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"MY BODY GOES NUMB A LOT OF THE TIME": EXAMINING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCES USING YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND EMBODIED CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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STUDENT-ATHLETE EXPERIENCES USING YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION
RESEARCH AND EMBODIED CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Department of International and Multicultural Education

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Doctor of Education

by
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San Francisco
11 May 2022

ABSTRACT

For many students, the classroom represents a place of oppression, stress, and routine, in which their voices are silenced and they are expected to sit still, listen, take notes, and regurgitate the arbitrary information their teachers share (Freire, 1970/2000; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Conversely, for many youth, sports are a source of joy, self-expression, creativity, and empowerment that naturally capture their interest and engagement (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Spooner, 2002). Unfortunately, our education system fails to utilize the passion student-athletes demonstrate for sports to motivate them in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of high school student-athletes in both academics and athletics, specifically focusing on their engagement in each setting. I enacted a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project at a rural high school in Northern California, in which I worked directly with student-athletes as co-researchers from July to December 2021. As a team, we developed a protocol for semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus groups with their student-athlete peers to center their voices in the research and accurately document their experiences and ideas for change.

Through the lens of *embodied* culturally relevant pedagogy, this project provided a space for student-athletes to envision and voice their ideas for a pedagogy that would more deeply engage the student-athlete population in school. The findings support that embodied culturally relevant pedagogy would serve to improve student-athlete behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in the learning process. This study also calls attention to the potential for YPAR to be utilized to jumpstart student engagement,

as this methodology embodies the pedagogical practices that student-athletes in this study

requested for their education. Lessons for future applications of YPAR and the need for

structural, systemic change are discussed.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

culturally relevant pedagogies. To Dr. Nicola McClung, thank you for opening my eyes to the complex world of statistics and welcoming my numerous questions and comments in your class. I value your unique perspective and pedagogical style deeply. Thank you to all the other wonderful professors and instructors I have had in my time at USF, as you showed me the possibilities of critical pedagogy in action.

I want to thank Dr. Melissa Canlas for the wonderful guidance and feedback you have provided me as the chairperson of my dissertation. I first got to experience your support in the completion of my master's capstone project, and I am happy that we were able to work together so closely on this YPAR project again. The clear, calm, and humanizing approach you take to providing academic support helped to make this wild dissertation process feel more manageable, even when I questioned my ability to meet my deadlines. I cannot thank you enough for your input in helping me bring the student-athletes' voices to life in this study. It has been a pleasure working with you.

To my husband, Brett, I am grateful that you have helped to solidify the need to reach intelligent minds and bodies like yours by connecting sports with academics to affirm that you hold vast stores of embodied cultural knowledge. I love our one-on-one games together, and I hope they never stop.

Finally, to my lovely daughter, Quinn Madelene, thank you for rearranging my dissertation bookshelf a zillion times and popping into the office to say hi during my endless work sessions. Your energy, personality, and spectacular intelligence warm my heart every second of the day, and I look forward to supporting you in your educational journey as Ria and Gung Gung have for me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Introduction

When I was a kid, I lived for basketball. I naturally understood the game and its strategy in my bones, my muscles, my heart. There was nothing like the rush of playing aggressive defense and stealing the ball out of the air, running up the court, and softly laying up the ball for two easy points. I loved the beauty of smoothly and intricately moving around the court, spinning, jab stepping, and zipping around the defender to get to the basket. It felt as though my body were made for the sport, like there was no need to learn how to play; it was something I already had in my being.

During my participation in sports and school, I always wondered why schooling is what it is. Reflective in my nature, I would ask: Why is school structured in such a boring and disjointed way? Why do I have to learn how to write a literary analysis of old books written by old White men? What is the value of memorizing dates and names from history just long enough to succeed on a test? Why does nobody talk about the fact that when we play basketball we are embodying geometry and physics and practicing basic arithmetic and statistics the entire time? If school is boring for me, an academically inclined student-athlete, how painful must it truly be to sit in class all day for those who struggle to understand academic concepts?

I like to imagine what it would have been like to be able to formally learn math and science through the beautiful sport of basketball. This thought is not a fantasy. It is rooted in the reality that basketball is an embodied, practical display of algebra, geometry, and physics. Young athletes demonstrate their embodied knowledge of these

complex disciplines through their engagement in this cultural practice every time they step foot on the court. Their bodies understand the principles of physics and geometry, but nobody has ever pointed out the connection between the physical, athletic world and the intellectual world of academics. Education needs to bridge this gap between the cultural knowledge and passion youth display and the academic standards placed on them. For me, this model of education sounds like a sweet dream, filled with movement, hard work, intellectual growth, and a much-needed connection between the world I know and love and the skills and information we have to learn in school.

With this introduction, I ask: What did you love to do as a child? Play baseball? Fix old cars? Dance? Bake? Hunt? Can you imagine an education that provided you the opportunity to learn academic subjects through that passion of yours? How much would you have looked forward to attending school? The ultimate goal for this dissertation is to start making this dream a reality, working with student-athletes to envision a way to transform school into a place to explore the intellectual world through embodied cultural practices for which students hold immense passion.

Statement of the Problem

The conventional academic curriculum is focused almost entirely on the world around us and pays little attention to the inner world. We see the results of that every day in boredom, disengagement, stress, bullying, anxiety, depression, and dropping out. These are human issues and they call for human responses. (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 52)

How many students...were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the

impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?

How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power

of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How

many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? (Dewey,

1938/2015, pp. 26-27)

As the quotes above suggest, high school classrooms are filled with bored and

unmotivated students, sitting at their desks, passively listening to teachers talk about

information with little or no immediate use in their lives (Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

For many students, the classroom represents a place of oppression, stress, and routine, in

which their voices are silenced and they are expected to sit still, listen, take notes, and

regurgitate the arbitrary information their teachers share (Freire, 1970/2000; Robinson &

Aronica, 2015). Teens understand school and education as an obligation filled with

requirements they must get through, rather than places for possibility, passion,

opportunity, and growth.

The traditional education that occurs within mainstream schools is disconnected

from the lived experiences of today's youth (Dewey, 1902/2011, 1938/2015; Robinson &

Aronica, 2015). This disconnect is even greater for minoritized students for whom the

current education model was not created, whose cultures are not present in the curriculum

and classroom environment (Lasdon-Billings, 1995; 2014). Ultimately, their *funds of*

knowledge are ignored in their classroom learning, leading many students to believe that

the knowledge in their homes and lives outside of school has no value (González et al., 2005). Very rarely do students learn through culturally relevant or experience-based education in mainstream classrooms.

Due to the standards placed on all public schools in the neoliberal education model (Giroux, 2014), the curriculum focuses on specific skills, primarily STEM and literacy, while the arts, physical education, and experiential education enjoy a small fraction of the academic focus (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Further, teachers have little time, freedom, or training to inspire students through dynamic and innovative lessons. This results in an overly competitive, one-size-fits-all neoliberal education model (Giroux, 2014) that removes the role of creativity and nurtures only certain hard skills instead of allowing students to explore their passions and develop in ways that support the life trajectory best suited to their interests and strengths. Students have little sense of agency and choice in their secondary education which contributes to disengagement, low academic outcomes, and high dropout rates (Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

Conversely, for many youth, sports are a source of joy, self-expression, creativity, and empowerment that naturally capture their interest and engagement (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Spooner, 2002). Many student-athletes voluntarily take on this additional responsibility, as they participate in multiple school sports in their free time throughout the school year and for much of the summer. For many who identify as student-athletes, sports give them life and a sense of belonging within the drudgery of school. The members of sports teams often develop close relationships among themselves and the coaches, acting as a cultural community that unifies individuals across race, ethnicity,

gender, and socioeconomic status (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). This voluntary cultural practice offers great opportunity for leverage to engage student-athletes in a transformative education, but both athletic and academic programs often maintain the divide between the two spheres.

Unfortunately, our education system fails to utilize the passion student-athletes demonstrate for sports to motivate them in the classroom, as "the potential of youth cultural activities, such as sports programs, to reconnect America's most dispirited youth to opportunities in the larger society remains largely untapped" (Duncan-Andrade, 2010, p. 39). This study explored this untapped potential by working directly with high school student-athletes to learn from their experiences in school and sports and imagine a pedagogical shift to deeply engage this population in their academic learning.

Background and Need

Within the dismal reality of student engagement in school, the scholarly research affirms that when students have a sense of belonging they are more motivated to actively engage in the classroom (Johnson, 2008). Teachers cultivate a student's sense of belonging through both fostering positive teacher-student relationships and dynamic and inspiring pedagogy (Keyes, 2019). Across the literature, findings suggest that students have a better sense of belonging and are more engaged when they trust their teachers and feel that they genuinely care about and can empathize with their lives outside of school and the issues directly affecting them (Girod et al., 2005; Keyes, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scales et al., 2020). Fluid, equitable, and reciprocal relationships support the students' development of agency in their learning process (Ladson-Billings, 1995),

counteracting the norm of rendering students to be passive receptacles of information (Freire, 1970/2000). In fact, improvement in teacher-student relationships generally leads to tangible improvement in academic performance (Scales et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Scales et al. (2020) found that teacher-student relationships often worsen over time, both throughout the school year and as students reach high school. Therefore, not enough emphasis is placed on maintaining these positive relationships.

When classrooms are treated as collaborative learning communities, students choose to engage more actively in their education (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Pedagogical practices that focus on collaboration among students, whether through peers helping each other to grasp concepts and make corrections or through elaborate group projects, capture the attention and motivation of students more effectively than passive activities, such as lectures, note taking, and individual assignments (Johnson, 2008). Previous studies affirm the importance of listening to and incorporating student voices and opinions in the classroom structure, culture, and curriculum (Girod et al., 2005; Johnson, 2008; Scales et al., 2020). These student perspectives support the need for learning through exploration with a high level of student choice and control (Spooner, 2002). In this type of learning environment, the educational activities are conducive to building relationships with classmates and teachers as well as further enriching student engagement and motivation (Cantrell et al., 2017).

Other well-documented contributors to student motivation, engagement, and academic performance include curricula and pedagogies that are aligned with students' cultures, interests, and lived experiences. There is often a discontinuity between the

knowledge that is useful in students' everyday lives and what is taught in schools, and most youth have culturally situated knowledge that teachers do not recognize or know their students have (Nasir, 2000). Teachers must not only support students' cultural knowledge, but also demonstrate how this knowledge can be applied academically. When learning objectives and activities directly connect with real life situations, students can problem-solve more effectively and efficiently all while enjoying the process (Tong et al., 2020). Learning outcomes improve when students consider class materials relevant to their daily experiences and struggles, and these relevant materials allow for deep self-reflection, discussion with peers, and overall engagement in their academic learning (Cantrell et al., 2017). Consequently, a great need exists to explore ways to connect the formal schooling experience with the lived experiences and passions of various student populations through culturally relevant and progressive education.

At its roots, culturally relevant pedagogy was developed to improve education for African American students in urban settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While this critical pedagogy has served this community well, it has since been expanded to transform education for various minoritized student populations. For example, culturally relevant pedagogy commonly utilizes artistic practices, such as hip-hop culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Alim et al., 2011), poetry (Jocson, 2006; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996), and dance (Katz, 2008), but to a lesser extent, sports (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

While culture is often defined by racial or ethnic identities, other cultural practices, the activities in which young people engage that help to shape their identity and lived experiences, deserve attention. Sports play a central role in defining the youth

culture in which student-athletes develop a sense of community and identity. Additionally, sports provide student-athletes the time and opportunity to develop much needed life skills that serve them far beyond the court or field. Participation in competitive youth sports inherently inspires the development of communication skills, leadership, work ethic, organization, planning, and maintaining social interactions under pressure (Jones & Lavallee, 2009). Similarly, some studies have found that sports participation is positively correlated with academic achievement in ethnically diverse public and private high school settings (Burns et al., 2020). Because sports participation can positively correlate with academic achievement, especially for ethnic minorities (Bang et al., 2020), more resources must be devoted to leveraging its potential for positive youth outcomes (Burns et al., 2020).

While we have an abundance of research on student motivation and engagement, many gaps remain in addressing this issue for specific underrepresented populations. Overall, very few qualitative studies center student-athlete voices in the research (Benson, 2000). Further, despite the presence of substantial research documenting the experiences of collegiate athletes, the experiences of high school student-athletes in education are nearly absent, as are the perspectives of young women in the world of athletics (Harmon, 2009). Similarly, very little research has been done on the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy with rural youth populations and in sports. Finally, minimal research exists on curricular integration of sports in academic teaching. In other words, very little research puts forth and analyzes the efficacy of curricula that utilize the strategy, rules, and practice of sports to teach disciplines outlined in the current Common

Core Standards to which public schools must adhere. Studies have been done on the integration of STEM education in sports (Drazan et al., 2017) and physical education (Lohren, 2017), and they reveal that this field needs to be investigated more extensively. Additionally, the National Basketball Association has developed a board game and curriculum called NBA Math Hoops in which students can gain fundamental math skills as they read, compare, and utilize real statistics from NBA and WNBA players ("NBA Math Hoops," 2017). Various educators and researchers have created lessons that teach and frame particular subjects through a connection with basketball (Nasir, 2000; Watters, 2000) and football (Kitchen & Kuehl, 2013). Crucially, some research documents the mathematical abilities young athletes demonstrate in their practice of basketball and argue for the need to integrate this cultural knowledge and academic knowledge (Nasir, 2000; Nasir & Hand, 2008; Nasir et al., 2008). While these studies and curricular examples show promise for the practical integration of sports and academics, research on its impact on student engagement is sparse. This dissertation seeks to add to this research, as this integration is not only possible but necessary to authentically engage the high school student-athlete population in their education to be successful in academia and life long into their future.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of high school student-athletes in both academics and athletics, specifically focusing on their engagement in each setting. I enacted a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project at a rural high school in Northern California, in which I worked directly with

student-athletes as co-researchers. As a team, we developed a protocol for semi-structured one-on-one interviews and focus groups with their student-athlete peers to center their voices in the research and accurately document their experiences and ideas for change. The interviews and focus group sessions were used to examine the elements of both schooling and sports participation that have differentially impacted their engagement as well as their academic and personal growth. We examined how classroom and sports pedagogies, social relationships with peers and leaders, the classroom curriculum, and embodied learning and knowing shape the participants' engagement in each space. After the participants shared their perceptions of the various factors that affect their engagement in school and sports settings, the co-researchers asked them to envision a more engaging education in which student-athletes would actively choose to participate. Through the lens of *embodied* culturally relevant pedagogy, this project provided a space for student-athletes to envision and voice their ideas for a pedagogy that would more deeply engage the student-athlete population in school.

This YPAR project blended research and authentic learning to spark curiosity, confidence, and conviction in the co-researchers, providing the context for them to gather data to promote a shift in the way student-athletes are invited to learn academics. In the process, this project helped to fill the research gap in sports-based, embodied culturally relevant pedagogy and YPAR studies enacted in a rural high school setting.

Research Questions

As a YPAR project, I collaborated with my high school co-researchers to formulate and finalize the first five research questions; the sixth is the meta-research

question I used on my own to examine the impact of the YPAR project on the

co-researchers. The research questions include:

1. How do student-athletes describe their engagement in school?

2. How do student-athletes describe their engagement in sports?

3. How do student-athletes describe the teaching practices of good teachers?

4. How do student-athletes describe beneficial coaching practices of good coaches?

5. How do student-athletes perceive and envision a way of teaching and learning that improves their engagement?

6. In what ways does the process of YPAR emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engage the student-athlete co-researchers in the learning process?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guides this study combines Deweyan progressive education (Dewey 1902/2011, 1938/2015), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), and embodied pedagogy (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2012; Freiler, 2008; Nguyen & Larson, 2015). These blend to form a framework that I have posited as *embodied* culturally relevant pedagogy, which acts as a useful lens through which to examine issues in and future directions for engaging the student-athlete population. Although John Dewey contributed to educational theory long in the past, his perspective continues to hold immense value in understanding the issues facing the education system today and their potential solutions. The power dynamics between teachers and students have not shifted since this seminal educator first put forth his critiques, and traditional (Dewey, 1938/2015) models of education, in which students are

forced to learn arbitrary information that is disconnected from lived experience, continue

to prevail in schools to this day. Adopting a more critical approach to centering students

in their schooling experience, Ladson-Billings (1995; 2014) takes up culturally relevant

pedagogy to offer a transformative way of educating and engaging with marginalized

student communities. These frameworks unite in their emphasis on lived experiences and

cultural practices, offering a useful, critical lens to examine the engagement of

student-athletes in academics and athletics. Embodied culturally relevant pedagogy takes

this one step further to include the body as a learning ground to which the student-athlete

population is particularly attuned through their cultural practice of sports, which offers

widely untapped potential in mainstream education. Together, embodied culturally

relevant pedagogy (Figure 1) acts as a lens to distinguish the differential impact of the

elements of school- and sports-based pedagogies on student-athlete engagement in school

and sports. In the following sections, I discuss the characteristics of each piece of this

theoretical framework.
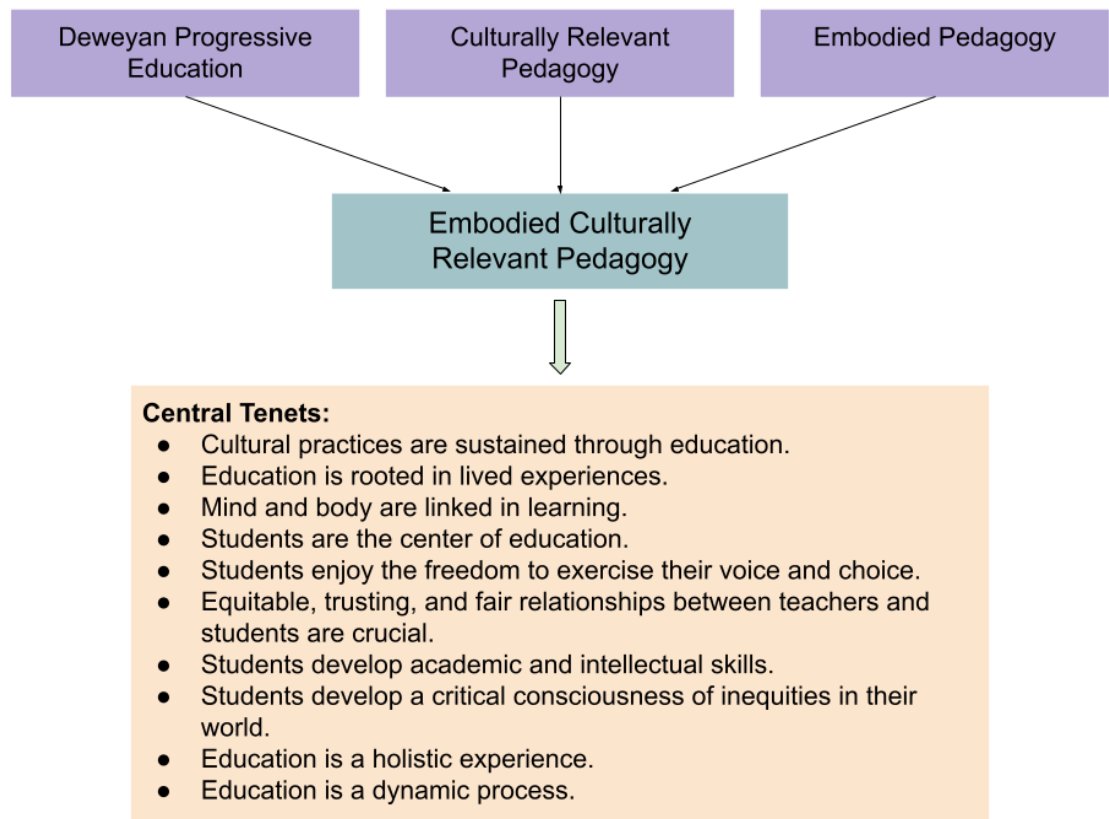
Figure 1. Theoretical framework graphic.

Deweyan progressive education

In progressive education, as put forth by John Dewey (1902/2011, 1938/2015), both pedagogical and curricular elements of education must instill "an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 20). Students' experiences, passions, and personalities play a crucial role in the curriculum, and teachers holistically value their lives and unique interests. Teachers must support the freedom of students to explore, which leads to deep moral and intellectual development.

In traditional education, which prevails in most public school settings, the

material acquired is disconnected from students' lives (Dewey, 1902/2011). The present

day structure of mass education was largely shaped during the Industrial Revolution,

when it was decided that certain bodies of information and skills were vital for students

to learn to become successful in the workforce, promoting commerce, productivity,

compliance, and uniformity (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). The overall structure of the

education system has not evolved with the diversity of our society, industries, and

workforce over the past century and a half. Consequently, the current curriculum is

arbitrary and static, and teachers expect students to adopt an attitude of docility,

receptivity, and obedience (Dewey, 1938/2015). School subjects are divided into classes

in which students must learn each discipline separately, disrupting the continuity of a

natural learning experience (Dewey, 1902/2011). The segmentation and dictatorial

control over student behaviors commonly enacted in mainstream schools not only stunt

educational growth and the ability to deal with life's challenges but also diminish the

impetus to learn. When students fail to learn the material taught in traditional education,

this system blames the student, rather than contemplating whether the content and

method of instruction might be at fault (Dewey, 1938/2015).

Conversely, progressive educators teach through authentic experiences in the

present moment, in which students engage in cooperative group activities and develop

skills to engage with the world as it constantly changes (Dewey, 1938/2015). Dewey

(1902/2011) argues that we must:

> Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself,
>
> outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as also

something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we

[must] realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define

a single process. (p. 16)

Progressive education seeks to support the continuity of positive intellectual growth

through the integration of educative experiences and the academic curriculum. This

occurs when subject-matter organically connects to the world and lived experiences of

students, the material is immediately useful and relevant, and teachers support their

freedom to explore. Accordingly, progressive education employs project-based learning.

Dewey argues for the necessity of organization, planning ahead, and the crucial role of

the educator to create learning situations that anticipate the individual needs of each

student, countering the one-size-fits-all education approach.

In the context of student engagement, the most powerful and crucial element of

progressive education is the consideration of social control and authority in educational

communities, which are discussed in detail in the following section.

Social control and authority

Progressive education examines the type of social control teachers employ that

cultivates enthusiastic engagement and motivation through community membership. In

contrast to traditional education, in which "the methods of learning and of behaving are

foreign to the existing capacities of the young" and, therefore, must be imposed on the

students (Dewey, 1938/2015, p. 19), he argues for teachers to create cooperative group

activities with a clear structure to establish social control, commonly referred to in school

settings as classroom management, through voluntary student participation in a fair and

free community. With such a clear and community-based foundation, a teacher can exercise authority as a leading member from within that group, rather than a dictatorial authority from outside or above.

Schoolyard games, such as tag, baseball, or football serve as the primary example that Dewey (1938/2015) utilizes to explain the social control model that "is not felt to involve restriction of personal freedom" (p. 52). Children choose to participate in these games that have particular rules and structure that guide the conduct of participants fairly and with order. These specific rules give the game its identity, and without them, the game would not work. They are enforced through the collective understanding of the community engaging in the activity, as they "have the sanction of tradition and precedent" within the community of practice (p. 53). Occasionally, players might disagree with the conduct of other participants because they violate these rules, not because they object to the structure of the game. Thus, participation in cooperative activities naturally regulates itself through structure, fairness, and a sense of belonging through community membership.

The same principles hold when this type of social control occurs in classroom settings. However, instead of playing only among friends on the blacktop, the teacher now acts as an authority figure in this space. Dewey (1902/2011) describes that this type of authority is exercised "in behalf of the interest of the group, not as an exhibition of personal power. This makes the difference between action which is arbitrary and that which is just and fair" (p. 54-55). Deweyan notion of authority contrasts from authoritarian, hegemonic models of social control, in which the demands of those in

positions of power do not support the common good of the community (Gross, 2012). When the teacher has created the well-defined structure and systems governing students' participation in the shared activities of their learning community, the teacher can then equitably exercise authority as a member from within the group, rather than an outside force from above. Unfortunately, many educators fail to understand this progressive concept of leadership and the cruciality of fair systems, thus feeling the need to keep order as a dictatorial figure. While seemingly simple, progressive social control requires immense planning, a depth of understanding of both subject-matter and the cultures, interests, and needs of individual students, and reflection on the fairness of their practices.

Dewey's critique of traditional education models and support of progressive education continues to address the problems in mainstream education today. His philosophy remains central to the effort to create more child-centered education integrated in the lived experiences of the students. More recently, critical scholars have extended this philosophy of education to better meet the particular needs of marginalized student communities. One of such pedagogies is discussed in the next section.

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy, as originated by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2014), provides a practical framework that can create a transformative educational experience for those who have not been served well by the education system. This pedagogy has the central goal of linking students' cultural identities and practices with school, which might include music, culinary arts, dance, poetry, or sports. Students'

cultures are not only incorporated on a superficial level, as is common practice in

multicultural education endeavors, but are actually integrated across the educational

experience. According to Ladson-Billings (1995):

> Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students
>
> must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain
>
> cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness
>
> through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (p. 160)

Through the use of students' cultures, instructors must emphasize academic learning and

critical consciousness development, which are both integral to a young individual's

formation but are not always prioritized. Thus, when creatively and authentically

executed, culturally relevant pedagogy guides students to choose to excel academically

for themselves, while guiding them to reflect and act upon the oppressive systems that

surround them.

While culturally relevant pedagogy has the potential for empowerment and

inclusion of minoritized students, educators must be careful to integrate cultural practices

intentionally for the holistic benefit of the students. In an education system that seeks to

sanitize and formalize information, educators must infuse their teaching with an "organic

connection with what the child has already seen and felt and loved" (Dewey, 1902/2011,

p. 31). In other words, the information taught in schools must authentically connect to

students' cultural practices or student interest will disappear. Educators often

misunderstand the execution of culturally relevant pedagogy and would benefit from

following John Dewey's (1902/2011) argument for the child to be the beginning, the center, and end of the curriculum, with the child's self-realization as the goal.

Django Paris (2012) formally evolves Ladson-Billings's work to argue for a *culturally sustaining pedagogy*, one that is not only culturally relevant, but sustains student cultural difference. He states that such a pedagogy must go beyond merely building bridges between the knowledge sets students have acquired in their home and community with school. Rather, educators and students must integrate and "extend the various activities and practices of these domains" to make their education truly empowering (Paris, 2012, p. 94).

Central to this pedagogy is the importance of positive teacher-student relationships, in which the teacher establishes and maintains deep and caring relationships (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Valenzuela (1999) identifies the distinction between aesthetic caring, that which occurs in everyday schooling, and authentic care, in which teachers seek to establish reciprocal relationships through which students open up and begin to care about school. Authentic care goes beyond a superficial display of care in which teachers merely say the right things, and includes sustained actions that actively demonstrate to students that a teacher deeply cares about the experiences, struggles, and successes of their students (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Culturally relevant scholars must not be afraid "to re-introduce the concepts of caring and love to teaching and learning and [strive] to make students feel supported so that they can achieve to their highest potential" (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 43).

Defining sports as cultural practice

Treated as a popular culture for a diverse youth population, sports necessitate a more central place in this pedagogy for both urban and rural youth populations. The term *culture* has historically served to generalize and limit populations, rather than recognizing and celebrating difference. In sociocultural theory and in the conceptualization of *funds of knowledge,* which seeks to reframe the application of culture in education, González et al. (2005) advocate for the interrogation of the assumption that cultures are purely and statically defined and shared by a closed group. They instead view culture as the practices in which people engage. When understood as practices, cultures become much more humanized, diverging from a cultural lens that operates based on snapshots of human behaviors or rituals. This dynamic lens enables educators to examine the complexity of their students' cultural identities, rooted in what they do to survive and thrive in life. This perspective looks at the hybridity of cultures, as "increasingly students draw from an intercultural and hybrid knowledge base, appropriating multiple cultural systems, as youth culture permeates greater and greater spheres" (González et al., 2005, p. 38). This concept informs the definition of culture that guides this project, evaluating one's cultural knowledge as that which is "derived from settings outside of school, typically in students' homes and communities" (Nasir et al., 2008, p. 187). The cultural practices of interest here are sports, which are examples of youth popular culture that sweep broadly across the classically delineated mass cultures based on race, ethnicity, or gender (Duncan-Andrade, 2010), to unify a diversity of student-athletes within a sport they are passionate about playing.

I explore theories of embodiment and embodied pedagogy in the next section, which provide a natural extension to the discussion of the integration of student cultural practices in education, as all such practices inherently include a level of embodied learning.

Embodied pedagogy

Theories of embodiment began in the fields of cognitive science and artificial intelligence, but have since been linked to the practical field of education. Embodied cognition asserts that no cognition occurs as separate from context and the physical experience (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2012); in fact, the body is the filter through which each individual takes in knowledge and experiences from the world. In effect, the body and mind co-construct meaning from this input. Embodied learning holistically views the body as a learning ground that has the power to connect the various domains of knowledge a student holds. This includes spiritual, affective, and cultural knowledge (Freiler, 2008). While this is no novel idea, as cognitive scientists have proved the link between mind and body for years, our education system severs this bond. Teachers commonly treat the mind as the only learning ground, missing the potential pedagogical piece embodiment can provide. However, it is crucial for educators to remember that "learning occurs in social contexts and bodies, not just in minds," so that we can "remove the body from a place of otherness into practicing space where both body and mind are being more holistically approached and valued" (Freiler, 2008, p. 45).

When applied to educational spaces, this understanding of embodiment reveals that, in fact, no student work is created or completed as separate from their emotional and

physical experience. Therefore, educators must read and include students' bodies in the classroom if they seek to support them to achieve academically. Embodied pedagogue and queer studies scholar Stacey Waite (2017) analyzes the idiom "body of knowledge" (p. 18) to emphasize that academic institutions have occupied the metaphor of the body to forcibly replace students' embodied knowledge with codified, sanctioned knowledge that is considered separate from physical bodies. This is common practice in the academic world, but results in superficial, impersonal learning. Waite argues that truly reading student work is inseparable from reading their bodies, voices, and movements.

Embodied pedagogy takes a different approach, counter-hegemonically bringing learning into students' entire lived experience, which is composed of all their embodied cultural practices. Specifically, embodied pedagogy is a way of teaching and learning that "joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction. This union entails thoughtful awareness of body, space, and social context" (Nguyen & Larson, 2015, p. 332). The body carries all of an individual's experiences, history, style, thoughts, and emotions. Providing students the platform to link their physical bodies to their learning allows them to process information in their own way, situating knowledge in their own realities so it gains authentic meaning for them. Cultural practices naturally fit into this way of teaching and learning, as they are ways in which people engage with the world around them, using mind, body, personality, and cultural lenses. With the understanding of cultures as practices in which one chooses to engage, every cultural practice is inherently embodied, and this link between mind and body has immense potential for improving pedagogical practices to support the student-athlete community.

