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The Effect of YPAR on Student Self-efficacy and Engagement

in a Suburban Junior High School

by

Timothy Cox

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Patricia Boyd, Chair
Sybil Durand
Peter Goggin

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Educators often struggle to effectively engage all students. Part of the reason for this is adherence to behavioral principles which curtail student autonomy and diminish student self-efficacy. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) can counter this problem; it was designed to increase autonomy for minority youth in urban high schools. I conducted a study to add to the growing conversation about YPAR in settings beyond urban high schools and to look at how YPAR can influence students' self-efficacy. Drawing on results from surveys, interviews, and field observation, I found that students who participated in a YPAR program showed improved self-efficacy in contexts closely related to their work in YPAR among peers and for a peer audience, but they did not show improved self-efficacy in their relationships with community adults or with their school. Students' improved self-efficacy stemmed from their social learning experiences and their perception of the community relevance, or authenticity, of their work. Schools seeking to improve engagement among students of any background should consider adopting approaches like YPAR which increase student autonomy and foment self-efficacy with authentic community-linked research.

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The anxious national discourse about education fuels a constant search for ways to improve instruction and educational outcomes, and over centuries of American education, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, myriad programs and approaches have been proposed and adopted to improve learning. Practicing educators encounter a sometimes dizzying array of techniques for presenting curriculum, managing classrooms, and engaging students. This study focuses on one such program: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Before proceeding, it is worth asking what YPAR might have to offer amid the many programs and possibilities vying for teacher attention and classroom time.

One answer is that YPAR addresses a fundamental problem schools grapple with—student disengagement—by helping schools address a fundamental weaknesses in their structure—inequitable power dynamics that deplete students' belief in themselves and in their school. Ira Shor noted that "power is a learning problem and learning is a power problem" (1996, p. x). YPAR gets at this problem with a modified power dynamic and an emphasis on collaboration and socially contextualized real-life action to draw in students, especially those who are not well-served with traditional school settings and dynamics and who are prone to disengage. For the purposes of this study, I will define disengagement as a choice a student makes to resist or withdraw from a learning activity or environment by means of active disruption of the learning activities ("misbehavior") or passive non-completion or partial completion of learning activities.

YPAR draws on a tradition of participatory action research which "[relies] on indigenous knowledge, combined with the desire to take individual and/or collective

action" (Caraballo, 2017, p. 311). YPAR focuses specifically on the "indigenous" knowledge of youth, and strives to empower them as researchers, "promoting [their] sense of ownership and control over the [research] process, and promoting the social and political engagement of youth and their allies to help address problems identified in the research" (Ozer, 2010, p. 153).

While I will often refer to YPAR in this study as an educational approach, it is important to keep in mind Michelle Fine's observation that participatory action research is more than a series of pedagogical steps:

> PAR is not a method. Scholars of participatory action research have relied upon and utilized surveys, logistic regressions, ethnography, public opinion polls, life stories, testimonies, performance, focus groups, and varied other methods in order to interrogate the conditions of oppression and surface leverage points for resistance and change.
>
> PAR is, however, a radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides. Participatory action researchers ground our work in the recognition that expertise and knowledge are widely distributed. PAR further assumes that those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements. PAR embodies a democratic commitment to break the

> monopoly on who holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken. (Cammarrota, 2008, p. 215)

To successfully carry out such an ambitious project, teachers adopting YPAR in their classrooms shift roles from those of lecturer, grader, and disciplinarian to those of guide, mentor, facilitator, resource, and encourager.

Compared to many educational interventions, YPAR is relatively new and not very widely used. Although I have spent a decade as a teacher, I only encountered YPAR in the last two years in my studies as a graduate student in a non-education field. The limited adoption of YPAR might seem surprising. Why has an approach as promising as YPAR not been snapped up by more teachers outside of urban high schools? It's not because of a lack of desire for progress. Many teachers are hungry for proven, effective techniques to reach kids they aren't currently engaging. Part of the reason may be that the YPAR conversation, developed specifically with urban high school students in mind, hasn't reached teachers in other settings, so they may not be as familiar with it as they are with other approaches (Bocci, 2016, p. 4). Schools not matching that profile may not be connected to the professional conversation surrounding YPAR.

While teachers may not be as familiar with YPAR as they are with other approaches, it seems even more likely that YPAR's limited implementation may be related to a source of its success: the dismantling of the school power hierarchy (Bocci, 2016, p. 4). Implementing participatory action research, for example, "requires that classroom teachers share power with students and guide them in a flexible process in which the teacher does not have the answers ahead of time and likely needs ongoing

technical assistance regarding research and advocacy activities" (Ozer, 2010, p. 163). Structuring a classroom around authentic power-sharing is difficult to plan and fraught with potential for complications. This can be a deterrent for teachers already stressed and strapped for time. Politicized opposition may also inhibit the popularity of YPAR (Romero in Cammarota, 2008, p. 135). Practitioners of participatory action research at times must "defend the rationale of their studies" from allegations that they are "involved, interested, engaged, and, somehow less important and rigorous than research that is distanced, disinterested, and objective" (Morrell in Cammarota, 2008 p. 159). School teachers, balancing classrooms full of already jostling political and ideological perspectives, may be hesitant to wade into an approach that doesn't avoid or downplay political discourse. Whatever the reasons, the reality is that YPAR is under-utilized, and most utilization is happening in urban high schools.

However, YPAR can be especially valuable in middle schools because "there is extensive literature establishing that the transition to middle school in late childhood and early adolescence is a crucial period in the trajectory of intellectual and psychosocial development," especially since "longitudinal research indicates that youth perceive fewer opportunities to exercise autonomy and participate in making decisions and rules in junior high than they did in elementary schools (Midgley and Feldlaufer 1987)." (Ozer, 2010, p. 153). I expect that YPAR has much to offer in any educational setting, but especially in this young adolescent phase of life where perceived decreases in autonomy can lead to frustration. There have been some efforts to use YPAR in a variety of contexts, such as Stoudt's (2012) "Polling for Justice" project, which brought together

marginalized youth and privileged youth to both empower youth and contest entrenched privilege, but the current data, scholarly discussions, and field practice are inconclusive about whether the benefits of YPAR can be extended to other populations (Christens, 2012, p. 631).

Below I will define the problem of disengagement, discuss self-efficacy, and explicate the YPAR technique and how it increases student self-efficacy and addresses disengagement. I will then discuss how YPAR has a positive effect on student self-efficacy and engagement, as might be expected considering its qualities, although that effect did not manifest itself in uniform increases in student self-efficacy and engagement but rather in context-based situations that reflected the nature of their work in the YPAR club.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

FRAMING ADOLESCENTS WITH A DFICIT PERSPECTIVE

Schools fail to engage many students. In my own classroom, I begin each year knowing that a handful of students in each class I teach will disengage from the learning and manifest it by disruptive or apathetic behavior. And I know that in all likelihood, approximately 20% of my students will not make it to graduation ("Accountability and Research," 2017).

If there were no way to work with the students who are not engaged with schools and curricula, then the conversation would end there and teachers would need to resign themselves to a reality in which they will fail to adequately educate a certain number of their students. Indeed, this is what many teachers do. I routinely hear teachers at my

school, frustrated and spent after sincere yet fruitless efforts to engage their failing students, wash their hands of the whole business. Conversations about students routinely conclude with a "Sometimes you have to let them fail" mentality. Even teachers who do not subscribe to this mentality can find themselves frustrated at their inability to engage students.

Student disengagement is too complex an issue to be pinned on a single cause. However, there are certain characteristics of educational environments which clearly contribute to student disengagement. Perhaps the most common is a deficit perspective that frames students as "a difficulty to be dealt with" during "a problematic stage" (Stevens, 2007, p. 108). This perspective enjoys deep roots in western cultural consciousness where it is often regarded as self-evident common knowledge. It is reinforced by research on brain development, such as a study that found that abilities associated with the prefrontal cortex, including the ability to remember, manipulate, and apply knowledge to make advantageous choices increases during adolescence and into adulthood (Hooper, 2004, p. 1155). Another study found that adolescent relational reasoning undergoes a temporary decrease in accuracy during mid-adolescence (Dumontheil, 2010, p. F21). A regular supply of such reports has contributed to developmentalist "mainstream views that read youth as in a state of 'becoming' and 'developing'" (Dejaynes, 2015, p. 75). Popular theories of developmental psychology frame adolescence as a series of discrete steps [toward a state of completed adulthood] (Raby, 2007, p. 39- 40), with the unspoken assumption that those who have not passed through the steps are deficient (41). Teachers adhering to this paradigm may assume a

benevolently condescending attitude toward students they see as unprepared to encounter the world.

Others adopt a more strident tone, pushing criticism to the point of a "tendency to psychopathologize children's behavior" (Best, 2007, p. 20). As much as any other group, and perhaps more so, teachers are often in danger of essentializing "young people as a pathological problem to be managed" or as "incipient radicals" (Greg Dimitriadis in Cammarota, 2008, p. viii). This assumption can oftentimes color teachers' approaches to unruly students, and it feeds a pattern of negative interactions and unhealthy relationships in the classroom.

TEACHERS GRASP AT POWER WITH BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUES

Deficit perspectives of adolescents have "material consequences that ripple across classrooms, schools and communities. When teachers view their students as a problematic or undisciplined force, they seek to control them. They attempt to monopolize decision making in order to suppress disturbances from problem students. Educational discourse turns to "control, management and containment," using "tight control of time and space in the classroom" to achieve behavior management (Stevens, 2007, p. 108). In such a school, "teachers rather than students ask questions, adults are rendered ''insensitive to what their [children's] interests, concerns and questions are…and children are viewed as incapable of self-regulation'' (Sarason in Ozer, 2010, p. 153). Teachers guide students they perceive as incomplete in order to protect them from their own mistakes and from the outside world. In the immediate classroom context, students find themselves following formulaic or micromanaged

activities. In a broader community contexts, students find themselves "not in control of their social and political environments…" (Christens, 2012, p. 630).

