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Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking Educational Research

Review of Research in Education

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Knowledges from academic and professional research-based institutions have long been valued over the organic intellectualism of those who are most affected by educational and social inequities. Participatory research recognizes what Antonio Gramsci described as “the intellectual and political power of ‘organic intellectuals’ from whom counter-hegemonic notions derive,” which presents a “fundamental challenge to what ... John Gaventa called ‘official knowledge’ as the sole legitimate claim to truth” (Fine et al., 2004, p. 4). Unlike positivist and postpositivist epistemological traditions and research methods that rely on the objectivity and expertise of university-sanctioned researchers (Isenhardt & Jurow, 2011; Noffke, 1997), participatory action research (PAR) projects are collective investigations that rely on local knowledge, combined with the desire to take individual and/or collective action (Fine et al., 2004; McIntyre, 2000). PAR with youth (YPAR) engages in rigorous research inquiries and represents a radical effort in educational research to take inquiry-based knowledge production out of the sole hands of academic institutions and include the youth who directly experience the educational contexts that scholars endeavor to understand. In this essay, we outline the foundations of YPAR and examine the distinct epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical contributions of an

interdisciplinary corpus of YPAR studies and scholarship. We outline the origins and disciplines of YPAR and make a case for its role in educational research; discuss its contributions to the field and the tensions and possibilities of YPAR across disciplines; and close by proposing a YPAR critical-epistemological framework that centers youth and their communities, alongside practitioners, scholars, and researchers, as knowledge producers and change agents for social justice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODS

Fine (2008) asserts that “*PAR is not a method*”--it is a “radical *epistemological challenge* to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (p. 215)¹. Because researchers across generations, contexts, and roles must “*deliberate deeply* within and across differences, *seeking dissent* and *exploring competing interpretations* of the evidence” (p. 222), the interpretive nature of this work, and a reflection of its ontological and epistemological assumptions, has been nurtured by participatory methodologies that are critical, dialectical, and hermeneutical (Arthur et al., 2012, p. 16). The epistemological work of PAR encompasses quantitative and qualitative data collection methods ranging from “surveys, logistic regressions, ethnography, public opinion polls, life stories, testimonies, performance, focus groups, and varied other methods,” yet its common purpose across disciplines and research designs is “to interrogate the conditions of oppression and surface leverage points for resistance and change” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). PAR “can be regarded as a methodology that argues in favor of the possibility, the significance, and the usefulness of involving research partners,” yet it is not fundamentally distinct from other empirical social research procedures” and bears “numerous

¹ Italics in original text.

links” especially to critical qualitative methodologies and methods (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 2; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Working against assumptions about neutrality, objectivity, and bias in qualitative inquiry (Roulston & Shelton, 2015), PAR is marked by efforts to validate and create spaces for the production of knowledge by and with those who are indigenous to their respective communities (Miskovic & Hoop, 2006).

PAR with youth², or YPAR, is therefore a critical research methodology that carries specific epistemological commitments toward reframing who is “allowed” to conduct and disseminate educational research with/about youth in actionable ways. Its origins in critical pedagogy inform its role as a pedagogical approach based on a conception of teaching and learning through collaborative and transformative inquiry. Grounded in the field of critical psychology, in the first study to document YPAR in education, McIntyre (2000) argues for the power of “engaging in a process that positions youth as agents of inquiry and as ‘experts’ about their own lives” (p. 126). Embedded in contexts of poverty, violence, and inadequate educational resources, the youth researchers addressed these inequalities by drawing on epistemologies of resistance, learning and then using various methods to draw on community narratives, toward “co-creating student-initiated intervention or action programs that promote community well-being” (p. 129). Our review thus focuses on the ways in which YPAR has transformed research on educational inequality by understanding it from the perspectives of those most impacted by inequitable educational conditions, as well as how marginalized youth have used YPAR to critique, redefine, and overcome the very asymmetries they face in their schools and

² The term *youth* often refers to an age range of 15-24, although the “definition of youth perhaps changes with circumstances, especially with the changes in demographic, financial, economic and socio-cultural settings.” (United Nations, “Definition of Youth.” (Available: www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf). April 15, 2016. YPAR scholarship in education encompasses work with youth within a wider age range, inclusive of elementary school age through undergraduates in college.

communities. Yet, we are also careful not to fetishize YPAR as a panacea for the vast inequities plaguing youth, in and outside of schools. We examine the inherent tensions in positioning youth as knowledge creators, understanding that these tensions are typically not the focus of the literature, but are often subtly addressed within research narratives.

Method and Research Questions

In April 2016, a Google Scholar search using the keywords “youth participatory action research” and “education,” yields just over 1,000 scholarly articles³, with emerging scholarship on participatory research with youth in fields such as sociology dating back to the 1990s (Kelly, 1993). When the results are restricted to those published after the McIntyre (2000) study, the number is reduced minimally to about 990 entries. Further refined from 2010 to the present, the results are again minimally reduced to 910 articles, indicating that the vast majority of entries have been published very recently--indeed, over 275 of these entries have been published since 2015. These numbers, while not meant to be definitive (nor exhaustive), demonstrate that participatory action research with youth, as examined in our review, has become increasingly prevalent within the last 10-15 years.

While space constraints prevent us from including all of these articles, we provide a framework for examining the various epistemological, methodological, and pedagogical traditions and disciplines of YPAR scholarship and research in education published since 2000. We analyze YPAR scholarship and empirical studies based on the following foundational questions that allow a broad analysis of empirical and theoretical YPAR studies from educators, youth, and researchers:

³ Excluding citations.

1. In what ways have inequality and its root causes contributed to the need for YPAR as a critical epistemology and research methodology?
2. How has YPAR sought to address educational inequality and promote justice through its methodological and pedagogical foundations?
3. How has YPAR scholarship drawn upon and extended critical research in education and beyond?