This project conceptualizes sports as embodied cultural practices to examine the experiences of student-athletes within this practice and the ways in which we might integrate sports and school through an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy to improve academic engagement for this youth community.

Embodied culturally relevant pedagogy

The resulting theoretical framework of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy acts as a way to analyze issues in and ways to improve student-athlete engagement in school. Fundamentally, embodied culturally relevant pedagogy links mind and body in a holistic learning experience through the inclusion of movement and the centering of cultural practices and lived experiences in educational spaces. Because existing research highlights the impact of teacher-student relationships on student engagement and learning outcomes, this framework treats trusting, fair relationships between teachers and students as paramount. Social control is established through clear structure, fair expectations, and shared responsibility as members of a learning community collaborating toward a common goal, licensing students to exercise their freedom and voice in a collaborative learning process. Finally, in the process of learning, students must develop a critical consciousness of inequities in the world and work to change them. With this framework, the YPAR co-researchers and I analyzed the data collected to examine how various elements of traditional classroom and sports-based pedagogies impact their engagement and uncovered the type of pedagogy student-athletes wish to have.

Limitations/Delimitations

This YPAR project was enacted at one high school in a small rural city of

Northern California that I both attended as a student-athlete and worked at as a teacher.

The main delimitation of this study is that the YPAR co-researchers were student-athletes

who were my former students in high school Spanish I and II classes in the 2018-2019

academic year. The co-researchers were high school seniors during the period of data

collection, from July 2021 through December 2021. Though they were no longer my

students at the time of the study, they continued to see me as a teacher figure, holding a

position of authority in the classroom. As their teacher, I had already established that the

form of authority I take in the classroom aligns with Deweyan notions of this role,

supporting students as a member of a learning community, rather than imposing

authoritarian control. These relationships with the co-research team also offered the

benefits of having a foundation of trust through demonstrating care for them as people in

the years prior. Aware of the nuances of our established relationships, throughout our

work on this project, I reflected on my role and actions to ensure that I remained true to

the YPAR methodology.

Crucially, the defining identity of the participants in this study is that of

student-athlete. I acknowledge that this inherently excludes students with disabilities that

prevent them from participating in high school sports, and future studies are need to

explore the ways in which embodied culturally relevant pedagogy can transform the

education of various student populations whose experiences are significantly shaped by

experiences of embodiment, such as BIPOC students, students with disabilities, or

students who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Educational Significance

The overall aim of this study was to learn from the perspectives and experiences of rural high school student-athletes (Byrd & Ross, 1991; Donald, 2019) to imagine and create a new, empowering, and engaging educational experience for this particular population. Through an intentional integration of the student and athlete identities, this project provided recommendations for practical methods to transform pedagogy to deeply engage the student-athlete community in their academic education (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Such a transformation has the potential to improve student-athletes' trajectories all the way through higher education by explicitly linking their passions to what they learn in school. No longer would they act as spaces and identities in conflict with each other (Simons & Rheenen, 2000). Rather, throughout young student-athletes' experiences in education and sports, starting from the very beginning, they would be supported to understand the athletic and academic spaces to overlap with and support each other. While educators and researchers constantly search for better ways to teach and engage students, very few have studied the potential for this integration (Nasir, 2000; Nasir & Hand, 2008; Nasir et al., 2008).

This study extends the existing research on how the relationships student-athletes have with their teachers (Cantrell et al., 2017; Keyes, 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2011; Yu et al., 2018) and coaches (Duncan-Andrade, 2010) shape their disengagement, critically moving beyond the characteristics that simply engage them in learning to understand precisely which pedagogical practices empower them to exercise their authority and freedom to explore and grow (Dewey, 1938/2015). Engaging

educational experiences, namely those that enact culturally relevant pedagogies, benefit

from reciprocal (Freire, 1970/2000; Girod et al., 2005) and trusting (Keyes, 2019;

Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scales et al., 2020) relationships between educators and their

students. Thus, this study sought to understand the ways in which the nature and

characteristics of these relationships impact student-athlete engagement in more depth.

This study differs from past YPAR projects (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008;

Mirra et al., 2016) enacted in urban settings in that it bridged academics and sports

through a transformative research study particularly with rural youth. YPAR and other

transformative methodological and pedagogical approaches, such as culturally relevant

pedagogy, have not been enacted in rural high school settings. Not only did rural

student-athletes get a taste of what it is like to participate in research, but they also gained

the invaluable experience of having authority over the choices and actions that determine

the direction of the study. In turn, their participation as active leaders in this project has

the potential to inspire their continued pursuit of education and knowledge long into the

future. Furthermore, this study established the utility and potential for educators to enact

YPAR projects with their students in the classroom to support their engagement in

learning.

The scholarly research on student engagement and motivation documents the

importance of teachers valuing and incorporating youth cultures, opinions, and

experiences into their learning. However, the methodologies of existing research have not

embodied the lessons learned from these findings, as studies rarely create equitable

relationships between students and researchers (Cooper, 2014; Scales et al., 2020; Yu et

al., 2018) or center youth voices (Girod et al., 2005; Keyes, 2019; Mitra, 2004). This study sought to align its methodology with these empirical findings and is among the first to enact YPAR with rural high school student-athletes, providing a hopeful example of this humanizing research to learn from the perspectives and interests of this youth community.

Overall, very little critical educational research examines the school experiences of the youth population of focus in this study. The scholarly research has not generally studied the experiences of student-athletes with a critical lens. Further, culturally relevant pedagogy and transformative participatory research models have not been well-documented in rural youth populations, as urban youth are often the focus of such pedagogies and research projects. While their experiences are different, rural youth also face challenges in the current educational landscape, and their voices deserve to be documented in the scholarly literature.

Definition of Terms

1. **Authentic learning.** Lasting learning that students are able to retain, situate, and apply to other contexts that have meaning in their lived experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

2. **Behavioral engagement.** The extent to which students display the actions and behaviors conducive to positive academic outcomes, including the completion of assignments, listening and following directions, and active participation (Cooper, 2014).

3. **Cognitive engagement.** The amount of mental energy a student applies to contemplating, analyzing, and learning new or challenging material (Cooper, 2014).

4. **Co-research team.** Educator-Researcher (author) and four youth co-researchers.

5. **Co-researchers.** The four student-athlete members of the YPAR research team who made decisions and carried out the research design, data collection, and analysis. These youth were current seniors at the high school in which we conducted the study, and have participated in one or more sports.

6. **Cultural practice.** The practices in which people engage, rooted in what they do to survive and thrive in life (González et al., 2005), rather than static cultures people *have*. These are the practices through which individuals authentically learn and acquire knowledge that support their identity as members of a particular community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These may include music, dance, culinary practices, poetry, or sports, which are the cultural practice of focus in this study.

7. **Culturally relevant pedagogy.** A term that I use to encompass culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012), and culturally responsive pedagogies. Together, these pedagogies are informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2000) and authentically engage, develop, and maintain student cultural differences and practices in the process of developing academic skills and critical consciousness.

8. **Educator-Researcher.** This is the term I use to refer to myself as I describe my role and work in the project with the youth co-researchers. I chose this term

because it aligns well with my approach to this study; additionally, while the youth co-researchers were no longer my students, they understood me as a teacher at their high school.

9. **Embodied culturally relevant pedagogy.** A way of teaching and learning that links mind and body in a holistic learning experience through the inclusion of movement and the centering of cultural practices and lived experiences in educational spaces. Additional focus is placed on developing equitable and trusting teacher-student relationships, centering student choice and voice, and developing academic skills while cultivating a critical consciousness.

10. **Emotional engagement.** The affective response students have toward their teachers, peers, class material, and the school climate (Keyes, 2019).

11. **Participants.** The student-athletes who were recruited to participate in the interviews and focus groups designed by the co-researchers.

12. **Progressive education.** A model of education, rooted in student experiences, that treats the students as the beginning, the center, and the end of the curriculum (Dewey, 1902/2011). This education seeks to reestablish the connection between school subject-matter and the immediate lived experiences of students to restore authentic meaning to this content. Progressive education creates opportunities for students to freely and actively participate in a learning community through cooperative activities.

13. **Student-athlete.** A student who not only participates on at least one school sports team, but also personally identifies as a student-athlete.

14. **Traditional education.** The model of education common in mainstream public schools, in which students must learn arbitrary bodies of information (Dewey, 1938/2015), and they are expected to conform to norms and passively receive information (Freire, 1970/2000). Subject-matter is disconnected from experience, causing teachers to impose authority from above, limiting students' freedom, creativity, and a sense of community.

15. **Youth community.** A group of young people that participates in activities together and shares an understanding of the meaning and value of such activities (Paris & Kirkland, 2011).

CHAPTER II: THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this literature review, I provide the research background for this YPAR study on high school student-athlete engagement in academics and sports. I first examine the research on current prevalent norms and practices linked to low student engagement. Turning to an examination of practices that address student apathy and boredom for a positive shift in engagement, I examine the research on the common elements of effective pedagogies and practices in high school education, specifically including research on culturally relevant pedagogies and progressive education models. I then explore the potential of sports to support academics, discussing life skills development and academic achievement and offering examples of the potential and utility of sports integration in academic education. Finally, this literature review closes with a discussion of existing YPAR studies enacted at the high school level. When possible, I incorporate literature that centers student voices and perspectives in its data collection process, as I understand student perspectives as the key to fixing the problems in mainstream education. This background literature establishes the need for a critical shift in education, the potential of sports for supporting academic engagement, and ultimately, the need for this YPAR study with rural high school student-athletes.

Student Engagement

Defining student engagement

Student engagement has become a common topic of discussion in attempts to address and improve student academic performance, as enhanced engagement highly

correlates with school success (Cooper, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2011). Scholars define student engagement as multidimensional, composed of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Cooper, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Keyes, 2019; Wang et al., 2014). Behavioral engagement regards the extent to which students display the actions and behaviors conducive to positive academic outcomes, including the completion of assignments, listening and following directions, and active participation (Cooper, 2014). Emotional engagement indicates the positive or negative affective response students have toward their teachers, peers, class material, and the school climate (Keyes, 2019). Finally, cognitive engagement identifies the amount of mental energy a student applies to contemplating, analyzing, and learning new or challenging material (Cooper, 2014). These three dimensions of engagement intersect and impact each other to constitute a student's holistic engagement experience. Different pedagogies, curricula, and educational policies impact such a multifaceted experience of school engagement in divergent ways, and the prevailing pedagogical practice and expectations placed upon students in mainstream education often lead to low student engagement across all dimensions (Geraci et al., 2017).

Current issues in student engagement in traditional education models
Industrialization and neoliberalism in education

The traditional education that students receive in mainstream public schools, similar to other social aspects of our society, has largely been shaped by the structure and values of major economic models in the United States, namely industrialization (Robinson & Aronica, 2015) and neoliberalism (Giroux, 2014; Kurth-Schai, 2014).

Largely, mass education was designed to mimic the linear, segmented industrial

manufacturing process through compliance with rules and regulations, division of labor,

conformity of action and output, competition, and supply and demand (Robinson &

Aronica, 2015). Industrial production pursues uniformity as its goal, actively

extinguishing any attempts to change or diversify the product or actions of the production

line. Such a method can only produce a one-size-fits-all education experience, which only

serves a fraction of the population and fails to support and educate minoritized students

and cultural groups.

Similarly, the neoliberal ideology, which guides the current economic model that

surrounds us, has shaped the standards, curriculum, and expectations placed upon

students in mainstream schooling. Neoliberalism promotes individual freedoms in the

name of personal responsibility, and functions through low government spending,

competition, expediency, a particular type of innovation, and one-size-fits-all products

and standards (Giroux, 2014). Through the hegemonic force of "common sense" (Gross,

2012), this model has extended to impact and shape every facet of societies throughout

the world, specifically education, which maintains an inequitable system and diminishes

the value of education for all students (Kurth-Schai, 2014). Knowledge is treated as a

commodity, individually accumulated capital (Kurth-Schai, 2014), rather than a human

right. Policy makers construct standards, assessments, and funding for schools with

market-based principles, minimizing qualitative difference, student voice, and

experience, while assuming which disciplines and skills will lead to a more productive

and profitable population.

As a result, the education system prioritizes STEM and literacy disciplines above all, followed by the humanities, and finally physical education, career and technical education, and the arts (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). This hierarchy has not adapted over time as the world continues to evolve and, therefore, effectively reduces the potential for schools to prepare students to work in various industries in the present day and future. As Robinson and Aronica (2015) eloquently state, "The preoccupation with particular subjects and types of ability means that students' other talents and interests are almost systematically marginalized. Inevitably, many people don't discover what they're really capable of at schools" (p. 37). When schools fail to support youth development properly and discourage an exploration of their talents and passions, they stifle creativity and growth, which diminishes their engagement in school as a whole (Cooper, 2014). Particularly damaging for student emotional engagement, the neoliberal ideology paints social problems as individual flaws while ignoring systemic issues through silencing critical thought (Giroux, 2014). This encourages harsh discipline and further ostracizes students from their teachers and the school experience (Scales et al., 2020).

This traditional model of education claims to orient itself toward the objective of preparing students for future responsibilities to be successful in the workforce (Dewey, 1938/2015; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Unfortunately, the manner in which mainstream schools and traditional education seek to reach this objective not only creates and reinforces boredom and apathy (Girod et al., 2005), but intentionally and systematically eliminates passion, creativity, and the freedom to develop into critical thinkers and innovators (Dewey, 1938/2015; Giroux, 2014; Kurth-Schai, 2014; Robinson & Aronica,

2015). As Henry Giroux (2014) summarizes, "Critical learning has been replaced with mastering test-taking, memorizing facts, and learning how *not* to question knowledge or authority" (p. 6). In turn, students remove themselves emotionally, behaviorally, and cognitively from this school experience that extinguishes the possibilities to develop their abilities to explore, think critically, and create something entirely new. Moreover, the school system fails to help "sustain the quality of life in a vibrant democratic society" (Kurth-Schai, 2014, p. 426) by robbing students of choice and freedom and depriving them of civic education.

Impact on student engagement

Data collected from upwards of 275,000 students on the High School Survey of Student Engagement between 2006 and 2009 revealed that 65% of students reported feeling bored at school every day, while only 36% of respondents attended school daily because they enjoy being there (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009). Perhaps surprising due to these numbers, one study of more than 2000 students reported that between 83 and 95% of students have intrinsic motivation to work hard and succeed in school (Geraci et al., 2017). Recognizing that low engagement persists, systemic and instructional issues necessitate further scrutiny rather than blaming adolescent students as the problem (Johnson, 2008).

Crucially, industrial and neoliberal models eliminate the human element of learning, understanding students as moving parts in the machine rather than addressing their individual, culturally-based needs. Thus, traditional education must be imposed on students from above because they do not understand the connection between the rote

memorization and regurgitation of arbitrary information and their lived experiences (Dewey, 1938/2015; Freire, 1970/2000). The material they are forced to learn in each school subject is generally disconnected from nature, students' experiences, and material covered in other classes (Dewey, 1902/2011, 1938/2015). Learning must come through a process of participation in the world. As Lave and Wenger (1991) argue in their research on the role of legitimate peripheral participation and apprenticeship for developing and maintaining skills and knowledge, "Learning is a way of being in the social world, not a way of coming to know about it" (p. 24). Unfortunately, rather than being rooted in experience in the social world, schools are tightly regulated through rigid schedules, tracking policies, harsh punishment, and achievement standards, which diminish a student's freedom to authentically engage with the wisdom around them (Yu et al., 2018).

Teachers and schools largely fail to meet the developmental needs of adolescent students (Wang & Eccles, 2011; Yu et al., 2018). Teachers completely misunderstand and diminish the adolescent experience, often condescendingly saying, "Just wait until you're in the real world" (Girod, 2005, p. 14). However, "for teens, after all, adolescence is the real world. In fact it is the only world they know, and hope and fears, pressures and successes, tensions and concerns are every bit as emotional and inspirational as the experiences of adults" (p. 14). Many teachers hold this sentiment and refuse to adapt their teaching to the immediate and individual needs of their students. They fail to empathize with the adolescent experience and effectively sever the possibility of developing nurturing teacher-student relationships.

The hostile environment of neoliberal education cultivates elevated levels of stress and simultaneous boredom (Girod et al., 2005). High school students experience high levels of both social and school-related stress because of daunting teacher and parent expectations, an impossible workload, high stakes standardized tests, and the looming threat of college admissions (Girod et al., 2005; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Within these constraints, students report feeling conflicted between devoting their time and efforts to school and their passions, and in this conflict, school generally prevails (Spooner, 2002). Students do not have enough time to do everything they want and need to do. Teen suicide attempts have increased immensely, and suicide is now one of the three leading causes of death in individuals age fifteen to 44 (World Health Organization, 2021). Among teens, the suicide rate appears to be correlated with the increase in high stakes testing (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). Within the anxiety and overwhelm of standards-driven schools, the strict and narrow focus on particular disciplines and specific tests reduces the opportunities for students to connect with their peers and the curriculum and practice their individual talents, which directly leads them to disengage from the school experience.

In fact, schools function to systematically kill creativity and prevent students from exploring their passions to develop into the unique individuals they are meant to be (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). As schools become more tethered to standardized testing for their funding, the focus of education narrows in scope. These tests do not meaningfully measure the ability to think critically or creatively in any particular field (FairTest, 2012). Spooner (2002) concluded that education does little to support creativity

even though it claims to emphasize future economic success, and in reality, individuals must think and act creatively to attain both this success and emotional well-being. He conducted in-depth interviews with 13 Canadian high school seniors who scored exceptionally high on the Creative Behavior Inventory assessment to document their perspectives of the parts of school that promote creative growth and expression. Overwhelmingly, the students shared that they exercise their creativity more outside of the classroom, so they believe that they should either get credits for extracurricular activities to alleviate the time constraints. Additionally, schools rarely display student creative work to signify the importance of creativity and to inspire other students to create even more. When classroom lessons are structured based on exploration, student autonomy, and clear basic expectations, creativity flourishes; unfortunately, many teachers fail to grasp the significance of such pedagogical practices, and the classroom serves to diminish innovation.

Due to the sum of these issues, the research shows that student engagement and motivation diminish over time, both throughout each school year (Scales et al., 2020) and as students progress from elementary school to high school (Wang & Eccles, 2011). Through a series of focus groups at the middle and high school levels and multiple surveys, Scales et al. (2020) found that in the majority of cases, motivation, engagement, and performance either stayed the same or got worse throughout the year. When measuring school participation, belonging, and self-regulated learning from 7th through 11th grades, Wang & Eccles (2011) confirmed that these three elements of engagement

declined for the majority of participants. Congruently, their GPA and educational aspirations declined over this time period as well.

The prevailing education that students receive in traditional schooling is disconnected from their lived experiences, passions, and developmental needs (Dewey, 1902/2011, 1938/2015; Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Yu et al., 2018), despite the extensive research that shows that culturally relevant and experience-based education cultivate a greater sense of belonging and thus higher levels of motivation and engagement in school (Cantrell et al., 2017; Comber & Nixon, 2014; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014). This leads to their boredom and a low level of engagement in their academic learning, which ultimately diminishes student academic outcomes (Johnson, 2008). The next section elaborates on research that has uncovered effective ways to improve student engagement.

Improving student engagement

The research documents the significance of connection, between students and their teachers, students and the material being taught in classrooms, and students and the school environment as a whole. Student engagement improves when education spaces are understood as communities of practice (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991) that are "complex and adaptive" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 62). A focus on the thread of connection and community brings together literature on the practices of teachers and elements of curriculum and schools that support the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement of students (Fredricks et al., 2004). Viewing the support for student engagement as a holistic enterprise proves essential, supporting the affective,

social, cognitive, and cultural needs of adolescents to build a learning community of care

and support for youth (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

Students at the center of education

If students feel a sense of belonging in school and the classroom, they are more

likely to actively engage in their learning. Comber and Nixon (2014) state that

"Belonging occurs in an educational setting when formal learning engages with the

learner's lifeworld experience, when their learning interacts with the learner's identity.

Such learning builds on their knowledge, interests, and motivations" (p. 88). Keyes

(2019) utilized mixed methods, primarily focusing on 31 semi-structured interviews to

understand the specific teaching practices and classroom factors that students identified

as those that helped them feel behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally engaged while

feeling a sense of belonging in class. The study found that a sense of belonging was

foundational to their engagement in classes. Students reported that feeling seen and heard

in the classroom and working toward a common goal are important factors in cultivating

a sense of belonging. Through the development of communities of practice, school

programs can support feelings of belonging as the members develop their collective

agency to meet common goals and respond to challenging situations around them

(Duncan-Andrade, 2010). This community of co-learning becomes a space in which

students feel seen, heard, and empowered to behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively

engage (Keyes, 2019).

The research on student voice reveals that student engagement, sense of self, and

leadership skills soar when high school students feel their voices matter in school (Mitra,

2004, 2006, 2008). Drawing on other research, Mitra (2004) defines student voice as "a construct that describes the many ways in which youth might have the opportunity to actively participate in school decisions that will share their lives and the lives of their peers" (p. 651). These decisions can be at the campus and administrative levels (Mitra, 2004) or within the classroom experience (Keyes, 2019). In a study documenting youth experiences in two programs at a high school in Northern California that provided the space for students to exercise their voices, Mitra (2004) found that students' agency, belonging, and competence improve through their exercise of voice in leadership and tutoring roles. Additionally, if presented with the opportunity to share their opinions and experiences as high school students, many students voluntarily produce insightful and reflective work (Girod et al., 2005). Such opportunities not only to voice their concerns and desires but to take steps to create this change empower students to feel like important figures and leaders in their educational experience (Mitra, 2004; Scales et al., 2020). Consequently, these opportunities inspire students to exercise their voices more strongly and more frequently. Unsurprisingly, when we listen to the voices of students, we learn that they long for their perspectives, struggles, and desires to be valued and addressed in the school setting.

This pursuit of autonomy extends to the curriculum and learning materials students must study. Cantrell et al. (2017) concluded that pedagogical practices that allow students to exercise their agency, as simple as selecting the reading material or classroom activities can improve a student's engagement and motivation to develop literacy skills. Similarly, in their qualitative study composed of 464 student essays regarding their high

school experience, Girod et al. (2005) discovered that "Several teens suggested teachers negotiate class activities, topics for study, and even timelines with students thereby giving them purchase on decisions about their educational experience" (p. 12). Students long to be heard, seen, and understood, and they thrive when teachers afford them the opportunity to alter their school experience to their needs and interests. When teachers establish the norm for students to exercise their voice and choice, students devote more of themselves to engage and succeed in school.

Even within traditional school models, when teachers include more group work and collaboration, student engagement increases (Keyes, 2019). While comparing the engagement of students at a traditional and non-traditional high school, Johnson (2008) utilized the experience sampling method (ESM) in which students document their own perspectives of their experiences in the precise moments they happen. Such a method of data collection allows the researcher to measure the intensity and frequency of a student's engagement, interest, and enjoyment over time, mapping patterns in discovering statistically significant trends. He found that students at the traditional school reported high levels of concentration but lower levels of interest and enjoyment, which were dramatically improved during collaborative work. Through collaboration, students relate to their peers and develop emotional connections to learning, while making use of the zone of proximal development, which can be characterized as the distance between the academic, cultural, and social skills and knowledge between learners of differing abilities and levels of experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygostsky, 1978). In these collaborative

spaces, students naturally learn from and with each other, engaging in a process of social transformation and internalizing new content and skills (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Positive teacher-student relationship

Perhaps above all other factors, supportive and close teacher-student relationships are instrumental in positively shifting student engagement. As Ken Robinson (2015) eloquently expressed, "The heart of education is the relationship between the student and the teacher. Everything else depends on how productive and successful that relationship is" (p. 71). Many studies have revealed the elements of relationships with teachers that students seek to feel motivated and engaged in the classroom and on campus (Cantrell et al., 2017; Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Keyes, 2019; Scales et al., 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2011; Yu et al., 2018). Findings in these studies suggest that students perceive their relationships with teachers positively based on their ability to meet and support adolescent developmental needs, which include autonomy, competence, and a sense of belonging (Wang & Eccles, 2011; Yu et al., 2018). Among these teacher traits, respect, care, closeness, trust, equity, fairness, and consistency are paramount. In their analysis of qualitative data collected from high school students, Yu et al. (2018) identified the themes of teacher noticing (i.e., being attentive to what students do and experience both in and outside of the classroom) and teacher investment (i.e., moving beyond surface-level interaction to encourage learning) as integral to positive teacher-student relationships.

Student perspectives in the research provide ample examples of the actions, personalities, and expectations teachers employ as a means of cultivating this type of supportive relationship. A resounding sense of humor makes students feel relaxed and

comfortable in the learning environment (Cooper, 2014; Yu et al., 2018). Additionally, high school students appreciate when their teachers take the time to have "free" conversations with them ranging from basic check ins to chats about their hobbies to sharing life stories (Yu. et al., 2018). Other students share the importance of their teachers listening to their opinions and acknowledging their points of view (Keyes, 2019). Scales et al. (2020) document the appreciation students demonstrated when teachers make mistakes and graciously apologize for them, which many teachers refuse to do. Students value when their teachers invest time outside of class to get to know them, provide academic support, or show interest in their passions and extracurricular activities (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Keyes, 2019; Yu et al. 2018). Additionally, students feel closer to teachers when they share a similar background or culture and can, therefore, understand where they are coming from (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Overall, students love their teachers who set high expectations for students, combined with unwavering support and guidance to reach these elevated goals, showing students that they truly believe in them so that they believe in themselves (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

With intentional focus on developing strong teacher-student relationships, the outlook for student engagement and academic performance becomes much brighter. Positive teacher-student relationships can have a strong positive impact even on the students who were the least motivated at the beginning of the year (Scales et al., 2020). Additionally, when student-teacher relationships improve throughout the academic year, their academic measures improve as well. As this literature review has demonstrated thus far, a sense of belonging, student voice, and cultural relevance play crucial roles in

enriching student engagement. Teacher-student relationships seem to be a primary way to cultivate and facilitate all of these other methods to create an engaging educational experience. As a result, I draw the conclusion that focusing on positive relationships between students and the adults in their schools is critical to dramatically improve the outlook of student engagement.

A complex solution to a complex problem

While these various methods have proven effective in improving student engagement, research shows that addressing the issue of low student engagement requires a dynamic, multifaceted approach. Not all students will positively and equally respond to each pedagogical technique, and a combination of methods often proves more effective than focusing pedagogical energy on just one. Cooper (2014) conducted a mixed methods case study to investigate student engagement in 581 classes at one high school. While the existing research demonstrated that connective instruction, academic rigor, and lively teaching supported engagement, Cooper found that connective instruction (i.e., those elements of teaching that connect to a student's sense of self and lived experiences) significantly more strongly correlates with student engagement than the other two. That being said, when academic rigor and lively teaching are combined in various degrees, they, too, can dramatically improve student engagement and enjoyment. Thus, no one simple fix is necessary; teachers can create the pedagogical practice with which they feel comfortable to positively engage their students if integrating these characteristics in their teaching.

Further complicating the matter, students display different levels of interest in and connection to each method or focus of engagement (Geraci et al., 2017). Geraci et al. (2017) quantitatively found that students identify within one of six dominant modes of engagement, including subject lovers, emotionals, hand raisers, social butterflies, teacher responders, and deep thinkers. Even more intricate to maneuver, different students respond to teacher actions in divergent ways. Some students may, for example, think a nurturing, motherly teacher figure is supportive and encouraging, while others respond to this style of care as condescending and alienating (Cooper, 2014). Therefore, teachers must adjust their practices to meet the individual and immediate needs and feedback of each student, recognizing that their job is to facilitate learning for all students.

Examining the impact of relevance and connection to student lives in material more critically and deeply, the following sections review literature of culturally relevant pedagogy and progressive education as transformative pedagogical models to increase student engagement for various youth communities.

Education rooted in student cultures and experiences

My focus in this section is to examine the intersections and commonalities in the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy and progressive education, analyzing how these approaches support student engagement.

The traditional model of education particularly fails to meet the needs of students of color and other marginalized student populations. Students from non-dominant social groups perform below grade level in various disciplines (Jocson & Cooks, 2011). In the era of No Child Left Behind and high stakes standardized testing, historically

marginalized student populations are blamed for their underperformance on biased assessments. Mainstream educators commonly lack the necessary cultural awareness of the student communities with which they work, which has a detrimental impact on student engagement and academic success (Ek et al., 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995). While educational experiences improve when students have teachers who have insider knowledge of student experiences based on shared race, gender, socioeconomic status, or hometown (Delpit, 1995; Jimenez, 2020), having teachers who look like students is not enough to deeply engage students. Educators must engage in a critical praxis to establish a pedagogical practice that supports all students to feel valued, accepted, and able to take risks in the learning space, which contribute to the development of a sense of belonging (Comber & Nixon, 2014). Thus, critical scholars argue that it is essential to investigate cultural bias and inequities in school structures, teaching practices, and the curriculum that contribute to deficit thinking, disengagement, and low academic outcomes for marginalized students (Haddix & Rojas, 2011; Jocson & Cooks, 2011). As a solution, many educators have enacted culturally relevant pedagogy to serve communities that do not see themselves in the one-size-fits-all method of traditional schooling.

Central to this pedagogy is showing students that they can "be themselves" in academic settings (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). By giving students the chance to learn through their own cultural practices, formal education validates and affirms their passions, lived experiences, and everyday ways of knowing (Jimenez, 2020). Nasir et al. (2008) document that "although students often [use] practices from their everyday or home math, they clearly [feel] that such practices [are] inferior and that the school math

[is] of higher status or [is] more highly valorized by students" (p. 196). Having formal educational experiences that integrate this knowledge allows students to see themselves in their learning, to see that they can, in fact, "be themselves" while learning math, science, languages, or anything else. Culturally relevant pedagogy rearticulates normalized school discourses to meet students where they are and connect academic domain knowledge to students' identities. Identity and learning are intricately intertwined, and engagement and understanding are heightened when students feel that their identities are linked to the learning setting. These learning experiences reinforce the value of their culture and clearly demonstrate how it authentically and unquestionably relates to academics.