Often, educators' attempts at control rely on behavioral psychological theory which emphasizes attention to objective, external, observable factors rather than internal subjective factors ("Behaviorism," 2009). This school of thought, known as behaviorism, has had a significant influence on contemporary American education (Kazepides, 1976, p. 53), often taking the form of operant conditioning approaches in which desirable behaviors are rewarded and undesirable behaviors are punished, with the assumption that students will make positive decisions after making a logical assessment of punishment and reward. Under this model, teachers maintain as much power as possible in a classroom in order to distribute rewards and punishments. In theory, the teacher's punishment of misbehavior and rewarding of good behavior will encourage all students to perform well. However, this is not the reality. Instead, punitive measures like suspensions reduce students' school participation and create noninclusive environments (Kupchik, 2015, p. 117). In spite of significant efforts to change these features of public school culture, they have remained highly resistant (Ozer, 2010, p. 153). The legacy of operant conditioning and behavioral techniques runs deep in the American school system.

BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUES ATTEMPT TO DISEMPOWER STUDENTS

When teachers use behavioral techniques to maintain power and control in the classroom, they impinge on students' autonomy, leaving them controlled or even voiceless (Best, 2007, p. 14). These attempts to control student behavior create "environments [that] tend to become increasingly rigid and rule bound," promoting not

learning and growth but helplessness (Bloom, 2010, p. 275). Under such circumstances, students may feel like passive subjects in an experiment where the well-meaning and well-informed educator turns knobs and flips switches until the best outcome is finally achieved. Incubating students in a passive position does little to help them develop content knowledge and skill, but it also runs counter to schools' ostensible mission of growing the next generation of creative thinkers and independent, responsible citizens. Schools which have "potential to emancipate and empower" may just as often "oppress and marginalize" their students (Solorzano, 2001, p. 313).

DISEMPOWERMENT DIMINISHES STUDENT SELF-EFFICACY AND SPURS DISENGAGEMENT

It is important to understand the critical role that power plays in the classroom and the connection between disempowerment and disengagement. Although "empowerment is a critical, and often overlooked, element of successful human development" (Christens, 2012, p. 630), schools often curtail students' power, sending a message that the student's choices will not make any difference in the outcome. This is problematic because an individual has "little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" without a "core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects" (Bandura, 2003, p. 87). This core belief, known as self-efficacy, is one's belief in her or his ability which enables mobilization of "motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context" (Stajkovic, 1998, p. 66).

Schools often do a poor job at cultivating the "self-efficacy [that] is vital to academic performance" (van Dinther, 2011, p. 105). Sandra Bloom explains how this

happens as environments that remove autonomy diminish the self-efficacy of those who inhabit those environments. Her example, using health care terms (e.g. “clients,” and “caregivers”), applies as well to the power systems in schools, with “students” and “teachers” occupying the corresponding positions:

> Historically, our systems of care have not focused on empowering clients to make their own decisions but have instead created “expert” cultures within which the client is chronically dependent for help on a medical model that places expertise solely in the hands of caregivers. Helpless passive or passive-aggressive dependency is likely to be the result....
>
> In a controlling, non-participatory environment exercising top-down management, every subsequent lower level of employee is likely to become progressively disempowered. This organizationally induced helplessness has been described as the antithesis of empowerment. (Bloom, 2010, p. 273-274)

Bloom makes clear that teachers’ “expert” status is often a tool of classroom control which functions to silence students whose non-expert position subjugates them in the classroom hierarchy. Under the gaze of commanding teachers, students often experience

> repeated strong negative mastery experiences [that] will probably lead to decreasing levels of self-efficacy. The fact that this phenomenon appears frequently is not that surprising since many school systems are built on the adagio of failure, non-mastery or

> mistakes. Teachers focus on what students have not mastered yet, what they do not know, and so on. (van Dinther, 2011, p. 105)

The negative feedback loop of negative mastery experiences—student mistakes and teacher correction—reinforces the school power hierarchy; each interaction reminds students of their deficits and of the teacher's ownership of knowledge and authority to make decisions. This atmosphere engenders feelings of helplessness, a companion to low self-efficacy. As helplessness sinks in, students "develop the expectation that nothing they do will affect the outcome" of their performance, and eventually they lose "the perceived capability to learn or perform at a certain designated level" (Chen, 2003, p. 79). This loss of self-efficacy leads them to "put less effort into subsequent tasks and consequently show performance deficits." (Bloom, 2010, p. 272). This disengagement connects directly to patterns of disempowerment that occur in classrooms. Students who continually absorb messages of adolescent deficits and disempowerment begin not to see the point of trying in the first place.

SOLUTION: ENGENDER SELF-EFFICACY

Decreased self-efficacy can grow out of the behaviorist disempowerment inherent in adolescent deficit perspectives and contribute to student disengagement. To undo this requires an environment that fosters self-efficacy by empowering students. It would be prudent for educators to address these fundamental issues of autonomy and self-efficacy. I will discuss self-efficacy and then describe one way it can be developed through the empowering dynamic of YPAR, looking specifically at the ways YPAR can have a positive effect on student self-efficacy.

VALUE OF SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is closely related to high performance. Part of the reason for this is because individuals who feel a high sense of self-efficacy will show more perseverance (Bandura, 2003, p. 88). This perseverance means a person is more likely to spend the time necessary to succeed. This is especially true when difficulty arises. The improved perseverance accompanying higher self-efficacy can help forestall discouragement. Students who judge their capability optimistically feel higher levels of motivation to continue in learning even when they perform at a deficient level (Chen, 2003, p. 80). This is true not just for students, but for adults. A study of employee self-efficacy and success determined that "...employees who perceive themselves as highly efficacious will activate sufficient effort which, if well executed, produces successful outcomes" while "employees who perceive low self-efficacy are likely to cease their efforts prematurely and fail at the task" (Stajkovic, 1998, p. 66). While this may seem an obvious observation, this reality merits special recognition in education, where discouragement, as noted above, can play a major role in student disengagement.

The benefits conferred by self-efficacy go beyond optimism and resilience. Self-efficacy is correlated with greater ambition as well. Students who believe their self-efficacy has grown "set higher goals for themselves, used more efficient problem-solving strategies, and achieved higher intellectual performances than did students of equal cognitive ability who were led to believe that they lacked such capabilities," corroborating "not only the functional relation of perceived self-efficacy to behavior but also the well-known impact of efficacy belief on aspiration and strategic thinking (Wood

& Bandura, 1989)" (Bandura, 2003, p. 89). In contrast to the stultifying pattern of controlling environments and negative mastery experiences, higher goals combined with the heightened perseverance of self-efficacious individuals creates a positive spiral effect:

> Goals, rooted in a value system and a sense of personal identity, invest activities with meaning and purpose. Goals motivate by enlisting self-evaluative engagement in activities rather than directly. By making self-evaluation conditional on matching personal standards, people give direction to their pursuits and create self-incentives to sustain their efforts for goal attainment. They do things that give them self-satisfaction and a sense of pride and self-worth, and refrain from behaving in ways that give rise to self-dissatisfaction, self-devaluation, and self-censure. (Bandura, 2001, p. 8)

The positive dynamic of rigorous, self-assigned goals, highly motivated effort, resilient attitudes toward persevering, and satisfaction in seeing the results of one's efforts applied practically is desirable in any school setting, but especially in settings where trends of disengagement are the norm. It is unlikely to develop in schools locked into deficit-based behavioristic approaches.

HOW SELF-EFFICACY DEVELOPS

An individual develops a sense of self-efficacy as he or she processes information through social persuasion (e.g. a trusted individual expressing confidence), self-reflection and self-regulation, and "enactive mastery experiences," authentic experiences which provide an individual proof of competency (van Dinther, 2011, p. 97). Of these, enactive

mastery experiences are "the most powerful source of creating a strong sense of efficacy" as they provide "students with practical experiences, i.e. students performing a task while applying knowledge and skills within demanding situations" (van Dinther, 2011, p. 104). In other words, learning that involves real-life application will augment a student's self-efficacy more than other types of learning activities. It is notable that the authenticity of enactive mastery experiences has a stronger effect on student self-efficacy than social persuasion, the kind of interaction that would characterize authority-based approaches driven by deficit thinking.

Providing students with the real-life work that will increase their self-efficacy requires a departure from traditional teaching methods, which generally limit learning to in-class instruction and practice that have little relevance outside the classroom. As students experience authentic learning that connects to the greater community, their self-efficacy increases and they report feeling "meaningful power" (Ozer, "Bounded Empowerment," 2013, p. 21). This structure is not some educational gimmick or ruse, but legitimate power sharing as students' actions and choices truly contribute to community discourse and action. Students respond to shared power and accompanying increases in self-efficacy with greater engagement. Their work also helps them to reverse negative patterns of self-efficacy; they learn to see themselves as agents capable of using critical engagement with their community to effect change (Duncan-Andrade in Noguera, 2006, p. 166). One teacher applying these principles observed "the thoughtful questions students ask and the eagerness with which they involve themselves in class discussion. They know I value their ideas. They know they can say anything. They feel

comfortable. They open up completely" (Shor, 1996, p. 224). Students who are empowered to do this counter the deficit stereotypes of adolescence. The creation of "democratic and critical spaces [can] foster meaningful and transformative learning," and allow students "to take social responsibility, [and] explore ideas, topics, and viewpoints that not only reinforce but challenge their own" (Glasgow, 2001, p. 54). They are prepared to confront a "complex world full of challenges and hazards, [where] people have to make good judgments about their [own] capabilities, anticipate the probable effects of different events and courses of action, size up sociostructural opportunities and constraints, and regulate their behavior accordingly" (Bandura, 2001, p. 3). This kind of education is less predictable and as a result is less formulaic. It is less controlled and as a result invests students with a sense of freedom. It creates an environment in which student self-efficacy can flourish.