Our interdisciplinary analysis documents how YPAR scholarship in recent decades has informed prevalent dilemmas in critical research in education, such as: the production of critical epistemologies (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991); issues of representation in qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 1994); activist research traditions that build upon the critical meta-awareness of individuals and communities (Hale, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2014); and the contributions and tensions inherent in the process of decolonizing research (Paris & Winn, 2014; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Our analysis highlights the necessity of working across critical research, epistemological, and pedagogical frameworks, and also describes what makes YPAR itself a unique and generative endeavor at the intersection of these disciplines.

YPAR IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

A deep history of social inequality and its root causes across disciplines have contributed to the need for YPAR as a methodology and educational epistemology. Within communities with the highest rates of violence, steeped in deep racial, economic, and class struggle, the earliest recorded YPAR studies were born (Cahill, 2007; Fine et al., 2004; McIntyre, 2000). Led by youth ready to take research about themselves into their own hands, YPAR work emerged in response to discrimination, racism, poverty, under-resourced schools, and the constant threat of

violence felt by youth researchers and their communities. Other YPAR projects focused more explicitly on academic disparities, reflecting a disconnect between student ability and student achievement in standardized test scores, advanced placement exams, and college readiness (Morrell, 2004, 2008). Throughout the field of research broadly, a long history of dehumanizing and colonizing methods, positioning affected communities as objects rather than subjects and authorities over the study of their lives, called for the critical and reflexive methodologies and epistemologies encompassed by [Y]PAR (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Tracing Critical Participatory Action Research with Youth

In its development as a research epistemology as well as a pedagogical project, PAR has been inspired by numerous intellectual and critical traditions (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). Critical PAR has antecedents in the work of John Collier and Kurt Lewin (Bargal, 2006; Collier, 1945; Neilsen, 2006), who rejected the positivist assumption of objectivity in research. They suggested that researchers could take action on and impact the issues they were investigating, and not only “academic” researchers could conduct research on issues that have an impact on their lives. Scholars argue that origins of what has come to be called PAR can be found in the practices of indigenous communities of Africa, the Americas, and South Pacific before Western paradigms of thought were ever encountered (Mirra et al., 2015; Nabudere, 2008; Smith, 1999). In the 20th century, PAR has been practiced on multiple continents, typically by communities who have experienced some form of colonization, and gained recognition as social science research in Latin America in the 1970s (Morrow & Torres, 1995). From its inception, PAR has articulated an explicit goal of social justice and societal transformation. PAR intentionally seeks to disrupt power structures, in an effort to transform the

ways in which traditionally marginalized communities have been subjugated by Western conceptions of research (Fine, 2008; Smith, 1999; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) articulate the transformational goals of PAR in their juxtaposition of researchers and participants:

[S]uch a relationship must be transformed into subject/subject rather than subject/object.

Indeed, the destruction of the asymmetric binomial is the kernel of the concept of participation as understood in the present context (researcher/researched). (p. 5)

This idea of the transformational impact of intellectual work can also be seen in the history of PAR's ideological and educational partner—critical pedagogy.

Morrell (2006) traces the roots of PAR and YPAR as an educational project to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who “fundamentally believed that any meaningful social transformation would only occur in conjunction with everyday people” united in a “conscious effort to disrupt or call into question this paradigm of knowledge production” (p. 6-7). PAR had its educational roots in the Freirian tradition of adult education in Australia, New Zealand, and South America (Freire, 1982; Smith, 1999; Stringer, 1996).

YPAR, or CPAR with youth⁴, is a more recent pedagogical project that has developed out of the tradition of critical pedagogy (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2004). YPAR has the same transformational goals as PAR, but recognizes youth as intellectual beings capable of engaging in the practice of critical investigation of community issues and the production of viable, usable knowledge. For Cammarota and Fine (2008), “YPAR teaches young people that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural; are designed to

⁴ We use YPAR and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) with youth interchangeably. CPAR is used in social science research and critical psychology to distinguish it from forms of PAR that do not center inequitable distributions of power.

privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and thus changeable” (p. 2). Through its epistemological foundations, YPAR challenges who has the right to produce and disseminate knowledge by placing students at the center of knowledge production. As pedagogy, YPAR has helped place knowledge production at the center of engaged teaching. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of YPAR is that it creates the conditions for young people to step back from their world and see that what they might have taken for granted is something that can be transformed (Lozenski, Casey, & McManimon, 2013). By recognizing YPAR’s intention to demystify and deconstruct power structures, then transform them in order to construct a new reality, critical agency is fostered in youth who participate in this type of learning through research.

Foundations and Disciplines of YPAR

According to Creswell (2013a), participatory action research (PAR) belongs within the *transformative framework* in qualitative inquiry, where research should “contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (p. 26). He organizes qualitative research according to the “five approaches that have now stood the test of time”: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study, stating that he has considered others, and “participatory action research, for example, could be a sixth approach” (p. 5). Within the transformative framework, Creswell argues that many participatory action researchers, along with critical theorists and researchers who work with marginalized communities, are informed by a *transformative worldview* that has developed since the 1980s and 90s among “individuals who felt that the postpositivist assumptions imposed structural laws and theories that did not fit

marginalized individuals in our society or issues of power and social justice, discrimination, and oppression that needed to be addressed” (2013b, p. 22).

Creswell’s definition of the transformative worldview reflects many of the elements taken up by YPAR scholars, many of whom trace the origins of their work to a various parallel and/or overlapping critical theories and movements. Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2015) “find it instructive to consider how some of these movements expanded the range of individuals and ideas that could *participate* in research—for example, feminism (women), postcolonialism (the colonized “other”), critical race studies (communities of color), postmodernism (historicity, discursiveness, and meta-analysis), and poststructuralism (instability of the structures that guide human thought and action)” (p. 17). Furthermore, the overlap among movements in YPAR underscores the need for an intersectional lens that transcends the implicit boundaries in critical movements in order to address inequities with youth.

