of their choosing about which they had questions and wanted to learn more, which arguably falls within a more inclusive definition of inquiry-based learning.

Adam’s students did participate in the other steps of a YPAR project, but again they diverged from a true inquiry-based approach at times. Adam’s students read articles related to their research topic, but instead of using them in a literature review as the basis for original research, the information contained in the articles was used to support the students’ theses alongside and, in some cases, in lieu of original research. A literature review was absent from any of the sample research papers, and use of secondary research was listed as one of the methods in the “Methods” section alongside collecting original research, for example. The “Methods” sections of some of the students’ papers also included actions such as sending letters about their topics to elected officials, which most YPAR practitioners would classify as an example of an action that might take place at the end of a YPAR project, as opposed to a method of collecting data. Finally, the information gleaned from reading secondary sources was mixed in with original data in a section entitled “Claims”, which was the equivalent of a “Findings and Discussion” section in a typical research paper.

That said, Adam’s students were instructed on the value of conducting original research as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using research instruments such as surveys and interviews. In turn, several students with similar research topics worked in teams to create surveys, and others interviewed peers to
solicit their opinions on the issues the students were researching. However, conducting original research was optional, and about half of the students limited their research to secondary sources. At the end of the research process, students created research reports consisting of a “Demands” section based on their findings where they outlined the changes they wanted to see made regarding their topic, e.g., survivors of domestic violence should be provided with counselors and shelters. This “Demands” section is consistent with YPAR projects that were conducted through Ernest Morrell’s Institute for Urban and Minority Education (personal communication, Dean’s Distinguished Lecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 10, 2015). Adam’s students’ modified YPAR projects culminated with various actions but I will withhold discussion of actions until the next section of the paper.

Though Gloria and Adam approached the implementation of YPAR in different ways, the processes were driven by student interests, drew upon students’ knowledge, and included students in every step of the process, even if some key steps were missed or modified in Adam’s case. In speaking to this process of relying on robust youth participation, Gloria reflects back on why she decided to initiate YPAR with her students, and why in Year 1 she asked them to select a research topic related to their own educational experience:

So I really wanted to make [the end-of-semester project] feel more relevant and more authentic and I had heard about YPAR through a friend of a friend. I mean, I love the idea of [young] people being the knowledge producers around an issue that relates to them directly, and then through that process of knowledge production
developing solutions or action steps. So I felt like that would be more authentic….I really wanted to bring education into the forefront of [the YPAR process] since that’s our common denominator here and, again, has implications for their own realities. It is the direct, immediate thing that they experience everyday and that they can say they impact….That idea is really powerful, I think; very empowering.

Throughout their projects, Gloria and Adam conveyed the message to their students that what they care about is important, and positioned them as researchers and scholars capable of conducting research projects designed to create change in their communities.

**Actions taken and voices heard in a variety of settings**

In addition to robust youth participation in a research process guided by their own lived experiences, the other major piece of YPAR that separates it from more traditional research is that it should be geared toward action to create social change. In discussing why they wanted to conduct YPAR with their students, Gloria and Adam mentioned the action-oriented nature of YPAR repeatedly, one example of which comes from Adam:

I think the *action* word is a big part of [YPAR]. So, [the students] have to take an action, whether that’s with an authentic presentation or writing letters to an elected official or to the principal or to a community member…. I think that’s what we’ve done. In the past it was a presentation, a PowerPoint presentation, and a letter to authentic audiences. But it could be any type of action that you can think of.

The most common action taken by both Adam’s and Gloria’s students at the end of the process was presenting their research to a variety of audiences.
Though I did not directly observe the presentations from Adam’s mini-YPAR unit the year before I began my study, Adam revealed in interviews that a major reason he wanted to implement YPAR for the full year was because his students had felt successful in presenting their research to authentic audience that included the principal, teachers, and their classmates, which directly resulted in tangible change in the form of a dress code policy change. Adam also stated that his students almost persuaded administration to re-institute recess, which had been taken away, but that they fell short in the end. At the end of his full-year YPAR unit, the students again presented their findings in front of their peers, though there were no outside observers present this time. In addition to their presentations, the students created and presented “sound collages”, which consisted of audio clips from students who had conducted interviews set over a beat using GarageBand. Adam stated that a few students created posters and pamphlets that they intended to pass out in their communities. While these actions at the end of the full-year YPAR project taken together are moderate indicators of successful actions, it appears that, counterintuitively, when given more time during a full-year YPAR project, Adam and his students fell short of the types of collective, authentic actions that can and did lead to tangible change at the end of the mini-YPAR unit. Adam recognized this fact, stating: “I think one of the things this year that we didn’t have enough time for were the actions…. some students did an excellent job with them but not everybody was given the time nor the tools to come up with a great action, which is unfortunate.”
In Gloria’s case, her students were highly successful in presenting their research to a variety of audiences through multiple formats. All students who completed their research papers posted them to a class website with the goal of sharing their work with a wider audience. Gloria and I promoted the website through our various networks, and several teachers emailed us stating that they had read several of the research reports and that they had shared the website with their students. However, the most successful and impactful action the students took was their community forum. At the end of the projects in both years, the students organized a community forum open to the general public and held at the school during the evening where they presented their YPAR research findings. Consistent with JJHS focus on the arts, Gloria asked students to present their research in an artistic way at the community forum. In front of about 60 audience members comprised of parents, siblings, friends, teachers, and administrators, the students presented their artistic representations of their YPAR projects. Examples included a modern dance interpretation of students breaking free from oppressive dress code policies, spoken word pieces about young people dealing with police brutality, and a documentary in which young women shared their experiences of being street-harassed. In addition, Gloria encouraged students to interact with the audience by asking audience members to share their thoughts about their research findings in dialogue with the presenters. In turn, young people from the audience connected to the projects by sharing stories of going through the same experiences they saw on display in the artistic performances, parents expressed mixed opinions
on topics such as the value of standardized testing, and teachers asked the student researchers questions about how they could make their curriculum more relevant and deal with issues like bullying. Gloria felt that this action piece of the YPAR project was a major success, referring to evidence from the reflections that students filled out in class the day after their performances:

I was so proud the night of their [community forum] where they were presenting to their communities, to their parents, to their teachers, to their peers…. They did really innovative, creative stuff. And I think every single person that presented felt empowered. I really believe, almost everyone – we reflected afterwards – felt really good about what they did in front of people. And in the reflections, they talked about realizing that they had power, which to me was really important, and that’s not something you forget. You will forget facts, you will forget content, but you won’t forget that.

Finally, ten students continued on after Gloria’s class ended to present their artistic research representations with Gloria and me at several conferences, including a research conference at a prestigious tier-1 research university, a social justice conference organized by local teacher activists, and a professional learning conference organized by the district’s teachers union.

Adam and Gloria approached the work with their students with action and social change in mind, and it resulted in students successfully taking actions at the end of their YPAR projects. Perhaps most importantly, though, both Adam and Gloria used the word “empowered” to describe how their students felt at the end of the YPAR projects, which is consistent with one of the outcomes often contained in the YPAR literature. Though I was unable to capture student voice in Adam’s class because of a lack of IRB approval, the data collected in Gloria’s students’
reflections at the end of the YPAR process confirmed her beliefs about the success of the culminating piece of the project. The vast majority of students felt the community forum was a positive experience for them, and many spoke highly of the research process leading up to the forum, often framing it as “hard work” but worthwhile in the end. The sentiments of these two students are representative of many of their peers:

In the future, I’d like to do more in changing people’s views on my topic. I’m definitely taking away more knowledge about my topic and other topics [researched by classmates]. Also, [the students in] this class got to know each other much better through the [YPAR] project.
– Student 1

[The community forum] for me was an experience that changed me. When you share your opinion with someone, a lot of people may disagree with you but some will agree with you. Even though I’m not a grown-up, people felt what I had to say. They could understand my work. It felt like a revolutionary movement. Okay, maybe I’m not changing the whole world, but those people who were there, at least they have a different state of mind now.
– Student 2

Challenges of Implementing YPAR in a Middle and High School Classroom

In many ways, Adam and Gloria were able to successfully adhere to the guiding principles of YPAR and to implement its practices, and they felt that they achieved some important actions and outcomes at the end of the process. However, their YPAR projects also fell short of fully meeting the standards for high-quality YPAR laid out in the literature. In the following section on the challenges Gloria and Adam faced, I will weave together instances where they felt
unsuccessful in meeting their own expectations for what a successful YPAR project should look like, as well as those established in the YPAR literature.

**Testing, curricular demands, and time**

When reflecting on the obstacles that prevented them from successfully implementing their YPAR curriculum, Gloria and Adam almost always referred to a lack of time. Gloria named *time* as “the biggest issue” she faces as a teacher in general, and she claimed the number of weeks she had to implement YPAR – six – is “just not enough time”. Similarly, when asked about giving advice to other teachers who want to conduct YPAR with their students, Adam stated: “I think you gotta have the time to do it. If you rush it, it’s not going to work.” While the issue of time is likely relevant for any type of teaching, I concur with Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis (2010) who argue that school-based factors such a lack of time are more salient for extended project-based learning like YPAR that also has an “emphasis on research and action intended to make change and disrupt the status quo”. I will take this claim by Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis – who conducted YPAR during an elective course – a step further by demonstrating through Adam’s and Gloria’s experiences that the difficulty in finding time to implement YPAR is exacerbated when trying to do so in a core class in a public school directly affected by district- and state-level mandates. Though they both taught in core classes in public schools, the lack of time that Adam and Gloria faced was a result
of substantially different factors. As such, I will again examine their cases separately.

Going into the 2011-12 academic year, Adam planned to implement YPAR over the full academic year, introducing students to projects in the fall, conducting research over the winter, and finishing the year by writing research reports and taking action in the spring. In theory, Adam was teaching in an environment that was highly favorable to implementing YPAR, given his school’s special designation that allows for curricular autonomy as well as his administration's support for YPAR. In reality, though, frequent standardized testing and the pressure to raise test scores as a Level-4 school, coupled with a perceived need to teach the districtwide ELA curriculum at times, prevented Adam from consistently implementing YPAR.