YPAR ENGENDERS SELF-EFFICACY THROUGH AUTONOMY AND AUTHENTIC (REAL-WORLD) WORK

Youth Participatory Action Research is a youth-driven educational approach in which students are trained to identify and research community problems and then take action regarding those problems (Ozer, "Impact," 2013, p. 66-67). YPAR helps to correct the disempowering deficit dynamic, turning educators' focus from a paradigm focused on controlling flawed or incomplete students via limited autonomy to a paradigm focused on empowering capable and curious students via training, preparation, and opportunity to make immediate authentic contributions in their communities.

YPAR programs restructure classroom power dynamics. While traditional educational practice positions the teacher as the central, active agent in a classroom (lecturing, assigning, analyzing, evaluating), YPAR reverses this, "positioning youth as doers and knowledge generators within the space of the classroom" and thus "promot[ing] shared responsibility and empathy" (Dejaynes, 2015, p. 78). Where traditional approaches subordinate the student to institutional forces such as the curriculum and teachers' imperatives, YPAR empowers students as key agents by inviting them to use their abilities and resources to choose, research, and perform authentic tasks with real-world value. In YPAR, the teacher allows students to be active agents in their learning environment by sharing many key instructional decisions with students. YPAR "[allows] students to participate in constructing the learning process" and "encourages them to perceive education as their project, something they create" (Romero in Cammarota, 2008, p. 137). This empowerment in turn helps students develop self-efficacy and encourages them to engage with their school and greater community. Disengagement and disruption diminish as "students study their social contexts through research[,] apply their knowledge," and learn that they "possess the agency to produce changes" (Cammarota, 2008, p. 6). Students engage and stay engaged because the work they do remains relevant to them, anchored to their interest by the fact that they chose it.

For the sharing of power to happen, teachers must jettison the deficit-oriented thinking that suppresses and silences youth under assumptions of incompetence by recognizing that "youth [are] already engaged in conversations around issues from which

our communities are not protecting them" (Dejaynes, 2015, p. 75). As teachers recognize this, they move past viewpoints that frame adolescents as deficient and are better prepared to entrust students with agency, giving them a central role in decision-making and the production of knowledge in a classroom. This is more than just a well-intentioned effort to make students feel more involved. It is a powerful means of reframing educational relationships in a way that activates the substantial energy, interest, and capacity of students. YPAR's use of agency unlocks this power:

> Agency represents the power that derives from the pursuit of those questions that matter most to students. It is what fuels action, a central component of YPAR that allows young people to attend to and explore firsthand the nuances of issues that have a direct bearing on their lives. It is contextually bound, always in negotiation, and mediated by the histories, social interactions, and cultures that young people's identities are entangled within. We argue that agency cannot be framed as a competency then, but as a capacity to imagine and act upon the world. Central to this is the opening of spaces for students in their plurality, spaces where they can examine their relationships with each other, with texts, and with the world. (Mirra, 2015, p. 53)

Emphasis on youth agency offers students a stake in meaningful conversations that extend beyond the arbitrary limits of a traditional classroom. This creates an environment where students' self-efficacy can be reinforced as they find opportunities to make choices with real-world impact. Autonomy and relevance give students a reason to

stay engaged or re-engage with the learning. Teachers benefit, too; concerns about adolescent mediocrity evaporate as students rise to explore and own a forum that values their voice and a community that welcomes their influence. As students complete their YPAR projects, they develop socio-political skills and motivation to influence their communities (Ozer, "Impact," 2013, p. 71), a highly desirable primary outcome for the educational system.

YPAR, with its emphasis on dismantling and restructuring classroom power dynamics, stands out especially for its potential to empower disenfranchised youth in urban settings, where educational issues of autonomy are further complicated by the educational complex's troubled attempts to resolve historical socioeconomic and racial disparities. Most YPAR programs strive to include a diverse variety of individuals "with very different kinds of expertise" while focusing "most significantly [on] those who have lived lives under the thumb of structural injustice" (Stoudt, 2012, p. 180). YPAR has been quite successful in these contexts

The authenticity of YPAR projects is a key factor in its success. Collaboration on authentic tasks that are, in other words, "genuine, true… appropriate, purposeful, and, simply, real" (Rivero, 2017, p. 5) transcends the limits of traditional classwork because it "actually [moves] the aims of [the] group forward"; unlike busywork, it "moves a society forward toward desirable, agreed-upon goals that enhance progress and survival" (5). Authentic engagement in community-linked activity is a "highly desirable [state] of being for [students]" (5) because it "helps them improve their social contexts," giving their learning "a greater purpose and meaning" (Romero in Cammarota, 2008, p. 136).

Schools that realize and act on this reality "could… actively stimulate self-efficacy of students by providing a programme that provides students with authentic tasks, requiring them to apply more frequently knowledge and skills within diverse situations" (van Dinther, 2011, p. 105). The fabricated scenarios and hypothetical frameworks that teachers create simply can't stimulate and challenge students in the same way their actual community can. And working on a project with greater purpose is simply more highly motivating than working on a contrived project with no intrinsic value. In contrast to what Moffett calls "the superficiality of much school writing [which] does not support children's ability to harness the power of writing… [but] rather… constricts their creative expression" (Jones, 2015, p. 77), YPAR gives students a real and meaningful audience to write for, speak to, and engage with. Students who work with autonomy for a real-world goal and audience acquire enactive mastery experience, and this increases their self-efficacy.

YPAR FACILITATES AND ENHANCES SOCIAL LEARNING

By its nature, YPAR leans classrooms toward collaboration. While a YPAR project can be completed by a single student researcher, the wide range of tasks necessary at each stage of the process, from brainstorming to research to design to presentation, makes group work advantageous and common. This quality of YPAR helps students to benefit from social learning dynamics much richer than the authoritarian distribution of punishment and reward characteristic of more sterile behavioral-style classrooms. One such dynamic, explicated in Social Cognitive theory, is social modeling, a mode of learning and decision-making which is contextualized in a social environment ("Albert

Bandura," 2017). A study of snake phobias showed that subjects attempting to overcome their fear of snakes progressed more when they observed people who like them had a snake phobia handling snakes than when they observed people without a phobia handling snakes or when authority figures attempted to persuade them (Bandura, 1969, p. 198). Although they received messages about their snake phobias through various means, they were most affected by those like them who modeled the behavior they were working to learn.

There is much more to Social Cognitive theory, but this concept--learners parsing messages in a social context and absorbing some more than others--is valuable for those striving to increase student engagement. The highly social context of YPAR positions it to take maximum advantage of peer social modeling, both giving students additional and more-effective avenues for learning and giving them another socially-mediated reason to engage with their learning environment.

METHODS

In order to better understand how a participatory educational approach like YPAR affects student self-efficacy and engagement, I organized an extra-curricular YPAR club at the junior high school where I work as a teacher. Feedback from participating students, given through survey responses, interviews, and field note observations, sheds light on this research question:

> **Does YPAR increase student self-efficacy, and if so, how does this affect their engagement with their educational environment and community?**

By conducting this study in a suburban junior high school, I hope to contribute a small part to the conversation about YPAR as it spreads from its origins in urban areas. I will additionally discuss my experience implementing YPAR to add to the bank of educational knowledge in the hopes that my experiences can help guide other teachers who are just beginning to implement YPAR or similar techniques.

Over the course of three months during the 2016-2017 school year, I organized a group of ten junior high school students into a YPAR club (the “Take Action Club”) at my suburban junior high school. Nine students participated from the beginning to the end of the 3 month program. Using YPAR principles, I guided these students through questioning, brainstorming, research, and project development. I surveyed these students before and after their participation in the club to measure their perception of school and self, and I also interviewed three students in order to add anecdotal detail to the survey data. My study focuses specifically on an area Ozer and Douglas note needs more attention: the effects of YPAR on students who participate in the program (Ozer, “Impact,” 2013, p. 67). Since my study sample population was limited in size, and a comprehensive analysis of YPAR in a suburban junior high school setting would be too broad in scope for this study, I focused the surveys and interviews on students’ self-efficacy, “the perceived capability to learn or perform at a certain designated level” (Chen, 2003, p. 79), and its role as a key contributor to student engagement.

I carried out the study at a Salt River Junior High School in Mesa, Arizona, where I teach Spanish and computer basics. To protect privacy, I am using pseudonyms to refer to the school and students in this study. This school is home to about 700 7th and 8th

grade students. 5.6% of the student population is African American, nearly 22% of students are Hispanic, and approximately 66% are Caucasian. A small percentage of the population is composed of Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, and multi-ethnicity students (Research and Evaluation, 2017). Compared to schools both in the district and in the state of Arizona, Salt River students perform slightly above average on standardized tests. The school was recently designated a Title I school, with just over 41% of students qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch.

RECRUITING AND MAINTAINING A STABLE CLUB POPULATION

Getting students to come to an extra-curricular activity at school is quite difficult, as many students are itching to leave by the time the school day closes. I knew that a simple general announcement would be insufficient to draw enough students for a full club. In order to improve the chances of a good turnout, I recruited our school's English teachers to briefly explain the club and hand around a flyer with a sign-up sheet for interested students. This ensured that every student at the school would get an explanation of the club's purpose, since all students attend an English class. I then followed up with students who expressed interest on an individual basis.

This process set me up with a core of interested students to start the club, but a problem remained. YPAR is optimized for students who may feel disenfranchised in a traditional school setting. However, my recruiting process was institutional and volunteer-based, and therefore was much more likely to elicit interest from students who already felt involved and comfortable in school. Left alone, this process would have left my club and any study associated with it inaccurately representing the school population.

To remedy this problem, I reached out personally to a number of students I had worked with in the past who did not evince a high level of enfranchisement in a school environment. I looked for them in the hallways of the school and would pull them aside to personally express my confidence in their abilities. I described the purpose of the club to them, expressed my interest in working with them, and invited them to join the club. I may have also mentioned that I would be bringing doughnuts. With this variety of strategies, I was able to gather a sample of students more representative of the school population.