As a transformative approach to research, YPAR is of particular importance in education, where Noguera (2009) underscores the significance of YPAR by arguing that in “most research into policy and school reform initiatives, particularly in education, youth are treated as the passive objects” whose “experiences, perceptions, and aspirations” are often overlooked by those who are responsible for identifying and “fixing” educational problems (p. 18). In the past two decades, YPAR projects have positioned youth as knowers, researchers, and agents of change in areas ranging from racial injustice (Torre, 2005), educational inequality and school reform (Fine, Roberts & Torre, 2004; Rubin & Jones, 2007), and students’ critical literacy experiences (Mirra, Filipiak, Garcia, 2015; Morrell, 2008), to the transformative impact of YPAR in experiential curricular approaches (Schensul & Berg, 2004).

ADDRESSING INEQUALITY AND PROMOTING JUSTICE**VIA YPAR PEDAGOGY AND METHODS**

As a participatory methodology, YPAR is epistemologically primarily centered in who is involved in the conception, design, implementation, analysis, dissemination, and action-based impact of research, rather than a specific set of methods that are employed. YPAR uses a vast array of qualitative and quantitative approaches, complicating reviews of literature that span disciplines. YPAR can be found in educational studies, geography, ethnic studies, social work, health, psychology, sociology, and other disciplines seeking to draw from the critical knowledges and unique positionality of youth to unearth and imagine new perspectives. Thus, YPAR tends to saturate areas where the voices of youth have not historically been privileged.

Although YPAR has been increasingly recognized within the academy as a legitimate epistemological framework and a necessary innovation in how research is conceptualized in the past decade, it is still often seen as marginal in many disciplines. Thus, researchers who document YPAR have contributed widely to discipline-specific journals as well as those with more justice- and action-oriented missions, who are often more open to non-traditional research paradigms. Additionally, research collectives have disseminated critical findings outside of academic journals through special reports (see *Voices of Youth in Chicago Education*, 2011), community-based publications (Tuck & Neofotistos, 2013), and online spaces (see the Public Science Project⁵). Rather than a reflection of the research itself, this speaks to the need for those with decision-making power in educational research to develop more expansive notions of the

⁵ Available: <http://publicscienceproject.org/>

epistemological and methodological variety needed in the field⁶. We were challenged to take these complexities into account as we collected and categorized articles for this review. While we used the foundational literature to help define the field, we did not presume to be the determiners of what counts as YPAR. Using the basic criteria of youth-led inquiry that seeks to impact the lives of youth through action, we drew from literature in which authors identified their studies as YPAR, or drawing from YPAR. Additionally, we recognize that there are methodological, ethical, social, and political “failures” in YPAR that are not reflected in the literature to the extent that they exist. We do not speculate regarding the transformative outcomes of the studies reviewed beyond what was documented by the authors.

YPAR literature demonstrates varied methodological interpretations of this epistemological construct, such that grouping the studies across discipline did not capture the convergences and divergences within the research. For instance, studies that were topically similar employed disparate methods ranging from traditional surveys and semi-structured interviews to arts and photo-based data generation strategies. There are significant and tangible differences in how YPAR is conceived and practiced. In determining the distinctions within YPAR, we observed an emergent theme across the literature: the work often morphed from its original conception, or what we call entry points. The following sections outline four distinct, yet overlapping, entry points that help explain how youth researchers and adult co-researchers/facilitators may have arrived at, or initially conceptualized, YPAR.

Entry Points for YPAR

⁶ The recognition of participatory research as part of the research and scholarship agendas of tenure-track faculty is of particular importance (Fine, 2008), as well as how such research is categorized and evaluated by tenure and promotion committees within and across institutions (Doberneck et al., 2010).

The first entry point is through *academic learning and literacies*. Understanding that all of the literature is academic in nature, we use this terminology to address the literature that explicitly focuses on the development of traditional educational capacities in youth through exploration in specific disciplines (e.g. sciences, literacy, social studies). This literature also includes critical service learning based approaches to YPAR. The second entry point is through *cultural and critical epistemological* research. These studies explore how youth take up cultural knowledge and heritage as epistemological frameworks. Youth draw from, and at times merge, Indigenous, Asian, African, Latinx, Feminist, and Queer knowledge systems to inform their implementation of YPAR. Here, cultural knowledge development and self-actualization become foregrounded as potential outcomes for action-based research. The next entry point is through *youth development and leadership*. The literature documenting YPAR through this lens focuses on skill development, apprenticeship, mentoring, and ways of healing and building strength in youth, often in out-of-school community spaces. The final entry point is through *youth organizing and civic engagement*. These studies foreground the impact of youth research on specific issues of focus. While the majority of texts focus on a particular issue, these studies tend to highlight the issue itself as the locus of the research. Again, research that uses one of these specific entry points may diverge in some other direction, or one of the foci of a specific entry point may be transformed or overlap with another. These are not definitive or exclusive categories, yet they reflect pathways that have informed and shaped areas of research and action in the field. A common denominator for each of the entry points is the desire of youth and adult co-researchers to transform the status quo. Whether through the development of school-based literacies or radical community civic engagement, these research collectives seek to make change

at a local level, tackling major issues such as shifting curricular content, ending the carceral state, exposing rape culture, resisting gentrification, or ending compulsory heteronormativity.

Academic Learning and Literacies. As the singular focus on high stakes standardized testing and the resulting narrowed curriculum in schools continues to yield no positive results toward educational equity (Hagopian, 2014), YPAR stands as the antithesis of these problematic frameworks. As Scorza, Mirra, and Morrell (2013) suggest,

Schools should be looking at [YPAR-based] programs to understand how their activities demonstrate that students learn, develop academic competencies and produce college-level work. Further, we reason that it is because of the use of critical pedagogy that students have developed these academic capabilities and that high stakes testing does not adequately assess learning, skills or competencies. (p.31)

Academic skill building as an entry point to YPAR addresses the structural inequity that limits access to high level thinking skills that post-secondary institutions look for in potential students. The foundational assumptions of YPAR run opposite to the dominant logics of deficit-based evaluation and remediation of marginalized youth.

