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Youth Participatory Action Research as a Multidimensional Strategy for Organizational Learning, Field Building, and Youth Development

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Abstract

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is traditionally valued for its developmental benefits for youth, such as enhancing leadership and critical thinking skills. However, this brief evidences that YPAR's potential extends significantly beyond individual growth, serving as a powerful mechanism for organizational development and academic field-building. We explore how YPAR facilitates local insights into organizational practices from a youth perspective and contributes uniquely to the broader academic discourse, effectively bridging the research-practice gap.

Introduction

Rooted in the intellectual traditions of action research, liberatory teaching, and critical consciousness, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a strategy in which youth, in partnership with adults, engage in critical inquiry and analysis of the spaces they inhabit (Caraballo et al., 2017). Though YPAR is often framed as providing opportunities for youth development, such as strengthening leadership and critical thinking skills, there are other equally important aspects to it. At its core, as the name suggests, YPAR is an approach to research. When the conceptualization of YPAR is limited to prioritizing its benefits for individual youth, its contributions as a form of knowledge building to better how organizations learn and how academic field-building progresses, are missed. Alternatively, when YPAR is facilitated with these additive effects in mind, it can precipitate change through multiple, cascading dimensions and bridge the research-practice gap.

In this paper, we focus on the organizational development and field-building opportunities surrounding YPAR. To do so, we evidence three key points. First, organizationally, YPAR often produces

local and actionable insights into how policies, programs, and/or practices are experienced by youth. Second, these findings can further general field-building, as youth hold unique perspectives that contribute to meaning-making and understanding. Finally, YPAR's pre established benefits to youth, combined with its benefits to organizations and the field, can occur simultaneously in execution and build upon each other to help alleviate broader challenges of translating research into practice and our understanding of youth contribution, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework acknowledging YPAR's cascading impacts

YPAR facilitates organizational development and improvement

Youth, particularly in their adolescence, may spend as much time in organized settings (e.g., schools, after-school clubs, and cultural programs) as they do at home or in other informal settings with friends or family members (Medrich et al., 1992). This suggests that these organizations hold influence on youth development. It also, to the corollary and our emphasis, provides an opportunity for youth to contribute to the organizations that shape their everyday experiences (Kirshner et al., 2005). YPAR can function as both a lens through which to view youth development and a method through which a mutuality of youth development and organizational improvement can be achieved.

Youth have unique ways of seeing and thinking that strengthen their ability to improve organizations, and these perspectives partially stem from their connections and attachments to different—and perhaps overlooked—pockets of communities. Structurally, they are often positioned at the bottom of social hierarchies, lending them an ability to observe assumed or accepted ideas by others, which can help disrupt existing power dynamics (Cerecer et al., 2023). Moreover, they experience and can illustrate the effects of policies in action, rather than the macro, system-level concerns of typical decision-makers, to shape new solutions. For instance, high school tardiness is a pressing concern for

many school administrators, and significant amounts of time and money have been poured into researching its causes and solutions. In fact, a quick search of "high school tardiness" on Google Scholar produces over 17,000 results published in the past five years alone, demonstrating its salience. And yet, when student researchers examined tardiness in Stockton schools, they identified an actionable barrier to on-time attendance: the between-class passing period was too short. The administrators to whom students presented the results tried and failed to walk a student schedule on time, leading them to extend the passing period that same year. Simply put, students, informed by their lived experience of walking to class daily, identified a factor that was otherwise overlooked by educators focusing on high-level concerns (Cohen et al., 2020).

Moreover, YPAR's capacity for organizational contribution extends beyond the school system. Youth-led research initiatives span from youth councils investigating chemical exposures of beauty products in California, to youth development nonprofits researching and producing media on the daily health of residents in Brazil. In each, there are resounding throughlines of the research being grounded in the youth researchers' lived experience and, at the same time, valued by the adult facilitators as a legitimate source of knowledge that they could use to understand community needs and generate potential advancements (University of California, Berkeley YPAR Hub).

Learning, improvement, and evaluation are crucial to organizational leaders, to those who fund their work, and often to the public as a means to provide accountability for improving outcomes. YPAR is a potent strategy for facilitating the development of proximal outcomes, understanding the degree to which they are being achieved, and making recommendations that can have a low cost and high impact.

