MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity by Design:

Youth Rising: Centering Youth Voice in the Quest for Equitable and Inclusive Schools

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> **"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time; but if you are here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." (Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s)**

KEY TERMS

Ableism refers to practices, beliefs, and systems that discriminate against people with disabilities, and may include seeing non-disabled as a superior state of being compared to disability.

Audism is a form of ableism specific to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Non-Dominant Youth refers to youth who have membership within a historically marginalized group and as a result have diminished social or political status and may be deprived of a number of legal rights.

Hegemony refers to "the legitimation of the cultural authority of the dominant group, an authority that plays a significant role in social re-production" (Wollard, 1985, p. 739)

Hetero-normative refers to beliefs or practices that treat heterosexuality as the normative or preferred sexuality.

Inclusive education refers to "a continuous struggle toward (a) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures" (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013, p. 35).

Latinx is used to refer to people with Latin American roots without using the gender binaries that accompany "Latino" and "Latina."

Educational systems worldwide are committed to the critical work of transformative change in order to create more equitable and inclusive schools (Ainscow, 2005; Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2015; Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Kozleski & Thorius, 2013). This work can happen at different levels of the educational system (i.e., state, district, school, practitioner levels) and involve a range of foci and priority areas (i.e., research, policy, pedagogy) for advancing systemic change (Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Kozleski & Thorius, 2013). Although these efforts are much needed, historically they have been top-down, adult-centered understandings of equity and inclusion done to *support* youth but *without* including youth (Kozleski, Thorius, & Smith, 2013).

The quote at the beginning of this brief serves as an important reminder that pursuing just educational systems often results in adult-centered notions of liberation, justice, and inclusion while neglecting to identify how these notions are bound with youth-centered notions. Indeed, even when adults want to include youth in more meaningful ways, this can be a difficult vision to realize. Yet, youth have the capacity to contribute to reimagined and innovative forms of school liberation, equity, and inclusion. This begs the question, in what ways can adults reconfigure school change practices to open opportunities for youth to help represent, name, and shape more equitable and inclusive schools?

We begin this brief by discussing the affordances of designing opportunities to partner with youth into school change frameworks. We then highlight a promising method for supporting youth in representing their notions of equity and inclusion. We then present Lidia's story, an emergent bilingual student, to illustrate how one school is using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a means to center student voice in school change efforts. Finally, we conclude this brief with a call to action for schools committed to advancing educational equity.

Whose Voice Matters in Creating Inclusive Schools?

Inclusive education is sometimes narrowed to focus on access to general education for students with disabilities, inclusive education is a movement that has aimed to address historical legacies of exclusion that have denied full access, meaningful participation, and positive outcomes for all students (Ainscow, 2005; Artiles, Kozleski, & Waitoller, 2015). Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) have defined inclusive education as a movement to address these inequities as follows:

> [A] continuous struggle toward (a) the redistribution of quality opportunities to learn and participate in educational programs, (b) the recognition and value of differences as reflected in content, pedagogy, and assessment tools, and (c) the opportunities for marginalized groups to represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions that affect their children's educational futures (p. 35).

This definition of inclusive education gives rise to the question *whose voice matters in creating inclusive schools?* Although school systems carry the responsibilities of school improvement, this responsibility also entails designing space for families and youth to "represent themselves in decision-making processes that advance and define claims of exclusion and the respective solutions." Involving youth in truly transformative ways requires deliberate attention to exclusion and marginalization in schools. For example, youth who are viewed positively by staff may hold leadership roles through student council, yet these roles are seldom designed to interrogate school policies or systems that youth might consider inequitable (Mitra, 2008).

Disrupting dominant notions of inclusion and equity includes creating opportunities for diverse ranges of students to name and explore their own experiences and understandings of inclusion. This might include youth of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, ability groups, language dominance, and such. It may also involve students that are disproportionately represented in special education (e.g., students of color including American Indian youth) or under-represented in advanced placement and honors courses. Learning and working alongside diverse ranges of youth provide more complex and needed equity narratives that can contribute to more transformative school change opportunities.

Creating spaces for non-dominant youth to represent themselves and participate in the decision making process also requires a commitment from school leaders to listen and take youth perspectives seriously, which is transformative in healing and re-mediating relationships between adults and youth. Byak and Schneider (2003) refer to this type of relationship as *relational trust*, which regardless of power structures focuses on the interdependence of the community members in pursuing the shared goals. Similarly, creating space for youth to engage in school change for equity and inclusion requires a full commitment to sustaining their engagement, rather than treating youth as temporary instruments to fulfill adult needs and interests.