Morrell's (2004) critical ethnographic research with youth pays close attention to the impact that the process of YPAR has on the identities of his students. He suggests that as youth begin to construct identities as critical researchers, they develop activist dispositions and seek to change their environment—whether it is their neighborhood, school, or the policies they are governed by:

Becoming critical researchers, for them, meant becoming more agentic in the world; acting upon the world instead of merely being acted upon, oppressed. It also meant the

inability to separate research from social action; for the students, there was no authentic research that was not political and conducted for the purpose of changing the world. (p. 114)

Pedagogically, YPAR positions youth as critical inhabitants of their social world; however, it is still incumbent upon educators to have a deep methodological understanding of how YPAR can be further bolstered through moments of crisis. Morrell (2004, 2006, 2008) has documented the academic development of youth researchers, particularly through the lens of critical literacy, demonstrating the capabilities of high school youth to perform at academic levels traditionally reserved for post-secondary scholarship. Kinloch's (2010) critical ethnography documents youth in Harlem as they use their rapidly gentrifying neighborhood as a unit of analysis to develop critical literacy skills such as writing across genres and public speaking. Kinloch explores how YPAR enabled the youth she co-researched with to enhance these academic literacies: "As Khaleeq expanded his literacy narrative during the course of our work together, writing became not only an activity that he performed at school; it became an activity that allowed him to express difficult ideas and emotions in and about the community" (p. 47). Similarly, Stovall and Delgado (2009), explicate how YPAR facilitated a sophisticated understanding of legal studies and the criminal justice system for youth in Chicago. Using an increase of drug arrests of students near their school to frame their research, the youth developed academic competencies to make meaning of their and their peers' experiences with the legal system. Rubin (2012) highlights the overlapping relationship between the development of academic proficiencies in social studies classrooms and youth civic engagement through YPAR, as discussed below.

Expanded academic literacies through YPAR are not limited to the social sciences and humanities. Yang (2009) documents how YPAR propelled youth in a California math class to produce sophisticated quantitative analyses connected to their lived experiences:

[Youth researchers'] ability to confidently enter uncharted territory was made possible through the transference of previously developed skills....(1) new academic literacy in producing descriptive statistics, analyzing distributions, and comparing means; (2) new media literacy in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)... and (3) critical code fluency in interpreting statistics with respect to the social world. (p. 111)

These transferable academic literacies become apparent across STEM disciplines, yet there remains a dearth of STEM focused YPAR studies, which may be due to the fact that qualitative fields have embraced YPAR in ways that the physical sciences have not. Perhaps due to the lack of opportunities to publish in academic journals, or maybe to make their work more accessible, and thus actionable, STEM researchers using YPAR have documented their work in online hubs such as UC Berkeley's YPAR HUB⁷. Due to the inherently critical nature of YPAR it has become more prevalent in the social sciences, staying true to its roots in liberatory struggles of oppressed communities.

Cultural/critical epistemologies. The documentary, *Precious Knowledge* (Palso, 2011), illuminated the impact of ethnic studies on the academic and social development of youth, while also exposing the lengths those invested in the status quo of educational inequity are willing to go to block structural change. While the film did not focus on YPAR specifically, it showed glimpses of the interconnection between cultural knowledge, critical epistemologies, and youth

⁷ Available: <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/>

inquiry. As an entry point into YPAR, cultural knowledge provides youth with a purpose that goes deeper than acquiring skills for college. It provides a framework through which heritage and identity can be reclaimed through youth studying themselves and the contexts of their environment (Cushing-Leubner & Lozenski, in press). Irizarry (2009) provides a theoretical framework for YPAR to play a central role in critical multicultural education: “Eschewing ‘melting pot’ models of assimilation, multicultural education proactively seeks to affirm cultural pluralism....In addition to fostering collaboration among diverse individuals, much of the content explored within YPAR reflects a commitment to promoting cross-cultural understanding” (p. 197).

True to its roots in critical research and pedagogical traditions of Central and South America, the impetus for cultural and critical epistemologies as entry points to YPAR reside within Latinx/Chicanx Studies. Romero et al. (2008), Cammarota and Romero (2009), Ayala (2009), Cahill (2010), Duncan-Andrade (2007), Torre (2009), Sanchez (2009), and Mayorga (2014) all use some form of Latinx/Chicanx Studies to provide a theoretical framing for the action research in which the youth are engaged. Romera et al. (2008) and Cammarota & Romero (2009) focus on school-based courses that combine social studies, U.S. Government, and Chicanx Studies for the dual purpose of using critical cultural knowledge to inform how youth engage in political action to gain power. These cultural and linguistic frameworks permeated the youths’ research from inception to dissemination.

Ayala (2009) and Torre (2009) extend these critical cultural epistemologies by building from Gloria Anzaldúa’s feminist mestiza scholarship. Both studies provide important nuance and also critiques of positioning YPAR as an all-encompassing framework for educational justice.

Ayala incorporates what she describes as “borderlands consciousness” to inform the YPAR through its notions of “house[ing] multiplicity, hybridity, conflict and collaboration, within the bodies of women of color” (p.72). As a critical epistemology, Ayala suggests that the focus on cultural knowledge fundamentally impacts how YPAR is enacted. Torre uses Anzaldúa’s theorization of *nos-otras*, which represent the implication of the colonizer and the colonized in each others’ lives to frame her research with youth investigating the “opportunity gap” in New York City schools.

Indigenous scholars Tuck (2008) and Johnston-Goodstar (2013) reframe YPAR through Indigenous epistemologies in the fields of education and social work, respectively. Tuck explores how using the vantage points of sovereignty, contention, balance, and relationship, which drew from her Indigeneity, allowed her to make alternative meaning of the complexities and limitations she saw in her work with youth researching the GED system in New York. Johnston-Goodstar highlights how Indigenous conceptions of YPAR can have transformative impacts on the field of social work. These cultural entry points illustrate how the purpose and conception of the research can greatly impact the process and outcomes of YPAR. .