At a couple of points during the year, Adam either cut short or postponed the YPAR curriculum because he was trying to implement three curricula at once: the YPAR curriculum, the districtwide ELA curriculum, and a test prep curriculum. Though Adam was not mandated by the district to implement their ELA curriculum⁸, his administrators had purchased the curricular materials with funds allocated by the district, so Adam felt pressure to implement pieces of the curriculum at least part of the time. This perceived need to implement a

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⁸ The districtwide ELA curriculum consisted primarily of five core novels and readings from a commercially-packaged anthology.
curriculum that is purportedly aligned to the state standards upon which the high-stakes statewide tests are based is likely intensified by the school’s Level-4 status.

Because of the pressure Adam felt to balance the districtwide curriculum with the YPAR curriculum, he chose to push back the implementation of YPAR by a few weeks at one point. Adam had introduced the concept of YPAR to his students in early November, and they began thinking about topics they might want to research. Adam intended to take a brief break from YPAR and then return to it in mid-December. However, Adam began reading a novel from the districtwide ELA curriculum with his students toward the end of the November and the novel unit ran longer than expected into December, forcing Adam to wait until January to revisit YPAR. In turn, his students would spend nearly two months without engaging with their YPAR projects.

Another major obstacle that prevented Adam from consistently implementing YPAR throughout the year was frequent testing and test preparation. The district in which Adam taught required all of its schools including Adam’s to participate in a series of practice tests that took place throughout the academic year leading up to the statewide tests in the spring.\(^9\) In an interview, Adam spoke to the amount of testing that occurred during the year that took substantial chunks of time away from his ability to implement YPAR:

\[\text{I mean we do a lot of tests at this school so that does eat up time….four practice [tests] and then the real [statewide test], and the}\]

\(^9\) Remarkably, one of the practice tests developed by the district is actually administered \textit{after} the statewide tests are completed.
days are all messed up on the four [statewide test] days, so there’s not always a lot of time to get stuff done. Plus, they’re just taking tests for two hours, so the students aren’t psyched to get a lot of work done after that anyway, which I understand. So, yeah, it gets in the way.

Not only do the tests take time to administer, but they also drove Adam’s curricular decisions at one point, again forcing him to abandon time he had planned to spend on YPAR. Adam and his students had spent a significant chunk of early and mid-January researching their YPAR topics. Adam had hoped to spend the end of January and a substantial portion of February working on YPAR, before switching to test prep in late February with the tests coming March.

However, Adam received data from one of the practice tests in January that indicated that his students had scored poorly on this particular test that purported to assess their ability to analyze poetry. In turn, Adam made the decision to switch from the YPAR project to a poetry unit in order to prepare his students for what they might see on the statewide standardized tests. This decision was likely informed by the high-stakes nature of the tests for his students, for his evaluation, and for the school’s status, which could include state takeover if test scores didn’t improve. As a result of these pressures, the students suffered, as evidenced in this exchange between Adam and me during one of our interviews:

**Adam:** I think we could have done a better job balancing [the different curricula], but at the same time, I feel like with 6th graders . . . if we make Mondays YPAR day, or every other Monday, it’s hard to remember even just a week ago, so you almost have to spend a lot of time building background knowledge. And then...you’re breaking up the poetry unit which is a cool unit and is a lot of fun and you gain a lot of momentum on that…. So, the way we decided to do it
this year was [to] just pretty much take a break. We went straight to the poetry unit and then didn’t really touch upon YPAR and then, during that time, kids were asking: “What about YPAR? What about YPAR?”

Interviewer: What did you tell them when they would say that?

Adam: I said: “We’re gonna get back to that but we want to cover poetry now. We’re going to definitely spend all year after [the state-wide test] working on that.” And the way the schedule worked, we kinda had to go straight from poetry to [test] prep/testing work. So we haven’t done any real YPAR work in a couple of months, or like a month and a half.

Adam was not able to fully commit to sustained work on YPAR until April when statewide testing in his subject area was over, which is 8 months into the school year. Because of this, Adam and his students ran out of time at the end of the YPAR process to take authentic actions to the degree Adam wanted.

The difficulty in finding the time and curricular space to effectively conduct YPAR projects is not limited to those teaching in tested subjects, as I will demonstrate with Gloria’s experiences. Teaching in a non-tested core subject, Gloria avoided the testing Adam faced and, in turn, did not feel compelled to implement test prep pedagogy that would have eaten into her curricular space.

Instead, Gloria was burdened by the fact that she only had a semester in which to implement all aspects of her curriculum, including YPAR. The semester-long course structure becomes increasingly common as students transition from elementary and middle school to high school, so Gloria’s situation is likely similar to that of most high school teachers. Even with JJHS’s substantial curricular autonomy, Gloria needed to cover core concepts that she and the rest of the
humanities department deemed important, i.e., the sociological concepts of race, gender, class, and citizenship, explored through the use of historical case studies.