Partnering With Youth

There are a myriad of ways that schools have sought to center student voice in meaningful ways that could lead to school change. Mitra and Gross (2009, p. 523) illustrate how these partnership commonly play out with a pyramid framework showing the most common being eliciting students' opinions and perspectives (i.e., "*being heard*"), followed by working in partnership with adults to address school problems and enact change (i.e., "*collaborating with adults*"), and with the least common being through sharing leadership roles with youth so that they partner with adults to address current school issues while developing leadership capacity for their futures (i.e., "*building capacity for leadership*"). This framework is helpful for schools to think about how they might include youth in advancing equity.

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a promising approach to shifting youth involvement beyond being heard. YPAR allows adults to reimagine the role of youth by working collaboratively with them (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; Morrell, 2006). Through this collaboration, youth are able to disrupt dominant notions of equity and inclusion by illuminating gaps in adult-centered efforts, which tend to reproduce their own Eurocentric, middle-class, hetero-normative perspectives (Brantlinger & Danforth (2006). Specifically, YPAR allows youth to become active members in the process of identifying, researching, and disseminating knowledge about equity issues impacting their daily lives in and out of school with the support of caring adults (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006). YPAR supports adults in viewing students' broad competencies including the ability to work as partners in school change.

YPAR is a flexible framework that schools can use to restructure school initiatives in ways that allow youth to respond to the challenges and needs impacting their schools (Baldridge, 2014; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Ginwright, 2007).

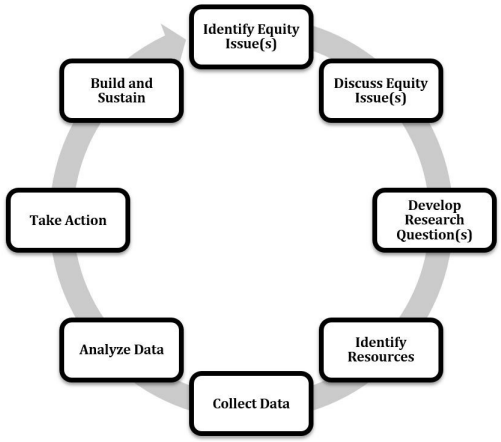
Putting YPAR to Work in Inclusive Education Frameworks

Waitoller and Kozleski's (2013) definition of inclusive education can be used as a framework for understanding and pursuing inclusive education. The above figure shows how YPAR can be used in conjunction with existing inclusive education frameworks to structure a leadership space for non-dominant youth to participate in identifying, naming, and addressing the inequities impacting their educational experiences. Youth have often understood structural barriers they face in in the US school system (Hosang, 2006), and YPAR serves as a viable method for allowing youth to become involved in school reform solutions that they believe will result in increased equity and inclusion. But what happens in these spaces using YPAR?

YPAR adults working in collaboration with youth and adults witnessing the process from afar have the opportunity to understand youth in more complex ways (Torre, et. al., 2008). A central tenant of YPAR is the belief that youth have strength and knowledge to offer schools and society (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). YPAR is a powerful equity tool that first requires school adults to resist damage-centered discourse that frames youth as "at risk," "disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived" (Baldridge, 2014; Tuck, 2002), and instead understand that black and brown youth are essential actors in education reform and community building.

YPAR is a flexible framework for youth-adult collaborations. Though there is a general process to engage in cycles of the research process, the work is youth-led and therefore requires openness and variability (see Appendix B for examples of YPAR in action). YPAR can be structured into school initiatives in a range of ways—built into an after-school process, into a class, or as a special youth advisory group.

YPAR scholars (Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell, 2016) tend to use YPAR cycles similar to the following:



In this YPAR sequence, adults bring tools or heuristics to the table so that youth can start discussing how they experience school. This can take many shapes (i.e., collecting school artifacts; mapping emotions/interests/ issues on a school map; conducting school equity and inclusion walks with youth). This supports youth in **identify(ing) equity issues** in their school that impact their educational experiences.

Next, adults facilitate deep **discussions into the**

youth-identified issues. This provides youth with opportunities to expand on the various issues that they have identified at their school, while expressing different viewpoints. Adults may need to bring in theoretical tools to support youth in discussing and unpacking their understanding without perpetuating hegemonic beliefs (e.g., the myth of meritocracy).

Adults then support youth in thinking about what they want to understand about the equity issue in relation to their school. The adults and youth work toward forming answerable **research questions** pertaining to their identified equity issue. Adults play an important role in locating and **providing youth with resources** to help further expand youth's' interest and understanding of the issue. Resources can include people, articles, archive, movies, and more.

