Youth-Led Participatory Action Research

Promoting Youth Voice and Adult Support in Afterschool Programs

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Afterschool programs often find it challenging to retain participants as they transition from childhood into early adolescence and enter middle school (Deschenes et al., 2010). During this developmental period, many young people, as they experience a growing need for autonomy, begin to disconnect from pro-social institutions (Eccles et al, 1993; Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). This is especially true for low-income youth of color, who are more likely than other young people to experience discrimination and disengagement from school and adult authorities (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Travis & Leech, 2014). These trends pose a significant challenge to out-of-school time (OST) programs that aim to serve disadvantaged youth.

How can afterschool programs engage middle school students of color as they enter their teenage years?

We asked this question while working with the Bridge Project, a drop-in community-based academic enrichment program serving low-income children and adolescents of color living in public housing in Denver, Colorado. Faced with dwindling enrollment among middle school participants, we turned to the research literature for guidance about how to respond to early adolescents'

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increasing desire for independence while also keeping them connected to the program. Studies suggest that two strategies may be key to keeping middle school students engaged: (1) allow young people to have a voice in decision-making and (2) create more egalitarian relationships between adolescents and program staff (Deschenes et al., 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002; Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). We decided to explore these strategies by increasing opportunities for youth-led research at the Bridge Project.

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) is an approach that is designed to support participants' self-determination and increase power-sharing between youth and adults. Very broadly, YPAR involves young people in gathering information about pressing school or community issues and advocating for solutions to these issues (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). There is growing evidence that YPAR creates opportunities for adolescents to engage in programmatic, organizational, and policy-level decision-making (Ozer & Wright, 2012). Studies have documented the unique and developmentally responsive relationships that are built through YPAR as young people renegotiate power dynamics with adults (Kirshner, 2008; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013).

Inspired by this literature, we piloted a YPAR program to assess whether middle school participants increased their perceptions of (1) opportunities for voice and choice in the program, such as planning and leading activities or making rules, and (2) supportive relationships with program staff who listen, show respect, and care about their ideas. We surveyed YPAR participants and a comparison group to chart the change they experienced on these two dimensions during nine months of programming. This article shares the results of our study, which has implications for OST programs interested in retaining participants during the transition from childhood to early adolescence.

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Youth-Led Participatory Action Research

In YPAR projects, young people identify a problem of concern, gather data about it, and then make recommendations for improvement. For example, participants might select the topic of school violence, survey their peers to assess their experiences, and then present their results and suggested solutions to the local school board.

Principles of YPAR

This process is captured more fully in the stages of YPAR outlined by Ozer and colleagues (2010):

- Young people begin by exploring social justice issues in their school, program, or community. They then choose a topic to explore in depth.
- Once they have selected their problem of interest, they gain hands-on experience in various research methods, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, or documentary videos.
- As participants collect data from stakeholders to answer their research question, they also think strategically about how to create social change by building alliances with stakeholders.
- After identifying the main findings from their research, youth generate recommendations for change and advocate for their solutions.

Rodriguez and Brown (2009) conceptualized YPAR as being guided by three key principles. YPAR is:
- **Inquiry-based.** Topics of investigation are grounded in young people's life experiences and concerns.
- **Participatory.** Young people share power with adults in making decisions about their project and how to move it forward.
- **Transformative.** The purpose of YPAR is to improve the lives of marginalized youth and their communities.

Impact of YPAR on Youth Voice and Adult Support

Studies suggest great potential for YPAR projects to improve opportunities for youth voice and transform typical relationships between youth and adults. For example, several qualitative investigations indicate that YPAR cre-

ates space for young people to make choices about their learning and give input to decision-makers. Studies of YPAR have also shown that participants regularly made decisions about their daily experiences in the program, along with broader topics like issue selection and action steps (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Ozer et al., 2013). Finally, scholars have noted the positive impact of involving YPAR participants in school reform and community change movements, where they plan and lead activities that aim to create social change (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009; Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014; Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Serriere, Mitra, & Reed, 2011).