Youth Development and Leadership. Kirshner (2015) highlights the natural overlap of YPAR and youth development. He writes, “The effort to engage youth as researchers is consistent with youth development principles that emphasize opportunities for leadership and mattering” (p. 91). An often overlooked aspect of YPAR is the social and emotional development that occurs through the process of research, providing youth with the capacity and hope to withstand and transform inequitable educational environments. Youth development is enacted in various ways from social and emotional development to placing youth in positions of

organizational leadership. For Galletta and Jones (2010), creating opportunities for youth to question their educational environments was a primary goal. Their study illustrates some of the important outcomes, processes--and also challenges--of establishing collaborations between college students and middle schoolers across institutions. This co-researching/mentoring framework illuminates yet another duality in YPAR. Cahill's (2007) study investigates the ethical commitments of youth researchers as they endeavored to take on inequitable legislation preventing access to higher education for undocumented youth. Positioning youth as researchers requires developing their ethical sensibility with regard to the historical and continuing problematic practices of researchers in communities. Similarly, Kirshner, Pozzoboni, and Jones (2011) explicate their work understanding bias with youth researchers. This study examines how bias manifests as both motivating and obfuscating ways for youth as they work with data that disconfirms previous predictions. Like Cahill's study, this meta-analysis of how YPAR impacts youths' perceptions of the work they are doing speaks to the social and cognitive developmental aspects of the research.

Flicker et al. (2008) explore a digital YPAR methodology they call e-PAR where youth researchers across seven youth-serving organizations participated in a project investigating holistic health in young people, emphasizing how youth conceptualized the ways in which "self-esteem, self-efficacy, and civic engagement" impacted their perceptions of "better futures" leading to healthier life choices. Payne, Starks, and Gibson (2009) illuminate black male youths' self-perceptions of "street life" as a response to inadequate educational conditions. They argue that, "allowing the phenomenological perspectives of the boys (co-researchers) to drive or guide the analysis is an approach that would inform interventions designed to reach them" (p. 48).

Many of the studies focusing on youth development came to similar conclusions, suggesting that youth researchers with sophisticated understandings of their social world are well-positioned to inform the developmental interventions targeted at them.

Youth Organizing and Civic Engagement. Understanding education as a contested space, structural discrimination and violence through the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, language, gender, and sexual/gender identity have continued to define the experiences of marginalized youth. From school closings, to language rights, to gendered bathrooms, youth have been at the forefront of many of these contentious issues. YPAR has provided a pathway for youth to gain useful organizing skills and provide pertinent data for issue-based campaigns to influence decision-makers. Written collaboratively with youth researchers, Tuck et al (2008) epitomizes youth organizing and civic engagement as entry points into YPAR. Outlining the development of their theoretical framing and research design, the authors share their praxes:

We would not be researchers without an inherent commitment to action toward the relief of social injustice, especially in education. We would not be researchers without an inherent commitment to participation, dissolving the traditional researcher–subject hierarchy. (p. 63)

While much of the literature focuses on the impacts of YPAR on youth researchers themselves, youth engaged in YPAR have been able to effectively influence policy and practice on a local scale. Yonesawa and Jones (2009) document the direct impact of youth researchers' findings at multiple schools in San Diego: after a student co-researcher team's presentation, a principal reported that "the faculty identified three main areas of needed growth for their...accreditation visit in parallel to concerns the [team] raised regarding student apathy and

how the school's structure and culture acts as a mediator" (p. 209). Youth in McIntyre's (2000) study created school-community clean up projects and career exploration programs as a result of their research. These smaller-scale impacts provide youth with a sense of their power to effect change while also demonstrating to educators that they may be underestimating the analytical capacity of their students. However, as Fox and Fine (2015) articulate, possibly the most powerful impact of YPAR is that it spreads seeds of change that inspire more action-based research:

Most significantly, several research projects based out of the Public Science Project at the CUNY Graduate Center picked up where [Polling for Justice] (a YPAR project) left off, including two studies on policing and community safety: the Morris Justice Project and Researchers for Fair Policing; and a study looking at the school discipline experiences for high school students identifying as LGBTQ (p. 56).

These rhizomatic characteristics of youth research were evident across the research as YPAR collectives again and again produced small scale impacts that contributed to prolonged struggles that may produce larger-scale impact, over time.

YPAR Methods and Pedagogies

Situating YPAR only as an epistemological construct with various entry points to implementation paints a partial picture of the field. YPAR contains inherent pedagogical elements, as there is almost always an adult co-researcher/facilitator working alongside novice researchers. Using YPAR as a lens for teaching qualitative and quantitative research blurs boundaries between research and action, and research and teaching, and encourages a critical broadening of conventional conceptions of rigor, positionality, and pedagogy. It is through this

duality of research and pedagogy that the transformative potential of YPAR to address educational inequity is realized. According to Freire (1982),

Instead of taking the people here as the object of my research, I must try, on the contrary, to have the people dialogically involved also as subjects, as researchers with me...This method of investigation...is at the same time a learning process.... Thus, in doing research, I am educating and being educated with the people. (p. 30)

The inherent fluidity between teaching, learning, and co-researching in YPAR emerged as another organizing theme in the literature. The interrelatedness of YPAR epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy is conducive to understanding the interpretive and recursive nature of qualitative research. According to Zaal & Terry (2013), “YPAR has significant epistemological effects on students: that is, an increased knowledge and awareness of what they can do and who they can be in the research process and in their communities” (p. 52). They claim, based on their research findings, that the cycles of YPAR allow youth “to engage in research, to act and educate others about their findings, and to receive feedback from teachers, their peers, and other audiences” (p. 52). Similarly, several studies highlighted how the pedagogical environment of the research informed the study. It is important to note that as students moved from novice to more experienced researchers, and took on increasing responsibilities as co-facilitators and creators of the space, the pedagogical environment was shaped by their choices and perspectives. As we attempted to understand the ways in which these pedagogies and environments impacted the research, four aspects emerged from the literature that made certain studies distinct in how YPAR was practiced and the outcomes they were able to produce.

The first aspect was the *environment* in which the research was implemented. As a pedagogical practice, YPAR can be situated in school spaces as well as out-of-school in community-centers or alternative educational environments. These environments influence the conception, purpose, time constraints, and resources available for YPAR. For instance, school-based research often focused on school-based issues (Galletta & Jones, 2010; Livingstone et al, 2014; Rubin & Jones, 2007; Schultz, 2008), whereas out-of-school research often dealt with larger societal issues (Fine, Tuck, & Zeller-Bergman, 2008; Fox et al., 2010; Torre & Fine, 2008). The second aspect was the *configuration* of the participatory collective. By definition, YPAR is youth-driven, but the degree to which the collective was intergenerational played a role in how the research was conceptualized and implemented. Torre and Fine (2008) illuminate the impact of configurations as they theorize PAR collectives as “contact zones,” where differently positioned youth and adults grapple with contested ideas.