Youth, with the help of adults, develop or expand upon the conventions of social science research. This includes designing tools and methods for **collecting the data** they need to answer their question(s). This may involve developing and administering surveys or interviews at the school site. It may also involve collecting data through school records (e.g., disciplinary records). Next, youth and adults work together to **analyze their data** using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.

Youth decide how and to whom they want to disseminate their findings with a **call to action**. Dissemination can take a range of forms including but not limited to formal presentations, public service announcements, dramatic or artistic expressions, or through multiple means. Audience members may include educators and administrators, school boards, city or state political representatives, school peers, families, and scholarly communities. Although youth may continue efforts directed toward their call to action, it is adults' responsibility to act on the contributions youth put forward. Their notions of equity and inclusion contribute an important youth-centered data set to adult-centered school improvement work. Youth may bring new or even opposing ideas for engaging in school change, and trusting and supporting them in these engagements is a transformative part of school change. This type of work with youth can be further built on and sustained by formally connecting the collaboration with youth to broader school-change initiatives.

Lidia's Story: An Emergent Bilingual Latina Wanting a Better School

In May of last school year Lidia, an eighth grader, stood alongside her YPAR peers facing an audience of her school's teachers and school administrators. The YPAR presentation was a culmination of a yearlong youth and adult collaboration. Her school had invested abundant time and effort into advancing equity through a project-based learning curriculum amongst other efforts. The school principal agreed that a YPAR club might further advance efforts towards a more inclusive school for students that seemed less involved in school.

A year and a half later Lidia and her peers stood in front of the school adults with a call to action. Earlier in the year, the YPAR had identified a school issue that involved youth calling each other racially and ethnically derogatory names despite their school being predominantly Latinx and African American. This led them to wonder why students of color would use such terms, which eventually unraveled into an investigation of how internalized racism impacted their educational experience. Lidia defined internalized racism in Spanish while referencing an expert in the field, a professor with whom she and her peers had earlier in the year held a bilingual Skype session with to further understand the issue. Another one of Lidia's peers explained their

process of interviewing school adults, students, and community members in addition to surveying more than 100 of the school's students. Many of the YPAR youth read from notecards as they addressed their audience. When Lidia was sharing her findings in Spanish her hands were notably notecard-free and gesturing boldly to emphasize her points while making eye contact with the audience. The youth presenters moved seamlessly between English and Spanish with their research questions, the data collection methods they used, movies and posters they had created to inform their peers, and a call to action for their school.

Nine months earlier Lidia had joined YPAR as a new seventh grade student that had recently emigrated from Mexico. Though she received pullout language support services and her school was predominantly Latinx, her learning was constrained by English-only curriculum and instruction. Lidia found a diverse group of peers in the YPAR club, including monolingual English speaking and bilingual peers, peers with disabilities, as well as peers with racial and ethnic differences. Lidia's presence, like those of her peers, shaped the YPAR work, and translanguaging (moving fluidly between two languages) became a normal part of YPAR. Consequently, the YPAR adults responded to this bilingualism when gathering resources such as readings and guest speakers for the youth.

Lidia and her peers identified bullying as an issue at their school, and while this was aligned with adult concerns at the school, the youth felt that this school issue was connected to internalized racism. They set out to understand how the students, school adults, and even community members' opinions about whether learning one's cultural and ethnic background was important, where this should be learned, and how participants felt about their own cultural and ethnic identities. Lidia played a critical role in developing data collection tools for their bilingual community. Indeed, when they stood in the parking lot of a local store interviewing community members, Lidia was able to conduct interviews with Spanish-dominant interviewees.

The months of work Lidia and her peers put into their research contributed to a youth-centered dataset that was missing from the adults' vision of how to make the school more equitable and inclusive. The youth highlighted a need for schools to play a part in incorporating students' cultural and racial differences into the curriculum as strengths, or in Lidia's words:

> *Nosotros también queremos que los maestros les enseñan a los niños…a los jóvenes que aprendan que se sienten orgulloso de su cultura de su propia raza* [We want teachers to teach the students…the young people to feel proud of their culture and of their own race].

While school adults may have considered racial and cultural pride as something that should be taught at home rather than at school, the youth presented this as an equity issue impacting their education.

Moving Forward with a Call to Action

The work to create an inclusive school for all students is no small task. Many have and will

continue to invest time and energy into restructuring schools to benefit *all* students. Although this is the responsibility of adults, youth can play critical roles in defining and contributing their own notions of equity and inclusion. This, of course, requires adults to think creatively about how they can restructure their school change efforts to center the voices of youth that are all too often pushed to the margins.