Investigators have found that dynamics between participants and project facilitators in YPAR programs are more egalitarian than those in traditional youth-serving organizations, suggesting that YPAR programs may be more responsive to early adolescents' need for independence (Kirshner, 2008; Mitra, Lewis, & Sanders, 2013; Ozer et al., 2013). Inclusivity, honoring the diverse experiences and perspectives of participants, and stepping back to allow youth to make mistakes were key relational strategies for adults in YPAR programs (Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005; O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). Finally, studies indicate that YPAR creates opportunities for youth to speak to decision-makers and feel heard and seen by adults in new ways (Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Ozer & Wright, 2012). These claims are supported by evidence that adults' connections to adolescents are stronger in all types of afterschool programs when their relationships reflect increasing trust in and autonomy of youth participants, shared decision-making power, and partnership in program implementation (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Jones & Deutsch, 2011).

Social Justice Youth Development

Our belief that involvement in YPAR would lead participants to perceive that they had more voice and choice was guided by the social justice youth development framework (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002). This framework builds on theories of positive youth development to account for the experiences of low-income youth of color with discrimination, inequality, and negative stereotypes of their communities,

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each of which compounds the developmental challenges all young people face (Swanson, Spencer, dell'Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002). For example, the literature on positive youth development suggests that supportive relationships and opportunities for choice and voice are key factors in program impact (Hansen & Larson, 2007; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Social justice youth development posits that such constructs need to be extended and contextualized for low-income youth of color, with an emphasis on power sharing and the promotion of systematic change through collective action (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002).

Strong evidence confirms that Latino/a and Black adolescents frequently experience discrimination and harassment from public authority figures, such as teachers and police officers, and that they are more likely than other youth to have adult responsibilities like caring for siblings (Anyon et al., 2016; Travis & Leech, 2014). These dynamics may create conditions for general distrust of nonfamilial adults and resistance toward typical power arrangements based on age. Similarly, evidence shows that marginalized youth have few opportunities for leadership and civic engagement (Jacobsen & Linkow, 2012; Littenberg Tobias & Cohen, 2016). Social justice youth development therefore suggests that the foundations of effective OST programs serving youth of color are egalitarian dynamics between youth and adults and opportunities for young people to take leadership roles in influencing their social contexts (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Travis & Leech, 2014). Social justice youth development also suggests that programs will have limited success in cultivating caring relationships and engaging youth in leadership opportunities if they ignore power dynamics and the contexts that shape young people's understanding of agency and leadership. Instead, this framework proposes that youth voice and caring adult relationships in YPAR projects will be stronger because the YPAR approach is more developmentally and culturally responsive than traditional youth development approaches.

Purpose and Method

The following research question guided this pilot study: Does participation in a YPAR program increase opportunities for youth voice and adult support? Drawing on a

social justice youth development framework, we hypothesized that youth involved in YPAR would report more leadership opportunities and more positive relationships with adults than a comparison group of youth from the same afterschool program.

Setting

This YPAR curriculum was nested in a drop-in academic enrichment program, the Bridge Project, which aims to mitigate the extremely elevated school push-out rates in public housing communities through educational enrichment and social-emotional learning programs (Jenson, Alter, Nicotera, Anthony, & Forrest-Bank, 2013). In a typical year, it serves approximately 500 youth between the ages of 5 and 18 who reflect the diversity of their neighborhoods: 37 percent are Latino/a, 40 percent are African American or African refugees, 9 percent are Asian, 8 percent are multiracial, 5 percent are White, and 1 percent are Native American. Households in all these neighborhoods are classified as "extremely poor," with average annual incomes of less than $8,490 for a family of four.

YPAR Curriculum

The YPAR program that is the focus of this study was guided by the Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) curriculum, a structured and sequenced approach to implementing YPAR in afterschool contexts developed by the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University (Anyon et al., 2007). This free and publicly available curriculum first focuses on developing young people's leadership and decision-making skills and then takes participants through a process of gathering information about pressing community issues and making recommendations to an external audience. Young people make decisions both about day-to-day processes, such as norm setting, and about project-level strategies, such as topic selection and data collection methods. The curriculum encourages a youth-adult partnership model in which adults work *with* rather than *for* youth participants (Anyon et al., 2007).