The Take Action club ended up with four girls and six boys. All of the girls were seventh graders, but five of the six boys were eighth graders. Three girls were Caucasian, and one was Asian (though she had been adopted into a Caucasian family). All of the boys were Hispanic except for one who was Caucasian. While all of the girls were engaged, high-performing students who came voluntarily, the boys, whom I had recruited individually, were generally less engaged students with lower performance on traditional academic measures such as grades and frequency of behavioral incidents.

Having recruited students into the club, keeping them coming was a challenge. While I had a good turnout on the first meeting, the second meeting a week later was very small. To address this problem, I began visiting students at the beginning of school, making phone calls to parents, and doing home visits. I also began to take snack requests from students. Giving them a share of control in planning seemed congruent with the power-sharing spirit of YPAR, and it also ensured that my efforts to

reinforce students' continued involvement and engagement with extrinsically motivating snacks would not miss the mark.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To design this study, I drew on the work of various scholars in YPAR. I modeled much of my instruction on examples from Emily Ozer and Laura Douglas' description and discussion of a YPAR program (2015). I also drew on materials and concepts from YPAR Hub, a superb resource site associated with UC Berkeley. In choosing to use an interview format as part of my data collection procedure, I was influenced in part by observations of scholars like Ernest Morrell that "if we are to truly understand how young people are affected by [serious social ills], and if we are to understand how to eradicate the social conditions that contribute to these issues, then we must listen to the young people who are most affected by them" (Cammarota, 2008, p. 158). It would have been ironic to conduct an entire study on the impact and value of YPAR without affording space to the voices of the students whose experience is central to it. I formulated many survey questions based on Bandura's writings on self-efficacy and its importance in motivation and performance (2003, p. 87). The survey assesses students' self-efficacy by questioning their self-perceptions from various angles. The survey also assesses students' community relationships, drawing on van Dinther's examination of self-efficacy as affected by school environments (2011, p. 105).

INSTRUCTION

The Take Action Club held 14 official meetings, along with numerous informal meetings, collaborations, and conversations. I used PowerPoint presentations, hand-held

and wall-mounted whiteboards, small group and large group discussion formats, various graphic organizers, and modeling to help students acquire key understandings about YPAR research techniques and philosophy. The timeline in Appendix I briefly describes the main actions I and the students took in each meeting and includes details from my meeting journal to illustrate key moments in the students' progress in the club.

The final action of each group was far from perfect, but it represented the work and passion they had invested in their research. The group studying poverty spent an evening preparing and serving food at a local homeless center and held a fundraiser, donating $40 to that shelter. Although this project did not address the deep issues surrounding poverty in a way that would be fully in line with the YPAR emphasis on social justice, the willingness of the girls in this group to dedicate their time to make an effort to address a social problem gives me confidence that they will continue to develop their awareness of issues in their community and address them more effectively.

The satisfaction that the boys who created a presentation on racism felt as they educated their fellow students was clear in their eagerness to keep going. After our first day of presentations, they asked if they could present to more classes the next day. Their message was well-received by their student audience, and they became more confident as they gained more experience. They ended their school year more seasoned as advocates for themselves, their classmates, and their community. Their two days of presentations played a key role in their improved self-efficacy, and I'm optimistic that they will carry that with them into high school.

The student working on the animal welfare project conducted the most extensive and sophisticated research, and she created the most professional presentation, based on her survey results and other research. She was also able to present to multiple classes. Almost a year later, when I see her in the hallways, she speaks fondly of her work in the Take Action Club.

Some of the best training I gave students was real-world procedural knowledge occasioned by necessity—a hallmark of the YPAR approach. Real-world necessities like preparing to interview an expert or planning a presentation for multiple classrooms of students lent urgency to students' training. Their research acquired value as a vital step to increase the credibility and effectiveness of their presentations.

ADAPTING THE STUDY TO LOCAL CONSTRAINTS

One of the most significant limitations of my study was its small group size and non-random selection of participants. While I made extra effort to diversify the pool of students involved and include as many students as possible, the final group does not represent a statistically robust representation of the student population at Salt River Jr. High or Mesa schools in general. Furthermore, the small sample size makes drawing statistical conclusions problematic. My starting sample size of 10 was diminished by the loss of a student due to discipline issues. With such a small group, factors such as a student's general mood can have a significant effect on results. In addition, it is very likely that students' and state of mind at the end of the year could have affected their attitude or mental stamina in completing the survey. In fact, as I was compiling the survey data, I found that two students had started using only one answer for every

question partway through the survey. While it could be possible that the students' actual feelings and thoughts coincidentally created this pattern, I was curious enough to track down and talk to one of the students during the summer. We spoke about his survey and ended up discussing reasons why he had felt compelled to rush his responses. In light of this conversation, he filled out a new survey more thoughtfully.

My final results included responses from 7 students. Even though my small sample size is a statistical weakness, it actually gives the study strength as a case study. Having a relatively small number of students allowed me to spend time with every student in the group, giving me a much more detailed view of their experiences, challenges, and perspectives. This close-up view was especially valuable in conducting interviews; I was able to probe and question based on observational information I had already gleaned. Although my results don't have the statistical advantages of large population samples, they offer an in-depth picture of how students experience YPAR and how YPAR affects them. Further conclusions can be drawn by couching this study in the context of numerous other YPAR studies and reports. The study also offers a foundation and possible direction for researchers interested in conducting larger-scale studies.

DATA COLLECTION

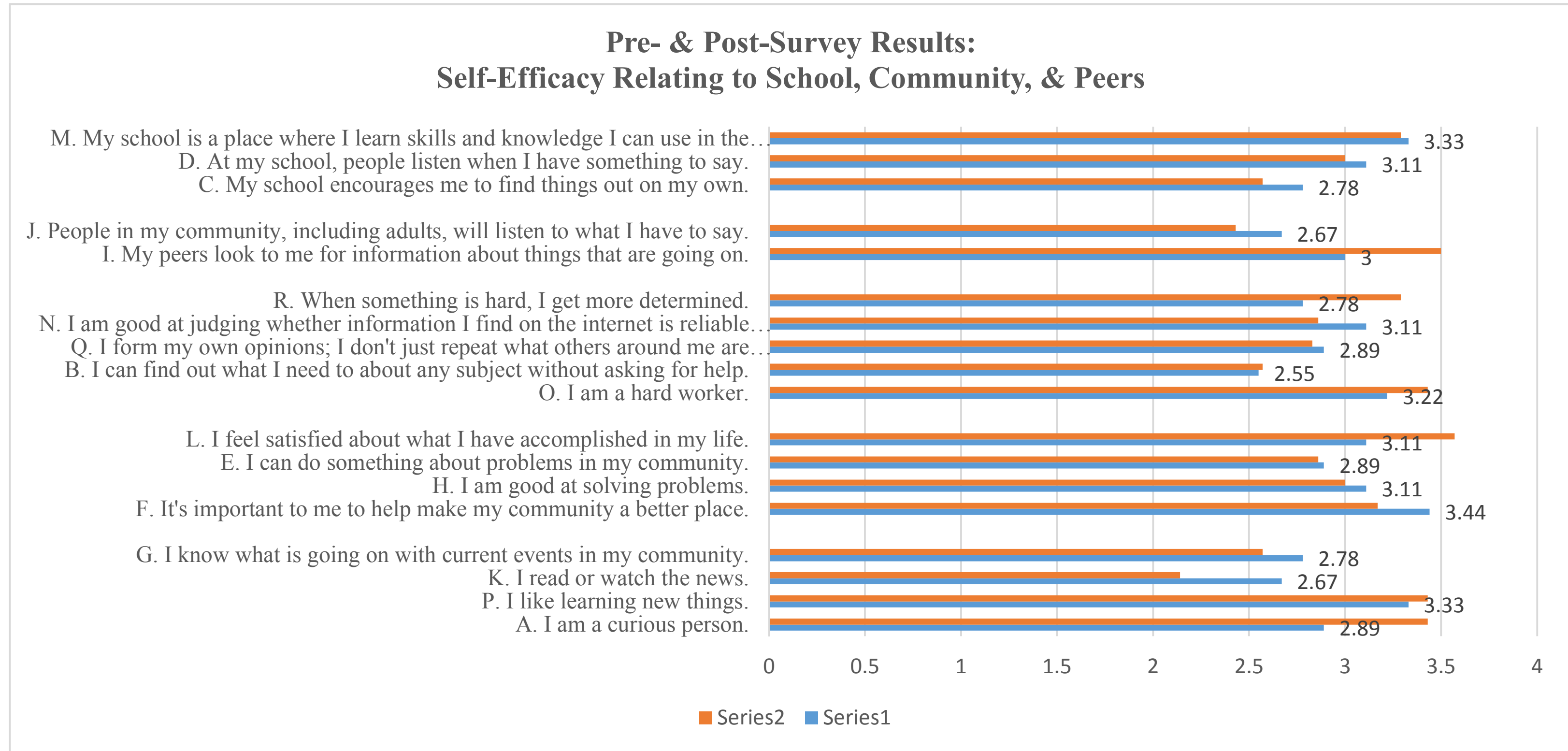
The survey was designed to assess students' self-efficacy, focusing specifically on their motivation, curiosity, confidence in research, and attitude toward and engagement with their community and school.

SURVEY

Methods. The Take Action Club began meeting early in the second semester of school. We ended up with ten regular attendees. At the start, I administered the survey to nine students (one club member opted out of the survey), and after projects were completed, I administered it again. However, the post-survey sample included only seven responses because we lost one student due to expulsion and one student's responses had to be excluded because of questionable validity. Even with this small sample size, the pre-survey and follow-up survey results shed light on how students' YPAR experience affected their perceptions.