Because of the semester-long structure of her course, Gloria has only 4.5 months, or about 17 weeks of school accounting for school vacations, in which to cover four major concepts and implement a full YPAR unit. In turn, Gloria was only able to allocate 21 days in Year 1 and 24 days in Year 2 to the YPAR curriculum. During this time period, students needed to be introduced to the concept of YPAR, to complete the research process from start to finish, and to create artistic products that were ready for presentation at the community forum.

In both years, students only had seven days total to develop a research tool or tools, collect data, and analyze the data. Among experienced researchers, a week’s worth of time would be nearly impossible to complete three major steps in the research process with thoughtfulness, attention to detail, or rigor, and the same held true for Gloria’s novice researchers. Because they were only given a couple of days in which to collect data, students often had difficulty finding a sufficient number of respondents to their surveys, which were sometimes in the single digits.

In addition, in some cases students limited the analysis sections of their research papers – which they had to write over 1-2 days – to only two or three pieces of evidence from their original research, but then made sweeping, unsupported claims based on that evidence. Given the extremely tight time frame and hard deadlines, coupled with the substantial number of students to whom Gloria needed to provide feedback, students had no time to be iterative in their data collection
and very little time or support to revise their written analyses to make them more consistent with standard research writing. Furthermore, Gloria’s students had substantial trouble hitting deadlines because of the time constraints, with about half of her students failing to complete their research papers on time at the end of both YPAR projects. Almost all students eventually completed their papers, but sometimes weeks after the deadline.

While the final research projects and presentations at the community forum were certainly empowering for the students who felt that their voices were heard on topics they cared about, the quality of the research they completed and wrote up, even in the strongest papers, would likely fall substantially short of the standards laid out by YPAR advocates who write about reliability and validity of high-quality YPAR (Fine, 2008; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). As such, questions remain in Gloria’s mind as well as my own as to the extent to which her students achieved the “academic” outcomes portrayed in the literature, such as improved literacy, numeracy, and research skills. In my interview with Gloria, she reflected on the quality of her students’ research: “So, was their research high-quality that way? No….They did get the understanding that if they want to go find some information about something then they can go write a survey and do it, for example. I don’t think they learned how to do that necessarily well.” When asked why they were unable to do high-quality research, Gloria responded: “Well, time. Time. We had five weeks to do the whole thing. That’s just not enough time.”
Class size, a lack of support, and the individualized nature of schooling

In much of the YPAR literature on projects conducted outside of schools, a university academic, often supported by doctoral candidates being trained in research methods, conducts a YPAR project with a single group of youth that is sometimes as small as 3-5 youth but more often ranges from 10-20 youth. Even in cases where YPAR was conducted in schools, the project usually consisted of a team of at least two to three university researchers working with a single class of about 10-20 students during an elective block. The largest class size in the literature in my review was 32 students, but the teacher implemented the curriculum with a single class and was supported by a “university team” that included three people trained in YPAR and a supervisor from a community-based organization (Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010).

Compared with the vast majority of the YPAR projects captured in the literature, Gloria and Adam were responsible for implementing YPAR with substantially more students. Gloria had two sections of 25 students each for a total of 50 students doing YPAR, and Adam had four sections of 20 students each for a total of 80 students conducting YPAR. This meant that Gloria and Adam were responsible for supporting 50 and 80 individual YPAR projects, respectively. Even with the partnership of an additional adult in the classroom (e.g., Adam’s co-teacher and Gloria’s student teacher in Year 2), which many public school teachers do not have, the total student-to-adult ratios of 40-to-1 and 25-1 in Adam’s and
Gloria’s classes, respectively, are substantially larger than most YPAR projects in the literature. In speaking to this issue, Adam lamented in an interview that the participatory, project-based nature of YPAR “makes it difficult to run with 80 students”.

In addition to the sheer number of projects Adam and Gloria were responsible for supporting, another factor affecting their ability to support students in doing high-quality research was their lack of a robust partnership with adults highly trained in research methods and YPAR. While I was technically a university researcher when I worked with Adam, I was only in my second year of a doctoral program and had not yet been trained in action research or even fully trained in traditional research methods. In addition, I was only in Adam’s class one day a week, usually observing. As for Gloria, though I had two more years of doctoral training including an action research course when I worked with her in Year 1, I was still only in her class one day a week on average. In speaking to how difficult it is to support 50 students in two classes doing YPAR without having been trained in YPAR and only having the support of trained researcher one day a week, Gloria stated:

> It was hard going into [YPAR] without having any understanding of the process. I felt frustrated a lot because I had large classes – 27 students, 25 students – in a full inclusion classroom with no sustained support. I was the only consistent person in the room everyday. This kind of work requires that there be more support for it to be done well, especially in a full inclusion classroom.
In Year 2, Gloria received the type of adult support that she was calling for. Tara, a full-time teacher candidate from a local university, was placed in Gloria’s classroom and supported Gloria and her students throughout the YPAR project. Additionally, I was in Gloria’s classroom three days a week, and I now had experience collaborating on two different YPAR projects with teachers, including Gloria in Year 1. As previously mentioned, this team of adult collaborators is the only set-up in the three years of my study that resembles the teams of trained adults usually found in the literature. Still, we were responsible for almost double the number of students of the school-based teaching/research team with the largest number of students in the literature. That said, unsurprisingly, Gloria expressed on several occasions that she felt that her students were far better supported in Year 2 than Year 1 and that the research process and final products were more rigorous. Because we could divide up large class sizes into more manageable groups of 7-8 students per adult, we were almost always able to check-in with every student each class period. In turn, students wrote stronger literature reviews (an area where they struggled in Year 1), they created surveys and interview questions that were clearer and spelling and grammar error-free (which undoubtedly led to more trustworthy data), and they included more extensive and accurate data in their research papers and presentations.