Third, the pedagogical and research-based emphases often coalesced around *critical multiliteracies*, including digital literacies (Jocson, 2014; Kamler & Comber, 2005; Mayorga, 2014; Morrell, 2006). Drawing on the background knowledge and literate identities of youth, these studies highlight the value of critically engaging students around relevant interests and cultural ways of knowing. These studies also discuss shifts in teachers’ perception of students once they reworked their literacy curriculum to include relevant technology, media, and popular culture (Kamler & Comber, 2005). As youth are challenged to create and disseminate knowledge, they often take up innovative and accessible modes through which to generate and analyze data, as well as disseminate their work and take action. These innovations manifest in the last aspect we explore, *performance as action*.

We found pedagogical and research-based engagement to revolve around performance as action throughout a subset of the literature (Fine, Roberts & Torre, 2004; Cahill, 2010; Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015). On a fundamental level, YPAR scholars have utilized art for outreach as a powerful medium to provoke public awareness and action. But the use of performance through theater, visual art, music, poetry, and spoken word also help researchers to make sense of social issues through ways of knowing (epistemologies) that they would not otherwise be able to articulate (Cahill, 2010; Winn & Ubiles, 2011). Acknowledging that the aims of social justice are not just about political change, these researchers foreground the value of psychic and emotional healing made necessary by social and educational injustices in their schools and communities (Winn & Ubiles, 2011). Regarding the arts as inherently critical, studies featuring performance as action assert performance as a critical medium for both healing and revelation, extending the research process in powerful ways.

YPAR AS EDUCATION RESEARCH:

CONTRIBUTIONS, TENSIONS, AND POSSIBILITIES

Assuming that “only an empowered, engaged and literate citizenry can form the foundation of an equitable and inclusive society” (Morrell, 2006, p. 1), YPAR challenges education researchers to engage in a “conscious effort to disrupt or call into question” a mainstream “paradigm of knowledge production” (p. 7). In this section, we highlight major areas of education research to which YPAR scholarship offers longstanding contributions and implications. We end with a discussion of some of the tensions and challenges encountered by the researchers who engage in this work, reflections on praxis that serve as a point of departure for future possibilities in the field.

Critical Qualitative Research

As a methodology centered on inquires designed, conducted, reported, and acted on by those who are closest to the issue of interest, YPAR is especially significant for historically marginalized populations whose experiences, identities, and literacies, are frequently overlooked in mainstream educational environments. Scholars argue that “the tradition of inquiry for advocacy is as old as the tradition of inquiry itself. This is important to keep in mind amid contemporary conversations about quality, validity, and rigor in social scientific research” (Morrell, 2006, p. 6). According to Fine (2008), “YPAR done well deepens the very social practices of objectivity, validity, and generalizability” (p. 222) because youth and adult researchers engage in difficult conversations about their assumptions, deepen validity and expertise via “intentional and sustained deliberative processes” (p. 224), reconsider the validity of constructs, and push their findings beyond understanding what is to imagining what could be.

In addition, since the postmodern turn, as qualitative researchers grapple with the complexities of representation and positionality in research (Denzin, 1994), particularly with marginalized populations, YPAR can disrupt the traditional induction of new generations of qualitative researchers. An emergent debate considers how to teach qualitative research critically, “as involving a set of transgressive practices that sustain and realize critical perspectives” (Hsiung, 2016, p. 60). Using YPAR as a lens for teaching qualitative research blurs boundaries between research and action and encourages a critical broadening of conventional conceptions of pedagogy, rigor, and positionality. In 11 years of work with the Council of Youth Research, Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2015) demonstrate that rigorous activist research is nurtured by researchers’ personal commitments to justice:

critical research opens up possibilities for new innovations that continue to honor the curiosity, hope, and potential of young people. This has been an exhilarating professional journey for us, but much more importantly, a deeply personal one as well. (p. xii)

In this sense, approaches such as Souto-Manning's (2014) critical narrative analysis, which challenges youth and adult researchers to "analyz[e] narratives in the lifeworld--the everyday stories individuals tell" as they deconstruct the discourses in them, nurtures a critical meta-awareness of the self in relation to society (p. 205). YPAR invites such critical approaches, contributing to the theory and practice of decolonizing inquiry and humanizing qualitative research (Paris & Winn, 2014).

Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Education Reform

YPAR has made significant contributions to critical research and reform in education in a wide variety of ways and in multiple educational contexts. However, one overarching element in all of these major contributions is the presence and participation of youth in education debates that have been historically waged between and among scholars, researchers, and practitioners with little to no input from students, particularly in the areas of school reform (Kelly, 1993; Noguera, 2007) and education policy (Bertrand & Ford, 2015), where YPAR has yielded actionable results.

Beyond the direct physical and intellectual participation of youth in education reform, YPAR has catalyzed rethinking and reframing of students' academic experiences and the identities that they construct in and beyond school, as well as conceptualizations of curriculum and pedagogy. Recent studies document the transformative impact of youth research in students' literacy experiences (Morrell, 2008) and college readiness (Knight & Marciano, 2013), as well as

in experiential curricular approaches (Wright, 2015). Integrating YPAR in the curriculum incorporates student voice in academic contexts (Cook-Sather, 2009) leading to the rethinking of curriculum and pedagogy in ways that support the learning of minoritized students. Within a YPAR third space, youth construct and negotiate critical literacies and identities (Caraballo & Hill, 2014) as they complicate existing structures and hierarchies such as those connected to the role of “learner” and “educator” in academic and institutional contexts (Cook-Sather, 2009). Caraballo (2016) notes that “participatory approaches can bear an integral role in the reconceptualization of curriculum as an assemblage of the many literacies, discourses, and interests, whether individual, cultural, or institutional, that are continuously negotiated in any academic discipline” (p. 20).