Deweyan progressive education, as detailed in the theoretical framework of this study, advocates for the investigation of material that has personal meaning, as real learning only occurs through topics grounded in experience (Garte, 2017). In this education model, the teacher acts as a leading facilitator from within the community of learners to build upon students' existing knowledge through structured experimentation and discovery, all while supporting equal participation to maintain student engagement and investment in the process (Dewey, 1938/2015; Garte, 2017). Kurth-Schai (2014) contends that following Dewey's pedagogy and philosophy of education would constitute a shift away from the neoliberal education model, restoring a democratic approach to learning and citizenry and reinvigorating subject-matter to capture the interest of students. Delpit (1995) has critiqued the common application of progressive education, as White middle-class educators often executed this pedagogy by providing minimal

instruction for students to figure things out on their own, often creating cultural bias and inequities for students whose cultural practices, perspectives, and values do not align with the teacher or curriculum. Therefore, progressive education practitioners must engage in critical praxis to examine their own positionality and maintain a truly individualized education for each and every student, meeting all students' unique needs (Garte, 2017).

For students of color and other marginalized populations, pedagogies that center student cultural practices cultivate a sense of belonging through pedagogies of possibility (Nasir et al., 2013). Such educational experiences powerfully impact student identities and engagement through the simultaneous valorization of their lived experiences, cultural practices, styles of engaging with the world, passions, and their growth as intellectuals (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Mirra et al., 2016). Student cultures are sustained and centered throughout the process of developing academic skills (Paris, 2012), acting as both the means and the end of the learning process (Dewey, 1902/2011). Within such pedagogies, even the most marginalized students develop an identity as organic intellectuals, as they understand how their personal strengths and academic knowledge can powerfully contribute to their communities (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

Culturally relevant pedagogy commonly utilizes hip-hop culture and spoken word poetry to bridge students' lives and passions with academic learning in the classroom. Hip-hop culture is deeply tied to African American oral traditions and artistic expression, and offers Black youth an outlet to speak to their own experiences, calling out inequities and painting an authentic image of their lived experiences (Kim, 2011). According to Alim et al. (2011), "young people, both locally and globally, are producing creative,

hybrid texts that speak about their realities. These creative practices are often employed to challenge dominant ideologies of language, culture, and identity" (p. 140). Jocson (2006) further argues that "these youths voluntarily engage in literate behaviors such as rapping and poetry writing that are often not valued or acknowledged in school" (p. 702). The distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary literacy practices refers to the divide between the songs, poetry, and other literary pieces youth create outside of the classroom, those that are personally meaningful and empowering, versus the written pieces that are assigned to them in school. Black youth often voluntarily produce creative texts to express themselves and reflect on their lived experiences (Jocson, 2006; Mahiri and Sablo, 1996), and this freedom allows them to exercise their personal language variety and critique their socio-economic reality.

Various culturally relevant pedagogues have blended these cultural practices into academic language arts instruction, including the five elements of true hip-hop--MC'ing, DJ'ing, breakdancing, graffiti, and knowledge (Akala, 2011; Alim et al., 2011; Kim, 2011). By constructing pedagogy around these tenets, educators must actively experiment and improvise in the moment with their students, collaborating with students to produce new knowledge (Kim, 2011). Connecting student cultural practices to the development of advanced academic skills, critical educators weave together vocabulary instruction, thematic analysis, rhythmic and syllabic identification, drawing connections to other literary works across genres, and production of original poetic texts through hip-hop (Akala, 2011). While these links to language arts standards are important, maintaining the

cultural authenticity of this integration to sustain students' cultural identities is paramount (Paris, 2012).

As youth populations engage with the world through media and digital literacy practices, the multimodal and digital literacies prevalent in popular culture act as meaningful avenues to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy (Bass & Halverson, 2013). Rather than focusing exclusively on traditional school literacy practices, Paris and Kirkland (2011) argue that educators must understand and embrace the multimodal performativity that students exercise, which "spans various media between the oral and written, the textual and otherwise symbolic, the static word and the moving word, the dominant voice and the marginalized one" (p. 182). Such an orientation toward the culturally prevalent language practices of today's youth legitimizes students' voluntary language practices by dismantling the dichotomy between academic literacy and culturally relevant styles of communication and meaning-making (Jocson, 2006). Thus, situating various repertoires of communication in school contexts problematizes the dominance of written word to include dynamic practices of countercultures. As their cultural language practices are valued in the classroom, students solidify their identities as learners (Comber & Nixon, 2014).

When students feel the learning content is relevant to their lives, student engagement improves (Cantrell et al., 2017). In a literacy intervention program, Cantrell et al. (2017) investigated the factors that impact literacy development in high school students beyond the acquisition of academic reading skills and strategies. This qualitative study of 63 students concluded that texts that are relevant and relatable to the students'

lives and interests support engagement. Students must see themselves in the content or they do not make emotional and cognitive connections between the learning materials and their own lives. In a study with 25 students from six Los Angeles high schools, Enyedy and Mukhopadhyay (2007) studied the efficacy of culturally relevant pedagogy in improving student engagement. The students investigated current trends of segregation in LA's schools, changes in demographics, and shifts in integration policies that impacted community struggles to obtain equal education. While these topics strengthened the participants' engagement in the learning process, the researchers argued that this engagement deepens even further when "students' existing repertoires for participation are made legitimate in the academic context" (p. 170). In other words, the content of instruction, delivery of pedagogical content, and norms of participation in the classroom must combine in culturally relevant pedagogy to enrich student engagement. To that end, in a study on the perceptions 37 "at-risk" students of diverse racial backgrounds hold of culturally relevant pedagogy, Hubert (2014) brought to light six elements that led to positive experiences of culturally relevant math pedagogy, ultimately improving the participants' performance on math assessments. These include home-like classrooms, an ethic of care, participation opportunities, technology use, confidence, and motivation (Hubert, 2014).

Many of these aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy that improve engagement and produce positive educational outcomes are echoed in other studies (Johnson, 2008; Keyes, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The crucial message here is that experiences of students in the classroom, including utilizing practices they have in

their home lives, feeling cared for and seen by teachers, collaboratively participating with friends, and having fun, are perhaps the most indicative of the positive impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on engagement and learning. Ultimately, culturally relevant pedagogy enacts all of the elements of teaching and learning that research shows support student engagement, especially for marginalized youth communities.

Other education models rooted in student authority, choice, and lived experiences act as promising examples of a dramatic shift in the way schools and classrooms operate to instill healthy levels of student engagement (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). North Star is an example of an education center that engages students far more profoundly in their learning than traditional middle or high schools by creating individualized learning plans based on each teenager's strengths and interests. Designed for students who have been miserable in school, at North Star, young individuals have the choice of what to study, how to learn about it, and how fast they want to learn ("North Star," 2021). Enjoying this autonomy and choice leads the majority of students involved in North Star to attend college, many among the top universities in the country (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). The High Tech High charter schools of San Diego, California offer another example of the promising impact of the progressive education model of student engagement and learning. Within the philosophy at High Tech High, the pedagogy of the technology world, which is experimental, collaborative, and project-based, combines with the content of school, as multiple disciplines are integrated and students and teachers focus on "*uncovering* the subject rather than covering the subject" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 129, italics in original). In this model of learning, students randomly selected from

underrepresented zip codes have fun as they produce work that serves their local communities and the world. Student engagement and academic performance of High Tech High students impress, as almost all students attend college with 70% going to four-year universities (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). These exemplar instances of alternative, progressive education models that function based on student autonomy, passion, fun, integration, and creativity provide hope for a new direction in education, suited to the individual needs of each unique student.

Embodied practices in education

Of specific interest in this study, culturally relevant pedagogies with a focus on embodied practices, such as sports and dance, support student engagement in the learning process. In a 12-month study conducted with the Lady Wildcat Basketball Program, Duncan-Andrade (2010) provides an encouraging framework of how educators can utilize young women's love for and practice of basketball to cultivate academic success and critical consciousness of social issues. Cultivating learning communities of mentorship and support, high expectations and genuine belief in students, establishing shared goals and developing concrete plans to execute these goals, working together to tackle social injustice, and taking the time to get to know their communities all rank as essential lessons teachers can learn from the world of coaching (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). After experiencing such a supportive academic and athletic environment, all the focal students of this study went on to attend at least some college and continued to play the sport and give back to their community (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). The Lady Wildcats Basketball Program prioritized basketball, school, and effecting social change on equal

levels, each one contributing to the other, exemplifying a truly culturally relevant pedagogy in practice. Each of these studies centered student cultural practices and norms in the pedagogy they employed, not as a superficial entry point to the academic experience.

Various educators have studied the embodied cultural practice of dance and its impact on holistic development and learning processes (Deans, 2016; Katz, 2008) . Katz (2008) examines "learning and knowing in the situated physical context of dance, where cognition, self, and emotion are consciously filtered through muscle and movement as well as through mind, language, and social interaction" (p. 13). She studied how dance connects with young women's identity formation, as well as cognitive, emotional, and social development, so that it can be integrated in education to support overall learning. Based on her study and the perceptions of the young women who participated, dance has many benefits, the most pertinent to this discussion being: developing a sense of control over one's body, thoughts, and interactions, creating a sense of community with other learners, multimodal learning, risk-taking and learning from mistakes. In highlighting the role of dance instruction in "taking feedback," Katz (2008) affirmed that dance gives students the opportunity to incorporate "new information, internalizing and digesting it in the body, through the senses and muscles" (p. 18). Furthermore, dancers noted that their art gives them more chances to explore and take intellectual risks than they have in their schooling. These skills can be transformative in their schooling experience, as well, as they find new ways to process information, take constructive feedback, and shift their practice for improvement.

The literature on student-centered, culturally relevant pedagogies illustrates the undeniable efficacy of such critical education models to solve the issues that public schools face. These pedagogies serve to cultivate each student's sense of belonging, identity as intellectuals, and agency to contribute to the classroom, school campus, and their own communities to have a powerful impact on their world. Simultaneously, culturally responsive pedagogical practices nurture positive, caring, and equitable teacher-student relationships that encourage students to engage in their academic learning while enriching their own cultural practices and passions. Most importantly, they center cultural practices and extend upon the cultural knowledge students already have to support them in their academic learning. In the next section, I review the literature on the positive outcomes and potential of one of these practices--sports.

Potential of Sports to Support Academics

The scholarly literature documents the positive outcomes of youth sports participation that can support student-athletes' academic endeavors. Sports participation leads to life skills development and can support academic achievement. This section includes examples of curricular and pedagogical integration of academics and the cultural practice of sports. Additionally, I explore the holistic benefits of embodied sports practices as they relate to youth development and cultures.

Despite the stereotypical depiction of athletes at the "dumb jock" and the treatment of sports as "anti-intellectual" (Simons & van Rheenen, 2000, p. 168), quantitative research has documented the positive correlation between sports participation and academic performance and engagement (Bang et al., 2020; Burns et al.,

2020). Burns et al. (2020) utilized quantitative methods to study a sample of 14,765 ethnically diverse 9th to 12th grade students by examining the US National Youth Risk Behavior Survey data from 2017. Through weighted logistic regression, they concluded that students who participated in at least one sport reported higher academic achievement, and those who participated in three or more sports throughout the school year reported even higher GPAs. The research provides the foundation for the potential integration of sports and academics to improve academic performance of various youth communities, particularly youth of color (Bang et al., 2020). Studying a large sample of 16,200 10th and 12 grade students, Bang et al. (2020) examined the impact of sports participation on academic engagement and GPA, controlling for race, linguistic status, gender, and socioeconomic status. Their findings suggest that for White students, sports participation had a statistically significant impact on engagement, but not on reported GPA; conversely, for students of color, sport participation significantly improved GPA, with a small effect on engagement. Thus, in diverse youth populations, those who identify as part of various social groups have differential, but positive outcomes that correlate with youth participation in sports. Within this backdrop of quantitative studies, more qualitative research is needed to understand the way student-athletes make sense of the impact of sports on their academic performance and engagement.

Those who participate in youth sports develop invaluable life skills that are crucial for becoming successful individuals in sports and beyond. Drawing on previous research, Gould and Carson (2008) define life skills as "those skills that enable individuals to succeed in the different environments in which they live, such as school,

home and in their neighborhoods" (p. 59). These include behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. Such skills develop naturally in the practice of sports and are transferable to other domains of life (Jones & Lavelle, 2009). In a case study on one female tennis player, Jones and Lavelle (2009) deeply examined her experiences and perceptions of her time competing in high levels of tennis throughout her childhood and college years. The athlete confirmed that she attributes her hard work, organizational, leadership, and communication skills to her time practicing tennis and playing in and navigating tournaments. Through their engagement in sports and the community surrounding this participation, the players of the Lady Wildcat basketball team became more organized and disciplined to meet challenges and finish difficult tasks while gaining a deep sense of hope for their futures (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). The perseverance and discipline that student-athletes must adopt for success in athletics serve individuals in academics and life beyond the arena of sports (Simons & van Rheenen, 2000).

This study pays particular attention to the transference of these life skills into the domain of school. Duncan-Andrade (2010) found that he could leverage his high school student-athletes' interest in playing basketball to support their adaptation of good academic habits for their present studies and futures in higher education. As he motivated and engaged his student-athletes in their academics through their participation in basketball, Duncan-Andrade instilled the importance of academic planning and dedication, helping them set goals and giving them the tools to reach them by requiring three "study table" sessions per week, giving summer writing assignments, guiding

participants to write college essays and applications, and introducing them to sports-related philosophical texts. Simons and van Rheenen's (2000) quantitative study of the non-cognitive predictors of academic success for 200 collegiate student-athletes discovered that those who were able to transfer the hard work, discipline, and perseverance they exercise in sports were academically successful. The 7th and 8th grade rural boys in Hastie and Sharpe's (1999) study on the impact of a sport education curriculum on social behaviors developed positive peer interactions and self-monitoring skills. Reverdito et al. (2017) found that youths who participated in extracurricular sports developed an elevated perception of self efficacy, which is positively correlated with engagement and motivation in challenging endeavors. The findings from these studies illustrate the ways in which sports can support the particular life skills that are conducive to academic achievement and engagement.

While Duncan-Andrade engaged his student-athletes in a sports-based culturally relevant pedagogy, he maintained a separation between academic content and the practice of sports. Some research has integrated the practice and knowledge of sports in academic learning, blending cultural knowledge with academic domain knowledge (Nasir et al., 2008). Nasir (2000) found that high school basketball players can more easily and accurately solve math problems when framed utilizing basketball language and scenarios than the common structure and framing of mathematical problems they experience in school. The findings revealed that "the basketball players possessed knowledge about average and percentage that was inaccessible in the math classroom and that their teachers likely did not know that they had" (Nasir et al., 2008, p. 189), as they more

easily and accurately solved the problems when situated in the basketball context. The parallels between basketball and math concepts exist, but the links between them remain largely invisible in the eyes of student-athletes and educators due to traditional education that intentionally severs this natural connection (Dewey, 1938/2015). Advocating the integration of physical education and mathematics, Kitchen and Kuehl Kitchen (2013) put forth a lesson plan that includes activities to teach math concepts, including graph coordinates, and physical skills within the frame of football. Such an integration of academic knowledge and the cultural knowledge student-athletes hold for sports serves to support their feelings of self-efficacy (Nasir et al., 2008), while making their academic learning meaningfully rooted in their passions and experiences (Dewey, 1938/2015).

Some research exists that helps to demystify the link between sports and math, demonstrating the potential to improve student-athlete engagement through this integration. Drazen et al. (2017) studied the way in which sports analytics can increase interest in STEM subjects for students who proportionately underrepresented in this field. Specifically, in their study, they established clinics in which students created heat maps to analyze their shooting percentage on different parts of the court. This study found that the use of sports analytics not only supported the improvement of athletic performance, but also provided evidence of improved self perception of STEM knowledge and interest in the participants. In her doctoral dissertation, Lohren (2017) employed mixed methods to investigate the outcomes of integrating mathematics and a physical education setting. The findings suggest that this integration positively correlates with academic achievement, and the participants demonstrated an increase in comprehension and knowledge retention

when the subjects were integrated, crediting movement and physical activity for this improvement.

Despite the examples of the potential interplay of sports and athletics discussed here, academic institutions reinforce the divide between young individuals' identities as students and athletes through the hyphenation of the role of "student-athlete" (Duncan-Andrade, 2010, p. 42). Collegiate student-athletes report that athletics and academics are in constant conflict, as they are unable to focus enough attention in either endeavor, and leadership in each space expects them to prioritize one over the other (Simons & van Rheenen, 2000). Overwhelmingly, the two parts of their identity as a student-athlete never overlap or support each other. The distance between the current norms in severing the student-athlete identity and skill sets into two unrelated camps and the potential connection between these two spheres demonstrates the need to creatively integrate the two domains into one empowering and inclusive learning space and take back what it means to be a "student-athlete," valuing both parts of one's identity on equal and intersecting planes.

While ample research displays the positive outcomes of sports participation on academics and life skills, I feel it is important to note the intangible, holistic benefits of supporting youth in their embodied cultural practices. Beyond supporting school performance and the potential to succeed in the world, sports and movement are purely good for the soul, something that young individuals can do for themselves, their bodies, their minds, and their holistic well-being. I am inspired by the anecdotal evidence from my own experiences and those of so many of my family, friends, and students in

basketball, yoga, meditation, tennis, hiking, swimming, and so many more beautiful

embodied practices. Not only do they form major aspects of each of our cultures and

sense of self (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2012), but they bring us more passion, creativity,

and motivation to pursue our goals than the experiences characteristic of traditional

schooling.

The stereotypical image of "dumb jock" continues to taint the way

student-athletes are depicted to the general public, teachers, school administrators, and

coaches (Benson, 2000). Considering the positive correlation between youth sports

participation and academic success, the documented life skill transference from sports to

other domains, and the beautiful connection with one's body and surroundings sports

cultivate, it appears that a cultural shift in education that intentionally integrates

academics and athletics could drastically improve the educational experiences of

student-athletes in high school and college. I would argue that bridging the academic and

athletic content, spaces, and identities early on can improve youth development and

academic engagement and performance throughout all years of schooling. Such a

progression in education would serve to eliminate pejorative labels of our young athletes

to allow them to explore and experience the beauty and joy of sports while

simultaneously cultivating an identity as intellectuals (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Mirra et

al., 2016).

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

In the final section of this literature review, I provide an overview of YPAR

projects enacted with high school students and other youth populations, offering this

methodology as a natural extension of experience-based culturally relevant pedagogy to support young individuals in their development as intellectuals. Various YPAR projects enacted with high school students demonstrate the inherent transformative impact of this research methodology on the students and communities involved. These have uncovered the potential to utilize such community-based research projects to motivate and engage students in the classroom and school community by supporting their development as intellectuals and agents for social change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Youth participants in YPAR "study their social contexts through research and apply their knowledge to discover the contingent qualities of life" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 6). Past YPAR projects in the United States have addressed various issues facing the most marginalized youth. Youth involved in YPAR projects have investigated topics that directly impact their lives, such as public school equity and access; language, youth culture, and transformational resistance; and urban youth political participation for educational reform (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Additionally, YPAR projects have examined the impact of substance abuse (Voight & Velez, 2018), social and economic pressures (Romero et al., 2008), public school push out in the New York City public school system (Tuck et al., 2008), barriers to recreation and sport program involvement (Hopper & McHugh, 2020), race and class inequities in the education system (Mirra et al., 2016), perceptions of youth democratic rights (Ginwright, 2008), critical leadership with Asian American community college students (Canlas, 2016), and HIV and harm reduction programs (Gaztambide-Fernández & Switzer, 2020) on marginalized youth populations. In each of these studies, the students enjoyed the power

to determine their own areas of investigation, pinpointing the precise issue that needed to be addressed for their own communities and the methods that they deemed most effective in doing so.

The existing YPAR studies illustrate that this is not only a research methodology but also a practical form of critical pedagogy (Romero et al., 2008). Scorza et al. (2017) coin YPAR the praxis of critical pedagogy, as this methodology embodies critical theory and critical consciousness put into action. Participation in YPAR projects supports students as they engage in a praxis to develop their critical consciousness while they develop advanced academic skills. In these studies, the research process is equally as important as the findings and analysis, as each aspect of the process impacts the utility and validity of the findings and subsequent action for the particular community involved in the project. At the beginning of each project, the formal researchers introduce the methodology of YPAR, social theory related to the topic at hand, and provide a basic overview of various research methods (Tuck et al., 2008). Even examined alone, this introduction to a different, participatory approach to research and education and to beautiful thinkers in the world of critical social theory and pedagogy--Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Ernest Morrell, Gloria Ladson-Billings, John Dewey, among many others--is something not many high school students experience. Furthermore, each project allows students to put these theories and concepts into practice to enact real change.

As students engage in the transformative process of participatory research, they have the opportunity to develop fundamentals of critical pedagogy--their academic skills, cultural identities, and social awareness (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008;

Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014). In a six year summer research seminar program at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA), Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) among other practitioners explored the connections between critical pedagogy and youth participatory action research. Participation in the seminar entailed a process of learning the concepts of YPAR and critical social theory, designing the research project, and engaging in the actual data collection and analysis process, all of which required the acquisition of elevated critical analysis and academic writing skills. In the Council of Youth Research, which is a collective of high school and college students and teachers, and professors housed at UCLA and engaged in YPAR projects, literacy skills were necessarily and inherently grounded in students' lived experiences and interest, which requires a critical breakdown of the conventions of academic writing to allow them to draw these connections (Mirra et al., 2016). By integrating cultural knowledge and academic excellence, the YPAR process allows students to situate their authentic selves within the systems of oppression surrounding them, cultivating their identities, civic responsibilities, and literacy skills. Further, they have the scaffolded support of members of academia to exercise their voice to enact change.

This form of research and pedagogy blends art and research as the team of researchers collaborate to practice their collective radical imagination for a different future (Ginwright, 2008). Ginwright (2008) argues that participatory models of research, when conceptualized as an art, liberate practitioners from the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries to expand upon generally accepted notions of validity, generalizability, and purpose. In the process, YPAR creates space to examine the current reality and envision a

more equitable and just world, which is essential for enacting social change. Tuck et al. (2008) describe their methods as a watercolor box, utilizing and mixing colors to cultivate harmony in the research process. Such an art opens students' minds to new possibilities while maintaining the clarity and balance necessary for equitable community-based research.

Through participation in YPAR, students uncover the details of their reality as it truly is, not how those in power wish them to see it. Romero et al. (2008) observed that participation in the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) provided Latina/o students in the Tucson Unified School District the opportunity to see that "they are not at fault yet [are] capable of addressing the social and economic pressures that are truly to blame" for their educational experiences and outcomes" (p. 138). The members of the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD) refused to accept being depicted as lazy and stupid as they applied mixed methods in their investigation of the experiences of hundreds of GED earners and seekers to understand their own experiences of being pushed out of the New York City public school system (Tuck et al., 2008). Ultimately, youth have the opportunity to "create their own sense of efficacy in the world and address the social conditions that impede liberation and positive, healthy development (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 10).

YPAR practitioners and youth participants believe that the success of a participatory inquiry project depends on the relationships cultivated throughout the group, between researcher and co-researchers and the latter amongst themselves. In their work on situated learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) posited that learning and knowing

occur in social interactions and activities, and thus, rely on relationships within communities of practice. The relationships between the researcher and community member participants directly impact the extent to which knowledge is constructed and shared. Therefore, as they analyze the Council of Youth Research, Mirra et al. (2016) highlight the importance of treating YPAR spaces as a community of practice to authentically support young people in their development of "identities of mastery" (p. 37). The relationships between the formal researcher and the youth co-researchers is reciprocal and equitable, each playing a crucial and central role in the decisions of the studies. This work in relationship building begins with the adults or formal researchers contemplating and exploring their commitment to the project to create the most supportive environment possible for the youth participants to develop into researchers themselves (Gaztambide-Fernández & Switzer, 2020; Mirra et al., 2016).

Because YPAR projects ask students to reflect on and investigate the inequities in which they are located, it is crucial for the researcher to cultivate relationships of trust and care (Mirra et al., 2016). However, this process can be challenging, as young individuals have historically been manipulated and controlled by adults in positions of power (Hopper & McHughs, 2020). Hopper and McHughs (2020) discovered the necessity of spending time cultivating connections between themselves and the youth participants in their study on the challenges and tensions youths face in engaging in recreation and sport programs. Bonding over sports became a crucial tool in building connections with the participants, which is one example of how researchers can break down barriers between themselves and youth participants. Ultimately, blurring the

teacher-student and researcher-participant dichotomies is crucial to establishing an ethic of care, trust, and responsibility essential for truly participatory dynamics in YPAR.

As a research methodology and pedagogy, YPAR responds beautifully to the issues in high school student motivation and engagement. This methodology integrates the findings of past research on issues in engagement of marginalized youth in its process, centering and following student voices (Hopper & McHughs, 2020) to investigate topics that impact them on a daily basis (Romero et al., 2008). As insiders in the research setting and topic, youth participant voices take the center, which creates an authentic sense of belonging and ownership in their investigation and learning (Hopper & McHugh, 2020; Mitra, 2004). The students' cultural knowledge of their youth community holds power as they take a leadership role, acting as the experts on a topic that directly affects them, even among those who generally exercise authority over them, such as teachers, administrators, and local politicians (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). The focus on equitable and trusting relationships makes youth participants feel supported to exercise their agency to make decisions (Romero et al., 2008). When combined, these elements of pedagogy improve student engagement and motivation. The students involved in UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) were deeply motivated and engaged in producing quality work. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) found that:

> Students, in becoming participatory action researchers, are more likely to want to read complex and relevant texts, they are more likely to exert energy in the data collection and data analysis phase when they are conducting research that matters

to their own lives and the lives of people they care about, and they are more likely

to want to take their products through this process because they want their work to

be solid, rigorous, and valuable to the process of remaking the world. (p. 128)

When urban youth have the support of teachers and mentors who position them as

scholars and intellectuals, they organically become more motivated and engaged in the

process of learning. They come to understand this learning as meaningful and

empowering, as they see the ways in which knowledge and informed action can bring

about equity and justice for their communities. Voight and Velez (2018) quantitatively

measured the impact of high school student participation in YPAR and discovered a

statistically significant correlation with improved school engagement, attendance, and

reading achievement. These studies provide evidence that YPAR projects can

substantially enhance student motivation and engagement while developing elevated

academic skills.

Students have ownership of the dissemination process that is encouraged to be

both formal and local. This process often brings students into contact with people and

contexts they would not normally access, and they do so as experts on their own

experiences and own research. This experience of public presentations from a position of

authority encourages students to develop greater self-confidence, affirming their

identities as researchers, intellectuals, and agents of change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell,

2008). IDEA student participants presented their work to UCLA faculty panels,

educational research conferences, local governing agencies, and high school campuses.

Students engaged in YPAR projects have produced lasting change for their communities.

Student presentations of their findings have helped enact a city ordinance outlawing

tobacco use in city parks and other public spaces (Voight & Velez, 2018). Additionally,

the youth involved in the Research Collaborative on Youth Activism (RCYA) at the

University of Arizona developed a youth rights handbook that has pushed local and state

legislatures to examine the possibilities of passing a Youth Bill of Rights to hold

institutions accountable to the youth involved in them (Ginwright, 2008). The work of

youth in SJEP led the school district to adopt intercultural proficiency as one of its six

major goals for its practices (Romero et al., 2008). Therefore, YPAR projects have a

direct and positive impact on the identities and academic trajectories of the student

researchers as well as the larger community.

Youth participants have shared the life-changing impact their experiences in

YPAR have had on them, which supports the integration of this methodology into more

educational spaces. One student shared that working on the SJEC project "opened up

[his] eyes to things that everyone should have the opportunity if not the right to see"

(Romero et al., 2008, p. 141). Another student ventured further to say, "I do not want to

know where I would be without this project. It has done so much for me, and my world

revolves around this now" (p. 142). The issues that students have ownership over

investigating are so meaningful to them that their engagement seems to become a part of

who they are and how they choose to live in the world. This provides evidence for the

immense possibilities of YPAR to cultivate a sense of belonging and passion for

education, in turn supporting student engagement. After experiencing a lifetime of

oppressive schooling where teachers are seen as the only bearers of knowledge, students

rarely hold the position of being experts of bodies of information who "can *inform* adult audience members" (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 125). Involvement in YPAR studies creates this transformative shift in the power dynamics of schooling.

This review of the literature on YPAR studies has demonstrated a connection between participation in YPAR projects and improvement in student engagement, motivation, and academic outcomes, such as literacy development (Mirra et al., 2008; Voight & Velez, 2018) and work ethic (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Thus, there is a need for the use of this methodology to support the engagement and academic growth of various student populations. In particular, I am investigating the impact of YPAR on the rural high school student-athlete youth community at North Vine High School. In reviewing the literature, I also solidified various features that I would like to instill in the YPAR project I enact with these student athletes, which are detailed in the following chapter.

Conclusion

This YPAR project seeks to transform students' educational experiences through the simultaneous extension of both their academic and athletic engagement and performance. While abundant research exists on student engagement and motivation and the positive impact of culturally relevant pedagogy, more research is needed on the perspectives and voices of high school student-athletes in schooling and the ways the practice of sports can critically transform this experience. After reviewing the scholarly literature, it remains clear that sports act as a youth popular culture that produce various personal benefits, such as life skills, academic achievement, and holistic well-being.

Further, this cultural practice holds potential to be utilized to more deeply and authentically engage students in their schooling (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). Embodying the findings of the research on student engagement, this YPAR project will follow the lived experiences and knowledge of rural high school student-athletes to investigate how we can improve the school experience for this youth community and the ways participation in such a project can enrich student engagement.

CHAPTER III: DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the research design and methods used for this YPAR study that explores the experiences of high school student-athletes in both academics and athletics, specifically focusing on their engagement. I enacted a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project at a rural high school in Northern California, in which I worked directly with student-athletes as co-researchers. I discuss the research methodology, design, and methods at length in this chapter.

Research Questions

As a YPAR project, I collaborated with the high school co-researchers to finalize the research questions, which have evolved throughout the co-research process. This process began once the co-researchers had identified the research problem they wanted to address through the "Drawing Your Experience" activity, which is explained below. The co-researchers individually brainstormed questions to address each of the problems they had identified, and then we collectively edited them, differentiating which were broad enough to be research questions and which would be most appropriate as interview questions. To help guide this process and provide examples of the types of language and level of specificity a research question should have, I also introduced some of the questions I had created in my initial research proposal. We did not use any of the exact research questions I had created, but notably, these examples undeniably impacted the direction the student-athletes chose to take in narrowing their focus. Furthermore, the final questions listed below are the result of an iterative process of revision in which the questions evolved according to the data we elicited from our interview questions.