With a small sample size, it is not as easy to look at changes between the pre- and post-surveys and draw conclusions. One way to deal with the difficulty of comparing the pre- and post-survey results is to look at patterns within each survey and use that to draw conclusions. For example, I can look not only at whether students' average curiosity levels increased or decreased, but at whether students' curiosity levels increased or decreased in comparison to their levels of research confidence. If an end-of-year mindset were to drive down their response levels for both categories, but one decreased significantly less than another, then I can draw a conclusion about the effects of YPAR on that characteristic.

Findings. The following chart details the results of the survey, which assessed students' perceptions about their own efficacy, their relationship with their school, educators, peers, and their community in general. Students were surveyed at the beginning of their involvement in the YPAR club and again at the end of the school year. Students responded to questions using a 4 point scale in which a higher number indicated a higher level of agreement, with 4 being "Very true" and 1 being "Very untrue."



School and Community Context: Students' Relationships and Self-Efficacy. Many of the students' survey responses show little or no change over the course of their time in the YPAR club. Some even showed a negative trend decreasing from the pre-survey to the post-survey. This was particularly true with students' responses about their relationship with the school, which generally showed a slight decrease. Responses for question M, "My school is a place where I learn skills and knowledge I can use in the real world" decreased from an average of 3.33 to 3.29. Question D, "At my school, people listen when I have something to say," showed a decrease from 3.11 to 3.0. Question C, "My school encourages me to find things out on my own," decreased from 2.78 to 2.57. These decreases are quite small and may simply reflect statistically insignificant variation between surveys, but the common trend among all 3 lends confidence to the conclusion that students' involvement in YPAR did not result in an improved view of their relationship with the school environment.

Students' general relationship with adults in their community likewise showed a slight negative trend. Question J, "People in my community, including adults, will listen to what I have to say," decreased from 2.67 to 2.43. Other questions regarding students' relationship to the broader community followed the same pattern. Question G, "I know what is going on with current events in my community," decreased from 2.78 to 2.57, and question K, "I read or watch the news," showed one of the largest decreases, moving from 2.67 to 2.14. With this trend reflecting disengagement, it is not too surprising that question F, "It's important to me to help make my community a better place," decreased as well, from 3.44 to 3.17. These responses were perhaps the most surprising of the

survey. I had anticipated that students' involvement with a YPAR program would result in a measureable increase in their engagement with their community and their sense of self-efficacy in dealing with community issues, but this does not seem to be the case.

Student Self-Efficacy. Student responses about their self-efficacy showed more variation. A few showed a negative trend, though most responses showed substantial growth. Questions H ("I am good at solving problems.") and E ("I can do something about problems in my community.") both showed insignificant decreases (3.11 to 3 and 2.89 to 2.86, respectively). Question N, ("I am good at judging whether information I find on the internet is reliable and trustworthy.") decreased from 3.11 to 2.86, and question Q ("I form my own opinions; I don't just repeat what others around me are thinking and saying.") decreased from 2.89 to 2.83. This slight decrease could be due to a decrease in student confidence, but it also may have changed due to students' high regard for other students' work. As students viewed others' projects in progress, they may have noted their own opinions being influenced. In such a case, this response change could be an indication of the impact of collaborative work, rather than an indication of lack of independence. Or perhaps students' perceptions on these topics are more resilient than they are with other topics. There might also be other factors affecting their outlook. There were no control subjects with which to compare responses; future studies could add a control group to better highlight changes attributable to YPAR participation.

Most questions regarding students' self-efficacy showed a positive trend. Questions B ("I can find out what I need to about any subject without asking for help."),

O (“I am a hard worker.”), and P (“I like learning new things.”) all received slightly higher responses (2.55 to 2.57, 3.22 to 3.43, and 3.33 to 3.43 respectively), suggesting that students’ perceptions about their abilities and qualities as student researchers fared well throughout the time they were involved in the club. This increase can be explained by the Social Cognitive theory tenet of enactive mastery experience, in which learners gain confidence by applying skills to perform a task (van Dinther, 2011, p. 97). Students’ self-efficacy improved as they went through authentic experiences which reinforced their belief in their ability to be researchers.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that students’ responses to other self-efficacy-related questions were substantially higher in the follow-up survey. Responses to question A, “I am a curious person,” increased from 2.89 to 3.43. It’s interesting to note that students rated themselves higher in curiosity even though they rated themselves much lower in likelihood to read or watch the news. It’s possible that this result may be due to semantics; perhaps students didn’t consider their forms of investigating the world “news.”

Responses to question R, “When something is hard, I get more determined,” increased from 2.78 to 3.29. Related questions (P and O), showed smaller increases, but all displayed an increasing trend, making it clear that students’ assessments of their own determination and curiosity grew during their time involved with the club. Students’ responses to question L, “I feel satisfied about what I have accomplished in my life,” increased from 3.11 to 3.57. It is likely that the club’s emphasis on the YPAR concept of real-world impact contributed to this increase.

Question I, “My peers look to me for information about things that are going on,” also showed a significant increase from 3 to 3.5. This response contrasts to students’ assessments of their relationship with the school and with adults, both of which fared poorly.

Summary and Discussion. One of the most important conclusions of this study is that students’ self-efficacy can indeed be affected by an extra-curricular YPAR program. The survey data can be generalized in the following conclusions:

1. Participation seemed to have little or no positive effect on students’ relationships with adults or the school itself. In fact, the follow-up survey yielded slightly lower response values regarding students’ feelings about schools’ practical value and schools’ willingness to listen to students’ voices. Responses revealed an even greater decrease in perception of schools’ encouragement of independent student exploration and of community adults’ willingness to listen to student voices. It is probably safe to say that students who participated in the program did not experience any revolutionary shifts in the way they viewed their school, the adult community, and their relationships with school and community.

This finding corresponds with research suggesting that widespread and deep-seated relationship patterns cannot be easily shifted. Studies have shown, for example, that “ it is incorrect to think that pairing a volunteer adult with an at-risk student over a given period of time will be enough to prevent the risks of problems of academic adjustment and failure” (Larose, 2005, p. 113). My experience confirms the resilience of such patterns not only with the survey results, but with one of my students who did not

complete his YPAR project. Although I was able to develop a good relationship with him in our club, he was still engaged in negative behavior patterns elsewhere, and eventually was expelled from the school. Future studies with larger and more in-depth scope could explore whether undesirable relationship patterns could be ameliorated with longer periods of involvement in a YPAR program, and what role self-efficacy plays in those relationships.

2. YPAR can enable professional-level interactions which allow students to assume an expert role in the eyes of teachers and peers (Ozer, 2012, p. 280). This phenomenon occurred in this study, especially regarding participating students' perception of their relationships with peers. In contrast to the unchanging or negative-changing responses of the above section, student responses regarding peers' tendencies to look to them for information showed a substantially higher response value. The collaborative nature of the YPAR club and the students' emphasis on sharing their projects and results with peers rather than with teachers or other adult community stakeholders may help explain why students' post-survey responses show higher perceived efficacy in their relationships with their peers (See Appendix A, questions A, I, L, O, and R) than with adults (See questions C, D, F, G, J, and M). The correlation between the focus of students' YPAR presentations and the increase in students' perceived efficacy in that area offers a compelling argument that YPAR can affect students' self-efficacy within the bounds of the context in which it is applied. This is consistent with research which finds that "youth empowerment is a context dependent process that requires attention to a multiplicity of factors that influence possibilities for

empowerment via second order change" (Kohfeldt, 2011, p. 28). The positive effects of student YPAR involvement can be anticipated, but only with careful consideration of complex contextual factors such as audience, topic, school and community environment, and personal factors.

Their interactions with other club members may also have had an impact on this change in perception. Students experienced validation with other members of their group as they worked together to make their ideas take shape. They also worked in close proximity with other groups, and it is likely that seeing other groups' successes, and seeing the interaction of groups sharing, borrowing ideas, and giving feedback and affirmation contributed to students' own improved sense of self-efficacy in relation to peers. Further studies, with larger and more in-depth scope could explore whether this correlation would show up in other YPAR programs, and if an increase in perceived efficacy can be replicated in peer group relationships. Further studies could also examine whether students presenting to adults would experience a similar effect on their perceived relationships with adults.

3. Participation may also have positively affected students' general self-efficacy. Students rated themselves noticeably higher in diligence ("hard worker") and satisfaction in accomplishment (See questions O and L). Students also rated themselves higher in curiosity, though they rated themselves lower in likelihood to read or watch the news. It's possible that this result may be due to semantics; perhaps students didn't consider their forms of investigating the world "news" (See questions A and K).

INTERVIEWS

Methods. After administering the post-survey, I interviewed three students. The interviews allowed me to follow up on student survey responses, probe for detail and rationale behind student responses, and collect anecdotal data to complement the survey data. I selected students who were engaged in the whole YPAR process from beginning to end, both to ensure that they would have experience to comment on any part of the program, and because the completeness of their experience would offer the most accurate reflection of the program and its effects. I also made sure to get representation from the girls in the club, who tended to fit the profile of a student invested in the school system (eager-to-please, high grades), and the boys in the club, who tended to fit the profile of a student not invested in the system (occasional disciplinary conflict, lower grades) in order to get the broadest possible range of student feedback.

The interviews, which I conducted after compiling survey results, added details of personal perspective to those results. They reinforced some conclusions I had drawn from the survey data, and they added more nuance to others.

Findings.

Authenticity. The interviews highlighted one of the most significant aspects of YPAR in contributing to improved student self-efficacy: authentic action. Student responses to questions regarding self-efficacy and satisfaction repeatedly referenced the real-world action that was the culmination of their project. Enrique's discussion about his appreciation for getting out of class provides one example. At first, it seemed he was

simply happy to get out of class, as many students would be. However, his true reasoning had more to do with his preference for authentic, real-life activity.