The complete curriculum of 55 lesson plans, ranging from 60 to 120 minutes, was consolidated into 26 sessions to be implemented once a week for 90 minutes with middle school participants. Lessons included five core components: opening circle, community builder, main activity, debrief, and closing circle. The curriculum uses an eight-step YPAR process that enables participants to:

1. Create a sense of group unity, learn about inequality, and build leadership skills
2. Explore issues in the community and select one topic that will be the focus for the rest of the program year
3. Investigate this topic using the Internet and surveys, photos, interviews, or focus groups
4. Organize and analyze the information collected
5. Explore different ways to create social change
6. Create a product (such as a presentation, video, or brochure) that will highlight research findings and recommendations
7. Take action and share this product with one or more external audiences
8. Reflect on the experience and celebrate successes

Lessons include topics such as team building and communication, understanding the root causes of social problems, research methods, data analysis, developing recommendations, and social action approaches. Studies of YELL in other communities indicate that the program promotes participatory behaviors, socio-political awareness, critical thinking, problem-solving behaviors, and public speaking skills (Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Conner & Strobel, 2007; Harden et al., 2015; Kirshner, 2008; Ozer & Douglas, 2013).

Adult Facilitators and Training

Project facilitators were seven master's students in social work who were completing their required field placement at the Bridge Project. Four were Latino/a and three were White. All but one were female. To strengthen fidelity to the program model and social justice youth development principles, facilitators participated in a weekly hour-long program coaching seminar for independent study credit. On average, they spent 22 hours in these coaching sessions, which were facilitated by a doctoral student with support from this study's principal investigator (a faculty member) and students' field placement supervisors. Each seminar be-

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gan with a role play, continued with structured reflections and group discussions on implementation struggles and successes, and ended with planning and consultation. Facilitators also submitted weekly fidelity forms, which were used to monitor student progress and identify opportunities to support facilitators when they struggled to implement social justice youth development strategies.

Example Projects

During the year of this study, YELL participants developed projects focused on issues that were salient to their daily lives, including police brutality, discrimination toward the LGBTQ community, self-care for women, and the need for urban gardens. For example, the group focused on police brutality drew on current events around the country related to racial profiling and on group members' own experiences, both positive and negative, with the police in their community. Their research involved analysis of media coverage of police violence and their personal reactions. Advocacy activities included a youth dialogue at the neighborhood police station, followed by a presentation to board members of the city housing authority about the group's concerns and recommendations for changing dynamics between youth and police. Another example of participant research involved eco-mapping community resources by walking the neighborhood and completing field notes about plant life, gardens, and types of food outlets. Through this hands-on research, the young people learned about food deserts, participated in workshops about pollinators, and then used this information to combat food deserts by developing a community garden at their program site.

Sample

A total of 89 middle school students were enrolled in the Bridge Project during the year of the study. Of the 82 youth who completed a pre-participation survey, 65 also completed a post-participation survey and therefore were included in the study sample. Of these, 33 young people were in the program group who participated in YELL, and 32 were in the comparison group who participated in other Bridge Project activities but did not attend YELL sessions. As shown in Table 1, YELL participants were between the ages of 11 and 17, with an average age of 13.1. More than half were female. A high proportion identified as Black or African refugees, followed by Latino/a and then Asian or Pacific Islander. Comparison group members were similar in age and gender but were less likely than YPAR participants to be Black and more likely to be Asian.

Procedures and Data Collection

Informed parental consent and youth assent to participate in the study were obtained during program registration. Participants completed the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes – Youth Version (SAYO-Y, National Institute on Out of School Time, 2015) at the beginning and end of the program year, in fall 2014 and spring 2015. Graduate research assistants administered the survey with support from program staff. Youth independently completed the survey using paper and pencil; adults were available to answer clarifying questions.

Measures

Two scales from the SAYO-Y were used to measure youth voice and adult support at pretest and posttest. The Re-

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

	YELL Participants ($N = 33$)	Comparison Group ($N = 32$)
Gender		
Male	36.4%	40.6%
Average age	13.1	13.9
Race		
Black	66.7%	25.0%**
Latino	24.2%	37.5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	9.1%	28.1%*
Other	0.0%	9.4%

*$p < .05$; **$p < .001$, based on a two-sample test of proportions. p values are indicators of mathematical confidence suggesting that results are not due to chance.

sponsibility and Leadership subscale included five items to assess youth voice:

- "Do you get to help plan activities for the program?"
- "Do you get the chance to lead an activity?"
- "Are you in charge of doing something to help?"
- "Do you get to help make decisions or rules?"
- "Do you get to do things to help people in your community?"