The first five questions below were developed with the co-research team, while the final question is the research meta-question that I used on my own to examine the impact of the YPAR project on the co-researchers. The research questions include:

1. How do student-athletes describe their engagement in school?

2. How do student-athletes describe their engagement in sports?

3. How do student-athletes describe the teaching practices of good teachers?

4. How do student-athletes describe beneficial coaching practices of good coaches?

5. How do student-athletes perceive and envision a way of teaching and learning that improves their engagement?

6. In what ways does the process of YPAR emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engage the student-athlete co-researchers in the learning process?

Methodology

This study employs youth participatory action research (YPAR), which aligns with this study's theoretical framework by embodying the principles of progressive education (Dewey, 1938/2015) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Participatory action research (PAR) is both a research methodology and epistemology that redefines the role research has in the lives of the communities being studied. This methodology's primary focus is one of empowerment and collective action, in which formally trained researchers collaborate with members of communities that have largely been silenced or manipulated in the world of research to investigate issues that these communities directly experience (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). At the heart of PAR, the fundamental aim is "to bring the realities, voices, struggles, and triumphs of the

oppressed to the mainstream discourse around social issues" (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009, p. 2). Instead of focusing on the outcomes and findings of the research study, PAR emphasizes process and intentionality, inclusion and reflection (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Scorza et al., 2017).

This methodology privileges the perspectives of those rendered to the bottom of the hierarchy of power across society and aims to establish authentically democratic production and ownership of knowledge (Fals-Borda, 1991; Fine, 2018). PAR values experiential knowledge, and through an application of this lived experience, communities can "conduct research on their own experiences, and act as agents of change in issues that impact them directly" (Bautista et al., 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, this methodology seeks to "return to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems, as fully scientific, and the right to use this knowledge...as a guide in their own action" (Rahman, 1991, p. 15).

While traditional research operates within a rigid hierarchy of power, in which the researcher conducts studies *on* or *about* communities, PAR erases this hierarchy through projects *by* and *with* community members (Fine, 2018). Whereas in traditional research, the academic enters a community with the research topic, problem, questions, and methodology statically defined and the individuals within the community play the role of "object," PAR attempts to be collaborative and equitable in every sense. As co-researchers, members of the community are valued as equals in all parts of the project, from the formulation of research questions to the data analysis and conclusions (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fine, 2018; Jacquez & Goguen, 2016). They work with

formally educated researchers to identify a true issue that impacts their daily lives and draft research questions to properly investigate this issue. Community members and academic partners collect data in a culturally responsive manner, and the community owns the results of the inquiry process. Ultimately, this process follows the understanding that "the people most affected by a problem are not only capable of better understanding their realities, but are also the best equipped to address their struggles" (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009, p. 1).

Such a methodology can be particularly transformative for today's youth, as YPAR provides them the platform and opportunity to investigate their own reality with the intent to change it. Within the current education system, in which curriculum and pedagogical decisions are made largely based on standardized testing, disengagement and lack of motivation are rampant. In addition, student voices are rarely considered regarding the type of education they should have the opportunity to receive and enact (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Therefore, PAR must be enacted with youth to provide students an alternative to the educational norms they generally experience.

In reference to W.E.B. Du Bois's (1904) question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (as cited by Fine, 2018, p. 79), Fine argues that in PAR, those who are considered the "problem" act as researchers of the true problems around them. Within the current reality of the education system, students in general are considered the "problem" from the perspectives of policy, administration, and teachers. Students who do not make it in the education system are labeled as "drop outs" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015; Romero et al., 2008), putting the onus on students rather than examining the systemic norms and

issues that fail to ignite their interest and engagement, and ultimately push out the most marginalized students (Tuck et al., 2008). Because all youth, some more than others, are oppressed within the confines of this system, diverse groups of students have the opportunity to come together under one shared experience of oppression to seek change (Fine, 2018). In the process, differential impacts of gender, race, socio-economic status, and other identities will naturally arise as they affect youth experiences in education and society.

According to Rodríguez and Brown (2009), to honor the YPAR methodology, a research project must embody three main principles. First, the research and learning topics must "reflect and address the real-life problems, needs, desires, and experiences of youth researchers" (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 25). Secondly, the youth must genuinely participate in the inquiry and knowledge production through a dialogical process in which they can include themselves and their knowledge. Finally, YPAR must embody "a commitment to research and learning that aims to actively intervene into and transform knowledge and practices in ways that improve the lives of marginalized youth" (p. 30). While collegiate student-athletes are often afforded some privileges and support from academic systems (Benson, 2000), the perspectives of rural high school students and student-athletes as a whole are often marginalized in educational discourse. The specific needs of this youth community play little to no role in establishing the type of instruction or curriculum they receive. Therefore, this study focuses on centering the perspectives of rural high school student-athletes to explore the issues they face in

student engagement and ways to support their engagement in school. Together, the co-researchers and I worked to enact all three of these tenets.

In practice, YPAR is an application of progressive education and culturally relevant pedagogy. YPAR provides the platform for students to develop a critical consciousness of the injustices in their lives and the supported opportunity to change them. In PAR projects, oppressed communities engage in a process of inquiry in which they take a position of authority over their own experiences and work to transform their circumstances through their own praxis of reflection and action (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970/2000).

Method

Research site

The research site selected for this study is North Vine High School[1] in rural Northern California. North Vine High School is a public school with 1,616 students, coming from the city of North Vine and the surrounding small towns. North Vine is a city of approximately 15,000 residents that is located about two hours north of San Francisco. Although the city itself is relatively developed, many of the residents live in rural conditions outside of city limits. North Vine's economy is largely driven by agriculture and is home to numerous vineyards and wineries, ranging from large production to boutique family wineries. Additionally, the marijuana industry is prevalent in the economy and culture, which deeply affects the youth population socially. The community prides itself on its support of local, small businesses, but it also houses various large

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[1] Pseudonym.

warehouses, grocery, clothing, and sporting goods stores. The county's only community college is also located in North Vine. Due to its rural landscape and the recent years of drought, the entire surrounding area has been devastated by wildfires, beginning in 2017 and most recently in 2020. These fires have disrupted the economy and school system, as they yearly experience school closures due to active fires and dangerous levels of smoke, and many students have not been able to travel to school due to blocked roads. Such challenging conditions have strengthened the community as they support each other to meet their collective needs.

As a high school serving a rural population, many students must drive upward of 30 miles each direction to get to school for classes and extracurricular activities. The student body of North Vine High is 50% Latino, 41% White, 4% Native American, 3% mixed race, 1% Black, and 1% Asian (Public School Review, 2020). 65% of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. While North Vine High School ranks relatively well in academic performance, with a GreatSchools rating of 7/10 for College Readiness (GreatSchools, 2021), very rarely do students experience critical, culturally relevant pedagogy. Further, North Vine High School's GreatSchools Equity score is only 4/10, indicating that it underperforms in serving marginalized student populations. For a rural high school with a majority of students from marginalized populations, research on the efficacy of culturally relevant pedagogy is needed to encourage a shift in teachers' pedagogical practices.

Participants

This YPAR project had two types of participants -- 1) the YPAR co-research team; and 2) high school student-athletes. First, a small group of student-athletes collaborated directly with me as part of the YPAR Team, making decisions regarding every aspect of the study. Therefore, I refer to them as "co-researchers." The second type of participants was a larger group of 15 student-athletes who participated in either a one-on-one interview or a focus group that the co-researchers designed and conducted. I refer to this group as "participants" henceforth.
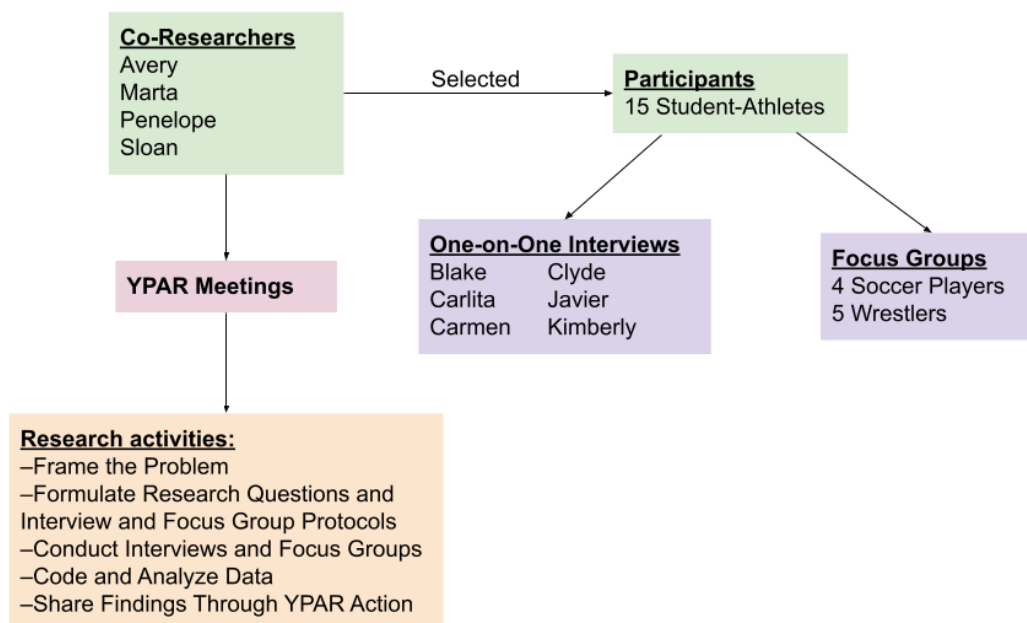
Figure 2. Participants and roles.

YPAR co-researchers

I selected the co-researchers from my former students from North Vine High School who were in 12th grade during data collection which took place from July to December 2021. All of the co-researchers have participated in at least one sport at North Vine High and, therefore, share an experience as student-athletes. Though at the time of data collection, I no longer worked at North Vine in any capacity, these are students with whom I spent the 2018-2019 academic year developing trusting, reciprocal relationships while integrating embodied activities and movement in their academic learning as their Spanish teacher. These relationships and shared history are crucial factors in establishing an equitable and productive co-research team in participatory research. Additionally, these students are those who have voiced dissatisfaction with their current educational experiences at the high school level. They have spent class time along with their own personal time to discuss with me their boredom and lack of interest in school due to the prevalent instruction methods and the negative treatment they receive from teachers. I have witnessed their behavior in class, their intellectual strengths, their unique personalities, and their passions for activities outside of the classroom. These students, among others, have inspired me to investigate ways to improve student engagement and create a more empowering educational experience.

Due to this research focus on the detrimental impact of traditional education practices on student engagement in contrast to the merits of culturally relevant and progressive education practices, I attempted to include co-researchers with a wide variety of educational experiences at the K-8 levels. Some attended mainstream public schools,

while others have attended a dual immersion program, a private Catholic school, and

Simons Charter School[2]. I intended for this diversity in past experiences to constitute a

complex lens through which these students could analyze their present experiences with

curriculum and pedagogical practices in a public high school. While all participants were

on a college preparatory track, based on their continued enrollment in Spanish classes[3],

some of them have performed at a very high level academically, whereas others have

performed at an average level, as measured by their overall GPA. Despite this elevated

track in academics, these students continue to have low motivation and engagement due

to the pedagogical practices of their teachers. Further, even those with a high GPA

continue to report feeling bored, stressed, and powerless in their classes.

In the initial planning stages of this study, I received confirmation from nine

student-athletes who wanted to work with me as co-researchers. Four of whom identify as

Latino student-athletes, one identifies as Eurasian, and four identify as White/Caucasian.

They encompassed a sample of students who ranged from earning a mixture of failing

and passing grades to getting straight A's and taking Advanced Placement (AP) classes.

Of these nine potential co-researchers, five attended at least one YPAR meeting. Four

co-researchers continued to participate through meeting seven, and for the remainder of

the study, three core co-researchers ran the interviews and focus groups, coded and

analyzed this data, and shared the findings with the community. The diversity of the

co-researchers diminished throughout the project, and I discuss this trend and strategies

to support sustained participation across all participants in Chapter V. In the sections that

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[2] Pseudonym.

[3] Passing two years of the same foreign language with a C grade or better fills the A-G requirement for freshman admission to UC and CSU institutions.

follow, I provide a profile of each of the four co-researchers who participated for an extended period of time, including demographic data that they provided. All names utilized for co-researchers are pseudonyms.

Marta. Marta is a Latina 18 year old who has played basketball throughout her life. She started playing basketball in recreational league, then played on the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) team, Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), middle, and high school. She played softball in high school as well. Martaa attended public elementary and middle schools. She is quiet and feels panicked when she has to talk in groups. In class during her freshman year, if she spoke, it was nearly a whisper, and I was strategic about when I asked for her verbal participation to avoid making her too uncomfortable. During her time of participating as a co-researcher, she actively participated and demonstrated significant cognitive engagement in all activities. Marta participated until the seventh meeting, after which point the co-researchers were tasked with interviewing their peers. Unfortunately, Marta completely stopped communicating with me about the project and did not get the experience of interviewing her peers, but I was very proud of how much she did participate.

Sloan. Sloan is an 18 year old White lesbian female who has a wide variety of experience across individual and team sports. She played basketball for 12 years, starting in recreational league, and then she joined the CYO team, AAU, middle school, and the freshman and junior varsity high school teams. Sloan also competed in the shot put for track and field all four years of high school. Looking for a change, Sloan wrestled for her senior year and made it to the State Championship. She attended a private Catholic

elementary school, and a public middle school. Sloan has not taken any Advanced Placement classes, but she has a 4.0 GPA overall in high school. Sloan does not take school too seriously, and she jokes around a lot of the time. We developed a strong teacher-student relationship in my Spanish I class during her freshman year. After graduating, she plans to either join the Air Force or attend community college in the Bay Area.

Avery. Avery is an 18 year old student-athlete who has played high school volleyball and tennis. She played recreational league basketball and soccer as a small child and played competitive club volleyball from seventh to tenth grade. She also played on the junior varsity high school team freshman year and on varsity her sophomore year. Due to COVID-19, she did not participate in sports her junior year, and she chose to try something new when she went back to school in person, joining the varsity tennis team for her senior year. She identifies as White/Caucasian. She attended a private Catholic school throughout elementary and middle school and is now among the top of her class with a weighted GPA of 4.36 (3.90 unweighted). Despite her exquisite academic record, Avery continues to report how boring and overwhelming the school experience is, arguing for the need for change. Avery plans to attend a four year college directly after she graduates from high school.

Penelope. Penelope is a 17 year old student-athlete who identifies as a White female. She attended a public elementary and middle school. She has played soccer throughout her life, starting in the recreational league when she was seven. She played nine years on a traveling club team and has played on the varsity team all four years of

high school. Additionally, she was invited to play on a more competitive club team in a large city in Sonoma County during the last year of high school. The athletic ability she displays is quite nearly that of college level play, but due to her limited exposure in the rural setting, she did not get recruited. While she is an excellent athlete, Penelope also is Associated Student Body President and has straight A's and has a weighted GPA of 4.24. Penelope was a shining student in my Spanish I class during her freshman year, and she was always eager to learn and deeply enjoyed the embodied activities I utilized in class. Crucially, of all the co-researchers, Penelope has always been the most vocal about her boredom, stress, and lack of confidence or ownership over her experiences in school, which makes her an interesting perspective to include in this study. She plans to attend a four year university following graduation.

High school student-athletes (participants)

The second group of participants in the study, to whom I refer as 'participants', were the 15 student-athletes who participated in the one-on-one interviews or focus groups. The selection criteria for their participation included that they were 12th grade students who had participated in at least one sport at North Vine High School. The participants came from many of the same sports as the co-researchers since they recruited their peers; these sports include basketball, soccer, wrestling, golf, and tennis. The co-researchers used convenience sampling to recruit participants, asking their teammates or friends who are also student-athletes to participate. They chose to recruit in this way because they believed they would feel more comfortable interviewing people they already know, and the participants would be more likely to candidly share. This sample of

participants included 15 student-athletes of diverse gender and ethnic identities, six of whom participated in one-on-one interviews, and the other nine participated in one of two focus groups.

Semi-structured interviews. Sloan, Avery, and Penelope each interviewed two student-athletes in one-on-one semi-structured interviews, for a total of six interviews. These participants included four female-identifying and two male-identifying 12th grade student-athletes. The co-researchers assigned them pseudonyms. Carlita started playing basketball in kindergarten and has played throughout high school; this is her primary sport. She also played softball in middle school and volleyball from fifth through 10th grades. She identifies as half Native and half Latina. Carmen identifies as Latina, and she wrestled on the high school team her freshman and sophomore years. Blake identifies as White, and she grew up playing many sports, including basketball, soccer, and volleyball. Volleyball was her main sport through middle school and freshman year, but COVID-19 interrupted this indoor sport significantly. She started to play on the high school golf team in 11th grade and also played her senior year. Clyde identifies as White and grew up playing basketball and football, but once he entered middle school, he started wrestling. Throughout high school, he has participated in wrestling and football. Kimberly is a White-identifying student-athlete who participated in softball, soccer, tennis, ballet, and taekwondo throughout her childhood. At the high school level, she has played two years of tennis. Finally, Javier identifies as Latino, and he started playing all the recreational league sports, including soccer, basketball, and baseball, and then he focused on soccer

primarily starting at age eight. He played soccer through his junior year, and then started

playing football his senior year for a change.

Focus groups. In total, nine student-athletes participated in the focus groups. One

focus group included four female-identifying student-athletes from the varsity soccer

team. Of this group, one identifies as Latina, and three identify as White. In the other

focus group, five female-identifying members of the wrestling team participated,

including four participants who identify as Latina and one who identifies as African

American. The co-researchers did not complete descriptive profiles of each of the focus

group participants. In the findings chapter, these participants are identified as "Focus

group participants" rather than specifying their specific name.

<div align="center">**Researcher's Positionality and Role**</div>

I have always experienced a powerful connection to my embodied self. I feel most

myself, most alive, when I experience and learn through my breath, body sensations, and

movement. Sports, yoga, and meditation play central roles in my life, as I develop my

sense of self, connection to others, and my reflective lens through these practices. I am a

trained Vinyasa yoga teacher, I attend Vipassana meditation retreats, and I have always

played sports every chance I get. My relationships to these practices interlace and

combine to create my cultural identity and perspective, but most importantly, they

connect with the inner workings of my soul. Our school system has disembodied

education (Waite, 2017), operating within the logics of Cartesian dualism, which limits its

possibility of providing the space for authentic knowledge production, blending academic

learning with the passionate souls of our students. As an educator, I try to tap into the

pieces of students' passions and souls that make them feel empowered, engaged, and motivated to grow and create. Therefore, this research project holds immense personal value for me as an individual with a passion for sports and movement, as an educator who cares deeply for the success, well-being, and empowerment of my students, and as an academic who understands the potential for increased representation in research to fight oppression and promote positive change.

As a child, I had the privilege of participating in a variety of extracurricular activities. I grew up as an active member of the local 4-H club where I learned the value and honor in community service and youth leadership. I took classical piano lessons and played stand-up bass to earn money with my brother. I started working at my family's grocery store when I was ten years old, stocking the shelves and eventually taking over the bookkeeping as I got older. Above all else, I played basketball. I played on the playground with my older brother and his friends, and as a first grader I pretended to be older to play on a third-grade team because they would not let me participate in organized basketball at my age. Throughout my adolescence, I played on various competitive traveling teams, and the varsity coach at North Vine High School approached me as an eighth grader to play for him in the summer and as a freshman. I graduated from North Vine High School in 2010. I played varsity basketball, junior varsity and varsity volleyball, and varsity tennis in my four years at this school.

Throughout my childhood, I was also fortunate to do well in school. My primary discourse aligned well with academic discourse (Gee, 1987) and, thus, I had little difficulty in acquiring this powerful form of speaking and engaging in dominant spaces. I

can honestly say that I did not have many educational experiences that were incredibly challenging for me through high school. Wholeheartedly, I recognize that this represents the privilege I have as part of a formally educated family who values traditional literacy practices, school engagement, work ethic, and experience-based learning and development.

I taught Spanish at North Vine High School off and on from 2018 to 2021. I loved returning to my community as a teacher to support the community from which I came. Whether my students were among the top in their class or skate by with average grades, the shared the same prevailing sentiments about school; it is boring, they are stressed, subject-matter is arbitrary and useless in daily life, and teachers act as authoritarian leaders. But they love playing sports. They choose to participate in basketball, soccer, volleyball, track and field, golf, and wrestling because they love it. It is an outlet for their stress, a source of fun and empowerment, and ultimately, a responsibility they choose to take on because of the positive outcomes they directly experience. These student-athletes are just like me in that we live for sports and movement. Our passion for playing the game moves and inspires us to strive and grow.

As an "insider" of this community, I am passionate about enacting YPAR with these young athletes to explore their experiences in education and envision a pedagogy that can engage them more effectively in the classroom. From an early age, I already understood there was great potential for this type of education, and I feel strongly that young student-athletes are the best equipped to create this change based on their lived experiences and passions.

I have developed and maintained strong teacher-student relationships with the co-researcher participants of this project. They know that I care about them as people above all else. We have reciprocally shared pieces of our lives to humanize the educational experience and develop a mutual trust in the learning space. I have listened as they voiced their concerns and frustrations with their school experiences, giving them an outlet to critique their teachers' pedagogical practices and the oppressive norms prevalent in public schools. They have taught me about the current struggles adolescents face and helped me develop a humanizing pedagogical praxis. I was not teaching at North Vine High School in a formal capacity during the time of data collection, which I hope created even more trust within the co-research team as I acted as a supporting player, present to assist them as they engaged in knowledge sharing and creating meaningful change.

As an academic researcher, I acted as a leader from within this community, following the established norms and interests of the group (Dewey, 1938/2015) to guide and support the student-athletes in their own process of knowledge production, discovery, reflection, and growth of skills that will positively serve them and their communities. Throughout each of these phases of the study, I played a guiding role, providing a space for the co-researchers to investigate and transform their reality to improve their own experiences in education (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009). Ultimately, I hoped that the project would provide "a space for young people to engage in critical examinations of schooling inequities, dialogues from which they are typically excluded" (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 26).

Ethical Considerations

I obtained approval from the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) and formal permission from the administration of North Vine High School before conducting any data collection. Following this approval, all co-researchers and participants received Parental Consent and Child Assent forms with all information regarding the methodology, procedures, data collection tools, timeline and time commitment, and the potential benefits of participation. As a part of these agreements, the participants had the opportunity to select a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality or allow the co-research team to select one for them. All participants and their parents signed these documents before the data collection began.

The essential characteristics of PAR help to ensure ethical research practice by combatting traditional research norms to be equitable and collaborative throughout the duration of a study. I recognize that as a previous teacher of the co-researchers, a hierarchy of power had been established in our relationship. Throughout my time as their teacher, I attempted to diminish this hierarchy, but as an Educator-Researcher, I paid particular attention to these power dynamics. To mitigate this issue, I maintained open dialogue with the co-researchers to support the realization of a study that best served this youth community's interests. We collaborated to identify problems, formulate research questions, design data collection tools, code transcriptions, and analyze data by themes to prepare them to share the findings with the teachers at North Vine High School, as each of these elements are crucial to the YPAR methodology.

I understand YPAR as a transformative educational experience and conducted myself as a critical educator and facilitator to support the needs of the participants. Crucially, I engaged in a praxis of action and reflection, embodying the tenets of progressive education and critical pedagogy. I attempted to lead as a fair authority from within the group (Dewey, 1938/2015) with cultural synthesis and cooperation at the center (Freire, 1970/2000). In keeping with PAR and culturally relevant pedagogy's support of reciprocal action and humility, I also shared candidly with the participants my personal experiences in sports and academics at North Vine High School, as well as the current challenges in my own life throughout the research process.

Confidentiality within the entire group of participants was of utmost importance. I asked the co-researchers, who in turn asked the participants, to detail their past and present experiences with their teachers and coaches. The participants and co-researchers critiqued pedagogical practices and discussed how these elements have impacted their engagement and performance in each space. Thus, it was crucial to maintain the group's trust from the beginning, ensuring that all participants respected the norms of confidentiality, so the participants received no negative consequences from their teachers or coaches for their honesty and openness.

In addition, it was important for me to communicate the potential benefits of participation to the co-researchers. They had the opportunity to develop invaluable skills, experience, and knowledge that they have not had the opportunity to gain in mainstream high school education. This unique experience will likely support their efforts to gain acceptance to higher education institutions and support them in their future work

opportunities. Furthermore, I hope that participation in this project will improve their academic engagement and motivation to pursue higher education or other avenues of leadership while continuing to center marginalized voices and promote change.

Overview of the YPAR Project

I worked with a small group of youth co-researchers who attend North Vine High School and identify as student-athletes to investigate the engagement of rural high school student-athletes in both academics and athletics. To explore these experiences and center student-athlete voices for positive change, the co-researchers and I designed and conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups with their student-athlete peers. The co-researchers and I analyzed the collected data and created a plan of action to disperse these findings and tools to the teachers of the school community.

We met a total of 13 times as a co-research team, and each of the co-researchers interviewed and ran focus groups with their participants individually. Participation in this study was not associated with a particular class or class credit, so scheduling our meetings after school hours presented quite a challenge, as all participants were participating in sports during at least part of the project, and many of them had jobs. During the summer, meetings lasted for about two hours, while those during the school year were shortened to accommodate the co-researchers' busy school and sports schedules, lasting only 90 minutes. The co-researchers and I also completed some of the work outside of our meetings to prepare material to discuss as a group (e.g., transcription, coding, presentation prep, etc.).

As a team, we collaborated to define the areas of investigation and develop the interview and focus group protocols (See Appendix C and D), and the co-researchers individually collected data to center student-athlete voices in the research and accurately document their experiences and ideas for change. The interviews were used to examine the elements of both schooling and sports participation that have differentially impacted their levels of engagement as well as their academic and personal growth. Focus group sessions were refined subsequently to investigate these topics more specifically, looking particularly at the challenges of being a student-athlete and ideas for change, including their interest in learning academics through sports and movement. We examined how classroom and sports pedagogies, social relationships with peers and leaders, the classroom curriculum, and embodied learning and knowing shape the participants' engagement in each space. We provided an opportunity for student-athletes to envision a more engaging, integrated education in which student-athletes would actively choose to participate.

The YPAR co-research team analyzed the data together and subsequently shared the findings and recommendations to transform school to better engage student-athletes in their learning with the teachers of North Vine High School. This crucial phase of the YPAR project was defined by the co-researchers based on how they believed the information would have the greatest impact for the student-athlete youth community.

Once my work with the co-research team was complete, I analyzed the data collected from audio recordings and field notes of the YPAR meetings and the presentation of findings to answer the research meta-question and add the co-researchers'

perspectives to the richness of findings for the five research questions about student-athlete experiences and engagement in sports and school. These data sources provided a picture of both the initial perspectives of the co-researchers to contextualize their trajectories throughout their participation in this project and the ways in which the YPAR experience impacted them as learners.

This YPAR project intended to blend research and authentic learning to spark curiosity, confidence, and conviction in the co-researchers and participants alike, providing the context for them to envision a shift in the way student-athletes are invited to learn academics. In the process, this project filled the research gap in YPAR and embodied culturally relevant pedagogy enacted in rural settings.

Data Collection

The data collection period lasted from July 2021 through December 2021. This section details the data sources and data types. Data was collected in the YPAR meetings via audio recordings, field notes, Google slides, and materials produced by the co-researchers through collaboration. The co-researchers then collected their own data through one-on-one interviews and focus groups. In our 13 training meetings as a co-research team, we engaged in a pedagogical praxis that embodied the principles of YPAR while designing the methods and preparing materials for data collection and the action at the end of the project. The following chart summarizes the content of each of the phases of work we completed as a co-research team. In this section, I describe the pedagogical, processual elements of each phase of data collection, while the specific details of data analysis are discussed in the section below.

Figure 3: Data Collection					
Data Source	**Data Type**	**Participants**	**Quantity/ Length**	**Timeline (2021)**	**RQ**
YPAR Trainings/ Meetings	Field notes and audio recordings	Co-research team (with Educator-Researcher)	13 sessions, 1.5 - 2 hours each	July - December	1-6
Interviews and Focus Groups	Audio recording	Co-research team will: a) Conduct 6 interviews, two for each co-researcher b) Conduct two focus groups with 8 student-athletes (Two groups of four).	a) 6 interviews, ranging from 11-37 minutes each b) Focus groups, two groups of four, 20 minutes each	October - November	1-5
Co-researcher findings presentation & debrief	Video and audio recording	Educator-Researcher will observe co-researchers as they present & debrief afterwards as a YPAR co-research Team	One presentation, 35 minute debrief	12/14/21	5-6

Phase 1: Introduction–YPAR and research topic

In YPAR projects, it is the responsibility of the formally trained researcher to understand how to introduce the methodology, potential data collection methods and tools, and data analysis process to students in an accessible manner (Fals-Borda, 1991). In the introduction phase, I provided enough information, structure, and suggestions for

the students to feel supported and grounded in the processual aspects of conducting their own research project while establishing that they had ultimate freedom and ownership over how they decided to investigate and address the issues facing student-athletes (Mirra et. al, 2016). Accordingly, the initial step in carrying out this research involved teaching the students about the tenets of the YPAR methodology, providing opportunities for co-researchers to reflect on their experiences in sports and school, exploring research methods, and providing space for students to ask questions and practice these methods with my guidance and support so they could specify the methods that best suited the research problem.

The first meetings with the co-researchers were facilitated similarly to the first days of a class. I provided a general overview of why we were working together, the benefits of this work for the co-researchers as well as for me in my doctoral studies, and the roles we would all play to support our collective work. Additionally, we engaged in icebreakers, movement-based team-building activities, drawing activities, and group discussions to develop a community among the members of the team. Finally, we collaboratively agreed upon the norms and responsibilities to which all co-research team members must hold themselves accountable. I offered the expectations that I utilize in my pedagogical practice, which I call The Super Six (See Appendix A) as a starting point and invited the co-researchers to alter, edit, or completely change them as they begin to take ownership of the space.

I provided background information on the methodology and epistemology of YPAR. Accompanying this introduction, I described various data collection methods that

the co-researchers could design for this study. I assigned sections of texts by Dewey (1902/2011, 1938/2015) and Ladson-Billings (1995), and we read and analyzed them as a group to establish a shared understanding of the theoretical lens I used to conceptualize this study. We engaged in discussions around their own experiences in sports and school to define the research problem.