> *Mr. Cox: Now, tell me about, so, I can see how getting out of class, that would be, like, one of the best things, you know, one of the nice things about it. What about getting out of class did you look forward to. Like, why is that nice?*
>
> *Enrique: Because, it was, like, the last day of school, almost.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Uh huh.*
>
> *Enrique: And, just, I just didn't want to be in first hour [Laughs] on the last day of school, 'cause all we did was watch a movie.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Okay, so you're just, like… So, why would you rather have been doing what we were doing than watching a movie?*
>
> *Enrique: Because, it's like, Take Action Club, is, like, a real, like, a real thing than watching a movie.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: I see. Okay, uh, tell me more about that. What, um, what is real about Take Action Club?*
>
> *Enrique: Like, like, our topic, racism, like, that's not fake. That's, like, something that really happens.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Uh huh.*
>
> *…*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Cool. Um, do you think that more students will, like, be, that students will be interested in that, like part of Take Action Club, where it's something real as opposed to just, like, watching a movie?*
>
> *Enrique: Yeah.*

Enrique's reflection on real versus fake work highlights a common challenge in education. Traditional schooling, impelled both by the challenges of educating large numbers of students and a deficit perspective on youth, removes student agency and power by isolating them from their community and from actions that have consequence. Their school work, exceptionally or poorly done, will have no effect on their community. They are powerless, and they take notice. In Enrique's case, even

though the activity in the classroom was pleasant and required little effort—most students I work with will choose watching a movie over most other activities—that was not his preference. He was excited to do a "real thing." In using this description, Enrique was contrasting the YPAR project with "the artificial or contrived exercises that typically fill [students'] school days" (Clark 4). The YPAR project gave Enrique an audience beyond the artificial bounds of the classroom, and the addition of a real-world audience in place of a hypothetical classroom audience is one way to bring "authentic application" to inquiry (3). His further description of the YPAR activity as "not fake" suggests that he views standard activities that happen in a classroom as "fake" because they don't involve things that "really [happen]." As an example, students can develop a distaste for school assignments involved in writing because they are associated with tight constraints and high-pressure expectations of time and output, and focus on "mechanics… accuracy, conformity, and adherence to prescribed topics, and [are] expected to be done alone" for uninspiring purposes such as curriculum completion and earning a grade (Jones, 2015, p. 64-65). YPAR benefits in its contrast to such activities, to the point that a less-engaged student preferred it to even a very enjoyable but inauthentic classroom activity. Enrique craved authenticity—community-relevant activities and real-world action. This student desire is invaluable to educators working to reverse patterns of student disengagement. Enrique's responses suggest that teachers looking to increase the level of engagement of their students should find ways to connect their curriculum to real-world action.

Programs such as YPAR address the deleterious effects of inauthentic work by "providing opportunities for meaningful expression of individual voice that resonate

purposefully and effectively" (Jones, 2015, p. 66). By opening the opportunity for action with consequence, YPAR empowers students to engage in authentic communication and thus have a real effect on their community. As they experience this, they begin to appreciate their power and their self-efficacy increases. This in turn whets their interest and engagement in school activities.

This was the case with Enrique. His experience with authentic action seems to have played a key part in his increased self-efficacy. At another point, when asked about his accomplishments, he noted how he "[gets] happy," a phrase I interpret as involving an improved self-image, every time he "[gets] something done." His earlier comments about fake versus real likely indicate that his happiness is based not on accomplishing school assignments and activities, but to real-world action.

Brenna's increased self-efficacy derives at least in part from the authentic action involved in her project. She spoke about an increased willingness to speak out to peers, noting that "if I speak out, it will change some views, maybe." Her increased self-efficacy made her more confident in front of her peers, and it seems that this came about because she had actually spoken out to her peers. However, when asked about her perceived willingness to speak out to adults, a task that had not been part of her project, she felt no change from her YPAR experience.

The effect of concrete action is even more apparent in Brenna's self-assessment of her public speaking confidence. When asked why she felt an increase in confidence, she explained:

> *Brenna: 'Cause, um, in the presentation, like, I could actually do public speaking, and I wouldn't, like, be bad at it or anything.*

Mr. Cox: Okay. Had you ever done, like, public speaking before?

Brenna: Uh, not really. I had, like—I've volunteered before, so I've, like, helped people and I've talked to people, but I haven't done groups of people, talking to them.

Mr. Cox: Oh, okay. So more like, you've talked to people one on one, but you've never just walked into a room and given a presentation to, like—okay.

Brenna: Um hmm.

Enrique also explained how his authentic YPAR experience gave him more confidence:

Mr. Cox: Did being in the Take Action Club make you a lot more willing to speak out to peers, a little bit more, about the same, a little less willing to speak out to peers, or a lot less willing to speak out to peers?

Enrique: A lot more, to speak out to peers.

Mr. Cox: Okay, and why, for that one?

Enrique: Um, because, like, you're in front of, like, a lot of people, and, like, you've got to get used to things, so that's a good way to, like, you know, be confident, and stuff.

It makes sense that community-relevant research and concrete action would reinforce a student's self-efficacy. By opening the opportunity for action with consequence, YPAR empowers students to have a real effect on their community. This is why Van Dinther urges "a general change in attitude and focus in the school system on 'what students can or master'... through authentic tasks" and invites further study of "patterns of teacher and student interactions that enhance students' self-efficacy, and the examining of additional sources of self-efficacy such as cognitive forms of enactive mastery" (van Dinther, 2011, p. 105). The value of YPAR, as highlighted by Brenna's and Enrique's experience, is in its ability to provide authentic experience as opposed to the simulated experience that is more common in classroom practice.

Observational Learning. *Student* responses suggest that Bandura's explanation of observational learning contributes to YPAR's effectiveness. Observational learning, a component of social cognitive theory, describes how an individual learns not just from personal experience, but from observing a model's behavior and copying or otherwise learning from it (Observational Learning, 2017). This observational learning is enhanced as the observer perceives rewards or punishments associated with certain actions (Vicarious Conditioning, 2005), especially if the observed model occupies a similar position or situation to the observer.

The value of observational learning to YPAR becomes clear in the following interview exchange, which shows one club participant, Joel, reflecting not only on his own work, but on the action he saw other students in the club taking:

> *Mr. Cox: What has doing this project helped you learn?*
>
> *Joel: It helped me learn that we could actually make a difference.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: What specifically happened that helped you to see that, "Hey, we can make a difference."*
>
> *Joel: Um, I want to say when we… like…. To be honest, the words got to me, the "Take Action Club." Like, it just means that everyone can make a difference. Not just adults. Kids, too. Like, going to the rec center, giving them, like, soup kitchen and all that.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Uh huh. That's one of my favorite things about the club, actually, is that it really emphasizes that.*
>
> *Joel: That kids can make a difference, too.*
>
> *Mr. Cox: Yeah.*

The soup kitchen project Joel mentions was a joint fundraising and service project conducted by a group of girls in the club. That he cites their work as an example of what

drove his improved self-efficacy illustrates Bandura's assertion that people learn by watching others like them.

Other students seemed to benefit from observing their peers as well. Enrique specifically pointed out another student's project on animal welfare as an example of "real" action, and this probably affected his increased response scores regarding self-efficacy with information (questions B and I), curiosity (questions K and A), and problem-solving (questions B, E, and H).

While disempowerment is common in classrooms, YPAR gave these students a chance to have a real and measurable effect on their world. It seems that students noted not only their increased power, but the increased power of other students. Many educational approaches emphasize the impact of interventions on individuals, but it should be remembered that all educational work is set in a group context, and what one student does affects others.

Social Energy. One of the most powerful tools YPAR uses to further learning is the unlocking of social energy in the service of learning. This not only helps to make YPAR activities more enjoyable for students, but it is vital to the purpose of both YPAR and education in general, both of which are dedicated to building empowered students in order to contribute to a social community.

YPAR appears to be effective in part because it is able to harness the social energy which can disrupt a traditional teacher-centered classroom and channel it toward constructive goals. The enthusiasm with which students engage in social activities in the classroom—talking, joking, laughing, passing notes, etc.—has long been an impediment

for teachers striving to direct those students' energy toward learning objectives. Even so, group settings are often considered the ideal venue for empowering and engaging youth in community action (Aldana, 2016, p. 354). Group settings allow for collaboration and social modeling, and they mirror the socially-oriented nature of participatory action. That YPAR applies students' social energy to learning and social action is apparent from the high volume of student interview responses highlighting the social impact of YPAR. Although teachers often distinguish between socializing and learning, keeping opportunities to socialize under tight control and close scrutiny due to fears that socializing will detract from learning time, Joel reveals in an interview response how in his mind, YPAR seamlessly connected socialization and responsible action:

> *Mr. Cox: What about the Take Action Club project has been most rewarding for you?*
>
> *Joel: Um, most rewarding is, um… when on the last day of school when I got to hang out with my friends, and then we got to go around and tell everyone, like all the 8th graders and all the 7th graders, and tell them, like, what we… what's happening, what's been going on, and, um, how, just, like, give them courage, like showing that, not just grown-ups can do this, like kids can do it, like, look at us, for example. We're trying to make a difference.*

Joel groups the social aspect of YPAR, hanging out with friends, in the same sentence as key scholarly actions of his YPAR project—communicating results ("tell everyone… what's happening") and instructing/modeling ("give them courage… like, look at us, for example."). Joel recognized that these two elements need not be mutually exclusive, and in the case of his group's project, they certainly weren't. Enrique's responses illustrated a similar connection between socializing and working:

Mr. Cox: What about this project has been the most rewarding thing? The thing where you look back, and you say, "I'm happy about that"?

Enrique: Um, like if I were to look back on my life?

Mr. Cox: Um, at any of the stuff that you did in the Take Action Club, what were you most happy about?

Enrique: Um, I'm most happy about, like, everyone coming together, and throwing ideas on the table.

Mr. Cox: Okay.

Enrique: And, like, having fun.

Mr. Cox: Okay, so for you, like, the brainstorming time?