We close this brief with a call to action for school leaders to consider the following questions:

- How can you understand the equity issues youth deem problematic in their education?
- Do youth have a say in school decisions? If so, whose voices are represented?
- How might notions of equity and inclusion take the shape of different narratives coming from different groups throughout the school (e.g., adults, youth, Latinx, immigrant youth, indigenous youth, youth with disciplinary records, youth with disabilities)? How might these different understandings advance equity and inclusion in different ways?
- Returning to the quote this brief started with, are adult notions of educational liberation bound with youth notions? If not, how might youth-adult partnerships put youth and adults in collaboration towards a new vision of liberation?

About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit www.greatlakesequity.org.

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Disclaimer

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Additional Resources

Civic education in the elementary grades: Promoting student engagement in an era of accountability

Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning: a Handbook for Program Staff, Teachers, and Community Leaders

Youth participation and community change

Appendix A: Callout Box

Youth Rising as Change Makers

Across the country there are current and historical examples of youth demonstrating their capacity to engage as change makers by resisting racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and audist structures that negatively affect their experiences in and out of school through school walkouts, community protests, writing to community leaders, or demanding inclusive textbooks.

The 1968 Chicano Student Walkout for school reform is an early notable example of young people mobilizing to fight for equity in their schools (see the figure). Chicano students in East Los Angeles protested oppressive conditions including having the highest high school dropout rate and lowest college attendance among any ethnic group (Palso, 2011). Chicano students, teachers, and community members developed thirty-six demands for the Board of Education, and when their demands were not met, students organized coordinated walkouts at their respective schools.

More recently, Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) offers another example of youth of color actively engaged in addressing inequity and exclusion in their schools (see the figure). Students regularly experienced punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices under the auspices of zero-tolerance policies, which contributed to students losing valuable instructional time and long-term negative outcomes such as dropout and involvement with the juvenile justice system. In response to these inequities, VOYCE developed a report complete with policy recommendations that ultimately resulted in changes to the disciplinary policies for minor offenses in Chicago Public Schools (Vevea, 2011).

At a national scale, United We Dream, a youth-led organization consisting largely of immigrant youth, has engaged in relentless mobilization efforts that contributed to the Obama Administration passing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA; see the figure). Their efforts, along with that of other activist groups, resulted in temporary relief from deportation, and for some, authorization to work through DACA (Valdivia & Valdivia, 2014). The DREAMers, which refers to undocumented youth and young adults that arrived in the US as children, continue their efforts in making access to higher education more attainable and fair treatment towards immigrants.

Youth are well aware of issues of inequity and have demonstrated their ability to work alongside adults in pursuing more just educational opportunities. Youth are rising as change makers, and with adult support can contribute important perspectives and work toward transformative school change.

Appendix B: Additional YPAR Resources

Examples of YPAR in Action		
Location	YPAR Group	Description
Cambridge, Massachusetts	YPAR Student Achievement Project (YSAP)	YSAP is a youth-led group that has tackled the opportunity gap through multiple years of YPAR. Youth from 12 area high schools come together for seven-week sessions to address justice issues in their schools.
New York, New York	Generation Citizen: An elementary school example	Generation Citizen is a civic curriculum designed for middle and high school students in major cities across the nation. Their community engagement involves picking an issue, learning how to take action, and taking action. The students are able to choose issues that are related to their community. This resource shows how a fourth grade teacher modified the curriculum to engage his fourth grade students in YPAR.
San Francisco, California	Student Leadership in the San Francisco School	A student group in San Francisco used YPAR to engage in a conversation about gender bias and oppression in the school dress code. Students conducted surveys among the school members and the parents, and concluded that boys did not consider their female classmates' dress a distraction. Students then took action to address their school's biased and sexist dress code with new guidelines.
Chicago, Illinois	Instituto Justice and Leadership Academy (IJLA)	The IJLA is a student-centered Chicago school that implements a Restorative Justice Project Advisory Committee to involve youth in restorative justice in the schools. This ideal looks to create lines of communication for all parties involved when the culture of the school is disturbed. This encourages all sides to be heard and for students to take responsibility for their actions. In order for students to take part in this form of justice, they must attend training and learn about research methods. This is done in hopes that restorative justice can be better applied in the school.
Boulder, Colorado	CU Engage	CU Engage is an example of YPAR at the university level that looks to understand and address the needs of students of color on the University of Colorado-Boulder campus. Undergraduate students conducted interviews with students of color regarding the spaces where they felt more welcomed and included on campus. They used these results to think about how CU civic engagement programs could better align with the experiences of students of color.
Denver, Colorado	Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) program	YELL develops youth leadership by supporting middle schools that tackle social issues including police brutality, bullying, and racial discrimination among others. Youth identify issues, showcase their findings, and then advocate for solutions. Through this process, youth develop their capacities to understand the roots of social problems and how to address them.

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