In these meetings, we utilized embodied and art-based activities to build community and reflect on past experiences in school and sports. We played a movement mimicking and memorization game called "I Move, You Move" to infuse some silliness into our work together, balancing out the challenging theoretical text reading we completed in the first meetings. Additionally, we did a "Follow the Leader" activity to explore the co-researchers' comfort level in leading, following, and collaborating when in conflict with a partner. Following these movement activities, we debriefed to reflect on their impact and how they connect to and represent the experiences the co-researchers would have in this research study. Finally, the co-researchers and I reflected on our experiences in school and sports through a "Drawing Your Experience" activity, analyzing the images each of us created, and drawing conclusions about the common problematic trends the student-athlete population experiences in education. Each of these activities served to establish an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy within our YPAR meetings.

In the "Drawing Your Experience" activity, I provided two flip charts, titled "Sports" and "School". I asked the co-researchers to depict pieces of their experiences in each setting using only drawings. We spent about 20 minutes drawing, and then I asked

the co-researchers to examine the images they had created. We then discussed each

drawing and how we interpreted their meanings. In the final step, we wrote on post-it

notes the main takeaways about our collective experiences in school and sports, sticking

the post-its around the edge of each flip chart. From this activity, we established the

research problems we sought to address in this project, rooted in the co-researchers'

experiences in school and sports.
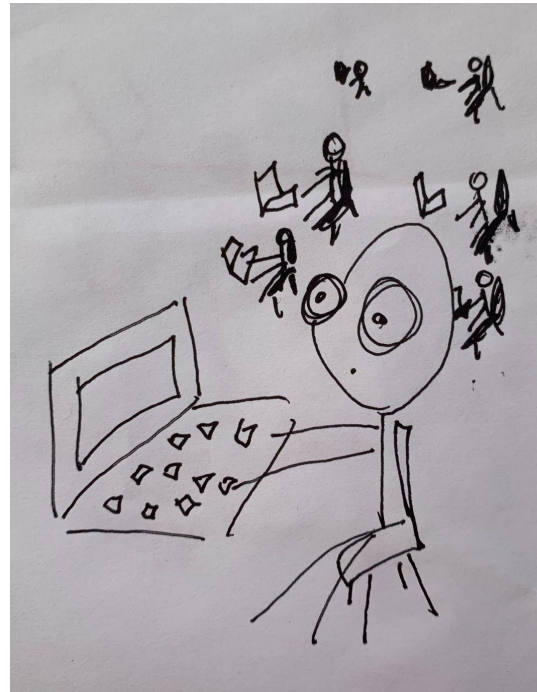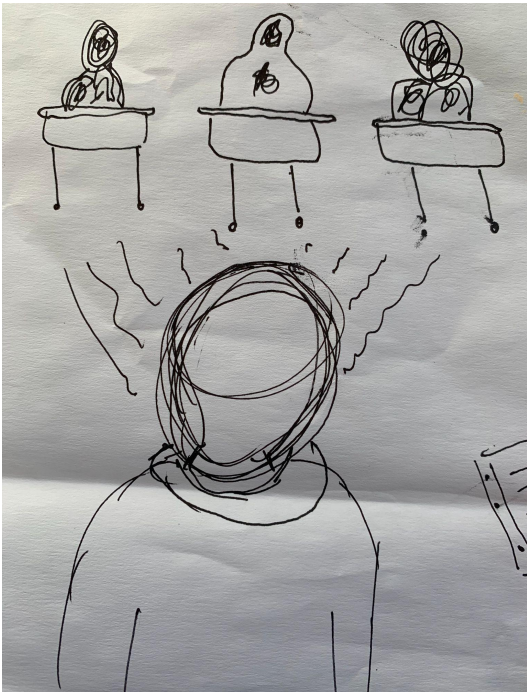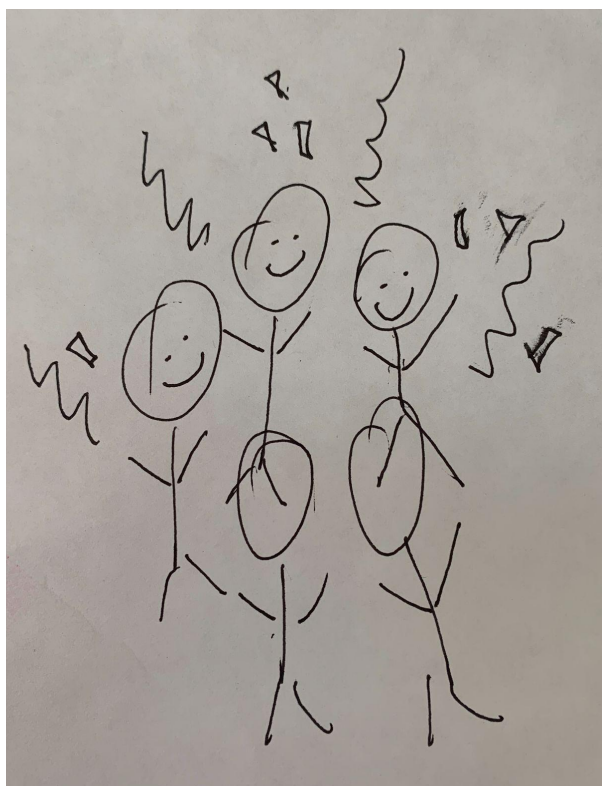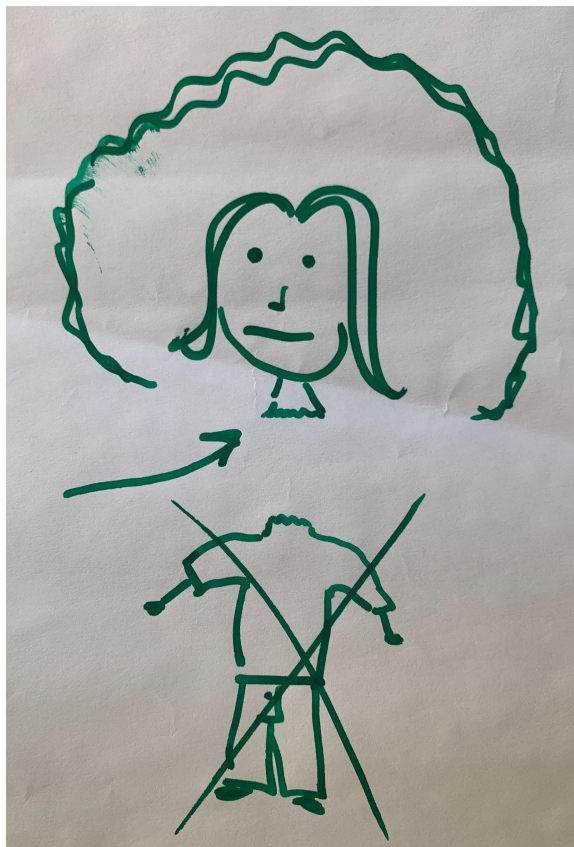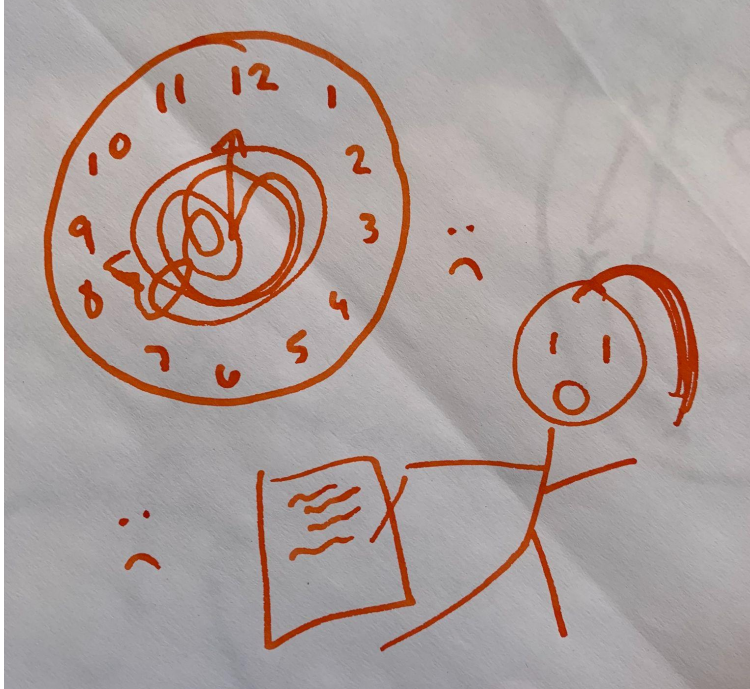
Figure 4: Experiences in School, as depicted in "Drawing Your Experience" activity

(Co-research team, 8/7/21)
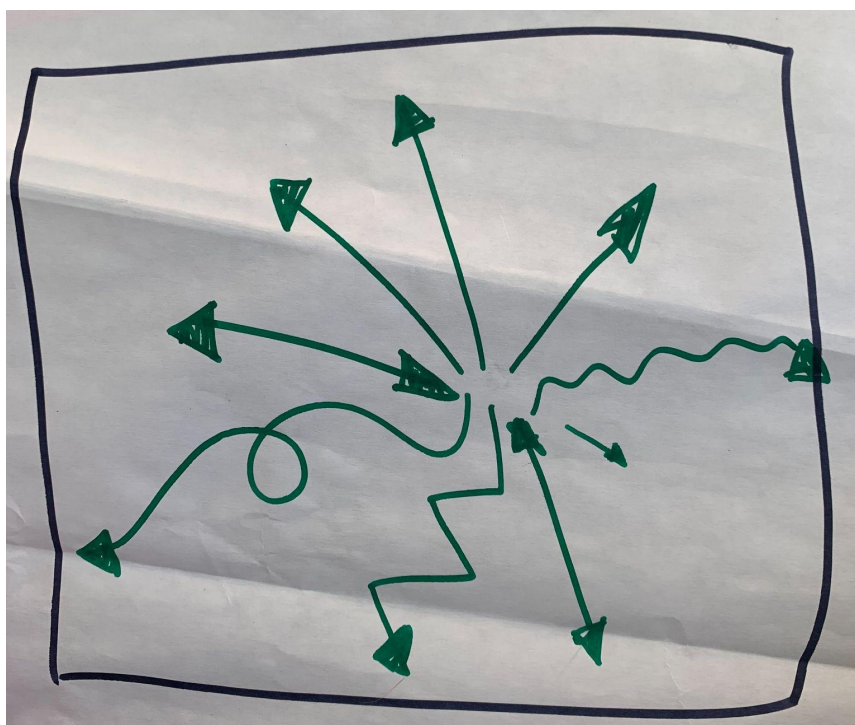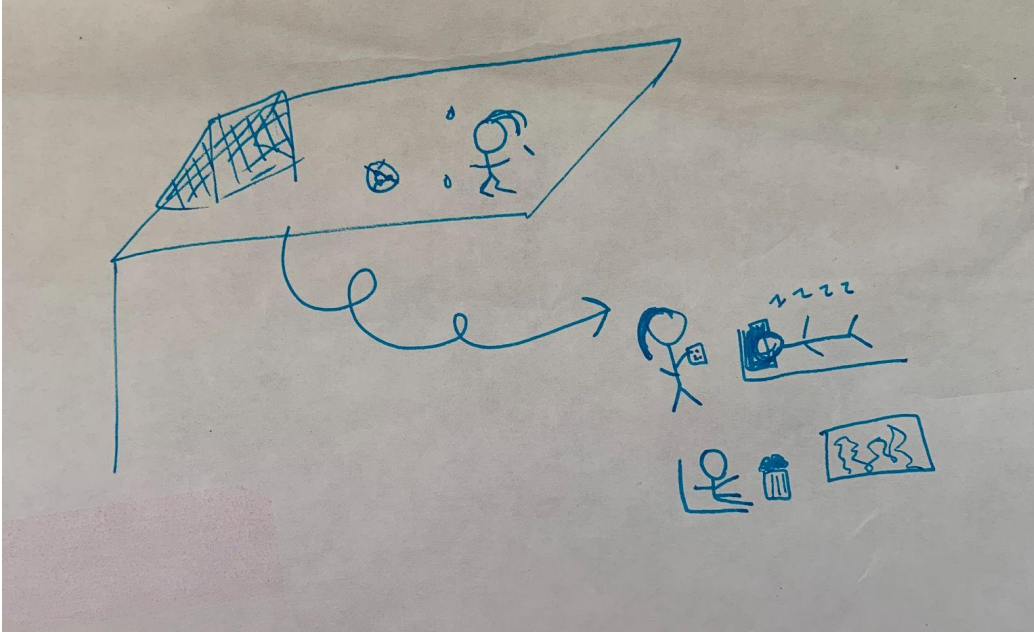
Figure 5: Experiences in Sports, as depicted in "Drawing Your Experience" activity

(Co-research team, 8/7/21)

The introductory phase ended with the formulation of research questions. Instead of providing step-by-step directions for formulating research questions, I provided minimal guidance, stating that they are the umbrella questions that guide the study, and asked them to experiment to come up with a few questions each. This generative process involved the use of flip charts on which each co-researcher brainstormed their questions, and then we used them to discuss how to edit them precisely to address the main themes related to issues in their school experiences that they had identified in the "Drawing Your Experience" activity. In this process, the co-researchers relied on their own knowledge and curiosities to establish a direction they wanted to take this project. As the Educator-Researcher, I ultimately approved the initial research questions, with the understanding that they would evolve as we explored the topic and examined the data.

Phase 2: One-on-one interviews

Once the co-research team established five research questions that examined

engagement in school and sports and perceptions of the practices of teachers and coaches,

we collaborated to create interview questions that they would be asking their

student-athlete peers in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. In this process, we

brainstormed various questions and collaborated to refine them, utilizing a topic guide.

Once we had generated ample questions for each research question, I paired up the

co-researchers and asked each of them to choose two questions to test out while

practicing interviewing their partner. In this practice, the interviewer practiced utilizing

active listening, non-verbal acknowledgement, and follow up questions to make the

interview participant feel more comfortable and provide in depth responses to each

question. During the process, they were tasked to determine if they thought each question

was easy enough to answer with meaningful responses or if it needed to be tweaked or

eliminated from the list. This practice was particularly helpful for me to understand the

types of questions to which high school seniors feel comfortable and able to respond, in

terms of content or wording. This phase of the pre-data collection part of the project was

the co-researchers' favorite, as it was interactive and supported them to develop the new

skill of interviewing. This practice was also crucial in supporting their confidence as they

went into the actual interviews with their peers, as they felt well prepared and

knowledgeable of the topic and intention of each question.

Penelope, Avery, and Sloan each interviewed two of their peers, for a total of six

interviews, which ranged from 10 to 37 minutes. The co-researchers chose to conduct

their interviews alone, as they thought that the participants would feel more comfortable to share candidly without me present. They audio recorded the interviews on their phones and sent me a copy. Following the interview process, we debriefed to provide each of them the chance to reflect on how they felt about that new experience. I then utilized Otter software to transcribe and edit the interviews for them to be coded by the co-research team.

In this phase, the co-researchers designed the protocol, practiced interviewing, conducted the interviews for data collection, and coded the transcripts with my instruction. The preliminary coding and analysis of the interview data helped to determine the need for focus groups to address particular themes in more detail. The details of this coding and analysis process are discussed in the Data Analysis section below.

Phase 3: Focus groups

Sloan and Penelope demonstrated interest in conducting focus groups when we were discussing methods as a team. However, we agreed that starting with one-on-one interviews felt more comfortable, especially for Marta, who communicated that she is shy in groups, and would be a good starting point. After collecting interview data, Sloan and Penelope continued to demonstrate interest in completing focus groups. At a YPAR meeting with only the two of them in attendance, we developed a focus group protocol to examine three main themes: experience as a student-athlete, engagement in school, and interest in learning academics through movement and sports. Additionally, based on the reflection from the preliminary findings that embodied culturally relevant pedagogy was

foreign to the participants, the protocol included a description of the theoretical framework guiding this project, followed by questions regarding the participants' interest in learning through such a pedagogical practice.

Sloan and Penelope recruited focus group participants from wrestling and soccer respectively. Each focus group lasted for about 20 minutes. Sloan and Penelope both audio recorded their focus groups, but unfortunately, Sloan's phone malfunctioned, and the recording did not pick up any of the audio. She wrote down notes of what the participants shared to capture overall takeaways and particular responses to questions. In this phase of the study, Sloan and Penelope gained invaluable experience with another data collection method, and they did so voluntarily. This process included reflecting on the interview experience, formulating questions, recruiting participants, conducting the focus groups, and integrating these data into the data collected in the interviews.

Phase 4: Data analysis

After we completed the data collection, we utilized two-step coding to get to know the data the co-researchers collected. We examined the codes that emerged in the data that were written on color-coordinated post-its and placed on flip chart pages for each research question. Next, in pairs, Avery, Sloan, Penelope, and I looked for patterns and commonalities to identify three to five main themes that answer each research question. We manipulated the position of the post-its to test out various groupings and discuss the significance of each, even exploring whether the themes actually answered different research questions than we had originally thought. Then, we labeled the groups with a potential subheading. Based on the subheading, we discussed ways in which we

could further group the themes together or if we needed to break down a theme into smaller parts to highlight the most pertinent findings. This process involved work in pairs and full group discussion to identify themes that were the most illustrative of what the participants shared. As a YPAR project, this phase of the research acted as both a crucial part of the data collection, as I examined the ways in which the co-researchers engaged in the process, and analysis of the data, which is discussed in the Data Analysis section.

Phase 5: Plan action and share findings

The last two YPAR meetings were devoted to organizing the co-research team's plan for taking action to intervene in their oppressive reality to change it (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). The co-researchers determined that they wanted to share the findings with the teaching staff at North Vine High School during lunch. We coordinated with our contact at the school to do the presentation in the same classroom we had utilized to work throughout the duration of the project, which was the Leadership classroom. The co-researchers designed a Google Slides presentation, much like the format of a conference presentation. They selected quotes from the data to illustrate each finding and center the voices of their student-athlete peers. They practiced the presentation as a group, and I took notes on areas that we could adjust and improve to get across the message more clearly. I also provided tips on public speaking in general, such as how to prepare notes, balancing the information displayed on the slides with what they verbally share, eye contact, and trusting in their knowledge of the material.

Finally, the co-researchers shared the findings to a group of 10 teachers. I video-recorded their presentation that lasted 10 minutes, as well as the question and

answer portion that followed. The teachers demonstrated interest in the findings the three

co-researchers presented, which made them feel supported and confident (Sloan, YPAR

meeting, 12/14/21). Following the presentation, we had a debrief session for a half hour

to reflect on the experience of sharing the findings, as well as the experience participating

in YPAR overall. We concluded with their summaries of what change they would like to

see in the way student-athletes are invited and expected to learn in school, as well as

discussing potential next steps for sharing the findings with the broader community.

Researcher journals

I had originally planned for the co-researchers to keep individual journals

throughout the data collection process. In the initial phase of the project, they answered

reflection prompts that coincided with the group activities and discussions we had. I

offered prompts to help guide their reflections and invited them to respond in narrative

form, notes, sketches, poetry, or any other method they felt most appropriate for each

entry. As we progressed in the project, the group activities took over the majority of our

time in the YPAR meetings. Therefore, these journals served as a means through which

the co-researchers processed their thinking, but they did not serve as a data source for

analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process fell into two categories, including: (a) data analysis *with*

the co-research team, answering the research questions they had defined, and (b) my data

analysis of the entire YPAR project, answering meta-research question 6. As a

co-research team, data analysis was integrated into the YPAR meetings through our

pedagogical activities and dialogues. To streamline the research process for the co-research team, I utilized Otter transcription software for the initial transcription of each interview audio recording and the focus group audio recording. I then edited these transcriptions to more accurately capture the words of each participant. Avery, Sloan, and Penelope then completed our version of a two-step coding process to extract and refine prevalent themes from these transcriptions. In this process, each of the research questions was assigned a highlighter color, and the co-researchers and I highlighted the significant portions of the transcripts that addressed each research question with the corresponding color. Then, we wrote a name for the code in the margins, and then wrote the code name on a post-it of the corresponding color and stuck it on the flip chart page for that question. After reading through the transcript, the co-researchers did a second pass through to underline and label any parts of the data that they deemed interesting or important that perhaps did not respond to a particular research question. This second step aided in adjusting the research questions to align more naturally with the data the student-athletes shared. For example, the research question: *In what ways do student-athletes experience support from teachers?* evolved to be: *How do student-athletes describe the teaching practices of good teachers?* Without the second step of this coding process, this refinement process would have been more challenging, or we may have missed important findings in the data. This iterative coding process began during data collection, after the initial interviews with participants. We used the preliminary codes to guide our creation of the focus group protocol and continue to be refined throughout the project to document and analyze the incremental development that YPAR promotes in the co-researchers (Ali

et al., 2020). We analyzed these thematic findings through the lens of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy to answer the research questions.

In the meta-research data analysis that I conducted individually, I enacted this same transcription and two-step coding process to review the transcripts of the YPAR meeting recordings. As previously discussed, YPAR is both a methodology and a pedagogy (Scorza et al., 2017), and the data analysis I conducted individually largely examined its role as the latter to behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engage the co-researchers in the learning process (research question 6). While my primary focus was on answering this meta-research question, as I reviewed the data from the YPAR meetings, it became apparent that the co-researchers also provided invaluable insight on the first five research questions. Their perspectives supported and complemented the perspectives that the student-athlete participants shared. Therefore, I share the findings based on interview and focus group data from the participants as well as the YPAR meeting data from the co-researchers to add to the richness of the data.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this YPAR project, a group of high school senior student-athlete co-researchers, Sloan, Avery, Penelope, and Marta, explored their experiences and perspectives of student-athlete engagement in sports and school through their five month participation. With my support and facilitation, they developed and evolved five research questions that they felt most directly addressed the problems they personally experience in their public high school education as members of the student-athlete community. They interviewed six of their student-athlete peers and conducted two focus groups, after which we collaborated to code and extract prevalent themes that answer each research question. Additionally, the co-researchers shared their own experiences as student-athletes in our nearly weekly YPAR meetings, which are also included in these findings. The way these findings are presented include the themes that the co-research team extracted in a collaborative and iterative process, which were then presented to a group of teachers.

In this chapter, I present the findings of this YPAR project, answering all five research questions that the co-research team investigated. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section answers the research questions related to student-athletes experiences in the classroom, which include: How do student-athletes describe their engagement in school? And how do student-athletes describe the teaching practices of good teachers? The findings suggest that student-athletes experience an abundance of passive learning and repetition in school, while subject-matter, interactive learning, and certain practices of teachers can positively impact student engagement. In the second section, I examine the findings that answer the research questions about student-athlete

experiences in sports, including: How do student-athletes describe their engagement in sports? And how do student-athletes describe beneficial coaching practices of coaches? Based on the data collected, the co-researchers and I found that engagement in sports comes from the constant use of mind and body, the social aspects of sports, and the qualities and practices of coaches. Finally, the third section focuses on the findings answering the question: How do student-athletes perceive and envision a way of teaching and learning that improves their engagement? According to these findings, student-athletes desire more community building and interactive activities, a focus on student learning rather than scoring, changing up routines, and integration of sports and movement in academic learning.

Section 1: Current Student-Athlete Experiences in School

Prevalence of passive learning and repetition in school

The data from student-athletes who participated in this project revealed that the overwhelming sentiment toward school is that the prevalence of passive learning activities makes school overwhelmingly boring. While this was the first issue the co-researchers shared in the early stages of the project, it also was reflected in the interviews that they conducted with their peers. Interview participants and co-researchers shared a lack of interest and engagement when sitting constantly and listening to long lectures without breaking them up with any more active learning activities. Blake shared that, "It's definitely boring to sit down and take notes, especially for like 90 minutes straight. That's something I do a lot in like history this year and last year, and just sitting in a dark classroom and writing down notes for like an hour or longer straight is

definitely boring" (Blake, 11/15/21, interview). When asked which parts of school they find boring, all four participants in a focus group agreed, saying, "Literally everything. All of it" (Aubrey, 12/1/21, focus group). Primarily, these passive, boring activities include lectures, note-taking, and watching videos in class that "don't mean anything, and you're never gonna use in life" (Aubrey, 12/1/21, focus group). Moreover, the participants shared that passively listening to teachers go through bullet points on slides leads them to forget the information nearly immediately (Cheyenne, 12/1/21, focus group).

Not only are the activities boring and ineffective, but the student-athletes conveyed frustration with the trudging, repetitive structures and processes of their schooling. In describing the general nature of her schoolwork, Penelope, one of the co-researchers, emotionally stated that "It's just like, getting the paper and then having to, like, just do the homework, turn it back in, do the same thing every day is just awfulness" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). Blake echoed this as she expressed that "when you get into a routine of the same thing, every single day is really boring, and you just don't like, you just know what's gonna happen. You're just like, dreading it because you just know" (11/15/21, interview). Both Penelope and Blake highlighted the boredom that originates from repetitive processes that become so routine that their emotional and cognitive engagement diminish. All potential for excitement, learning something new, or thinking and interacting with peers in fresh, interesting ways dissipates as they go through the motions (Javier, 11/2/21) to get good grades.

Furthermore, student-athletes consistently reported that they experience nearly zero embodied pedagogy in their classes. When asked about how they use their body in school, they responded with a mark of confusion, as the concept of an embodied learning experience remains foreign to them. Javier responded with complete surprise, questioning, "My body in school? Oh, what the hell? I dunno, freshman PE? I mean, I space out a lot, and my body goes numb a lot of the time, so you know, I have to just readjust and refocus" (Javier, 11/2/21, interview). He effectively stated that his body is completely separate from his experiences in his academic classes, as his body even "goes numb" when he is sitting in his chair, passively receiving information. The primary mention of the inclusion of the body or movement in school was either sitting in a chair, raising a hand, or in physical education or Bigger Faster Stronger (BFS), a weight training elective class. The absence of integration of the body in the academic experience became apparent when student-athletes identified when they had, in fact, experienced some movement in their classes, as in his Scrubs[4] class, Clyde (11/15/21) and his classmates were required to stand up when anyone walked through the door and had to wait to be seated by the teacher. Additionally, Sloan, a co-researcher shared a memory of her geometry class, reminiscing, "I remember that time we walked around and took a little triangle to buildings, but I don't remember that time where I sat in class and did nothing" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 11/17/21). Clyde and Sloan described this miniscule level of integration of movement in learning as engaging, which highlights the missed

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[4] Scrubs is an elective course that provides an introduction to the medical field. Students learn about jobs in health care and emergency response, first aid, and basic anatomy, and they get their CPR certification.

potential of leveraging movement as a fundamental instructional and pedagogical tool to improve student engagement in the learning process.

Overall, the experiences of student-athletes in the classroom are filled with a baseline of passivity, boredom, predictable routines, and numbness. Notable is the general manner in which the participants spoke about these experiences of dissociation and disengagement, in contrast to the positive experiences they have had that stimulated higher levels of engagement in their learning.

Subject-matter matters

Overwhelmingly, the findings suggest that subject-matter impacts student-athlete engagement in their classroom learning. When the subject-matter connects to student interests outside of the classroom or future career path interests, they identify these classes as more interesting and engaging. The application of concepts to the real world aides in both understanding the material and feeling more inclined to engage in the learning process.

Javier described his experience in his Economics class as engaging because it is connected to the real world. He explained, "I possibly want to go into a government job, and so talking about this, and this test, where it talks about some random municipal government, how they're gonna spend their annual budget on this random acre of, these random acres of land. I find it interesting because, you know, I could possibly want to do that" (Javier, 11/2/21, interview). Other participants simply conveyed that they have a preference for learning a particular subject, which naturally inspires them to be more

engaged in that class because they deeply enjoy learning the material, regardless of the teacher or activities in the class (Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview).

Multiple participants voiced that they are most engaged in non-academic classes in which they are constantly moving. Penelope affirmed that movement plays an integral role in this engagement, as she shared, "I'm in BFS, and I do weightlifting, and that's really fun. I think that's why it's my favorite class because I get to use my body" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21). Clyde communicated the same message regarding his love for the BFS class, explicitly mentioning that he felt like it was an engaging class because of the use of his body. It comes as no surprise that student-athletes enjoy classes in which they are able to exercise, participate in group physical activities in contrast to the monotonous, passive time they spend in their academic classes.

In addition, the findings highlight that subject-matter impacts the pedagogical choices teachers make, which in turn, affects the level of engagement and enjoyment of each class. Avery, one of the co-researchers, distinguished the differential impact subject-matter can have on her experience in two classes taught by the same teacher. The focus of her Psychology class is lectures, learning a lot of information through slideshows the majority of the time out of necessity due to the nature of the class material. In contrast, Avery stated that her Literature class, taught by the same teacher, is fun almost every day because the topic of the class allows them to be more interactive in daily discussions. In their AP Spanish class, Avery and Penelope's teacher requires all students to stand up and dance at the halfway point in their long, block schedule classes. Penelope acknowledged that dancing helps to make everyone engaged because it creates a sense of

connection with other students in the class, and she considers dancing particularly helpful in Spanish, stating, "Spanish songs are so good, and then it makes me listen to them outside of Spanish class too, and, and I obviously, like, try to listen for what I can hear and make sense out of. Yeah, that's cool" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21). Student-athletes recognized that there are some constraints around how teachers can teach and structure their classes based on the type of curriculum or requirements. Further, they identified the way in which subject-matter hinders their ability to develop a positive relationship with their teachers. In more challenging classes, students are much more likely to dislike their teachers initially, as it appears that the struggle with the material taints their ability to feel comfortable to develop connections. However, the students articulated that their feelings shift as time goes on, and this impact of subject-matter subsides relative to the impact of teacher's pedagogical practices.

School engagement improves with interactive learning

Participants and co-researchers alike conveyed their enjoyment of and improved engagement in group activities, such as presentations, discussions, Socratic seminars, student-generated activities, and games such as Quizlet Live. They do experience these in the class currently, but not as much as they would like. Noticeable is their ability to specifically identify particular interactive activities they have experienced, which indicated to the co-research team that these activities do not occur the majority of the time, but rather, are more common in particular classes, with particular teachers or subject-matter. All participants shared that they enjoy group work for a variety of reasons, including sharing of different perspectives (Carmen, 11/14/21, interview),

learning from each other rather than the teacher (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21; Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview), collaboration and teamwork (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21), and building community and relationships (Penelope, 12/14/21).