YPAR facilitates the growth of broader academic fields

In tandem with advancing organizational development and effectiveness, the knowledge generated through YPAR can further contribute to the field of research, particularly in disciplines concerned with social problems and systems. Unlike its contributions to organizational change, YPAR's contribution to academic fields has not yet been extensively realized. While YPAR often has a local focus, its impacts need not be confined to the school or organizational setting in which it is conducted. Rather, YPAR and its inquiries have the potential to meaningfully contribute to academic research as a complementary strategy to processes that traditionally constitute the field. In other words, YPAR can be a strategy that shifts the research process from the footholds of academic institutions to share it with youth, who have a deep understanding of, for example, the impact and efficacy of educational contexts (Caraballo et al., 2017), challenging what knowledge is defined as legitimate.

Methodologically, YPAR can broaden the scope and focus of research. YPAR offers a unique opportunity for traditional researchers to co-create with youth researchers and ask a different set of questions to gain a different set of insights—insights that are based upon the youth experience and that prioritize research poised to inform practice. This subverts typical research, disrupting

assumptions made about what the problem or puzzle is, how hypotheses should be tested, and why the research is conducted to begin with. In the context of youth and their experiences, the disconnect between adult and youth conceptualization of the research process can be large. For instance, youth-written questions on community health surveys from YPAR produced results that were especially innovative and transformative to the youth researchers (Smith et al. 2024), demonstrating that research conducted *on* youth is not the same as *with* youth. In short, academic field building is defined by its ability to theorize how the world works; by including youth as co-creators rather than participants, YPAR helps make new theories possible (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

In addition to shaping how research is conceptualized, YPAR practically changes its implementation of data collection and analysis, as youth have shared syntax, and often shared trust and influence, with other youth. The widespread success of peer-led interventions in other areas, such as peer feedback on writing performance (Wu & Schunn, 2021), has been attributed to the efficacy of youth role modeling, utilizing existing peer networks, and the increased social influence of youth in relation to other youth (Turner & Shepherd, 1999). By placing the youth-focused data and its processes in the hands of other youth researchers, YPAR capitalizes on these benefits of peer-to-peer interaction. Thus, both in the "what" and "how" of research, YPAR allows youth to be crucial contributors to the study of issues that directly impact them.

At its core, YPAR combines research methods and rigor to honor youth insight. It leverages youth voice and perspective to accurately and completely scaffold the issue at hand and its urgency. Still, YPAR and, more generally, participatory action research (PAR) frequently face challenges of legitimacy. These claims question credibility and objectivity: for instance, participatory action researchers are often not trained scientists, which can lead to criticism of result validity (Dosemagen & Schwalbach, 2019). In addition, the researchers' lived experience is questioned as "biasing" the research process, implying that participants cannot both compartmentalize and fully hold multiple potentially conflicting ideas at once (Beames et al., 2021). Even in spaces intended for inclusion, Kim Sabo Flores (2008) found in her review of 50 participatory evaluations that no adult participants counted youth as stakeholders, demonstrating the limited role youth hold in the shaping of experiences that affect them.

YPAR is a bold epistemology in light of these hesitations, a novel–and arguably, undeveloped–means of field-building. It is a response to research that values replicability, controlled conditions, and the ability to predict. Educational researchers argue that "rigor" should be reconceptualized to better encapsulate practices leading to sustained documentation and relevance to practice (Gutiérrez & Penuel, 2014). Within this framework, the methodology and effects of quality YPAR display immense rigor, external to credibility concerns. Thus, when considering YPAR as complementary to, rather than eclipsing, traditional research, there is no tension between the 'best' evidence and the evidence generated through YPAR.

Discussion

YPAR, then, has the potential to fill critical gaps in understanding and facilitate applying that knowledge to practice. When the local/practical and broad/field-building effects of YPAR are considered together, they can act upon each other, facilitating organizational development and providing potential solutions for the long-standing challenge of research-practice gaps. There are many unrealized opportunities related to literature findings and implementation, as much of academic research is not utilized by policymakers or practitioners (Anyon et al., 2018). Fundamentally, the research-practice gap is perceived as a problem of "research translation," with the underlying assumption being that the knowledge generated is the right knowledge, and the challenges primarily lie in the translation of that knowledge into practice. YPAR addresses this gap and assumption. It not only recognizes the nuts and bolts of bridging research to practice, as youth are often on the receiving end of these programs and policies, but it can also redefine the very scope and type of questions and methods that are used, thus having the potential to produce more actionable findings.

For example, a YPAR cohort with Stanford's John W. Gardner Center was tasked with investigating how the school setting helped or hindered students' sense of belonging. Their findings suggested that one small act that teachers could do was keep their doors open, an unexpected but easy-to-implement solution, unconstrained by the practicalities, limitations, and complexities that can hinder adult recommendations and solutions (Diaz et al. 2023). Moreover, the very fact that youth were involved in presenting these recommendations encouraged implementation, as adult facilitators and educational leaders were open to considering novel ideas from students, further helping to close the research-practice gap. School policies developed as a response to youth researchers help to create a sustainable and culturally responsive environment, precipitating greater levels of students' school engagement, especially youth from underserved cultural backgrounds (Gunter & Thomson, 2007). In this and similar instances, when YPAR findings are put into practice, youth and organizations alike experience positive change that in turn encourages youth participation in future research.