Gutierrez (2008) argues that the sociocritical literacy concept of third space is also a “transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (p. 152). The collective third space that YPAR offers youth is not adult-centered scaffolding, but but a space where curriculum and pedagogy are “grounded in the historical and current particulars of students’ everyday lives” toward becoming “conscious ‘historical actors’ (Espinoza, 2003) who invoke the past in order to remediate it so that it becomes a resource for current and future action” (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 154). YPAR third spaces can foster skills and agency development in collaborations, sometimes carefully designed to undo much of what traditional schooling perpetuates (Paris & Winn, 2014).

Teacher Education

Beyond its impact in youths’ experiences, teachers’ participation in YPAR offers the opportunity to broaden their understanding of curriculum and pedagogy for historically

marginalized populations, whose rich experiences, identities, and literacies are often excluded from traditional and standardized curricular and pedagogical approaches. Through this pedagogical framing, YPAR as a critical epistemology encompassing various teaching methods illuminates the merging of teaching and research as an interwoven practice. Research on the role of fieldwork in the preparation of preservice teachers to work in racially and socioeconomically diverse contexts suggests that justice-oriented and community-based field experiences can have a positive impact on preservice teachers' multicultural awareness and beliefs (Akiba, 2011; Brayko, 2013; Whipp, 2010). For example, Morrell and Collatos' (2002) research with high school youth and pre-service teachers in Los Angeles demonstrated the potential for authentic communities of practice where pre-service teachers and urban students can forge relationships as co-participants (p. 68). Educators who have led YPAR projects during their teacher preparation and doctoral programs have contributed powerful scholarship that is grounded in their experiences with youth researchers in academic and community contexts (Morrell, Duenas, Garcia & Lopez, 2013).

PAR with youth can inform areas of study that seek to broaden conceptualizations of teaching and learning in teacher education, such as practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, 1992), multicultural fieldwork experiences (Brayko, 2013; Whipp, 2010) and the interrelatedness of students' and teachers' experiences of curriculum, identities, and literacies (Caraballo, 2016; Luttrell & Parker, 2001). Building upon these alternative critical approaches and previous research, YPAR can position teachers, students, and communities, as agents of social change (Fine, Roberts & Torre, 2004; Morrell, 2008) to disrupt inequality and dismantle

hierarchies among cultural and experiential knowledge(s) and “official” or disciplinary knowledge(s).

Youth Studies

As the field of youth studies continues to ask critically reflexive questions about the practices, imaginings, and possibilities of studying youth (Talbert & Lesko, 2011), YPAR offers unique opportunities for an emic understanding of youth engagement, desires, frustrations, and abilities in contexts where their voices are usually under-regarded. According to Morrell (2004),

Although they are the population with the most at stake in schools, youth are rarely engaged in conversations about the conditions of schools or school reform...Simply put, youth do not often participate as researchers or experts in dialogues concerning the present and future of urban education (p.156).

In the face of this, Morrell’s YPAR work apprenticed youth as critical researchers of popular culture, where educators undertook the interests of students (i.e. popular culture) as valid sites of interrogation replete with value.

In centering youth interests (Morrell, 2004; Kamler, & Comber, 2005), arming students with the tools for critical inquiry (Fine, Tuck, & Zeller-Berkman, 2008; Fox et al., 2010), and asking them to speak (Flicker, 2008; Livingstone, 2014), YPAR offers the field of youth studies cases where youth interests, perspectives, and identities are seriously engaged as assets to their learning and social transformation. For example, the YPAR work of Fox et al. (2010) led the collective toward a theory of method for youth engagement, where they assert the importance of recognizing the knowledge and expertise carried by youth, and that privileging this knowledge and expertise offers more varied outcomes of academic, social, psychological, and political well-

being. They argue that youth and adults can engage in serious inquiry where “emphasizing youth leadership, in partnership with adults, frames youth themselves as assets and actors, contributing to growth and change in adults, institutions, systems, communities and society (Fox et al., 2010, p. 20).

Tensions and Challenges of/in YPAR

While virtually all YPAR studies and analyses begin or end with the assertion that youth develop critically, intellectually and socially as a result of their participation, the process is not unproblematic. YPAR scholarship raises important challenges and tensions that emerge as youth and adult researchers engaged in transformative work. While PAR with youth

is positioned as a new(er) hope for socially relevant, hierarchy-disrupting, counter-hegemonic research...there are splits that we all contend with in doing this work; splits...between its hope or promise, and its potential for social reproduction and co-optation. (Ayala, 2009, p. 67)

In their study of a multi-year YPAR project across peer mentoring programs in five California public schools, Ozer et al., (2013) studied tensions in program implementation. Although youth “manage[d] to experience meaningful power despite constraints,” Ozer and colleagues’ codes for the data they collected serves as a summary of the kinds of challenges faced by YPAR co-researchers (p. 24) Examples of challenges include projects co-opted by mandates; lack of continuity; internal politics; practical barriers such as scheduling; conflicting values among facilitators; and administrators’ lack of recognition for teachers’ efforts in participatory work-- examples of some typical challenges to YPAR in school settings.

The tensions and challenges raised by those who work with youth in afterschool or community spaces are also situated and contextual, and usually related to the complexity of adjusting to new roles and relationships with/in institutions and communities (Irizarry, 2009). For example, reflecting on their participation in two distinct YPAR projects, Winn and Winn (2016) grappled with the “complexities and tensions” of engaging in YPAR with youth who are usually confined to a curriculum with less opportunity for creativity and critical discussion:

Although we understood YPAR as a process of becoming engaged civic actors for young people, we did not expect to be so central to the projects for so long as we hoped that the work would, indeed, be "owned" by youth. (Winn & Winn, 2016, p. 128)

Many adult facilitators express similar concerns about the degree to which they should provide instruction, guidance, and framing, particularly in light of the usual constraints of time and resources that could shorten or restrict the scope of a YPAR inquiry (Galletta & Jones, 2010).