Building on the group aspect of learning activities, embodied activities appear to have a profound impact on student-athlete learning and engagement in the classroom. The co-researchers all could identify particular movement-based activities we did in Spanish classes their freshman year, which indicates the positive impression these embodied activities had on their learning experience. When asked to provide examples of the types of embodied learning activities they have experienced, Sloan responded, "literally everything we did in your class" (12/14/21). Avery (12/14/21) reminisced about the "Movimientos para memorizar (Movements to Memorize)" activity I frequently used in my class to support students in their vocabulary development. For every new unit or list of useful verbs, I assigned each student one word for which they had to create a movement, sound, or both that signified the meaning of the word. The whole class stood in a circle, and as we went around the circle, each person said their word in English then Spanish while simultaneously making the gesture associated with its meaning (e.g. bending down to touch one's toes to signify "to stretch"). All students copied the word in Spanish and repeated the gesture. Once we went around the whole circle, we progressed to reciting and gesturing simultaneously as a group, rather than waiting for the creator to demonstrate. In the final step, I challenged three students at a time to attempt to recite and provide the appropriate movement for all of the words, and by the end of each session, the students were able to succeed in this challenge. Avery compared the efficacy of this

vocabulary activity to that of writing the word three times in Spanish, which is commonly used by another Spanish teacher at North Vine, and she confirmed that Movimientos worked far better to aid in her lasting learning. Penelope excitedly shared how much she enjoyed the Color Tag game we played in her Spanish I class. She remembered, "You would say a color and we had to, like, walk fast to [touch] something in the room" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). Students got competitive and silly with this, as they got "knocked out" if they were the last to touch an item of the same color I had named. Sloan and Avery both remembered sitting on their desks in Spanish and throwing a ball to each of their classmates, and the person with the ball had to answer a question or conjugate a verb in Spanish. Interestingly, the co-researchers remembered these specific activities from their freshman year, which emphasizes the positive impact of using movement for academic learning as well as the rarity of their use in classrooms. Unfortunately, neither the co-researchers nor participants could provide many significant experiences of embodied, interactive learning in their other classes.

Teaching practices that improve student engagement

Across all participants, the findings suggest that teacher qualities and practices impact student-athlete engagement in the classroom. When teachers enact the practices of what the student-athletes identified as those of good teachers, their engagement improves. The co-researchers believed it crucial to focus on the practices of good teachers, considering that our end goal was to present these findings to the teaching staff at their high school. They wanted the teachers to hear what student-athletes value in their teachers to encourage them to embody more of these practices and effectively improve

student engagement in the process. Naming these practices generated more specific responses and stories from the interview participants, while they merely shared overall, general experiences of being bored while at school. Thus, it appears that students remember the highlights and positive elements of their educational experiences with greater detail, which improves their learning and positive trends in engagement in the school experience. These practices and qualities can be categorized into two main categories, which include teacher-student relationships and subject-matter and delivery.

Positive teacher-student relationships support engagement

Primarily, student-athletes emphasized the major impact of developing positive relationships with their teachers. Crucially, the findings suggest that developing these positive relationships with teachers significantly improves their engagement in their classes. Ultimately, taking the time to develop these relationships likely makes instructional time more effective because students pay closer attention and are more behaviorally engaged to complete their assignments. When students have understanding and caring teachers, they are more likely to actively participate in class.

Student-athlete participants recognized that they appreciate when teachers demonstrate an ethic of care. For example, Javier shared that his favorite teacher was for his MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement) class because "she's always trying to help me with class even when I didn't want it. She would, you know, help me anyway. She believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. I really appreciated that" (11/2/21, interview). Despite the way students present themselves, acting like they

do not care or believe in their ability to succeed, the best teachers persist and provide students with caring encouragement.

Similarly, student-athletes reported responding well to teachers who get to know students on a friendship level. One of the teachers that multiple student-athletes mentioned as being an excellent teacher focuses heavily on developing personal relationships with his students. Kimberly explained why she thinks he is a great teacher:

> I like that he builds personal relationships with every single one of his students, like every single one of his students. He goes out of his way to make sure that every single one of his students feel important, and that is something I feel like a lot of teachers don't quite have a grip on yet…That just elevates the learning experience, and it makes the learning environment, his classroom, feel more friendly and like, welcoming because you know you have someone in your corner, regardless of your situation, so it makes you want to come to class, makes you want to do the assignments because he's like, a positive influence in your life. (11/2/21, interview)

Kimberly spoke not only of her own experience of developing a positive relationship with this teacher, but of an overall practice he has with each one of his students. He focuses on building relationships, which palpably transforms the classroom environment into something students naturally buy into, which bolsters student engagement in his classes. Penelope described how her engagement and interest in a challenging AP Calculus class evolved due to the change in posture and formality her teacher displayed. She stated:

For some reason, this past week, I've been so engaged and like loving it, and I

don't even think she did anything different, but it seems like maybe she, like, took

a step down from being so formal and was actually getting to know us, on more of

a friendship level. But now I feel comfortable saying, girl, I do not get this, and

then she explains it to us, and what helps a lot is when she explains it to us and

then we go immediately into practicing it. (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21)

Teachers can counteract the burden of difficult subject-matter through the adoption of a

friendly and approachable demeanor. When students feel more comfortable being

vulnerable and asking for help when the teacher is less formal and demonstrates a more

humanistic, relational approach.

Numerous comments from participants indicate that students appreciate when

their teachers take time away from the curriculum or set lesson plan to have tangential

conversations. Sloan, a co-researcher, described her English teacher telling a story about

the time he played basketball with George Clooney, summarizing:

You go on a full on tangent, like he'll, I don't want to say waste time, but he'll

like, take up his time, his class time to like be personable with you and like, have

a good conversation and then get back to class. (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 11/17/21)

This teacher utilizes his class time to not only teach and provide assignments to his

students, but he allows for flexibility so that he can capture the interest and attention of

his students with something different, surprising, or funny. These types of digressions are

sprinkled throughout class, which helps to break up the monotony of the day while

providing more connection to students. Whereas the neoliberal perspective of education

might consider the time spent on these conversations as a distraction from academic instruction, these tangents truly serve as a way of cultivating the teacher-student relationship by humanizing and engaging students in the learning community.

The findings suggest that teachers who practice clear, open, and respectful communication with students leads to more positive perceptions of teachers, which supports students in their engagement in the classroom. The co-researchers surprisingly indicated that it is possibly more common for their teachers to develop a connection with students than not. This finding is unexpected, as the overall sentiment shared about the school experience was dissatisfaction, yet the students also highlighted the role of positive teacher-student relationships in supporting their engagement. Thus, the complexity of student engagement must lie outside of a basic effort for teachers to make a connection with their teachers because they simultaneously shared that their schooling is still boring and needs to change, which speaks to the role of other pedagogical factors beyond the teacher-student relationship.

Dynamic delivery of subject-matter supports engagement

Beyond the relationship they have developed with their teachers, the participants discerned the impact of the method of delivery of subject-matter on their engagement in the classroom. They voiced that when a teacher is passionate about the subject-matter, this has an immense impact on their level of engagement in the class. Kimberly described one of her teachers as having an enjoyable teaching style. She said, "You can just tell, like, she's passionate about the things that she's talking about, like nobody's forcing her to be there. That makes me want to come. I like people that actually care about what they

do" (11/2/21, interview). Passion inspires passion, and the class feeds off the energy of the teacher. However, without this excitement for a subject for which students do not naturally hold a high level of interest, teachers cannot expect them to become engaged emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally. In a curriculum that has established the arbitrary topics that students are required to learn, teachers must instill their instruction with passion or low engagement is inevitable.

Simultaneously, the student-athletes indicated how important structure and preparation are on their experience in the classroom. As she described the teaching style of her US Government teacher, Sloan (11/17/21) shared, "He definitely has, like, he has all those laws, classroom laws, custom rules that you have to follow, but I feel like by him setting that, you learn like, that's like, what you have to go around" while in his class. This particular teacher provides structure and expectations of behavior, and then he affords his students the freedom to make decisions within these "laws," which allows him to create a clear structure and framework without imposing an authoritarian style of control over student actions.

Finally, student-athletes appreciate when teachers teach beyond the book, expanding activities and methods of instruction outside of just what the book says, including group work, Socratic seminars, presentations, student-designed and led activities, movement, a change of scenery, or games. These activities are discussed in detail in other sections.

Overall, the teacher practices and qualities discussed in this section align with those student-athletes identified in their coaches, as well, indicating the value of

modeling classroom pedagogies after sports-based pedagogical practices, which are discussed in future sections.

Section 2: Engagement in Sports

Engagement in sports comes from constant use of mind and body

The data illuminate the fact that the cultural practice of sports involves a constant use of mind and body, a combination that stimulates student-athlete engagement sports. On the surface, the embodied characteristics of sports are obvious. Therefore, the co-researchers chose not to ask interview questions directly about how the body is used in sports. That being said, the participants voluntarily shared the various benefits and enjoyment they experience from the embodiment of sports, such as getting a good workout, sweating, staying active, and moving.

While the participants effortlessly identified how they utilize their body in sports, perhaps more surprisingly, they also readily indicated the precise ways in which they employ their mind while playing sports. In reflecting on her experience on the mat, Carmen said:

> I think [the brain] really has to be turned on because [wrestling] is different every time, so you never know like, what anyone's gonna do on you or what their next move is, so you always kind of have to, like, be thinking about what you're doing too or changing it up. (Carmen, 11/14/21, interview)

She indicated that wrestling requires a constant orientation toward problem-solving, anticipation, reading the context, and analysis of the best subsequent action; all of which are high-level intellectual processes. Another interview participant, Kimberly, shared that

tennis is a sport of strategy, which requires quick, in the moment decision-making, teamwork, effective communication, hand-eye coordination, and an awareness of actions and appropriate responses. She considered her mind to be constantly active while playing tennis. Penelope described her process of learning a new defense in soccer when she played on a different team, which she explained as a multitiered learning process, involving explicit instruction, then observation of others executing the defense, trial and error in physically practicing the defense, and finally feeling comfortable to play in a real game. She further described the immense amount of mental activation necessary for her position as a center midfielder, needing to know where her teammates are and where her opponents are positioned to know precisely what she will do with the ball before it comes to her. The process of split-second decision-making develops with immense amounts of mental and physical practice to train her mind and body. The prevalence of their awareness of the activation of their mind in sports provides an untapped avenue through which sports can be integrated into an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy to more deeply stimulate cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in the classroom.

Social aspects of sports

Based on the data from this project, the most prevalent aspect of sports that supports student-athlete engagement in and passion for athletics is the social connection with teammates and coaches. Fundamentally, student-athletes simply stated that they play sports to have fun with their friends. Several participants described the team bond that forms between teammates that makes struggling and working through physical and mental challenges fun, working toward a common goal and being in community in the

process. Carlita (11/14/21) spoke about how the teamwork aspect draws her to participate in school sports, and a focus group participant also shared that, "it's fun to be included in a team" (12/1/21). When surrounded by good friends, student-athletes feel more capable of just letting go and having fun despite the stress of schoolwork (Focus group participant, 12/1/21).

Oftentimes, when playing on teams with players of various levels, mentorship between players supports student-athletes to grow. Penelope described her experience of mentorship on the varsity Soccer team, saying, "I started on varsity as a freshman, which was a great experience because I've always enjoyed playing with older girls and better people because that always pushed me to be better" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21). Sports act as a learning space where youths interact with people of different ages and abilities, which organically allows teammates to establish mentoring relationships with those who are new to the team or developing skills for the first time.

Sports also provide students with a connection to the school culture and community. Student-athletes expressed that at the beginning of their high school experience, they joined a sport to try something new and make new friends (Carmen, 11/14/21, interview). Additionally, Blake (11/2/21) articulated that she feels supported at her games by the student section in the stands, cheering on the team. Playing on a sports team supports a sense of belonging and community that is often challenging to find elsewhere in the high school experience. Thus, engagement in sports is driven by community membership in addition to the embodiment of sports as a cultural practice (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/1/21).

Beneficial practices of good coaches

Student-athletes establish another crucial social connection in sports with their coach. In describing the beneficial coaching practices and qualities of good coaches, the co-researchers identified four coaching tenets that make coaches such powerful figures in student-athlete lives. These include: good coaches have personal connections with student-athletes, good coaches support academic life, and coaches serve as role models.

Coaches have personal connections with student-athletes

All of the student-athlete participants in this project recognized the strong personal connections their coaches develop with their team. Coaches demonstrate an ethic of care for their athletes as human beings with complex lives and challenges beyond sports and school, which Kimberly articulated as she described her coach who "never made a division that's so commonly found with student-athletes. You know, the division between being a student and being an athlete and having a personal life, like it's difficult to be a teenager" (11/2/21, interview). Kimberly captured the fundamental inspiration for this project as she identified the problematic nature of the common distinction between identities of student, athlete, and teenager. She was fortunate to have a coach who acknowledged this complexity and intersectionality and practiced understanding, patience, and space for high school student-athletes to maneuver these challenges while ensuring her athletes were happy and safe. Other participants described good coaches as those who listen to their problems (Blake, 11/2/21), give them rides after practice and games (Clyde, 11/15/21), care about getting to know them as individuals (Carmen, 11/14/21), and even develop a family within the team (Penelope, 10/6/21). These

qualities and practices combine to make student-athletes feel supported and understood, which encourages them to engage in sports.

Coaches support academic life

The student-athletes clearly articulated that the best coaches recognize that their players are more than just athletes, and do not force them to prioritize sports over academics, but rather, support them as students. The data show that various coaches actively support student-athletes in staying on top of their schoolwork. Kimberly's tennis coach communicated directly with her teachers about her academic performance, and Carmen and Sloan's wrestling coach actively checked her athletes' grades. If some were falling behind on assignments or their grades were not up to her standards, she dedicated practice to tutoring and study hall, in which students supported each other to catch up before returning to practice as usual. Javier's soccer coach even provided his players with a math tutor of his own accord. The best high school coaches acknowledge that school comes first and use the sports space as incentive and leverage to improve academically. Across the data from all participants, a common theme emerged regarding the discrepancy between coaches' focus on supporting their athletes in keeping up with their schooling and teachers showing little to no interest in supporting their students as athletes. This coaching practice appears to solidify the positive regard student-athletes hold for their coaches over their teachers, which indicates the need for teachers to improve their communication with coaches and interest in supporting their students as athletes as well.

Coaches serve as role models

As the co-researchers and additional participants spoke about their perspectives of their coaches, they described the admirable qualities of a role model that coaches embody. Furthermore, the manner in which they shared the information further demonstrated the immense admiration and respect they hold for them. The data reveal that as role models, coaches demonstrate embodied knowledge of the sport and lead by example, embodying the skills and values student-athletes seek to adopt. Additionally, they demonstrate loyalty and perseverance, refusing to give up on their teams even during challenging times.

Coaches display a respectable level of knowledge of the strategy and play of the sport they are coaching, and lead by example as they play alongside their players in practice and model important skills. In order to effectively identify areas of needed improvement and teach athletes the skills necessary to progress, coaches need to have a firm understanding of the sport (Blake, 11/15/21). Clyde (11/15/21) shared having a high regard for coaches who play with their team during practice because he believes they need to be able to do the things they are trying to teach their athletes. As he described his favorite soccer coach, Javier echoed this sentiment, as he stated, "It's also cool because sometimes when he made us do work, he would do it with us" (11/2/21). Soccer practice was not always fun; it also involved a significant amount of hard, sometimes unenjoyable, work, but enduring this hard work alongside one's coach builds a level of equity, respect, and solidarity, much like the role of teachers in problem-posing critical pedagogies as they engage in the learning process alongside students (Freire, 1970/2000).

This highlights a crucial difference between the actions of a good coach and what occurs in traditional classrooms, in which teachers do not complete the same challenging work as students. Camaraderie and mutual respect develop between student-athletes and coaches when the playing field is leveled and they both struggle and have fun together.

Coaches provide youth with good advice, offering a supportive and wise perspective from a place of care. Carlita reminisced that one of her basketball coaches not only taught her how to play ball, but also "how to be a better person on the court and off the court" (11/14/21, interview). One of the interview participants described his wrestling coach as a role model figure in his life, stating that "he gives pretty good life lessons, and he just knows how people, different people, are and how people act, and he's just a really good guy to learn from" (Clyde, 11/15/21, interview). When answering a question about his favorite coach, Clyde immediately mentioned the qualities of his coach as a person, rather than referencing his knowledge and ability to coach the sport. Student-athletes look to their coaches to provide an example of how to interact with others and develop as people rather than just athletes. This data underscores the fact that coaches play a role that integrates into the holistic development of young athletes, extending far beyond the court, mat, or field.

Finally, they role model through actions rather than just words, and demonstrating perseverance, loyalty, and respect. Multiple participants identified the importance of coaches demonstrating loyalty and never giving up on their teams even through challenging times of defeat. Carmen (11/14/21) shared feeling inspired when her coaches believe in her when she feels like giving up, and she powers through even though she

doubted herself. Additionally, Carlita reminisced about a coach who inspired her to persevere when questioning her strength and skills:

> I remember that one of my coaches actually told me that, to have confidence in myself and to not give up and stop overthinking and stop being in my head and actually just play, and just do you and just be you. (11/14/21, interview)

The interactions coaches have with their athletes motive and inspire them to achieve beyond their perceived abilities, as student-athletes trust their words and encouragement. In this instance, Carlita's coach encouraged her to rely on her embodied knowledge to achieve success. Coaches build this foundation of loyalty and the belief that student-athletes will succeed, which inspires young individuals to continue on. This contrasts significantly with common trends of teachers and grading systems breaking down high school students' confidence in the classroom.

Section 3: Improvement of Student-Athlete Engagement in School

The participants answered the research question: How do student-athletes perceive and envision a way of teaching and learning that improves their engagement? both through wishes for potential change and through the memories and current experiences they have of beneficial and engaging activities some of their excellent teachers have utilized in their teaching. While students shared experience with some of these pedagogical practices and learning activities, they often spoke of them in terms of what they wanted more of in the classroom, or what they thought would improve their schooling. These findings support the use of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy and fall into the following categories: community building and interactive learning, focus on

student learning, fresh routines, and interest in integrating sports and movement in academic learning.

Community building and interactive learning

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the findings was the desire for more community building and interactive learning in the classroom. Every participant and co-researcher stated that they would like to have more group work and interaction with their peers in the classroom. They desire more group presentations, hands-on group projects, class discussions, Socratic seminars, and games incorporated in their classroom learning. They stated that any activities in which "everyone is being included" would be more engaging for them (Blake, 11/15/21, interview). Fundamentally, more group work and interaction would make the learning experience more fun.

The participants and co-researchers indicated the importance of developing relationships with their teachers. The qualities of good teachers and coaches that have been discussed in this chapter, such as developing a personal connection with students, taking time to get to know students as people, providing mentorship, communicating clearly and directly with care and understanding, support student-athlete engagement. Therefore, these are among the qualities that student-athletes recommended teachers to embody to improve their experiences in the classroom. This kind of teacher-student relationship allows students to feel comfortable participating, sharing their personalities and perspectives, and making mistakes in the learning space. Sloan considered her experiences in classes in which she had a connection with her teachers, and concluded

that she learned more in those classes. She compared her experiences in class with two of her high school teachers, Miss P and Mr. S:

> I had that with Miss P. I would literally joke with Miss P, and whenever she would ask a question, my hand would be the first one up, and I would say literally anything that came to mind, just to like, sometimes I'd be guessing. Even if I thought I was wrong, I'd still say it, and then she would be like, Oh, actually, it's this, and then would go over it with me. I'd be like, oh, now I know, so I'd put myself on the spot, and I feel like I've learned better in that way. But like in [Mr. S's] class, in the beginning especially, I got so scared to get anything wrong or like him to get mad, so I never rose my hand or raised my hand. And I never said anything in that class because I was scared. (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

Sloan juxtaposed her experiences and levels of comfort in engaging in a classroom with a teacher with whom she has a connection with her experiences in a classroom with a daunting teacher who has not taken the time to develop a relationship with her. She was much more likely to actively participate and feel comfortable making mistakes that lead to her learning and development in the class with Miss P. To the contrary, Mr. S made her too scared to participate and take chances, which stifled her engagement and learning.

Similarly, student-athletes communicated their desire to cultivate relationships with their peers in the classroom. The co-researchers discussed the important effect of interacting with and getting to know all of their classmates to improve the learning experience. In a discussion with the co-researchers, they stated that they interact with every student in their Spanish class, through group work, dancing, and Quizlet Live

rotations, which makes them more comfortable with their peers. In contrast, they have barely interacted with any of their classmates in other classes, such as in Mr. S's class, previously mentioned by Sloan, as Penelope shared:

> I haven't talked to, like, three fourths of the people in Mr. S's class. We've stayed, like, in the same spot the entire time. We haven't even moved around once, so like, I don't even know them, and I hate when he moves me to that off table. (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

Not only does Mr. S not put forth an effort to develop relationships with his students, but he also fails to provide his students the opportunity to interact with each other, which prevents them from building a positive learning community.

As Carmen described, "when we're doing group work, [teachers are] explaining that we all need to, like, do the same work or if not, we're all gonna, like, fall behind, like because we all depend on everyone" (11/14/21, interview). She spoke to the impact of teamwork on her motivation to get work done and do her part on group assignments, and her interviewer, Sloan, picked up on this connection to the teamwork that is essential to success in sports. Student-athletes are accustomed to working together as a team on the field or court, and there is great potential to leverage this part of their cultural practices in their academic education.

Not only would this improve engagement, but it would also enrich their learning through the inclusion of different voices and perspectives. Kimberly eloquently articulated the impact of group interaction and discussion on student learning:

When someone's wrong, instead of the teacher being like, no, blah, blah, blah, a

student being like, well actually, this is what I think, and then making their claims,

and then just literally teaching someone what they know, like, that's how you

absorb information. It also creates a more, like, filled out memory than just

writing something down in class, you know? You write that thing down in class,

you come up with an argument based off of that thing, and then you talk about it,

and you realize you're wrong, or you prove yourself right. You, even if you're not

right or wrong, get other people's perspectives on it. It creates a more filled out

memory. It makes it more memorable. (Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview)

Instead of playing the passive student role, when all students are encouraged to discuss

and defend their perspectives, the collaborative and reflective process produces new

knowledge from that which students already hold. She highlighted the idea of a "filled

out memory," which captures what the majority of their academic instruction fails to

establish, which is a common theme throughout the data. Carmen reiterated this point, as

she pointed out that in group work "everyone has different knowledge, and they all kind

of bring it in. You even learn stuff from them that might not even be of the topic" being

discussed (11/14/21, interview). The participants recognized the value of learning in

community to complicate each other's thinking, fill gaps and diversity of knowledge, and

cultivate a new understanding. They identified the truth that all individuals hold

knowledge, and students are not meant to be passive receptacles of information (Freire,

1970/2000).

Focus on student learning

Across the input from participants and co-researchers alike, the findings suggest that student-athletes would like teachers to focus more on authentic student learning rather than external factors, such as grades or covering all of the curriculum. According to Penelope, "It's like, [teachers] care so much about just, like, cramming the material they don't care about if kids actually learn it and understand it" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/9/21). Currently, teachers experience such pressure to teach to the standards so their students succeed on standardized tests that they cannot slow down enough to support lasting learning and understanding of the material. Students experience this as an emphasis on scoring, which reflects positively in the immediate sense, but students realize that their knowledge and understanding of academic content disappear extremely quickly. Sloan described her distaste for the way students are forced to focus on their grades:

> The grading system in general is just completely messed, and it's outdated, and we need to completely change the way that like, we view it…Getting the A, like all of us, all we're trying to do is get A's, so that we can get into the best college and then get the best A's there, whatever. (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

Furthermore, the focus on tests creates an elevated level of stress that students must endure constantly, detracting from the enjoyable aspects of learning (Kimberly, 11/2/21; Penelope, 10/6/21). The structure and expectations placed upon students reinforces that grades are the most important indicators of student achievement, but this priority seems to deflate their engagement in the classes and interest in actually learning the material.

Avery and Kimberly shared that one of their teachers has effectively utilized activities that combat this trend by asking students to teach the material to each other. Kimberly (11/2/21) described this as a group project in which students must create their own activity that they then present to the class, which serves to build their memory of the topic while associating it with something experiential and tangible, both for the presenter and the other students. Avery detailed her experience of such an experience of teaching her peers, elaborating the positive impact it had on her learning:

> I just have been in a class where [the teacher] was like, okay, so you have to do this presentation, obviously, on this part of the brain, but you have to make up an activity that lets us know, like how that part of the brain works. So like, I had the Wernicke's Area, so I had to, like, let people know that that's how you comprehend stuff, so we played a game of Telephone. So like, when I'm speaking and whispering, they're actively trying to comprehend what I'm saying, and so that's like, it's activating the Wernicke's Area. So like, I just don't know what those are called, but making up your own, like, making your students make up the activity. That would help the learning. (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

This is just one example of how teachers can build learning activities that prioritize learning over scoring (Avery, 12/9/21). It combines group work, social interaction and community building, connection of academic material to student knowledge and cultural practices, and empowers students to apply the concepts they have learned to what they already know.

Fresh structure and routines

The structure and routine of classes lead student-athletes to feel bored for most of the day. Therefore, the participants suggested that changing routines would improve their engagement. Blake articulated that "when you get into a routine of the same thing, every single day is really boring, and you just don't, like you know what's gonna happen. You're just dreading it because you just know" (11/15/21, interview). She recommended changing up the types of activities, the way groups are chosen, with whom students work, and creating new activities so you feel "refreshed and new". Even a student-athlete who mentioned that she loves a good lecture argued for the need to "break it up" (Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview) so that different types of learners can focus. Co-researcher Penelope felt strongly about the need to change routines, as well, describing how unproductive and inefficient she feels while at school because of the daily monotony. Furthermore, Penelope referenced the value of student presentations to simply hear a new voice and perspective, rather than always listening to a teacher sharing their knowledge with the class. Finally, Javier (11/2/21, interview) recommended changing the configuration of the desks to make boring or challenging classes more interesting. While some of the recommendations the student-athletes contributed involved significant changes in the types of activities teachers assign in classes, many of them are miniscule, such as stretching in the middle of class (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21) or changing the configuration of desks. Even so, they do not frequently occur in the participants' classes, which points to just how mundane and systematized the school experience is for these high school students.

Interest in integrating sports and movement in academic learning

Crucially, one of the most revelatory findings was the fact that students experience nearly zero movement or inclusion of the body in their academic classes. When interview participants were asked the interview question, "In what ways, if any, do you use your body in school?", it was apparent that the concept of using embodied practices or activities in their academic education was so foreign to them and their current experience that they did not know how to think about such an idea. The interview participants responded with a general confusion and surprise, barely able to think of examples, such as walking to class, raising their hand, fidgeting and jittering their legs, and sitting in their chair. Therefore, when the co-researchers decided to run two focus groups in the phase following the interviews, we designed focus group questions that directly asked about their interest in learning through sports and movement. All participants in the focus groups responded with an exuberant excitement for such a novel idea. One focus group participant said, "I feel like the stuff we're learning would, like, stay in my brain more. I'd probably learn it way better" (12/1/21, focus group). Not only did participants think it would be more engaging to learn school subjects through sports and movement, but they anticipated that it would improve the quality and longevity of their learning.

The student-athlete participants expressed a great interest in incorporating movement in their school experience more. When asked to provide examples of what kinds of activities would make the school day more engaging, Sloan listed, "Anything from walking around campus, doing a little project, to like, even like sitting on your desk

doing silent ball" (12/14/21). Silent ball is a misnomer of an activity that we did frequently in my Spanish classes, in which the class passed a ball around to every student, and the person holding the ball had to say the subsequent vocabulary word, verb conjugation, or number. Interestingly, every co-researcher positively reminisced about their enjoyment of this embodied activity in their learning of Spanish. Similarly, Kimberly offered the possibility of "going on a walk while lecturing. That's just like, something for the people that need that physical aspect to help them concentrate and also wake people up and gather their interest and make things more entertaining" (11/2/21, interview). Focus group participants also mentioned that getting up and moving around more in class would make classes more interesting and effective. Therefore, the expectation for the types of embodied activities is low, which highlights how rare these opportunities occur and the immense potential to improve student-athlete engagement in the classroom with an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy. Each of these examples would not significantly shift the paradigm of education in mainstream schools; they are small changes that every teacher could easily put into practice to have a significant impact on engagement and learning retention considering the requests that student-athletes voiced in this study.

Based on the information and discussions the co-researchers had throughout the project that oriented them to the possibility of learning academic subjects through sports and embodied activities, all the co-researchers clearly and readily communicated their interest in an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy. During a discussion following the

presentation of the findings, I asked the co-researchers how beneficial they believed it would be to learn through this sports-academics integration, and Penelope declared:

> I think it'd be way more engaging not only just for me, but probably a bunch of other kids in the room because it's something that is easier to relate to, than like just what happened in the 1700s. I dunno. I think it'd be beneficial, and it would just feel, I would feel more of a connection with the teacher, like they're more human. Oh, they've watched this sport and they play this sport. I think it would be nice. (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21)

Penelope based this on her own experience and what she learned about her peers through the interview process. Many shared that they are bored by what occurs in the classroom and that when the subject-matter is related to their own interests, their engagement improves. Thus, she shared that linking sports and academics would benefit this population because it incorporates all aspects of education that the data supports – breaking up routines, interactive, incorporating movement, and material related to student interests.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that teachers should mirror the type of pedagogical practice that coaches employ to better support and engage their students, which would also lead to more lasting, authentic learning.

Section 4: YPAR Supports Student-Athlete Engagement in the Learning Process

In this section, I examine the findings that responded to the research meta-question regarding the impact of participation in the YPAR process on the co-researchers' engagement in the learning process. In the discussions I had with

co-researchers and the data they collected from interview and focus group participants, it

appears that their understanding of engagement is defined by emotional and behavioral

engagement, looking at how interesting, fun, or enjoyable they believe class material and

teachers are and their behaviors of active participation and work completion in the

classroom. In the concept of engagement that has guided this project, cognitive

engagement is also a significant dimension of engagement. The findings indicate that the

elements of YPAR positively contributed to their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive

engagement in learning activities, which have potential to be utilized to transform the

educational activities and structures that high school students experience in mainstream

classrooms. Moreover, the positionality of the Educator-Researcher and the values innate

to this methodology that I embodied throughout the research process align with the

elements of pedagogy that the student-athletes identified as crucial to improve their

engagement in classroom learning.