Importantly, successful YPAR programs are built upon putting the results of that research into practice, filling the research gap and producing a cascade of organizational and field-building effects. For example, in a YPAR study of an aftercare program, youth continued to be involved in decision-making after the research period had ended, prompting the staff to create a regular feedback mechanism to facilitate sustained attention to youth voice (Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020). When YPAR is used as a strategy for discovering actionable interventions as it is here, a "developmental cascade" follows, where changes in one domain influence another and eventually produce a cumulative effect (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010). By no means should the impact of YPAR as an intervention strategy reduce its importance as a youth development strategy—rather, the two functions complement each other. Developing the leadership and communication skills of youth helps bolster their confidence, which facilitates a continuation of research, field-building, and organizational change. And as youth witness their work take impact in organizations and inform the broader knowledge basis in research, their

leadership and self-confidence grow, reflecting the reciprocal relationship between the intervention and youth development strategies of YPAR.

When YPAR facilitators consider and implement the results of YPAR as research grounded in lived and salient experiences, youth feel and know that they are important parts of their communities. When these knowledge-building and organizational improvement strategies of YPAR are put into practice, youth development is also encouraged, as part of a cycle that facilitates stronger community development. YPAR is merely one framework that demonstrates the importance of the active contribution of youth to the long-term success of organizations such as nonprofits, volunteer groups, and schools. Research has suggested that when youth actively engage in their local community, they gain social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose, as well as feel empowered to lead community development efforts in the future (Brennan & Barnett, 2009). Viewing YPAR through the lens of youth development, therefore, complements, not conflicts, with elevating YPAR as a strategy to improve local organizations and the broad field of knowledge.

Opportunities & Conclusion

There are many existing opportunities for YPAR facilitators to improve its reach and strengthen YPAR's contributions to organizational, field-building, and research-practice improvements. One such opportunity includes facilitating easy, online access of YPAR findings—the ones created by the youth researchers, not merely the analysis of the programs by the adult facilitators. For example, when writing this piece, most—if not all—of our results found via Google Scholar were written by adult facilitators and highlighted the implementation and impact evaluation of YPAR, rather than the youth-created results or recommendations of that specific YPAR project. The power of YPAR as a tool to change organizations and systems ultimately hinges upon an understanding of its power as a legitimate research practice that produces insightful and actionable knowledge, as well as establishing an institutional method of making YPAR research accessible to others.

YPAR as a strategy for field-building, in particular, remains in its early stages. We emphasize that it does not and cannot replace all other strategies of organizational development and field-building. However, YPAR can expand on who and what are considered valid contributors to research and organizational change, becoming a tool to increase the inclusivity of traditionally excluded populations such as youth. This can begin not just with sweeping institutionalization of YPAR programs but also in smaller gestures that elevate YPAR-produced research into the academic field of vision, such as citing youth-produced work in academic literature.

When youth are acknowledged not only as research participants but also as researchers themselves, all of us gain better insight into their unique insights, providing support to translate research into policy-making and practice. Bringing the ability of YPAR to propel organizational, field-building, and research-practice development in conversation with its well-established ability to propel youth development allows for a deeper understanding of YPAR's reinforcing benefits for youth and their

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communities. Thus, to further these powerful, cascading shifts, we invite you to consider YPAR multidimensionally: a method for legitimate and critical knowledge-making and organizational improvement, as well as an approach to youth development and service.

About the authors

Ella Gray (she/her/hers) is passionate about elevating the voices of other young people, particularly those who have been systemically silenced, in order to equitably improve the health of all. She is interested in exploring the intersection between community research and healthcare and plans to pursue a career in medicine dedicated to examining how the intersection between private and public health can improve the wellness of marginalized communities. Ella graduated from Stanford University with distinction in 2023 with a Bachelors of Arts in Human Biology and a concentration in disease, gender, and public health.

Victoria Ren (she/her/hers) is interested in what it means to create systems in which people and communities receive the right support at the right time, as well as how to measure and coordinate these efforts across the public and private sector. She joined the Gardner Center in her first year as a Stanford undergraduate, and through that work, she has deepened her appreciation for how community research can build capacity from the ground up. Victoria is a rising junior at Stanford University and expects to graduate with her Bachelors of Arts in Data Science and Social Systems, with a focus on democracy and governance, in June 2026.

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