One possible solution to the problem of having to support 50-80 different research projects is to require all students in each class to work collaboratively on the same research question, or to work in groups of 4-5 students with each group
selecting a different research topic but working collaboratively on the same topic within their groups. These are the two different arrangements that are most commonly found in the projects in the YPAR literature.\textsuperscript{10} These whole-group or small-group configurations, however, are made substantially more difficult when YPAR is conducted in core subjects in schools where the norm is that students are expected to be able to show what they know and are able to do as \textit{individuals}, in part because schools require individual grades and, increasingly, individual students must show that they are proficient in certain standards. In out-of-school projects, there are no requirements of YPAR beyond conducting high-quality research and taking action and, as such, these tasks are allowed and encouraged to be collective in nature. A similar freedom to work collaboratively likely applies in YPAR projects conducted during elective blocks in schools, since grades in electives are often considered far less important to teachers, students, administrators, and even parents.

In addition to the individualized nature of schooling, Adam pointed to another reason for students choosing their own research topics: “I could pick a topic or two and force everybody to do that, and it would be much more

\textsuperscript{10} Both Adam and Gloria did, in fact, limit the number of topics that students could explore to about 5-7 overarching topics, but each student chose their own specific sub-topic and research claim (for Adam) or research question (for Gloria). For example, a topic that 5-10 students in Gloria’s classes were working under might be “school discipline codes”, but each of those 5-10 students had their own research question, e.g., “How do students at JJHS feel about dress codes?” or “Should students be disciplined for having cell phones in school?”. In turn, each student conducted their research and wrote up their research papers individually.
manageable but then it wouldn’t be as authentic, and there wouldn’t be as much buy-in.” Gloria agreed, stating: “They had choice around questions they were going to be asking. I found that to be very exciting, and there couldn’t be this hiding behind ‘this is boring, this is irrelevant’.” Gloria’s and Adam’s 50 and 80 students, respectively, did not opt into conducting YPAR, unlike the students in virtually all of the out-of-school projects and, likely, in the projects conducted during electives as well, which students usually choose to take. Therefore, the decision to allow students to choose their own research topics and conduct their own individual projects likely increased the chances that every student would feel engaged in the project.

**Lack of research training**

Like most teachers in public K-12 schools in the U.S., Gloria and Adam had not been trained in critical pedagogy or YPAR as part of their teacher training programs (Macedo, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Though their administrators were supportive of their implementation of YPAR in general, neither Gloria nor Adam received coaching, curricular resources, or any other forms of professional development related to YPAR during the years that I observed them. Without training, resources, or support of any kind to teach YPAR, it is not surprising that Adam implemented a hybrid version of the YPAR process that arguably violated the inquiry-based nature of conducting research. This is particularly true given the training he likely did receive to become an ELA
teacher. Trained as an ELA teacher myself, I can attest to the fact that, in our
discipline, we are trained to teach students to make claims and support them with
evidence, usually in the form of analytical essays that begin with a thesis that
needs to be supported by evidence from a text or texts. Consistent with the
approach that is most commonly taken within his discipline, Adam asked his
students to enter the research process with a claim, or position, that they were
required to support with evidence. In addition, the literature, or texts, that students
read on their YPAR topic was used as evidence to support a claim, rather than as a
body of prior scholarship upon which to build an original, inquiry-based research
project.

Research has shown that professionals are trained to think, argue, read, etc.
in very different ways within different disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).
Therefore, it is very likely Adam was trained to think and teach as a literary critic
and ELA teacher in different ways than scientists (including social scientists) and
science teachers, who are trained to enter into an inquiry-based process with an
open research question and hypothesis that can be complicated or contradicted.
Why then would Adam take an approach to research that is different from his

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11 The 6th grade ELA Common Core Standards for writing, for example, contain
the word “claim” in seven different places, whereas the word “question” only
appears once: http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/6/. In addition,
though one of the research standards speaks to answering a question, another
highlights the practice of using textual evidence in research papers in the ELA
classroom: “CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9 Draw evidence from literary or
informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.”
disciplinary and pedagogical training if he had never been taught otherwise?

Further reinforcing this point, as a doctoral student who had not been fully trained in the research process yet, but who had been trained as an ELA teacher, I made no attempt to recommend to Adam that he and his students take an inquiry-based approach to doing YPAR because I did not know any better myself.