It is important to note that of the five co-researchers that actually attended any of

the 13 total YPAR sessions, one came to only the first meeting, one attended for the first

seven meetings, and three participated throughout the entire process. While the precise

reason for this decline in attendance and participation is concerning, I have analyzed it to

be due to factors in their personal lives, scheduling, and for one, a discomfort in

interviewing her peers, which I will discuss further, but I also wonder if there are

additional factors that prevented or discouraged their sustained engagement.

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement encompasses the extent to which students display the

actions and behaviors conducive to positive academic outcomes, including the completion of assignments, listening and following directions, and active participation. Overall, while at each meeting, the co-researchers displayed positive behavioral engagement as they completed each activity and participated in each discussion actively. Furthermore, they completed each assignment I asked them to do outside of our meeting times, including interviewing and coding, and Penelope and Sloan took this one step further by requesting to do more work, as they facilitated focus groups. This project would not have been possible without the behavioral engagement of the co-researchers. I have chosen to focus in more detail on the impact of YPAR on the emotional and cognitive engagement of the co-researchers, as these appear to be the foundational blocks that supported their active and dedicated participation, behavioral engagement in the project.

Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement includes the affective response students have toward their teachers, peers, learning material, and the school climate (Keyes, 2019). Initially, the co-researchers were emotionally engaged enough to show up to our work sessions and complete the tasks requested of them due to the relationships they had with me as their former teacher. Sloan candidly shared that her connection with me was the motivator of her emotional engagement:

> I just was like, oh, I have to give up my free time for this, and I was going through
> rough stuff at home, so I didn't want to come, but like, I was like, oh, Señora

Holmes is there, so like, I'll go for her, and like, this is part of her grade and her

project, so I didn't want to disappoint you. (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

I was asking them to come to school, read challenging texts, and discuss complex topics

during their summer break with minimal structure around the steps we would be taking

and the final product we would have. The relational connection and respect Sloan and I

had previously developed inspired her to continue showing up and putting in the work

despite personal challenges and the sacrifice of her time, which exemplifies the cruciality

of positive teacher-student relationships to get student buy-in to the learning experience.

In addition to the time requirement, due to a lack of understanding of what we were doing

together and the expectations I had for the outcomes of this project, they communicated

that they really kept coming back because of the respect they had for me as a teacher, not

because of the research topic (Sloan & Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). Thus, they

began this process because of a positive connection with me as their teacher and

mentoring figure, not because of the topics we were going to address.

Throughout their five months of participation in this YPAR project, the emotional

engagement of each of the three co-researchers who participated the entire time continued

to improve. This improvement stemmed from the topics we were investigating and the

types of activities that we completed. We began each meeting with a check-in to allow all

members of the co-research team the opportunity to share their current thoughts, feelings,

struggles in school, sports, or personal life, so we could create a sense of community

amongst all participants. All participants shared openly, and they listened to each other,

responding to pieces they could relate to and demonstrating solidarity amongst each

other. In the first few YPAR meetings, we also played games, explored our experiences through drawing, and incorporated movement activities to bond as a team, contemplate complex and personal topics, and examine the impact of such activities on their engagement. The activities seemed to guide the co-researchers into this research process from a place of playful fun, breaking down the inaccessibility of educational theory and expanding beyond dry readings, powerpoints, and sitting idly in a chair. Their positive affective response to these learning activities was apparent in their overall demeanor, laughter, playfulness, and willingness to get out of their comfort zones.

As they progressed through the project, the three co-researchers demonstrated that their emotional engagement evolved as they communicated how much they enjoyed and had fun with various parts of the process. Interviewing, coding, and extracting themes from the codes proved to be highly emotionally engaging in this regard. When asked about the experience of interviewing, Penelope and Avery both had a lot to say, and I could tell how much they enjoyed it through the energy and tone of their voices. After the end of the project, they both shared that interviewing was their favorite part of this project. Penelope described it as making her feel powerful, as she was part of this doctoral dissertation research project and acted as an authority from within the student-athlete community. The knowledge we had developed together in the research project provided Penelope a sense of expertise and confidence, and she thrives overall when in positions of leadership. Avery stated that she wanted to interview even more people because she liked that each time she interviewed, her skills improved. Both recognized the positive impact of the significant preparation and practice we had done

prior to their actual interviews on their sentiment toward interviewing their peers. Not only did the co-researchers collaborate to identify the themes to be investigated and to formulate the interview questions, we practiced interviewing each other to test out the questions and gain experience with asking follow up questions and utilizing non-verbal, active listening skills. Each of these parts of the YPAR process supported them to emotionally engage in the data collection process.

The manner in which the co-researchers interacted with each other and me during our sessions together illustrated their comfort in the learning space we had created. Notable was the amount of laughter and jokes that the co-researchers shared amongst themselves and with me. They made jabs at themselves and at me, which created a reciprocal relationship of both vulnerability and lighthearted connection. After reading one of the transcriptions, Sloan asked if we need to keep all the "likes" in the quotes, and I commented that we can edit some of them out, but we need to maintain the teenager vernacular of the participants, to which she responded, "I know, but I don't want to admit that teenagers talk like that because it makes us sound dumb" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/7/21). One of the most hilarious moments in the entire research process was when we were discussing pseudonyms for the interview participants. All co-researchers were highly interested in this process, offering silly names, and engaging in a sarcastic banter back and forth with me to define the pseudonym for each participant that is culturally appropriate and aligned with each gender identity. Whereas this process would have been quick and direct, the co-researchers put a lot of thought into it, and I opened up space for them to make jokes and think creatively before making their choices. This banter was

apparent throughout their collaboration in each of the phases of the project, from identifying research problems, formulating research and interview questions, and coding and analyzing the data.

As they interviewed their student-athlete peers and learned from their perspectives, their emotional engagement grew because they discovered the similarities in their sentiments and experiences with their peers. Reflecting on the interview process, Penelope shared:

> I thought it was cool to see, like, everyone kinda had the same, like, if I felt bad
> about something, and I interviewed someone, they also had the same feeling, so it
> just made me feel reassured, and that everyone's pretty much going through the
> same thing, even though we don't know it. Like, we all have the same thoughts.
> (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

Penelope described how previously she had felt like she was the only one struggling to balance school and sports and being so frustrated with her classroom experiences, when in fact, these are common feelings among this student-athlete population. This realization provided Penelope reassurance, which encouraged her to engage in this research process even more, as she saw herself in the data she collected from her peers.

The co-researchers also communicated that they were engaged in this process due to the voluntary nature of their participation. As I asked questions regarding why YPAR kept their engagement for five months, Avery responded,

> It's like voluntary participation, like sports. I didn't have to do this, like, I wanted
> to, and I chose to, so that was also what helped me learn more because it wasn't

like, oh, I have to do this assignment. It was like, oh, I'm doing the work. (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

They enjoyed a level of control over what they were doing and whether or not they wanted to continue, with nobody forcing them to participate. This eliminated the hesitation to complete assignments while inspiring them to learn more because they felt empowered through doing the work. Penelope voluntarily chose to present the most difficult slides during their presentation of research findings to their teachers, which included the theoretical framework and a description of the YPAR methodology. She was nervous about this choice, but reported feeling "important and professional" after they gave their presentation (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). Similarly, Sloan stated that she did not believe YPAR would be as effective if it were part of a class. She said, "I feel like people wouldn't care as much, as much as like, we did, because they'd be like, oh, I just have to get this done" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). They associate school with the sentiment of coercion, lack of control, and drudgery, and their statements illustrate how different their work on this YPAR project felt for them. They learned through a project that was defined by their constant ability to choose.

Finally, the experience of sharing the research findings with their teachers supported the co-researchers' confidence and inspired them to want to continue to participate. They were pleasantly surprised by the teachers' interest in their study and loved that they asked questions and took time out of their busy schedules to listen to what they had to say. Sloan (12/14/21) voiced, "It made me really happy, all the teachers who were asking questions, cuz I was like, wow, you guys actually care and are actually like,

involved." Avery (12/14/21) pointed out her frustration that all the teachers that came to their presentation "genuinely care, and they're all genuinely good teachers," wishing that more "bad" teachers had come to hear their talk. When I offered to support them to do a future presentation to all the teachers at North Vine High School, noting that it was entirely up to them because this was the official end to the project, they all said that they wanted to do it. Penelope passionately declared, "I'm down to continue because I think this is something so important for teachers to, like, include in their class. I want it. After collecting all of this, I'm like, please, I want it. We're telling you [what you need to change]. Please listen. (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). Their desire to take on more responsibility and work was the outcome of their experience of care from the teachers present, empowerment in the YPAR process, and an impetus to transform the way student-athletes are invited to learn in the classroom based on the voices of their student-athlete peers. Instead of pure relief to have their free time back, they elected to continue on, which was a definitive mark of the emotional engagement they gained from this process.

Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is considered the amount of mental energy a student applies to contemplating, analyzing, and learning new or challenging material (Cooper, 2014). YPAR's impact on the cognitive engagement of the co-researchers was the most striking, as they thoroughly contemplated each aspect of the project during the personal reflection and research design phase and then analyzed the data with a critical lens to identify trends and draw connections and conclusions. As a means of illustrating the

impact of the YPAR process on cognitive engagement, I describe the thought processes

the co-researchers went through to make decisions through the project, providing

snapshots of our YPAR meetings and activities that were part of this analytical journey.

I utilized a drawing-based activity to facilitate space for the co-researchers to

examine their experiences in school and sports to identify trends and commonalities in

their experiences and pinpoint problems in their education they would like to address. I

created two posters, one with the title, "Sports", and the other titled, "School". I provided

them with markers and asked them to add at least one drawing to each poster that

represents their experiences in each space. They were invited to contemplate how they

feel about it, what it means to them, how engaged and motivated they are in each space,

and memories they have of their time spent in each space. I instructed them to only utilize

images without words, and we all spent about 20 minutes drawing on each poster. Avery

and Penelope were the two co-researchers present for this activity, and they were actively

and diligently drawing throughout this time, focused on their own images. Following this

step, I invited each of them to interpret the messages and meanings of the drawings on

each poster, and they displayed a beautifully in-depth analysis of each drawing. Each

co-researcher had the opportunity to clarify any misinterpretations of their drawings,

which led them to share genuinely and openly and make connections with each other's

experiences and perspectives, telling particular stories about teachers, coaches, and

assignments they have had. Next, each of us wrote the main takeaways we had from this

activity and added post-it notes around the edge of the drawing. Finally, they journalled

afterward, answering the prompt: Please articulate the specific problems you experience

in school. They were cognitively engaged at every step of this activity, which led to their generation of the main research problems we would be addressing in this project. While their elevated cognitive engagement was palpable in the richness of their discussion, they also verbally confirmed that they enjoyed this activity because it made them think about these ideas in a different way (Field notes, 8/7/21).

As I guided the co-researchers to formulate research questions to address the problems they had identified, contemplated, produced, and revised questions until they got to a place of clarity. I provided them with a couple of examples of the preliminary questions I had included in my dissertation proposal to demonstrate how simple they can be, but after that, I requested that they create 3-5 research questions on their own. They read them aloud and I added them to a shared document, and then we workshopped their questions for them to learn the difference between an interview question and a research question. Both Avery and Penelope shared that they liked the way we started this phase, that it was better that I did not try to teach them precisely how to create a research question before they had a chance to come up with their own (Field notes, 8/7/21). The editing process allowed them to maintain cognitive engagement, as they learned a new skill through making mistakes and editing their work to develop the precision of the wording of each question. They analyzed the difference between the semantics of verbs like *describe, perceive, envision, understand,* and *experience* to delineate the exact meaning they intended for each question. They contemplated the fine line between research questions that are broad enough, but not so broad that they expand the scope away from the problems they had identified previously.

This process continued the next meeting, in which I paired up the co-researchers and they collaborated to generate more research questions on posters. In my field notes, I commented on each of the co-researcher's engagement in this process:

I wanted to change the dynamics a bit, and I paired them up to work together to come up with as many questions as they could think of. Sloan and Penelope were in a pair, and Avery and Marta were in another. They did less discussing and more individual jotting. Sloan asked if it was okay to write an idea or comment instead of a question, and I said, "Of course!", explaining that we could likely rewrite it as a question after she gets it down. Avery had a lot of questions that she was copying down out of her journal. Marta wrote a few questions and was noticeably thinking hard. Penelope wrote a few and as I was walking around reading, she commented on how long I was reading them, like I was actually trying to go over everything. It seemed like she was surprised by the time I took and a little nervous about what I was thinking. (Field notes, 8/25/21)

Each of them produced multiple research questions in their own ways, and then we examined the questions to establish which theme or topic was being addressed by each question. They identified: motivation, support from leaders, creativity, engagement, movement, and link between school and sports. Through this process, we chose the main themes they wanted to focus on, which were engagement, support from leaders, and link between sports and school, as they concluded that the other themes were subcategories of each of these. Throughout this multi-step process, I merely facilitated and guided the

process, but their contemplation of complex meaning and distillation of the foundational elements was the result of their deep thought and collaboration.

The co-researchers engaged in a deeply contemplative process in deciphering the difference between a research question and an interview question. Marta was particularly engaged in this process. She read a question off of the poster about engagement in sports and explored how we could get information about each theme:

> **Marta:** What makes it so that you like running? What makes them like the movement of their activity, and how can that be used in the classroom to get them to engage?

> **Penelope:** There are also some drills you do that you don't really realize you're working so hard because it's fun. If you don't like running, but this one drill has a lot of running, but you don't realize it. What experiences in sports make it engaging?

> **Gaby:** This is a really interesting idea. How can we get at the answer to this question? Because if someone asked me about what it is about movement that I enjoyed so much, I don't know that I would be able to describe what it really was about movement.

> **Marta:** We could use a feeling! After a workout, I usually feel really good that I was able to get up and actually workout, so if we used a feeling, they could communicate a feeling to you rather than the specific reason they enjoy the movement. (YPAR meeting, 8/25/21)

In this exchange, Marta visibly had an "ah ha!" moment. She contemplated how she feels about the topic, how her peers would respond to the question, and came up with a solution to allow her peers to be able to answer more easily. She addressed a challenging problem with persistence to make a breakthrough in her understanding and contribute to the project.

Designing the interview protocol required the co-researchers to be cognitively engaged, as they needed to analyze the meaning of each question and contemplate how their student-athlete peers would respond to them. All the while, they referenced the research questions they had designed to ensure that the interview questions were eliciting the information to answer these questions. To begin this process, I asked all co-researchers to brainstorm interview questions to answer each tentative research question, writing them on posters for each research question. Then, they immediately tested them out in pairs, practicing interviewing each other to see how their student-athlete peers would respond to each question. I was able to pair up with them, which gave me insight into their engagement in the process.

> I loved having the opportunity to pair up with them because I got to see how engaged they were in the process. I could see their expressions as they asked and answered questions, noting how fluid their responses were to some questions and how they struggled to answer others. (Gaby, Field notes, 9/29/21)

All of them shared that they enjoyed this activity and wanted to practice more to improve at interviewing, despite the challenge and vulnerability necessary in this practice. They

also tweaked their questions to be open ended and more directly elicit information to answer the research questions.

The co-researchers' cognitive engagement was on full display during the coding and analysis process. They coded the transcriptions in a two-step process, extracting the most important codes individually, and then we collaborated to group these codes together and identify the most prevalent themes. Throughout the coding process, the co-researchers and I highlighted segments of the interview transcripts with different colors corresponding to each research question. Then, we wrote the names of the codes in the margins and on post-it notes of the proper color. Each research question had a poster on which we placed the post-it notes with the codes. Once the coding was complete, we paired up and discussed how to group together the individual codes to form the broader main themes, giving each theme a title. The deep contemplation of these themes and how they relate to the research questions required significant cognitive engagement, as the co-researchers were categorizing the data collected from various participants, putting them in conversation with one another. While I described the process of looking at the ways each code relates and coming up with three to five main themes that serve to answer each research question, I did not provide the co-researchers with a set expectation of what types of themes to look for, so they discussed them extensively in pairs, manually moving around the post-its to come to clarity on how they fit together. Throughout this process, the co-researchers asked questions to define the parameters around the generation of themes, as Avery and Penelope created many specific themes, rather than looking at the broad strokes of similarities across many themes. Thus, this became an iterative process.

Sloan provided an abundance of complex analyses of the interview data, which was her most engaged phase for the whole project. In looking at Carmen's interview, Sloan commented, "She said something about how she loves groups and group work, and I just thought it was like, what if student-athletes like group work more because they're used to being in a group and used to working as a team?" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 11/17/21). She took the analysis one step further than what I was currently asking of her, applying what the student-athletes shared in interviews to the broader implications of these findings. In doing so, Sloan highlighted the potential for teachers to leverage student-athletes' experiences with and propensity for working as a team toward a common goal. As we were discussing possible directions for the focus group questions, Sloan examined her experience of interviewing individual peers, and proposed a shift in focus and interview style to open up the possibility of more in-depth responses from the high school participants. While we generally avoided binary yes/no questions, we realized that asking the direct question, "If given the opportunity, would you like to learn school subjects through sports and movement?" would be useful because we discovered that this idea was so foreign to their experiences in school, that most of their peers did not know that it was possible. Sloan reconciled the use of this binary question:

> So can we stick with the yes/no that we have, then do, 'Have you ever experienced your teachers using sports to teach you to learn?' And then do the, 'How would you want your teachers to teach you through sports?' As like a three part question? (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 11/17/21).

In breaking out of the strict confines that disallow yes/no questions, she was able to envision a line of questioning that would generate interesting responses. She made the process her own and supported her decision with reason.

Overall, the YPAR process of this study had an undeniably positive impact on student-athlete behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Specifically, the co-researchers displayed joy, silly playfulness, deep critical thought, vulnerability, diligence, reflection, and hard work throughout this learning process, which are all elements that need to be included in mainstream education to bolster student engagement.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I begin by offering a summary of the findings of this study. I then put these findings in conversation with the existing literature on student engagement, culturally relevant pedagogy, progressive education, and embodied learning to support the use of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy and YPAR in the education of high school student-athletes. This study highlighted three key themes: the potential positive, transformative impact of an embodied culturally relevant pedagogy on student-athlete engagement in the classroom; the alignment of the YPAR methodology with student-athlete recommendations for their education; and the need for structural, systemic change in education. I conclude by offering lessons and considerations for future YPAR studies, acknowledging and reflecting on the triumphs and shortcomings of the current project in hopes that educators will adapt and employ this empowering and fresh methodology in their pedagogical practice.

Summary of Findings

In this YPAR project, the student-athlete co-researchers and participants unequivocally highlighted the shortcomings of their school experiences and their desire for new ways of learning. Not only are they bored in their classes, but they also rarely experience pedagogical practices that support their lasting learning, as they reported forgetting what they learn almost immediately. Students commonly sit in their desks, listen to long, monotonous lectures, engage only with the content in the book, watch videos, and complete assignments, all in an effort to get an A, with little time or encouragement to internalize, contemplate critically, or apply that knowledge to different

contexts. Conversely, sports act as an outlet for student-athletes to have fun with their friends, receive support and guidance from their coaches, and move their bodies while exercising their minds.

The findings of this study suggest that the relationship developed between teachers and students is the primary indicator of student engagement, and the co-researchers and participants shared that they have been fortunate to have many teachers who have developed these connections with them. However, the overwhelming sentiment that the student-athletes in the study have toward the drudgery of school is filled with boredom, frustration, stress, and apathy, which demonstrates a problem in the emotional and cognitive engagement in school even in those students who are behaviorally engaged. This points to the need for positive connections with their teachers to be accompanied by new, fresh routines and pedagogical practices that engage them to think and participate in different ways. The subject-matter and instructional style can prevent students from feeling capable of developing positive relationships with their teachers and lead to an overall negative experience in the classroom.

The findings suggest that student-athletes experience an abundance of passive learning and repetition in school, while subject-matter that is relevant to students' interests, interactive learning, and practices of teachers can positively impact student engagement. Based on the data collected, the co-researchers and I found that engagement in sports comes from the constant use of mind and body, the social aspects of sports, and the supportive practices of coaches. According to these findings, student-athletes desire more community building and interactive activities, a focus on student learning rather

than scoring, changing up routines, and integration of sports and movement in academic learning.

In this chapter, I expand upon these findings to discuss the potential of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy to improve student-athlete engagement, the positive outcomes of YPAR, and the need for structural, systemic change in the education system. I conclude by providing my reflections on the successes and challenges of this study to provide lessons for future applications of YPAR with high school students.

Potential of Embodied Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

In the development of this study, I utilized a theoretical framework that combined principles of culturally relevant pedagogy, Deweyan progressive education, and embodied pedagogy to posit a new theoretical framework in embodied culturally relevant pedagogy. Embodied culturally relevant pedagogy is primarily rooted in the integration of the instruction of academic content with student experiences and cultural practices, focusing on learning through mind and body. In this study, I define sports as an embodied cultural practice in which student-athletes choose to spend their time. The practice of sports and the experience of being a student-athlete form a significant part of their intersectional identities, through the communities they create and the embodied knowledge they have developed throughout their sports participation. Fundamental to this theoretical framework is the role of positive teacher-student relationships in supporting student engagement and cultivating a sense of belonging, while encouraging students to exercise their freedom, creativity, voice, and critical thinking for positive change. While I developed this framework in consideration of my own identity as an athlete, student, and

educator who is deeply aware of the mind-body connection, the findings of this study indicate that embodied culturally relevant pedagogy would improve the school experience and efficacy of instruction for the student-athlete population as a whole. In this section, I highlight the various elements of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy, as detailed in Figure 1, in connection with the experiences the participants and co-researchers shared in this study. While this pedagogy is largely absent in their current experiences in school, the findings support that embodied culturally relevant pedagogy would serve to improve student-athlete engagement in the learning process.

A central theme explored in this research is student engagement in the classroom and in sports. We examined three dimensions of engagement, including its behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements (Cooper, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2014). In their study on student engagement, Geraci et al. (2017) found that not all students are engaged in school for the same reasons. In fact, students fall within one of six different modes of engagement, including those who love the subject-matter, those who are emotionally connected to learning, those who raise their hands and ask questions frequently, those who thrive in the social aspects of the classroom, those who gravitate toward teacher relationships, and those who think deeply about the material. The findings in the present study also support the various entry points to and styles of engagement for students, demonstrating that each learner embodies a mixture of these engagement modes. Furthermore, embodied culturally relevant pedagogy supports this entire spectrum of modes of engagement, as it treats learning as a holistic, social-emotional process rooted in experiences, passions, relationships, and fascinating subject-matter.

This contrasts with the traditional education model, which divides knowledge into various disciplines while separating facts from their natural origin (Dewey, 1902/2011). In doing so, formal education erases the connection between information and the lived experiences that students have, effectively sterilizing this knowledge until students struggle to find academic material meaningful enough to remember. It became clear that the student-athlete participants largely experience this type of education at North Vine High School. Multiple participants shared the experience that information they learn in their classes falls out of their brain right after they learn it (Focus group participants, 12/1/21). Additionally, the student-athletes critiqued the arbitrary nature of the dated, disconnected information they are forced to learn in school (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 10/6/21), arguing for the need to make academic material more relatable and connected to student interests and cultures.

To the contrary, progressive education, rooted in experience where students actively learn beyond the confines of the mind, affirms that "not knowledge or information, but self-realization, is the goal" (Dewey, 1902/2011, p. 13). Authentic learning is not about acquiring information or getting through the material, which currently occurs in the educational experiences of North Vine High School students and many others in mainstream public education. Rather, learning is about the process of understanding and critiquing phenomena and information as students situate them in experiences that give them meaning. Embodied culturally relevant pedagogy seeks to reestablish this "organic connection with what the child has already seen and felt and loved" (Dewey, 1902/2011, p. 31).

Central to this process is the need to center the body in student-athletes'

educational experiences. According to Francesconi and Tarozzi (2012), "Thought does

not merely relate to the body as an object of the outside world, but is made from it" (p.

269). The co-researchers and participants in this study indicated that while practicing

sports obviously encompasses a use of the body, they constantly engage the mind,

whether through an embodied understanding of the fundamentals of the sport or through

the moment to moment adaptation to their opponent's moves. Sloan, one of the

co-researchers, affirmed this, as she stated, "I feel like I use my mind a lot in sports

because I'm constantly like, thinking about what I'm going to do, and my mind is the first

thing to, like, go off before my body even" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 9/29/21). As she is on

the wrestling mat or basketball court, her mind and body interface with the combination

of input from her acquired knowledge of the sport, past experiences in similar situations,

and the current physical position of her teammates and opponents to understand and

produce the most appropriate next move. This embodied cognition occurs organically

from within based on her stored experience and knowledge of this cultural practice.

Francesconi and Tarozzi (2012) go on to distinguish "between the body as an instrument,

a machine that can be used in functional and instrumental ways in sports, performance,

and communication, and the lived body as the expression of the individual's identity" (p.

276). The data from this study illustrate both of these considerations of the body, as

student-athletes exercise their bodies as instruments for their physical practice of sports,

and the practice of sports is an embodied expression of their own identities, passions,

unique and creative skills to interact with the world around them. The body offers the

potential for those whose identities are authentically expressed through movement and who have experience learning concepts and skills through movement, such as student-athletes, to process academic information in ways that more closely align with their identities and cultural practices.

Overwhelmingly, the data from this study as well as existing research illustrate that the school system and classroom pedagogies fail to leverage this embodied cognition and identity to engage and support student-athletes in their academic learning. Despite their awareness of this mind-body connection in sports, the co-researchers and participants were truly surprised by the foreign idea of integrating movement, embodiment, and sports in academic instruction because most of them have never experienced anything like this before. Student-athletes have not experienced embodied learning "to construct knowledge by incorporating unity of mind and body in the process of knowing through both objective and subjective realms of knowledge construction" (Freiler, 2008, p. 40), objective being the structures of reason that are traditionally valued in classroom pedagogies and subjective being more personal processes of constructing knowledge through feelings and experiences. Classroom instruction focuses almost entirely on the objective realm and excludes the subjective, which in turn excludes the body. However, student-athletes shared that they would learn academic content more effectively and would retain the information more efficiently and consistently if they could learn through sports and movement. Linking academic content with the subjective element of embodiment would provide more of an organic and humanized connection to the material (Dewey 1902/2011), leading to lasting learning.

Utilizing a connection between mind and body also provides a gateway for the inclusion of student-athletes' cultural practice of sports in their education. Such an inclusion of sports benefits not only from embodiment, but also from the emotional and identity-based connection student-athletes have with sports. Sports are a voluntary cultural practice in which student-athletes choose to spend their time, energy, and responsibility (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Jocson, 2006; Mahiri and Sablo, 1996). The integration of this cultural practice into educational spaces creates the potential that student-athletes will buy into their academic education more voluntarily, whereas "traditional school curriculum, coupled with traditional pedagogies, stand little chance of capturing the hearts and minds of young people" (Duncan-Andrade, 2010, p. 59). Furthermore, such an integration of sports reinforces the application of cultural knowledge in the classroom, validating athletes as holders of valuable practical knowledge (Nasir et al., 2008). As it currently stands, the participants in this study generally are not aware of this connection, and therefore, are not aware of the ways their embodied knowledge can serve them in academics. When explicitly asked if they would be interested in learning through sports and movement, participants responded exuberantly in the affirmative. It is crucial that teachers see students, and students see themselves, as organic intellectuals, understanding the practices for which students already are skilled and knowledgeable and providing them an opportunity to exercise those skills and knowledge in the classroom (Duncan-Andrade, 2010).

The structure of sports and sports pedagogies more closely align with the Deweyan progressive education model than traditional education, which allows students

to exercise their own agency and choice. This contributes to their sense of belonging and emotional and behavioral engagement in sports. In comparing her experiences in the classroom and in sports, a focus group participant shared:

> I feel like I have more freedom on the field because you could just let go and just play your own game, and you don't have to like, sit in your chair and do work or whatever. You have to be braver on the field and also that gives you more freedom because the coaches really push you. In class you aren't pushed as much.
>
> (12/1/21)

While student-athletes experience a freedom to have fun and make their own decisions on the field, their coaches also push them hard, communicating high expectations for their contributions (Duncan-Andrade, 2010), but allowing them the space to exercise their skills and creativity to reach their goals. They also have the freedom to take intellectual risks while developing their skills and identity in their cultural practice (Katz, 2008). The exercise of freedom in sports parallels the example of schoolyard games that Dewey (1938/2015) provides, as they have rules that govern conduct in each game, but conduct is also organically regulated by the social control of members of the community. The coach acts as a member of the group who is working to support the interests of the community through guidance, encouragement, and high expectations. When coaches have demonstrated their loyalty and care for their athletes, their contributions and critiques, even if direct or blunt, serve to support the group to reach their goals. This is a balance of student-athlete freedom and their efforts to reach a common goal as part of their team community.

As Dewey (1938/2015) argued, "The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile" (p. 61). This concept of being intrinsically worthwhile is crucial, as student-athletes have deemed the exercise of observation and judgment on the field or court as meeting this criterion, which motivates them to continue their voluntary participation in sports. Conversely, the purposes of school assignments and requirements do not have intrinsic value, but rather are motivated through arbitrary and imposed structures of grades, test scores, and punishment. Unfortunately, because their current traditional educational experiences are not set up as communities co-participating in shared activities, student-athletes often only participate to get a good grade.

The data of this study underscore the importance of collective work and community building in the classroom, echoing the existing research on student engagement. Through the development of community, as students develop a sense of belonging and learn through group projects, students are empowered to behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively engage in the learning process (Keyes, 2019). The humor, competition, friendships, knowledge, tension, and teamwork that come out of interactive classwork lead to lasting learning that goes beyond a surface-level understanding of the material (Blake, 11/15/21, interview; Carmen, 11/14/21, interview; Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview). The process of truly coming to know something "takes place in a *social world*, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation, and change" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 123). Participants in this study

shared that they feel like they actually learn when working with other students, hearing from other experiences and points of view to adjust their own understanding of the subject-matter and the reality that surrounds them (Kimberly, 11/2/21, interview).