Enrique: Yeah.

Mr. Cox: And, so that, for you, that was fun. What was fun about it?

Enrique: Um, 'cause, like, sometimes we would, like, jump around and make fun, and then sometimes we would be, like, serious, so like, there would be some giggles in it.

It should be noted that getting to "hang out with ...friends" did not result in pedagogical fluff and wasted learning time. The students were simultaneously working "trying to make a difference." Students having fun is actually "a natural and important part of the learning process" (Lucardie, 2014, p. 440). Enjoyment improves students' affective state which in turn improves their cognitive readiness for learning. Since there is a strong correlation between enjoyment and authenticity (Jones, 2015, p. 73), creating an environment in which students can have fun as they work on authentic tasks also facilitates the development of self-efficacy. All of these factors work together to improve student engagement.

DISCUSSION

My findings offer many exciting possibilities for educators to consider. Seeing young students taking ownership of ambitious projects, dealing with challenges, and drawing conclusions about themselves and their world reaffirmed the power that agency, authenticity, and self-efficacy can have in a learning environment. This also reaffirmed my faith in young students' ability to work with conscience and determination, regardless of their previous level of engagement in school. I also felt personally rejuvenated as a teacher. While running the club and carrying out the study were exhausting, the chance to be directly involved in the authentic learning of students resonated with my deepest values as an educator, values that often take a back seat to the bustle and grind of daily classroom struggles. YPAR is good for teachers, too.

While no single program will solve complex problems such as widespread deficit perspectives of youth and the student disengagement such perspectives facilitate, YPAR offers educators one way to address the roots of those problems. And while YPAR shines particularly as a way to engage marginalized students in urban communities (Ozer, "Impact," 2013), the experience of students in this study shows that YPAR's ability to augment self-efficacy and empower through authentic community engagement can benefit students from other backgrounds as well. Teachers and administrators should consider adopting YPAR and other related pedagogical approaches in their curricula. At the very least, educators should incorporate the fundamental philosophical tenets that drive YPAR's success in engaging students: self-efficacy, empowerment, and authenticity. Doing so can not only improve the engagement and performance of

individual students, but the atmosphere of the school as a whole. As students sense the respect and autonomy afforded them via YPAR and come to see themselves and others as accepted and contributing citizens in their school and community, their faith in that school and community will increase and they will be willing and even eager to engage with learning

Future studies might investigate further the contextual relationship between YPAR and self-efficacy. Would students who presented to an adult audience experience an increase in their self-efficacy comparable to students who presented to peers? Would students who present to adults experience an increase in self-efficacy in relation to peers? Researchers might also consider other program variables such as length of time devoted to the project, type of project, and type of topic to determine whether they affect self-efficacy.

IMPLEMENTATION

While YPAR is clearly an effective tool, it would be simplistic to assume that educators will always be able to easily implement the deep changes necessary to use it. Designing this study opened my eyes to the benefits of YPAR, but also to the costs of its implementation. My students had a largely positive experience and the study results were promising, but we achieved it with a small group of 10 students and intensive follow-up. I harbor no illusions about the difficulty a teacher with a classroom of 30 or a student load of more than 100 (typical numbers for any secondary school teacher) would face in implementing a full-scale YPAR program. It would require significant skill and a substantial investment of time. For this reason, YPAR alone may not be a panacea for

schools with disengagement problems. However, that does not mean that teachers should ignore YPAR. Successful remedies to deep-rooted problems don't come cheap. And the principles of YPAR offer one of the best opportunities to improve school outcomes. YPAR can be used flexibly within the boundaries of limited school resources:

Use YPAR Selectively.

A YPAR project could be assigned as an individualized alternative for a student or group of students who have disengaged from the standard curriculum. In this way, the empowering benefits of YPAR could be afforded to students who really need them without the sometimes prohibitive investment of time and resources needed to implement it on a large scale.

Offer a YPAR Class.

At the end of the year, teachers could nominate for a YPAR class students who are less engaged by traditional curriculum and might flourish with additional autonomy. This class could be taught by a teacher with YPAR experience and given as an elective, or it could be used as an alternative means of gaining Language Arts Credit.

Offer a YPAR Summer Course.

Students who receive a failing Language Arts grade during the school year are often assigned a remedial summer school course. Since disengagement will naturally result in lower grades, summer school classes will likely contain many disengaged students. The modified power dynamic of YPAR would give these students opportunities they may not have had during the school year.

Make YPAR Principles a Part of Teacher Development.

Administrative-level educators could inform teachers of YPAR and incorporate YPAR research and examples into teacher training. Care should be taken not to present YPAR as a new demand burdening the backs of already overtaxed teachers. Instead, YPAR should be presented as an example of innovation that can help teachers meet the needs of their students. This would allow teachers to start absorbing and applying YPAR principles and lay the groundwork for further YPAR work in the future.

CONCLUSION

This study bolsters the argument against behavioral teaching methods and favors a shift toward Social Cognitive theory. Attention to concepts like authenticity, self-efficacy, and social modeling can activate latent interest and energy in students to greatly increase their level of engagement with learning activities and institutions. This can rejuvenate not only students, but teachers and schools as well. YPAR is uniquely suited to carry out such a shift. It provides a contextually-bound but significant increase in self-efficacy as it helps students to see themselves and their peers as purveyors and creators of authentic knowledge with value in their community. They learn individually from their research, challenges, and success, but also socially from observing the research, challenges, and success of other students. They experience a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment both in associating with their fellow student-researchers and in accomplishing their research goal. Educators must pay a price for this high-yield engagement. They must brave political discomfort amid the threat of controversy. They must accept the frustrations of an amorphous curriculum and schedule. They must sacrifice time for

behind-the-scenes preparations and mentoring students, often in small groups or one-on-one situations. But if educators are willing, they and their students will experience firsthand the power of YPAR to increase student self-efficacy and engagement and to invigorate the student learning experience.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Survey—Take Action Club **Name ___________________**

In the following section, circle the number on the scale that best represents your response, with 1 being "Very untrue" and 4 being "Very true."

A. I am a curious person.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

B. I can find out what I need to about any subject without asking for help.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

C. My school encourages me to find things out on my own.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

D. At my school, people listen when I have something to say.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

E. I can do something about problems in my community.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

F. It's important to me to help make my community a better place.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

G. I know what is going on with current events in my community.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

H. I am good at solving problems.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

I. My peers look to me for information about things that are going on.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

J. People in my community, including adults, will listen to what I have to say.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

K. I read or watch the news.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

L. I feel satisfied about what I have accomplished in my life.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

M. My school is a place where I learn skills and knowledge I can use in the real world.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

N. I am good at judging whether information I find on the internet is reliable and trustworthy.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

O. I am a hard worker.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

P. I like learning new things.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

Q. I form my own opinions; I don't just repeat what others around me are thinking and saying.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

R. When something is hard, I get more determined.

Very untrue	Somewhat untrue	Somewhat true	Very true
1	2	3	4

Complete each sentence by circling one of the choices from the list.

S. When I am curious about something, I am most likely to look for information by

- asking a teacher
- asking a parent
- looking it up online
- looking it up in a library
- asking a friend

T. When a problem comes up, I am most likely to try to resolve it by

- asking a teacher
- asking a parent
- looking it up online
- looking it up in a library
- asking a friend

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What has doing this project helped you learn?

2. What about this project has been most frustrating?

3. What about this project has been most rewarding?

4. Why do you think your response to [survey question] changed/didn't change?

5. Did your work in the Take Action Club make you feel more confident, less confident, or about the same?

6. What part of your experience in the Take Action Club are you most glad you did? (If there were one thing about the club that you're glad for more than anything else, what would it be?)

7. What would you change about the club to make it better next year?

8. Survey results—Use this scale: A lot more, A little more, Same, A little less, A lot less

Do you think your experience in the club made you more

Curious

Confident

Willing to speak out to peers

Willing to speak out to adults

Determined and Hard-working

Satisfied/Happy with your accomplishments

Why?

APPENDIX C

YOUTH EXEMPLAR GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Youth Exemplar's Name
What problems did she or he face?
What resources did she or he use?
In what ways did the exemplar raise his or her voice?
What actions did she or he take?
What opposition did the exemplar encounter?
How did this person overcome opposition?
What qualities of this person's story and work are most useful to you as a researcher and an agent for change?
What is one question you would ask this person if you could talk to him or her?

APPENDIX D

COMMUNNITY BRAINSTORM

Good things

A lil Mexicans in the school (cultural variety)

economy

good teachers (Mr. Cox ☺)

security (Salt River)

our food

our stores

Problems

a lot of white people

firing a teacher that I don't like

need cold water fountains and bigger bathrooms

some students are rude and disrespectful

not enough money for schools

bullies

low pay for teachers

teachers who discourage or yell

too much racism

too much smoking/drugs/cigarettes

drugs

littering

our neighbors

problem teachers

how schools are handling problems

racism

poverty

too much drugs

Actions we could take

Fire bad teachers

Donate more

Need a new school board

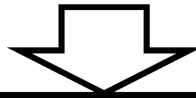
Talk to state governor about bad teachers

Go against cigarettes

APPENDIX E

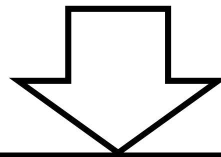
PROBLEM ANALYSIS GUIDE

What is the Problem?___________________________________



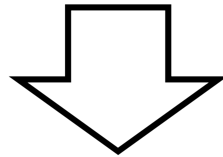
What are questions I could ask? (Remember to get at the ROOT CAUSE!)

- What____?
- Why____?
- How____?
- Where____?
- When____?
- ____?



What's the question I really need to answer to become an expert on this problem?

What kinds of places might I look into to find out about my research question?

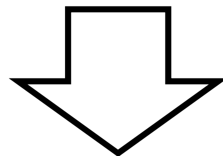


What are the different viewpoints about my research question/the problem?