Similarly, Gloria, in trying to adhere to general writing standards established by the JJHS staff, attempted to approach the work like Adam in that she wanted her students to stake out a position and support it from the outset of the project. Luckily, because of the knowledge gained in two additional years in a research doctoral program, I was able to steer Gloria toward asking her students to develop open research questions and use literature in a review to set the stage for their inquiry process. In speaking to her misunderstanding about an inquiry-based approach to conducting research – which had previously been Adam’s and my misunderstanding – Gloria stated at the end of Year 1:

[You and I] had some conversations where I was like “Oh, really? You can’t have a position [at the beginning of the research process]? You’re not supposed to have a position?” So, yeah, I really don’t have a lot of understanding...I don’t feel like I have a lot of background doing and teaching research. So, I just understood it really abstractly. I didn’t understand it concretely, so that was hard.

Most teachers in public schools with the possible exception of science teachers will likely be in the same position and face the same challenges as Gloria and Adam since most teachers are not prepared to do research themselves or to teach YPAR.
Implications

Gloria and Adam were able to implement YPAR projects in core subjects in urban public schools that were often consistent with the principles and practices of YPAR, and their students achieved some important successes at end of the process. A final example of the success Adam and Gloria felt in conducting YPAR with their students that I have not yet mentioned is that Adam has continued to implement YPAR with his students in three consecutive years since I worked with him, and Gloria plans to implement YPAR for a third year in a row during the 2015-16 academic year.

That said, Adam’s and Gloria’s experiences illuminate some important challenges of implementing YPAR in core classes in urban public schools – challenges that overlap to some degree with the current YPAR literature, but which played out differently in some key ways in core classes. Many of these challenges are structural in nature – e.g., frequent high-stakes testing, large class sizes, rigid school structures, inadequate teaching preparation – and I second calls by YPAR advocates and others to address these constraints (Cannella, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Macedo, 2013). However, in addition to working to change the conditions in which teachers like Gloria and Adam teach and their students learn, YPAR advocates must also attempt to support them to do this work in present conditions. To that end, we can draw upon Adam’s and Gloria’s experiences to illuminate important questions about how YPAR
advocates might support teachers looking to do this work, and how teachers themselves can implement YPAR in settings similar to Adam’s and Gloria’s:

1. *In what ways can teachers in core classes in public schools navigate the obstacles of standardized testing and other curricular demands in order to give YPAR the extended period of time it requires?*

Adam’s decision to delay implementation of the YPAR project in the face of the pressures of standardized testing is consistent with the experiences of Phillips, Berg, Rodríguez, and Morgan (2010), whose YPAR project in a remedial skills class was delayed three months to clear space for high-stakes tests preparation. It is also consistent with Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis (2010), who struggled to find support for “non-academic” activities such as YPAR because, as one principal claims, he and “every [other] principal is super under the gun to deliver test scores”. Teachers looking to implement YPAR in core classes in tested subjects will likely need to anticipate the demands of high-stakes testing, and possibly wait until testing season is over before implementing YPAR. Of course, this is essentially the approach Adam took, waiting until testing season was over to fully commit to YPAR. In my final interview with Adam, he stated: “Starting in April is too late, so it would be great if we could start in March or just having the one extra month I think would help a ton, but we can’t do that [because of the tests].” Since testing is usually conducted in the last few months of the school year in most states, teachers in core classes will likely face similar challenges to Adam if they wait until testing is over. In short, teachers should
understand that YPAR takes time – preferably months, not weeks – and they will need to account for testing demands, including test preparation, when planning to undertake a YPAR project in a core classroom.

Additionally, teachers in core classes who are expected to cover content in their discipline within a semester-long course structure will also have to figure out how to allocate enough time to a YPAR project. Gloria’s short time frame to implement YPAR led to final projects that did not meet the standards for high-quality YPAR projects in terms of rigor, validity, or reliability. Gloria could have gained back the eight days she dedicated to preparing for the artistic presentations by abandoning the community forum, but that seems like an unwise trade-off since the community forum was such a success for her students. Even if Gloria were to take that trade-off, 25 days total to complete the YPAR process from start to finish is arguably too short of a time period in which to do rigorous research whose findings could consistently convince audiences made up of teachers, administrators, and policymakers to make changes that affect young people’s lives. That said, Adam’s students were able to convince their principal to change the dress code based on their mini-YPAR unit, which only lasted a month.

Furthermore, both Adam and Gloria continued to conduct YPAR after their initial year so they clearly see value in conducting condensed and sometimes truncated versions of YPAR with their students. Regardless, teachers in similar situations to Adam and Gloria will need to anticipate how to navigate and mitigate potential time constraints in implementing YPAR. In addition, YPAR researchers should
continue to investigate a lack of time as an obstacle to implementing YPAR in schools, documenting the strategies teachers use to address this challenge. Finally, YPAR advocates may need to think about ways to modify the YPAR process for projects conducted in core classrooms in schools, determining which pieces are essential and which can be shortened or perhaps even jettisoned.

2. In what ways can teachers conducting YPAR with large class sizes and total number of students provide appropriate support to all students?