Culturally relevant pedagogues believe that while it is vital that the curriculum is reflective of the passions, interests, and experiences of the students, how teachers deliver this material determines whether students connect with and internalize the information (Duncan-Andrade, 2010). These pedagogies, when enacted to teach to the state standards, can inspire students to "choose academic excellence" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). To the contrary, what occurs frequently for students at North Vine High School is that students make choices that get them good grades so they can progress to the next step (e.g., Honors classes, college, etc.) or to get through boring activities, which truly leads some of them down a path of academic disgrace, filled with cheating and cutting corners (Sloan & Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). As Sloan shared, "He gives the assignment to us and says, like, do one through five, and we'll like, do it. Mainly, I just cheat off [Penelope]" (Sloan, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21). This is not an issue in student morality or care, but a symptom of the woes of the education system as it currently stands. To the contrary, when students are asked to connect what they have learned in class to a game or activity of their choice to teach their peers, they take ownership of their education and draw meaningful connections between advanced academic material and prevalent popular cultural practices, such as teaching Wernicke's Area through a game of Telephone (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21) or the amygdala's fear response through the Michael Jackson Thriller video (Kimberly, 11/2/21). As Duncan-Andrade (2010) stated,

"The chance for a student to be accountable for teaching and mentoring a younger peer is an invaluable learning experience" (p. 148). I would extend this to all peers, not just those who are younger, but sadly, this type of academic activity is rare in the experiences of this sample of student-athletes, and they never involve sports.

The cruciality of situating learning in social worlds extends beyond peer to peer relationships and includes the cultivation of relationships between teachers and students. The data from this study align with Duncan-Andrade's (2010) findings in *What a Coach Can Teach a Teacher*, which highlights the elements of a coaching and sports-based culturally relevant pedagogy that can provide insight for classroom teachers. Central to his premise is that teachers should strive to cultivate meaningful relationships with their students, much like a coach fosters with their athletes. A coach cultivates community through demonstrating love and compassion for the members of the team while upholding firm boundaries and high expectations. Further, coaches support student-athletes to feel like they belong to and collaborate as part of a supportive community, instilling that they fail or succeed together. The current study reflected the need to apply this to classroom communities, as student-athletes long for group-based work and community building with their peers and teachers in the classroom (Blake, 11/15/21). Duncan-Andrade (2010) also found that students have positive sentiment toward teachers and coaches with whom they have formed bonds through collective struggle, such as on team sports, debate teams, or group research projects. This bond forms naturally between student-athletes and their coaches when they demonstrate loyalty and trust, and particularly when they practice alongside their athletes. Conversely,

students rarely experience this in the classroom, as teachers do not co-participate in the struggles that they ask their students to endure. However, in a culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers can engage with their students in this way if they take on the position of learner in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Overall, the characteristics and practices of compassionate, firm, and equitable coaches provide lessons for the type of relationship teachers should aspire to foster with their students.

While this study focused on the positive practices and attributes of good coaches, it is important to consider that not all coaches embody such practices. The data seemingly illustrated that overwhelmingly, the student-athletes in this study had positive perceptions of their coaches, while they had less positive perceptions of their teachers. However, it is important to avoid an oversimplification of these roles into a binary of either good or bad. For example, not all coaches support their athletes as positive role models, nor do all coaches get to know their athletes as holistic human beings or even as students. Additionally, the social context of a sports team can have its challenges and complexities, and teams do not always enjoy a familial bond. Conversely, some teachers demonstrate authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999) for all of their students and teach with a dynamic pedagogy that inspires high levels of engagement. The individuals filling these roles are not monolithic, and more research is needed to investigate these complexities.

This study adds to the literature to support the pedagogical practices that support student engagement in learning. Similar to Duncan-Andrade's (2010) study on culturally relevant pedagogy in his high school basketball program, the pedagogical practices that support student-athletes engagement in sports and in the classroom align, meaning that an

integration of sports-based pedagogies is needed. Teachers must devise a way to connect academic skills, processes, and material to the cultural practices and lived experiences of the students in their classroom. Further, they must develop positive teacher-student relationships that are built around clear boundaries, high expectations, trust, equity, and an ethic of care (Duncan-Andrade, 2010; Keyes, 2019).

This YPAR study takes culturally relevant pedagogy one step further to explore how the embodied practice of sports and the passion student-athletes have for movement can enliven the classroom learning experience and support meaningful learning. The co-researchers and participants expressed interest in using any and all types of movement in the classroom to make them more engaged in their schooling, as this pedagogy links their embodied identities and knowledge, physical bodies, and mind in their academic learning (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2012). This study focused on ways to engage the student-athlete population in their schooling through an examination of their experiences in school and in sports and their relationships with teachers and coaches with the lens of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy. This population of focus has demonstrated a passion for embodied activities through their voluntary participation in the cultural practice of sports. Future research is needed to investigate how embodied culturally relevant pedagogy can be utilized to support the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement of other intersecting student populations, particularly in the education of students whose lived experiences are constantly shaped by their embodied existence. Namely, this research is needed by, with, and for students with disabilities, students of color, and students who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community, as their

experiences in society and schools and personal intersectional identities are impacted constantly by their physical bodies, their abilities, and appearances. An intentional application of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy has significant potential in transforming the school experiences of these student communities as well. Further, linking mind and body in the education of all students may support improved engagement across the board.

YPAR Aligns with Student-Athlete Recommendations for Education

This study adds to the research that shows that students experience boredom in the drudgery of mainstream schooling, which points to the need to look for additional ways to engage students. In addition to the potential of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy to improve the schooling of student-athletes, this study also calls attention to the potential for YPAR to be utilized to jumpstart student engagement, as this methodology embodies the pedagogical practices that student-athletes in this study requested. The impact of participating in YPAR studies indicates that YPAR extends beyond a research methodology, acting as critical, culturally relevant pedagogy in practice (Romero et al., 2008; Scorza et al., 2017). This is the fundamental reason that I selected this methodology for this project, as the foundational research problem to be investigated started from reflections on the lived experiences of the youth co-researchers. Moreover, throughout the process, my work with the co-researchers illustrated that the pedagogy utilized in YPAR perfectly aligns with the ways in which student-athletes desired to transform their educational experiences. Thus, the impact of participating in the process of YPAR further reinforced findings in the data.

As we analyzed the data, I reflected that the positionality and choices I took as the Educator-Researcher enacted precisely the pedagogy that student-athlete co-researchers and participants named as being the key to improve their engagement in school. The elements inherent to the YPAR methodology, such as collaboration, community building, and a focus on the teacher-student relationship, align perfectly with what the student-athletes desired in their education. Moreover, student voice and choice guided the process of inquiry and analysis, which legitimizes their organic intellectualism (Duncan-Andrade, 2010) and the stores of knowledge they have gained through lived experience. The entire YPAR process was composed of fresh routines and activities, integrating movement activities to build community and process their thoughts, utilizing art to express themselves and think critically, and actively manipulating posters and post-it notes to visualize the coming together of themes. Each one of these activities broke the mold of traditional education, while I simultaneously encouraged them to think outside of the box to rely on their own intuition and intellect to draw valid conclusions based on the data they had collected. As the Educator-Researcher, I supported through co-participation while verbally reflecting my own learning process alongside the co-researchers, attempting to eliminate my power over this process, and maintaining a genuine motive to honor the decisions the co-researchers made together. I openly and frequently said, "I don't have the right answer" to reaffirm the decision-making control co-researchers had in this process, as the natural regression to the "teacher holds knowledge" normative assumption automatically crept into the co-researchers' minds during times of challenge. The co-researchers experienced a learning process that was not

dictated by their teacher's arbitrary expectations, which created a space for them to be highly engaged in their learning experience.

Perhaps the most important overlap between the recommendations student-athletes had for their education and the YPAR methodology was the type of relationship that grew between myself and the co-researchers. The equitable, friendly dynamics we developed and strengthened throughout the study created a fun and supportive learning environment in which we all held responsibility and ownership over the decisions we made as a team. I took time to ask and hear about the co-researchers' struggles and triumphs in school, sports, and personal life at the beginning of every class. In a reciprocal fashion, I also shared openly about my academic journey, new job struggles, and family life to develop our relationship of trust further. Additionally, throughout each YPAR meeting, I took time to engage with the co-researchers on digressions from the research task at hand, discussing personal experiences with COVID, upcoming school events, work issues they had, or youth slang of which I am unaware. We joked with each other and made space for all of us to reveal our authentic personalities. I adjusted each lesson based on their communicated needs, answering their questions when I could and acknowledging that I would have to look into the answer when I did not. The foundation of this bond had already been established when I was their teacher, but throughout my participation with the co-researchers it deepened, as we struggled and grew through the research process.

The findings highlighted the student-athlete desire for more community building and group work. Nearly all of the work in this YPAR project was completed in a group,

relying on collaboration, discussion, and community building to make decisions and get the work done. Across all the data from co-researchers and participants, the most common recommendation they offered to improve their engagement in school was to use more group projects and interactive activities in class. Every step of the YPAR process involved a form of group work, including team-building activities, such as "I Move, You Move" or "Follow the Leader", framing the research problem through "Drawing Your Experience", interview question testing and practice, code grouping and theme analysis, and a group presentation. Sprinkled throughout the YPAR meetings were focused discussions, laughter, side conversations between partners, questions being thrown across the room from one group to another, personal sharing, and thoughtful questions to deepen our discourse. We created a supportive, open learning community in which we shared knowledge, made mistakes, struggled to understand, and made intellectual breakthroughs while working on a project that deeply connected to our identities and cultures. Each of these elements aligns with the student-athletes ideas to improve their education to support a higher level of engagement.

The YPAR action taken at the end of the project, in which the co-researchers shared their findings with teachers to encourage them to change the way they teach in the classroom, provided a space for the co-researchers to exercise their voice and agency. The co-researchers chose to present their findings to a group of teachers because they felt that they were the ones who most needed to hear the message of the pervasive nature of the boredom student-athletes experience in school and the common trends that arose across their student-athlete peers. When the co-researchers were considering which action

they wanted to take to disseminate the findings, considering either a presentation or newsletter, Penelope shared, "I feel like we'll get more engagement out of the presentation. It'll be harder. It's like, more out of the comfort zone obviously. What do you want? Change? This is how we have to do it" (Penelope, YPAR meeting, 12/7/21). Penelope's statement reflects their belief that although a presentation is more challenging than creating and distributing a newsletter with the findings, they wanted teachers to see and hear them directly as they voiced the need for change. It also shows the confidence she gained throughout this project, and the passion and determination she developed as they uncovered the problematic trends in student-athlete experiences in education. The process of YPAR showed the co-researchers that they were "not only capable of better understanding their realities, but are also the best equipped to address their struggles" (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009, p. 1). The opportunity to share with teachers reinforced their understanding of themselves as an authority on their own experiences.

In our debrief following their presentation of the findings to their teachers, all three co-researchers named that they were engaged in this process because it forced them to think outside of the box. Students are generally trained to think, write, and act in defined and controlled ways that are subjectively determined by teachers and the education system as a whole, but inherent to these norms is the understanding that someone will always tell students if they do something wrong. This stifles the cognitive and emotional engagement of students simply due to the lack of ownership over their work and an absence of opportunity to learn by trial and error. Avery reflected on the differences between learning and decision making in school and in the YPAR setting:

I feel like in school, like, there's a specific answer that I need to have, so when I write an essay, and I think I do good, and then like, randomly, it'd be like, no, that's actually not what the teacher was looking for. So then I always try to ask for help or like, get direction, but for this, there wasn't a set answer, so it was a lot different…I had to be more self-assured during this project, because you weren't completely telling us exactly what to do. (Avery, YPAR meeting, 12/14/21)

Each of the co-researchers enjoyed a level of control and freedom over the decisions we made and the way we explored and shared topics, which initially made them uncomfortable, but ultimately led to their improved understanding and engagement in the research process. By default, when I was not giving them answers or direction, they had to rely on their own analysis of the best decision, which required significant cognitive engagement that they wholeheartedly embraced.

It is important to note that the context of this YPAR project provided me as the Educator-Researcher the freedom to enact a pedagogy that stayed true to the fundamental tenets of YPAR. Without the expectations to teach to a certain curriculum or cover the state standards for a particular discipline, I was able to orient the project and my interactions with students to support their choices and needs while minimizing the impact of my own motivations, as well as eliminating the need for the co-researchers to learn arbitrary information. We experienced this learning as a journey of reflection and discovery we were on together, all of us bringing in our own knowledge, experience, and ideas for change, and simultaneously developing research skills in a learning community together. We certainly practiced literacy and critical thinking skills that the education

system values so highly, but in a way that they never have the opportunity to experience, connected to their desire for change. YPAR provides this opportunity, as it is conducive to complex academic skill development while honoring student experiences, perspectives, and cultural knowledge. In the next section, I discuss the crucial need for systemic change to allow more opportunities for students to learn through transformative processes such as YPAR and embodied culturally relevant pedagogy.

The Need for Structural, Systemic Change

While the data suggest ways that teachers can adjust their practice to align with embodied culturally relevant pedagogy, it is crucial to point out the need for structural, systemic change to shift to a more humanizing educational experience. Kysa Nygreen (2013) critiques the paradox of getting ahead in her work using YPAR at a "last chance" high school. In her commentary, she highlights that "for decades, scholars have pondered this fundamental paradox of schooling, and many have concluded that the emphasis on getting ahead in school undermines possibilities for meaningful learning and democratic education" (Nygreen, 2013, p. 4). The neoliberal model of education that centers progress, competition, and individual responsibility inevitably emphasizes success on standardized tests and good grades, effectively eliminating the holistic human elements of critical pedagogy. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) distinguish between the use value and exchange value of learning as they point to the flaws of testing in schools. They argue that "the commoditization of learning engenders a fundamental contradiction between the use and exchange values of the outcome of learning, which manifests itself in conflicts between learning to know and learning to display knowledge for evaluation"

(Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 112). The experiences of the co-researchers and participants in the current study reflect this issue; as students focus on getting ahead, they must play into the system that equates high letter grades and test scores with success, but these come with little lasting learning, critical thought, or personal growth.

Not only do students experience this detrimental impact of the competitive neoliberal model, but it weighs on educators who try to do their best within the constraints of the education system and time. In this project, I realized that despite my own orientation toward embodied learning, cultivation of teacher-student relationships, and integrating cultural practices in learning spaces, when there are time constraints and external expectations and guidelines for the work educators do with students, it is sometimes inevitable to adjust back to the norm of traditional instruction. I found myself having to cut out some of the movement and embodied activities that I had planned due to a sense of urgency to get through the project. The same watering down process occurs daily in classrooms with wonderful teachers who simply do not have the time, energy, or support to teach in creative ways because of standards-based curricular constraints, pressures to prepare for assessments, or overall burnout.

Henry Giroux (2003) argues, "Any viable theory of radical pedagogy must not only be concerned with issues of curriculum and classroom practices, but must also emphasize the institutional constraints and larger social formations that bear down on forms of resistance waged by educators, teachers, students, and others attempting to challenge dominant teaching practices as well as systemic forms of oppression" (p. 8). Therefore, structural and systemic changes need to occur to move away from a neoliberal

model of education while developing and adopting a new curriculum and overall

education paradigm that humanizes education, taking the onus away from individual

teachers. Such a systemic shift would allow teachers the freedom to focus on supporting

their students in the pursuit of authentic learning and the development of lasting skills

that will allow them the opportunity to progress in their own personal passions and goals.

      The responses of participants to questions about movement-based or embodied

learning experiences overwhelmingly indicated the distance between embodied culturally

relevant pedagogy and the classroom pedagogies that teachers currently utilize. Queer

pedagogue Stacey Waite (2017) argues that academic institutions intend "to forever

codify and compartmentalize what we know from what we do, from what we are, from

the lived experience of our bodies…it even paves the way for us to dismiss or disregard

what the body knows in favor of what the institution knows" (p. 18). Students find

themselves stuck in the middle of this paradigm of education, but teachers, too, have been

educated and trained within this sort of disembodied education model. Teachers

experience the constraints of the neoliberal education model through academic standards,

competition to perform, and pressures to conform to the norms of the school, which do

not dictate the pedagogy sports coaches are free to enact on their teams. As a result,

teachers are trained to follow the traditional education model that disconnects education

from experience and completely ignores the physical bodies and embodied identities of

students. This was apparent in the questions the teachers had for the co-researchers

following their presentation of the findings. Their North Vine High School educators

asked them for more specific examples of using interactive activities and movement in

the classroom, demonstrating interest in adjusting their pedagogy in dynamic ways, but lacking the training or ideas for how to put this into practice. Therefore, teacher education programs must adapt in light of research such as this study to support them in their ability to spice up their pedagogical practice with movement and a centering of student bodies in their experiences in the classroom and in their processing of academic concepts. I provide lessons for future applications of YPAR in high school settings in the following section.

Lessons for Future Applications of YPAR with High School Students

As I planned this study and selected youth participatory action research as my methodology, due to its connections to the underpinnings of critical and culturally relevant pedagogies and Deweyan progressive education rooted in experience, I never could have anticipated the challenges and beautiful, surprising directions this project took in collaboration with the team of co-researchers. The impact this methodology and extended process have had on each of the co-researchers is profound, and I strongly recommend the use of this methodology in classroom pedagogies and extracurricular activities with high school students to spark joy and engagement in their education experiences. This YPAR project successfully engaged the co-researchers, as discussed in the previous section. Here I discuss the potential to improve upon what we did in this project and the benefits of making certain choices to facilitate the YPAR process, based on feedback from the co-researchers and my own reflections. Crucially of note, the YPAR process is inherently complex in nature, and due to the number of variables and the participatory aspects of this methodology, no YPAR study can perfectly address the unforeseen challenges that arise. Each decision the lead researcher makes can have its

benefits and drawbacks. This is all a part of this beautifully complicated and humanized methodology.

The voluntary nature of participation in this project brought benefits, yet added complications to this study. Because this project was not associated with class credit, grades, or the standard school schedule, the sustained participation of co-researchers was challenged. High school senior student-athletes have busy schedules outside of school hours, including practice, games, jobs, other extracurricular activities, and family responsibilities. I was asking the co-research team to choose to spend what little free time or time for completing homework they had in a classroom at their school. This participation even started on their summer break. Despite having this information from the onset of this project and agreeing to spend this time, four of the nine student-athletes who confirmed their participation as co-researchers never showed up, and one co-researcher only attended one YPAR meeting. Of the remaining four, one only participated through meeting seven, and the final three participated through meeting 13. The diversity of co-researchers quickly diminished, and the final team was composed of three female-identifying, White, academically high-performing students. I struggled with this reality, as I made every effort to include and support diverse students from the margins and to provide a sample of the ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and academic diversity of student-athletes at North Vine High School in the co-researcher team. However, it is unclear what added barriers each of the invited co-researchers were experiencing at the time of this project that prevented their participation.

Thus, to create a more equitable opportunity for students of various backgrounds to participate in future projects, I argue that YPAR must be included in classroom learning experiences. As part of a class, enrollment is guaranteed to be quite stable, ensuring prolonged participation and guaranteeing more consistent attendance of students. The time students can take each week to read and discuss challenging theoretical texts and investigate the background literature on the research topic would allow students the opportunity to engage in an elevated academic experience while further developing their critical lens, situating their own experiences relative to those already shared in the literature. Simultaneously, the consistent time and space would allow the Educator-Researcher the opportunity to support the co-research team to cultivate trusting and equitable relationships, creating a sense of community in the learning and investigative space. As part of a class, the potential scale of the project would increase, as more students could get the invaluable experience of YPAR, and the scope of investigation could expand quite significantly. Finally, participating students could receive academic credit for their participation, which would both support them in reaching their goal of obtaining their high school diploma and formally signify the importance of centering student voices and experiences in their education.

Practically speaking, I would recommend that future Educator-Researchers provide more definite structure at the beginning of a YPAR study, as my co-researchers struggled to visualize and comprehend what I was asking of them at first, which somewhat tested their interest in prolonged participation. Sloan directly shared:

I feel like in the beginning, if you would have said like, here's our outline of what

exactly we're gonna do. First we're gonna do this, then we're gonna code, then

we're gonna, or interview, then code, then this, then you're going to do a

presentation, like exactly what we were going to do. I feel like I would have

understood in the beginning, like, oh, this is our end goal, like, this is what it's

about, because in the beginning, I was honestly, I was kind of just BS-ing because

I was so confused what was going on. I was like, what? (Sloan, YPAR meeting,

12/14/21)

Sloan's comment highlights my own novice experience with YPAR, as I intentionally did

not provide a clear roadmap of what the co-researchers could expect because I did not

want to plant ideas in their minds before they had the chance to formulate their own

ideas. At the same time, her feedback illustrates that students are trained to operate only

based on clear structures that are established for them without their input. In my own

reflections on the level of structure necessary, I believe that providing students with a

general outline of the parts or phases of a research study, particularly a YPAR study, is

crucial while leaving the decision-making of what choices to make for each of those

phases up to the co-research team with the Educator-Researcher's guidance.

As previously mentioned, the co-researchers named that the voluntary nature of

the project supported their cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. However,

considering the potential positive outcomes of integrating YPAR in a class-based project,

it seems necessary to envision how to authentically maintain the integrity of YPAR, so

the project can still include voluntary processes, student choice, and freedom despite

being tethered to a class and grade. This must occur on two, interrelated levels. First, the teacher must strive to deeply understand and follow YPAR, allowing students to truly take the lead in making decisions based on their own experiences and perspectives relative to the particular topic. Second, the expectations of the outcomes of the YPAR project and the way in which student work is evaluated must be aligned more with overall development of leadership, critical thinking, and research skills, rather than purely on getting through material and getting assessed on surface-level understanding of the information. This requires more of a school administration and education paradigm shift, as this is not what currently occurs in mainstream classes. Teachers can still focus on traditional academic skills of reading and analyzing texts, but these texts should be related to student interests, and they should have a selection to choose from, rather than being forced to read a particular text that has no personal significance or interest to them. Grades should be more process-based, rather than measuring the supposed mastery of knowledge on a topic.

While the co-researchers shared the belief that this YPAR study was effective in supporting their engagement, they also confirmed that they believe YPAR should be utilized in classes at school because they would learn the material more effectively through this process. Avery shared, "if we did this within the classroom, we'd have to figure out how to do it ourselves, and then we'd be able to learn a lot more" (12/14/21). Relying on their own knowledge and thinking outside of the box would force them to develop their knowledge, which is what the participants and co-researchers shared should be the focus in school.

This study and past research have highlighted the positive impact of teachers and coaches co-participating in challenging activities with their students or athletes, so I recommend that teachers take the role of co-researcher and co-learner in YPAR projects. Eliminating the hierarchy of power between teachers and students allows students to cultivate a sense of trust, confidence, and control over their learning. Simultaneously, through the YPAR investigative process, the teacher would not play the role of the keeper of knowledge, and therefore, students would be more likely to share their opinions, make confident decisions, and have fun while working in collaboration with their teachers. The possibilities of the application of YPAR in classroom pedagogies to improve student engagement in the learning process are immense, centering student voices and experiences in their learning to promote positive change.

APPENDIX A: THE SUPER SIX

The Super Six

1. Be mindful of your actions and your impact on others.

2. Be responsible for yourself, your time, and your assignments.

3. Be honest.

4. Be respectful and be respected.

5. Be your own advocate.

6. Believe in your ability to succeed.

APPENDIX B: YPAR TRAINING READINGS

YPAR	Methodology section from my dissertation proposal (p. 65-68).
	hooks, b. (1994). Theory as liberatory practice. *Teaching to transgress* (pp. 59-75). New York: Routledge. *Excerpt.*
Sports-Based Culturally Relevant Pedagogy	Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. & Morrell, E. (2008). What a coach can teach a teacher. *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools* (pp. 69-88). New York: Peter Lang. *Excerpt.*
	Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice*, *34*(3), 159-165.
Theoretical Framework	Dewey, J. (1902/2011). *The child and the curriculum* (pp. 8-16). Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing.
	Dewey, J. (1938/2015). *Experience and education* (pp. 17-23, 51-60). New York: Free Press. *Excerpts.*

APPENDIX C: OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Participant Name:
Year in School:
Preferred Pseudonym:
Race/Ethnicity:
Gender Identity:

Sports History/Experiences
1. Tell me about your history and experience playing sports, like the sports you have played, when you started, and the teams you have played on.
2. What makes you choose to participate in school sports?
3. How do you think playing sports affects you as a person and a student? (Skills gained, negative effects, challenges, impact on grades, etc.)

School Experiences
4. In what ways do your classes make you feel interested and motivated to learn? (Material, teacher's style, types of assignments, etc.)
5. Describe the parts of your school experience that are boring to you.

Teacher and Coach Relationship
6. Tell me about a favorite teacher or coach you have had. What made them your favorite?
   a. Follow-up: Ask about the one the participant didn't describe (teacher or coach).
7. Tell me about the most inspiring thing your coach has said or done to you.
   a. How has this inspired you beyond sports?
8. You have played sports on various teams with different coaches. How would you describe the qualities that make a good coach?
9. How do you experience communication between your coaches and teachers in regards to your learning/education?
10. How do your teachers treat you as a student-athlete?
11. Tell me about a time a coach has helped you with school or your personal life.

Ways to Improve School
12. Have any of your teachers ever taught you a concept or topic by connecting it to sports? Can you describe what that lesson and experience was like?
13. In what ways, if any, do you use your mind in sports? In what ways, if any, do you use your body in school?
14. If the school asked for student input on how to make classroom learning more engaging, fun, or effective, what would you recommend?
15. What activities would you like to do in your classes to be more engaged? Can you tell me about a time you have experienced this in a class? (Both simultaneously)

Useful Additional Questions: Tell me more about that… Can you explain what you mean by…?

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Experience of being a student-athlete
1. Tell me about what makes you all choose to participate in sports.
2. How do you think playing sports affects you as people and students? (Skills gained, negative effects, challenges, impact on grades, etc.)
3. What would you tell an underclassman who is a student-athlete and trying to figure out the balance between school and sports?
4. In what ways, if any, do you feel like you have freedom or control in both sports and school? (Get response for both sports and school).

Engagement in School
5. Tell me about some of the most memorable or engaging activities you have done in your classes so far this year?
6. What parts of school do you dislike or find boring?
7. In what ways do you feel like teachers try to adjust their teaching style or assignments according to what you like, want, or need?

Before I ask the next questions, I want to give a little background. In this project, we have been talking about something called embodied culturally relevant pedagogy, which is a fancy way of saying "ways of teaching and learning school subjects that use your body, movement, and sports." The person doing this project with us is so passionate about this way of teaching and learning that she is planning on starting an after school program for middle school students to learn school subjects like math, science, history, English, and Spanish through playing sports. The students involved in this program will play the sport together on a team and grow their skills on the court or field, but the coach will also teach them algebra, physics, and statistics, and provide space to read and write about the history and current events surrounding college and professional sports. Everything will be connected to their love for sports, with lots of movement, team bonding, and mentorship.

Interest in academic learning through movement/sports
8. If given the opportunity, would you like to learn school subjects through sports and movement?
9. Can you share an experience you have had where your teacher used sports or movement in a lesson? (If they seem to struggle to think of a time, give an example of something simple, even walking, stretching, or talking about professional games or players, etc.)
10. Can you think of any ways soccer/basketball/tennis/wrestling connect to a school subject like math, science, or social studies? (Pick the sport they play, and think of a way you might answer that question to start the conversation if they can't think of anything, but don't talk about too many ideas so they can come up with some together. Try to spend some time discussing this with them to get some responses. Ex: leverage in wrestling, shooting percentage in basketball, burning calories while running, flight trajectories of the ball in soccer/tennis, history of Team USA women's soccer, etc.).

11. If you had the opportunity to make your classes or teachers more interesting or effective for you, what would you like to change?

APPENDIX E: YPAR CO-RESEARCH PHASES

Phase	Meeting #
1: Introduction–YPAR and Research Topic	1-4
2A: Design Interview Protocol	5-7
2B: Data Collection–Interviews	Co-researchers completed the interviewing process individually, and no YPAR meetings were held during this time.
2C: Coding–Interviews	8-9
3A: Design Focus Group Protocol	9
3B: Data Collection–Focus Groups	Sloan and Penelope facilitated the focus groups individually.
3C: Coding–Focus Groups	Educator-Researcher completed this individually to support co-researchers in finishing in December.
4: Data Analysis	10
5A: Plan Action	11-12
5B: Disseminate Findings/Action and Reflect as a Co-Research Team	13

APPENDIX F: YPAR MEETING DESCRIPTIONS AND ATTENDANCE

Meeting #	Description	Co-Researchers in Attendance
1: 7/24/21	Introduction: Icebreakers, co-research team norms, relationship building, critical reading lesson, defining research in small groups, YPAR methodology, logistics and planning	Sloan, Penelope, Marta, Elena
2: 8/7/21	Identifying the problem: Ken Robinson video "Changing Education Paradigms", Drawing Our Experiences activity, journaling about issues in education, research question overview, RQ brainstorming	Avery and Penelope
3: 8/25/21	Research questions and theoretical Framework: Instruction of embodied culturally relevant pedagogy and its components (Dewey, Ladson-Billings, Francesconi & Tarozzi); Discuss topics/framing of a problem; Formulate research questions and themes to investigate	Sloan, Penelope, Avery, Marta
4: 9/1/21	Qualitative research methods introduction: Interviews and focus groups, interview question development, Follow the Leader movement exercise and debrief	Sloan, Penelope, Avery, Marta
5: 9/15/21	Interview protocol, topic guide, strategies for designing interview protocol and running semi-structured interviews, brainstorming and testing interview questions	Sloan, Penelope, Avery, Marta
6: 9/29/21	Interview question practice in pairs, revising and eliminating to finalize interview protocol and practice interviewing skills	Sloan, Penelope, Avery
7: 10/6/21	Co-researcher identity exploration activity, final interview practice, overview of IRB Consent/Assent forms for participants, plan to interview participants	Sloan, Penelope, Marta
8: 11/10/21	Debrief interviewing experience, introduction to coding, first step coding interview	Sloan and Avery

	transcripts and adding themes to posters for each RQ	
9: 11/17/21	Debrief interview experience with Penelope, two-step coding, develop focus group protocol for Sloan and Penelope only.	Sloan and Penelope
10: 12/1/21	Debrief focus groups, grouping codes by theme, revision of research questions, preliminary planning for sharing findings with the community	Sloan, Penelope, Avery
11: 12/7/21	Create presentation slides, identification of useful quotes to represent each theme, pseudonym discussion and selection, plan for promoting attendance at presentation	Sloan, Penelope, Avery
12: 12/9/21	Finish presentation slides, practice presentation and get feedback	Sloan, Penelope, Avery
13: 12/14/21	Action: Presentation to teachers; debrief of experience of presenting, participating in YPAR as a whole, and reflections on their conclusions	Sloan, Penelope, Avery

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