The Supportive Relationships with Staff Members scale included four items assessing young people's connections to program staff:

- "Is there an adult here who is interested in how you think about things?"
- "Is there an adult here that you can talk to when you are upset?"
- "Is there an adult here who helps you when you are having a problem?"
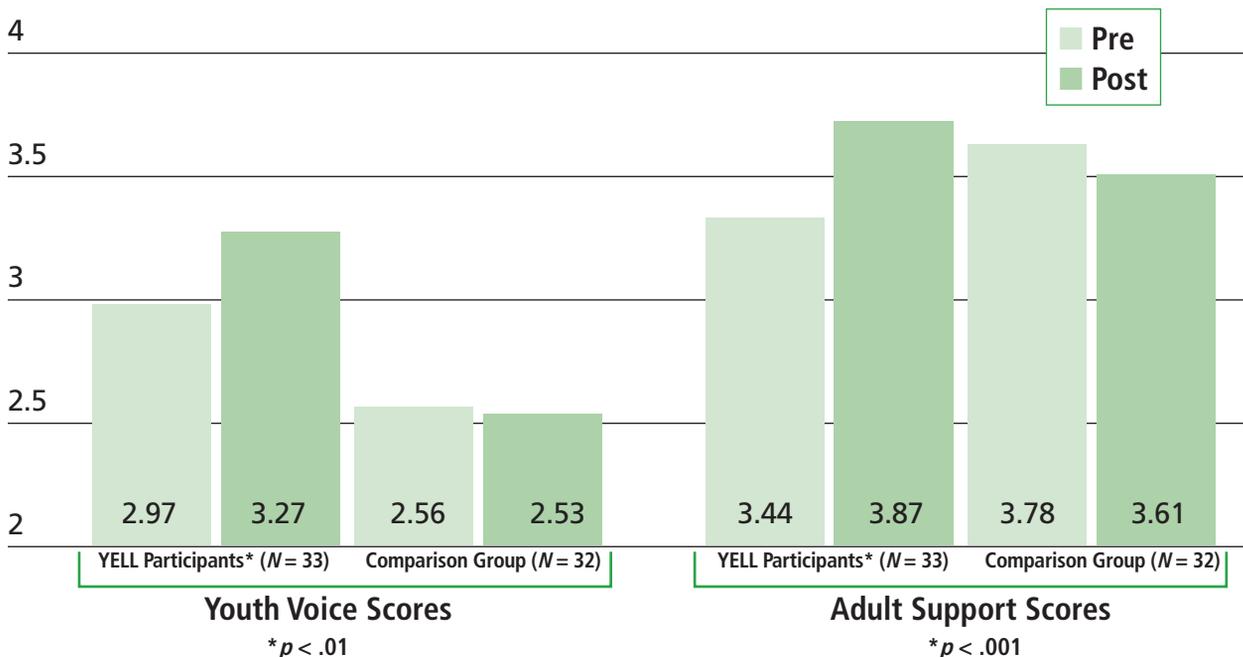- "Is there an adult here who you will listen to and respect?"

Possible responses to all questions for both scales were yes (4), mostly yes (3), mostly no (2), and no (1). In our sample, tests of reliability resulted in strong evidence of internal consistency (α = .88 for Responsibility and Leadership and α = .81 for Supportive Adults); this result is consistent with other studies using these measures (National Institute on Out of School Time, 2015; Surr et al., 2012).

Findings

To assess whether YELL participants' perception of youth voice and adult support improved during the program more than the comparison group's, we matched students' survey responses from pretest to posttest and then compared how scores changed. As shown in Figure 1, YELL participants' scores on both SAYO-Y scales improved between pretest and posttest. The differences were statistically significant; the p values in the figures are indicators of mathematical confidence suggesting that our results are not due to chance. For the survey scale for youth voice, YELL participants reported an initial score of 2.97, which rose 0.30 points to 3.27 by the spring. For adult support, YELL participants reported a score of 3.44 in the fall, which improved 0.43 points to 3.87 in the spring. In contrast, among the comparison group nonparticipants, scores declined slightly for both youth voice (from 2.56 to 2.53) and adult support (from 3.78 to 3.61). This trend was not statistically significant, suggesting that the comparison group's scores were relatively stable.