#1

#2

#3



What kind of final product will my project probably be?

APPENDIX F

STUDENT ACTION EXAMPLES

interviews

observations of peers and community

present to district, city, state, and national elected officials

present findings in the community (education and political settings)

create field notes

photographic and video documentation

student surveys

develop a storyboard with photographs to share with the principal and other stakeholders

present findings to a conference

a lunchtime activity: students talk to those they wouldn't ordinarily talk to

a multicultural assembly

an anti-racism assembly: students play a game about different people's experiences

participate in urban planning processes

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Half sheet)

You are going to pick the brain of an expert on your topic. But what will you ask that person? Remember the How/What/Where/When research questions you've already come up with.

Research Question:____

Other questions to ask in my interview:

Important Information about my topic (What would I like to learn from this expert?)

Q1:

____

Q2:

____

Other ways or places I can learn about my topic (Do they know other places I can go for info?)

Q1:

____

Q2:

____

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Introduce yourself:

____

____

Describe your purpose/reason for calling:

____

____

Explain why you are reaching out to them in particular:

____

____

Ask if they would be willing to answer some questions:

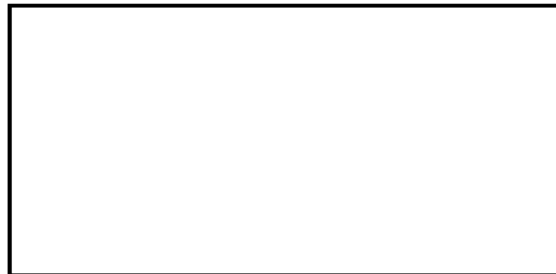
____

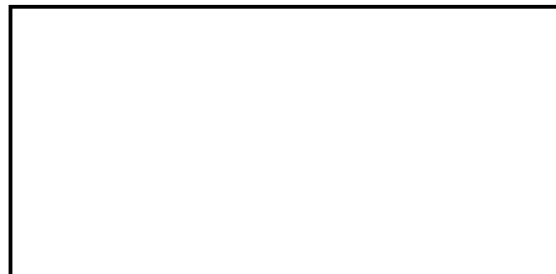
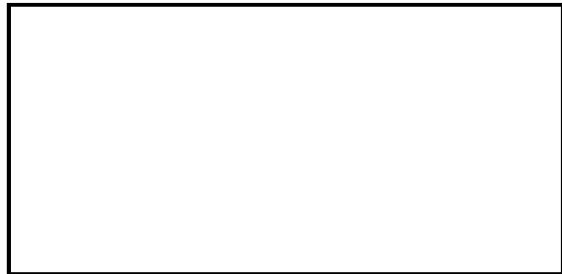
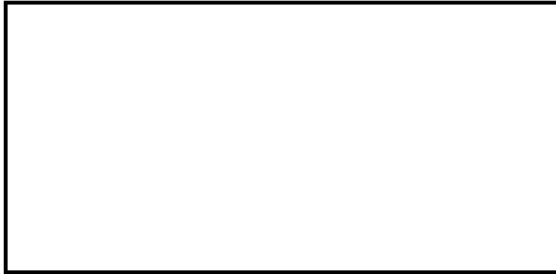
____

Questions:	Answer Notes:
-	-
-	-
-	-
-	-
-	-

Thank them and wish them well!

More Questions: More Answers:



APPENDIX I

TIMELINE

1 Feb. 2017 Youth Exemplar Jigsaw Activity.

Each of three groups researched a different exemplar of youth action: Malala Yousafzai, William Kamkwamba, and Svante Myrick. Students read a biographical summary of their exemplar, gathered information using a graphic organizer sheet (Appendix C), did some analysis and reflection, and then presented what they had learned to the rest of the club. I inserted commentary on occasion.

Students listed ideas on a three-columned "About My Community" Brainstorm chart (Appendix D). In this activity, students were navigating the tension over doing this brainstorm with a teacher present. I'm sure that my presence affected their ideas, even though I tried to be accommodating and maintain a positive environment through humor. For example, when Enrique, Jonny, and Brian (all of whom are Hispanic) wrote under their "Problems" section, "A lil Mexicans in the school," I took exception, showing good-natured outrage: "What?! You wrote that down as a problem?!?!" Johvanny then explained that he had reversed the columns because he is left-handed, and that the problem they actually wrote down was "alot of white people." They eventually pursued that topic, conducting a project on racism. I learned a good lesson about the limitations of my ability to observe, and the care a teacher must take in drawing conclusions about students.

8 February 2017 Review Group Brainstorms from Previous Week.

Starting from a list of possible student projects (Appendix E), club members discussed possible topics to research and courses of action they might take. Only three students attended. This was the first sign of challenges that the club would face.

15 February 2017 Catch-Up Day.

Four students arrived who had missed one or both previous meetings. The students who had attended both meetings introduced the newer students to the key concepts and discussions the club had developed thus far. At the end of the meeting, I put a chart on the board to help the students see the direction they would take their work in the club:

Brainstorming/Decide → Empower (Questions) → Prepare → Perform/Present

This was one of the first examples of students taking on the role of expert; it was good preparation for the projects they would eventually complete.

22 February 2017 Choosing Topics.

Students chose three topics and formed groups. One student chose to work individually on an animal welfare project. Three students chose a project focused on poverty, and six students chose to do a project on dealing with racism in schools and divided into two groups of three. I presented a brief presentation on analysis and short-term versus long-term action, a topic students had been struggling with. Students worked in their groups on a questioning graphic organizer (Appendix F) to get them started digging deeper into their topics.

1 March 2017 Feedback and Silent Discussion.

I displayed questions from each group and praised their critical thinking skills. I also pointed out how thoughtless assumptions and questions can lead to "othering." Students held a silent discussion on different sources of knowledge that ended up being more of a group discussion. Students then brainstormed local sources of knowledge they could turn to as they conducted research. I began following up on these brainstorms by contacting local experts to set up interviews for each group. Students took home a half-sheet guide to help them start coming up with questions for interviews (Appendix G).

8 March 2017 Interview Preparation: Script Outline.

We discussed the importance of planning an interview in advance, and the students prepared to interview an expert by filling out an interview script outline (Appendix H). Once everyone was finished, I had each student read their script to the group. It was interesting to see their responses. Two of the girls were nervous about even sharing with the group. Gabrielle shared her feelings of social awkwardness, and Brenna flat-out said she'd rather not share. I reassured them that such feelings were natural and mentioned that I had had to work through embarrassment on more than one occasion. I reminded them that sharing would be good practice to prepare for their actual interview. In the end, everyone agreed to share. It went pretty well, with everyone (for the most part) listening and giving positive feedback. The boys were very gallant when the girls presented ("Phenomenal!") but a bit more unforgiving (in a humorous way) with their own presentations; their group interaction involves a lot of humorous sarcasm.

That humor helps them, I think, deal with the topic of racism. It made my work as a mentor tricky, however, because I was constantly deciding when was the right time to validate their humor by laughing along and when was the right time to extinguish the humor and challenge assumptions that might lie beneath it. One example was Brian introducing himself by saying "I get bullied and people call me a "beany burrito." The other boys laughed, which was clearly part of his purpose, but at the same time, real-life experience underneath such storytelling is sobering. It was hard to find the right balance with these boys. I had to constantly reining them in and refocusing them on the task at hand without taking the joy out of their work.

9 March 2017 Interview

I arranged for the students working on the poverty project to interview an expert from Mesa United Way. After school, Gabrielle came to my classroom with her script and interviewed him over the phone. She was visibly nervous, but performed her task admirably. I acted as a scribe, taking notes on their conversation.

22 March 2017 Video: Sample Project.

We viewed a video of a student project from another country and discussed what our final projects might look like. Students read and discussed a list of possible projects. I provided critical reading techniques and support as it contained some advanced vocabulary.

Soccer tryouts started, and that took away almost all of the boys. I worried soccer season would cut off that group at the knees, so I'm strove to make sure they knew that we could be very flexible about when the club met. I took some time after the club

meeting to walk out and meet the boys who did tryouts, share the meeting's snack with them, and ask them how things went with tryouts.

29 March 2017 More Sample Projects.

Only three students attended due to forgetfulness, soccer tryouts, and a fight. The students who came sampled a student audio interview project and a Photovoice project. Then they worked drafting materials (script, presentation, and survey) for their projects.

5 April 2017 Work Day.

Attendance was low due to the usual reasons, and also because two students moved 15 miles away. Even though they attended the school through the end of the year, they had a harder time coming to extracurricular activities. Students who attended worked on their projects.

12 April 2017 Work Day.

All four girls attended, but none of the boys made it.

19 April 2017 Work Day.

Only one student attended, and that was because he had injured his leg and couldn't play soccer. He worked on his presentation. We discussed alternate meeting times to accommodate the students on the soccer team.

26 April 2017 Work Day.

Attendance started turning around at this meeting, with 5 students in attendance, including representation from every project. Students did research to advance their projects. The group of girls addressing poverty researched different local organizations that serve the homeless. Noah looked up an article on racism. Our expert we had scheduled for an interview on racism didn't work out, so we filled in the gap with online research. All of the students present took the survey a student made about animal welfare and gave her feedback on it.

3 May 2017 Work Day.

The students working on the poverty project made posters for a fundraiser to donate to a charity serving the homeless. Brenna reported on her difficulty working with animal shelters because of bureaucratic restrictions. None of the boys from the group addressing racism came, even though soccer season had ended. After a long disconnect, I had to seek out many of the boys and help them remember their enthusiasm for their project.

17 May 2017 Fund Raiser.

The students doing the fundraiser had very weak sales and were discouraged. I offered an optimistic perspective. We discussed how we might improve sales through better advertising and diversified sales locations and times. I spoke with two boys in the group working on a racism presentation, and they pledged to start coming in during mornings to fast-track their project and get it done in time to present to students before the end of the year. They followed through, and were able to present to a number of classes in the last week of school.