Gloria and Adam’s relatively large class sizes and total number of students highlight a unique challenge for public school teachers looking to do YPAR with their core classes – a challenge that has yet to be explored in the literature. It is important to note that Gloria’s and Adam’s average class sizes and total number of students in their core courses are lower than those of many teachers in urban schools, where class sizes are sometimes over 30, with teachers often teaching four or five sections of a core course. And still Gloria and Adam felt unable to support all of their students. As mentioned, Adam and Gloria both felt that students choosing their own individual research topics led to greater engagement and motivation, and the individual nature of the projects aligned with school practices that require individual grades for students. However, in future studies of teachers in core classes, it would be worth experimenting with small groups of students or the entire class working on the same research topic and question where

\[ \text{Gloria teaches an additional two courses that are not considered core and in which she did not conduct YPAR.} \]
the work can be distributed in order to determine if management is easier and if anything is lost in terms of engagement or motivation.

Even if students were to work in small groups or as one large group on the same project, the difficulty of conducting and supporting YPAR projects with only one or two full-time teachers remains. As such, it seems that teachers looking to do this work would benefit greatly from the addition of other adults to provide support, thereby lowering the student-to-adult collaborator ratio. When asked to give advice to other teachers looking to do this work, Gloria stated:

I wouldn’t want to discourage people from doing [YPAR], but I would want to say “Be realistic about doing it if you have a large class and you’re the only teacher.” You just can’t support students the way they need to be supported. It’s not really fair; it’s not fair to the students. They’re not getting the coaching and support they need to be successful…. So, can you find volunteers? Can you find college tutors? You know, if you can bring together resources to support students. If you can draw on…human resources.

Building on Gloria’s advice, it seems that teachers looking to do this work essentially on their own would benefit from adult collaborators from: 1.) local colleges and universities, particularly those with doctoral programs and/or teacher education programs; 2.) local community organizations, especially those who conduct community-based research; and 3.) non-profit education organizations, especially those who focus on conducting research with youth, e.g., civic education programs. An additional piece of advice from Gloria is to try and find colleagues within one’s school who might be willing to undertake YPAR in their own classes. On several occasions, Gloria indicated that she wished she had a
colleague or two with whom she could co-create resources and troubleshoot challenges that arise in the YPAR process.

3. **How can we support teachers who have not been trained as researchers to effectively implement YPAR?**

   As previously stated, most public school teachers have not received training in their teacher preparation programs to either conduct original research themselves or to teach their students how to do so. A discussion of whether we should require this in teacher preparation programs and what that might look like is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the purpose of my study is to support teachers already in the classroom who want to conduct YPAR. While partnering with trained researchers is likely the ideal way to address the issue of teachers untrained in research methods and teaching YPAR, only a small percentage of teachers have the connections to researchers in universities and community-based settings who have the availability to partner with teachers and youth in schools on a consistent basis.

   In turn, those of us who are YPAR advocates and want to see this empowering pedagogy expand into core classrooms in public schools must consider other ways to support teachers who do not have access to university or community partnerships. One possible method is to develop and widely disseminate YPAR curricular and pedagogical resources, as well as stories of teachers and youth conducting YPAR. This may even include lesson plans, pacing guides, sample texts, and other curricular resources. In conversations I have had
with YPAR advocates, many are uncomfortable with the suggestion that we create general curricular resources for doing YPAR. They argue, justifiably, that true YPAR should be fluid and context-specific, driven by the issues affecting young people that differ depending on where they live, and thus YPAR should not be packaged or prescribed. Additionally, if YPAR were to become a packaged product, advocates worry that it could be co-opted, sanitized, and commercialized, thereby violating the critical essence of YPAR, which is designed to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression, not to conform to and reify them. These concerns have merit and should be taken seriously. However, we can either capitulate to these concerns and teachers like Adam and Gloria will lose out on supports that could potentially help them implement YPAR more effectively with their students, or we can do our best to create and disseminate resources in thoughtful and responsible ways that help teachers and students in urban public schools, despite the risks. If we truly want this approach to successfully expand into schools, I argue we need to err on the side of the latter approach.

To the point about YPAR being dynamic and context-specific and therefore unable to be packaged into curricular resources, there are in fact parts of the YPAR process that will likely not change in any substantive way no matter where the project takes place. For example, the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews versus focus groups are not context-specific. Models of open-ended research questions that are narrow enough to be answered in a YPAR project lasting a few months could be useful to students trying to develop their own
research questions. These and other examples could be included in a YPAR curricular framework that teachers could flesh out and adapt to meet the needs of their own students and context, which is what highly-skilled teachers do with any curriculum. Gloria, who stated on multiple occasions during Year 1 how hard it was to build a YPAR curriculum from scratch, indicated her desire for curricular resources: “YPAR follows a particular trajectory so there can be templates for each of those aspects of that trajectory….Of course you can’t just carbon-copy reproduce it but the outline can be adapted, and it would be helpful to have an outline.”

For those who would still balk at any generalized YPAR curricular resources, perhaps an acceptable alternative would be for researchers, teachers, and youth who document their experiences doing YPAR to include more details of the pedagogical practices they used, the obstacles they navigated, the student work they created, etc. with a caveat being: this is the way we did it; you will likely have some different experiences. This suggested level of detail that teachers would find helpful is currently missing from the vast majority of the literature on YPAR.