Participants' own words confirm these quantitative findings. In response to an open-ended survey item asking participants to describe what they liked about YELL, one respondent wrote, "It is a program where you get to show leadership [and] do a project where you can help the community." Another participant observed, "There's really cool staff" who facilitate YELL. Taken together, these results suggest that the program may have im-

Figure 1. Youth Voice and Adult Support Scores

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Youth Voice Scores
YELL Participants* (*N* = 33): Pre 2.97, Post 3.27
Comparison Group (*N* = 32): Pre 2.56, Post 2.53
p < .01

Adult Support Scores
YELL Participants* (*N* = 33): Pre 3.44, Post 3.87
Comparison Group (*N* = 32): Pre 3.78, Post 3.61
p < .001

proved participants' perceptions that they had leadership opportunities and adult support.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that YPAR may be a promising approach to increasing opportunities for leadership among low-income youth of color and improving youth-adult relationships in community-based afterschool programs. Youth who participated in a 26-week YPAR curriculum experienced positive and statistically significant changes in perceived youth voice and adult support, in contrast to a lack of change in the comparison group. Our study findings parallel previous qualitative evidence that YPAR creates opportunities for adolescents to take on meaningful leadership roles, engage in programmatic decision-making, and negotiate new relational dynamics with adults (Anyon & Naughton, 2003; Conner & Strobel, 2007; Kirshner, 2008).

Guided by a social justice youth development framework, we propose that these results may reflect the unique opportunities afforded to youth in YPAR projects. For example, the YELL program manual highlights the critical role of adult facilitators in the process of supporting youth voice, directing program staff to take on the roles of "facilitator, mentor, and partner" (Anyon et al., 2007, p. 10). Program activities are intentionally designed to support youth voice and adult relationships. At the start of the curriculum, youth are charged with creating their group norms, whereas in other Bridge Project programs behavioral expectations are often determined by adults. At midyear, participants vote to select a community issue or problem that is important to them to become the focus of their research. At the end of the curriculum, youth work with adult facilitators to create a product of their choosing and share their work with others in the community. These are just some of the ways that YELL, and YPAR projects more broadly, create environments that are culturally and developmentally responsive to the needs, interests, and experiences of low-income early adolescents of color.

Study Limitations

Our pilot study found evidence that supports use of YPAR in community-based OST programs. However, several limitations must be considered. The sample size is small, and the program and comparison group participants were not randomly assigned. Anecdotally, practitioners reported that schedule conflicts were the most common factor contributing to participation in YELL. In addition, the YELL and comparison groups differed significantly by race, so that selection biases might have influenced perceptions of youth voice and adult support. This concern is tempered by evidence from the literature that Black youth, who were a larger proportion of the YELL group than of the comparison group, experience high rates of marginalization (Travis & Leech, 2014).

Another set of limitations has to do with confounding effects. YELL participants also used other Bridge Project services. For example, they could participate in a science and engineering program on a different day of the week and could access tutoring and homework help in the hour before YELL sessions began. Changes in SAYO-Y measures could be due to participants' involvement in other programming.

Finally, our research included only Bridge Project participants who completed surveys at both the beginning and the end of the program year. As a result, participants who experienced less transience or were generally more engaged in program services than other students were overrepresented in both the treatment and comparison groups. Such sample biases limit the generalizability of our pilot study.

A Promising Approach

Our findings suggest that YPAR is a promising approach to supporting self-determination and developmentally appropriate adolescent-adult relationships for low-income youth of color in community-based afterschool programs. YPAR may therefore be an important strategy for increasing young people's engagement in OST programs, particularly during the transition from childhood to early adolescence. Additional studies of the YELL curriculum and of other YPAR strategies are needed to more fully understand the potential of these approaches and their impact on program participants.

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