Like Winn and Winn (2016), many facilitators experience tensions with respect to “when and where to enter, as well as exit” and perhaps also how to do so:

In our efforts to decolonize research methods and practices, we lost sight of the fact that some youth might benefit from purposeful scaffolding such as "guided participation" in YPAR to get to the phase where youth take ownership of the process and, when relevant, the product(s). (p. 128)

Similarly, Caraballo and Lyiscott (2016) discuss the need to initiate youth into collaborative inquiry, “deschooling,” in a sense, in order to create a more democratic context for critical participation. They also highlight the logistical constraints of their afterschool YPAR seminar, where facilitators needed to protect the urgency of the YPAR projects while negotiating schedule

changes related to preparation for tests, service hours, and as others have noted, other conflicts with seminar meeting times (Schensul & Berg, 2004).

More powerful than the tensions themselves, however, is the legacy of praxis in YPAR. Scholars and their youth collaborators frequently demonstrate the capacity and desire to engage in critical reflection and work through relational struggles (Tuck et al., 2008). Scholars convey these “experiences with YPAR projects and a purposeful reflection of this work, hoping to build capacity for adult allies of youth” (Winn & Winn, 2016, p. 112).

History has taught us that such research practices and methods, framed as liberatory interventions with the power to support meaningful social and political change, often lose their radical capacity as they are co-opted or absorbed into the mainstream. This concern has been argued for the work of multiculturalism, action research, participatory research, culturally relevant pedagogy, and other frameworks offered as transformative until they were moved from the margins to the center (Casey, 2010). Given the cyclical nature of transformative/mainstream work, we push the critical-epistemological call of YPAR as a *stance* for future possibilities. That is, while the methodological tools of intervention will inevitably change with time and space, we assert the urgency of sustaining critical orientations in this work, even as new methods might one day emerge from the ashes of YPAR.

TOWARD CRITICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES IN TEACHING, RESEARCH, AND SOCIAL ACTION IN EDUCATION

YPAR represents “a new paradigm, a challenge to existing epistemologies, and, thereby, a competing (or complementary) entry into the political economy of knowledge production” (Noffke, 1997, p. 307). Through an analysis of how youth and their adult collaborators have

conducted inquiries, created knowledge, and enacted change via performance, protest, lobbying, social media, and many other forms, our review documents the impact of YPAR on education research in almost two decades. Considering the role and impact of YPAR as epistemology, methodology, and pedagogy contributes to efforts that problematize orthodox research and teaching practices and asserts anti-hegemonic knowledges in education. Grounded in its catalytic nature, we propose that a YPAR critical-epistemological approach leads to the co-construction of critical knowledges that can, in turn, reframe the question of what counts as knowledge and research, and what constitutes action, in educational research and scholarship. Such a critical-epistemological framework must be grounded in the contexts of inequality in which it is to be employed, and developed in juxtaposition to the theoretical and methodological shifts of our time.

In their critical co-constructed autoethnography, DeMeulenaere and Cann (2013) frame their thinking about qualitative research according to three dimensions: *ideological*, or research that “attempts to challenge or disrupt ideology”; *material*, “the degree to which a project results in material change for participants”; and *scale*, how many people are affected by this work (p. 558). Their goal is not to measure research, “but rather to offer a heuristic for reflection” in response to critical theorists, critical pedagogues, and critical race theorists who have long called for an engagement in a praxis that incorporates activist work with ongoing reflection (p. 561). Similarly, we argue for YPAR frameworks that are centered in decolonizing research methodologies (Paris & Winn, 2014; Smith, 1999; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and activist research traditions that support youth’s critical meta-awareness of the inequalities that shape their educational experiences (Souto-Manning, 2014).

In addition, a critical-epistemological framework challenges all who collaborate in YPAR inquiries to theorize about what counts as social action and agency in current contexts of inequality. In their YPAR work with high school youth, Mirra, Filipiak, and Garcia (2015) define agency as “the power [derived] from the pursuit of those questions that matter most to students. It is what fuels action... It is contextually bound, always in negotiation, and mediated by the histories, social interactions, and cultures that young people’s identities are entangled within”; they frame agency “as a capacity to imagine and act upon the world” (p. 53). In a 2009 issue on YPAR in *New Directions for Youth Development*, guest editors Brown and Rodriguez also stress the importance of “oppressed peoples’ interrogating and intervening into the conditions of their own oppression” (p. 1), where interrogation (research) and intervention (action) are inextricably connected, regardless of the extent of the action in question. Bigelow (2002) suggests that even small actions and victories can combat the despair connected to feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of many social issues.

Nonetheless, those of us engaged in YPAR wonder what “counts” as action, and scholars have attempted to codify action in the context of action research⁸. Coulter (2011) traces Arendt’s re-theorization of Aristotle and Marx’s depictions of human action, and suggests that “Arendtian action research instead aims at better understanding experience, creating consistency (however limited), generating knowledge and understanding (which will always be in some ways inadequate). Such research aims at helping people make better sense of their lives” (p. 203). As such, his Arendtian notion of action research encapsulates Freire’s (1970) argument for praxis,

⁸ This debate takes place in various areas of YPAR research and scholarship; for example, while YPAR work is co-developed and enacted with youth who often also feature as coauthors in YPAR scholarship, many of the articles that report on this work are still authored primarily by academics. As discussed above, it is our hope that the critical epistemological shifts that YPAR demands will continue to permeate academic structures and encourage more prevalent co-authorship with youth and community partners.

which combines reflection and action: “if action is emphasized exclusively to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The latter—action for action’s sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible” (p. 88). In the context of a critical-epistemological YPAR framework, the action implicit in youths’ self-transformation and knowledge production bears promise for large scale social transformation.

In order to disrupt inequality, educational researchers must continue to explore alternative research (and action) paradigms that actively seek to redistribute methodological and analytical power to those who hold an intimate knowledge of the struggles of navigating systemic oppression. Without a legitimate consideration of what YPAR offers to the landscape of educational research, we may continue to base our accounts of inequality on those with the most access, the most privilege, and the least to lose from the maintenance of the status quo.

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