**Conclusion**

YPAR has the potential to empower students to conduct critical, action-oriented research designed to challenge systems of oppression that affect their lives and their communities. Increasingly, YPAR is moving into regular public schools where teachers are attempting to implement it in their core classrooms.
order to support teachers and students to do great work, we need studies that illuminate the possibilities and challenges of doing YPAR in traditional classroom settings. To date, very few studies exist in which teachers implemented YPAR without robust university partnerships, and virtually no studies looked at teachers who did so in core classrooms. My study adds to this relatively sparse research base and, while no generalizations can be made from Adam’s and Gloria’s experiences, the successes they achieved and the obstacles they faced shine a light on places where future research needs to be done so that we can better support teachers in similar environments who want to do this work. In addition, teachers looking to implement YPAR in similar environments as Gloria and Adam may find their experiences informative when trying to avoid pitfalls and achieve success with their own students.
Bibliography


### Appendix 1: Timeline of Study

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Study Participant</th>
<th>Summer</th>
<th>First Semester (Sept-Jan)</th>
<th>Second Semester (Jan-June)</th>
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<td>Adam</td>
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<td>• Observed Adam’s class once a week</td>
<td>• Observed Adam’s class once a week</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Provided occasional logistical support, e.g., finding readings</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Provided in-class support to students on YPAR projects in May and June</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Gloria</td>
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<td>• Observed Gloria’s class once a week throughout semester</td>
<td>• Presented with students at conferences on Mar. 1, May 10, and June 17</td>
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<td>Year 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Observed once a week; provided in-class support to students on YPAR projects</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Met with Gloria weekly to provide feedback on lesson plans</td>
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<td>2014-15</td>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>• Observed Gloria’s class once a week prior to YPAR unit</td>
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<td>Year 2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Observed approximately 3 days a week; provided in-class support to students on YPAR projects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Met with Gloria weekly to provide feedback on lesson plans</td>
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Appendix 2: Sample Teacher Interview Protocol

Interview #1: Prior to Start of YPAR Unit

*Questions on the purposes and goals for engaging in YPAR*

- Why did you decide to take on YPAR this year?
- What does YPAR mean to you?
- What are the specific academic goals that you would like the students to achieve while engaging in YPAR?
- Are there any goals beyond strictly academic goals that you think students might achieve through YPAR?
- How will you know if you and your students have achieved these goals?
- How will students choose their research topics?

Interview #2: Halfway Through the YPAR Unit

*Questions on the progress of the YPAR unit*

- What are some of the successes you and your students have had so far?
- What are some of the challenges that you have faced in implementing YPAR?
- How much autonomy do you have to deviate from the districtwide curriculum in order to implement YPAR?
- What role, if any, does standardized testing and test prep play in hindering your ability to implement YPAR?
- What resources have you drawn upon to implement YPAR successfully?

Interview #3: End of the YPAR Unit

*Questions on the evaluation of the YPAR unit*

- What are the successes you and your students achieved in doing YPAR?
- What actions did your students take based on their research projects?
- What were the biggest challenges in implementing YPAR?
- What would you do differently in implementing YPAR next time?
- What advice would you give to teachers who want to do YPAR with their students?
Appendix 3: Sample Student Interview Protocol

Questions on the experience of doing YPAR

- What was your YPAR topic? Why did you choose this topic?
- What did you like about doing YPAR?
- What was hard about doing YPAR?
- What did you learn from doing YPAR?
- Do you think you’ll take any further actions on your research topic?
- Would you want to do YPAR again?
Appendix 4: Etic and Emic Codes

Etic Codes:

- **Guiding Principles of YPAR:**
  - Critical in nature
  - Grounded in students’ lives
  - Robust youth participation
  - Inquiry-based
  - Draws on indigenous knowledge
  - Action-oriented
  - Awareness-raising
  - Authentic audiences

- **Practices of YPAR:**
  - Relevant, critical research topic
  - Open-ended research question
  - Read relevant, rigorous literature
  - Literature review
  - Develop research instruments
  - Data collection
  - Data analysis
  - Written research report
  - Action plan
  - Authentic actions

- **Outcomes of YPAR:**
  - Engagement and motivation
  - Positive identity development
  - Improved academic knowledge and skills

- **Challenges of YPAR:**
  - Structural:
    - Power dynamics preventing implementation
    - Curricular space
    - Testing
    - Time
    - Hard deadlines
  - Procedural:
    - Adult-youth dynamics
    - Democratic production of knowledge
    - Peer-to-peer issues
Emic Codes:

- **Challenges:**
  - Lack of research training
  - Lack of YPAR curricular resources
  - Disciplinary training
  - Large class sizes
  - Adult-to-student ratios
  - Individual research topics
  - Individualized nature of schooling
  - Competing curricula
  - Test prep curricula
  - Districtwide testing
  - Semester-long courses
  - Lack of rigor in the research process
  - Lack of rigor in the research products

- **Supports:**
  - Administrative support – active
  - Administrative support – laissez-faire
  - Community organizations