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# The Challenges and Possibilities of Youth Participatory Action Research for Teachers and Students in Public School Classrooms

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## Abstract

*This study explores the challenges and successes that two public school teachers experienced while implementing youth participatory action research (YPAR) with their students in core academic classrooms. Most academic studies of YPAR have focused on university-based researchers implementing YPAR with youth outside school settings or in special courses inside schools such as electives. Hence, the findings of existing research may not adequately predict the experiences of teachers implementing YPAR within the constraints and requirements of core academic classrooms. Using action research and ethnographic approaches including interviews, field notes, teaching artifacts from classroom observations, and reflective conversations with teachers, I found that the two teachers successfully implemented the epistemological tenets of YPAR in many ways and achieved positive outcomes. However, they were also stymied by structural issues common to core academic classrooms, such as required curricula, standardized testing, and large class sizes.*

**Keywords:** youth participatory action research, youth activism, critical pedagogy, public schools, teaching and learning

Over the past two decades, a growing number of university-based researchers have been partnering with youth through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR<sup>2</sup>; Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, & Morrell, 2017; Mirra & Rogers, 2016). YPAR comes out of the critical research tradition that seeks to link reflection (i.e., research and analysis) with practice (i.e., action) in what Freire (2008) referred to as praxis. As such, young people who engage in YPAR with adult collaborators conduct root-level analyses of structural oppression that affects them directly with the aim of taking action to change those structures. Thus, YPAR advocates believe that young people can create change now, not in some distant future.

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<sup>2</sup> Also referred to in the academic literature as PAR with youth, yPAR, CPAR, or just PAR.

University-based researchers engaging in YPAR have begun to build a body of empirical evidence that demonstrates a link between YPAR and various youth development outcomes, such as increased engagement, motivation, and sociopolitical awareness (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Ozer & Douglas, 2013), as well as academic outcomes in subjects such as literacy (Van Sluys, 2010) and math (Yang, 2009). An emergent body of studies using quantitative and quasi-experimental designs have also begun to amass evidence about the impact of YPAR on student outcomes, including engagement, attendance, graduation, and academic achievement scores (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014; Voight & Velez, 2018). Advocates have argued that engaging young people in YPAR not only has educational and youth-development benefits, but also the potential for young people to create change in their material conditions (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). For example, Cammarota and Fine (2008) argued that “education in YPAR projects includes more than learning skills and abstract knowledge, but also the acquisition of intellectual resources through which students initiate revolutionary projects to transform themselves and the worlds which they inhabit” (p. 10).

Because of its educational and social-change potential, YPAR is gaining the attention of teachers in K–12 public schools who want to engage their students in critical, inquiry-based, action-oriented work inside classroom settings. However, schools have never been particularly hospitable places to conduct extended, youth-centered learning designed to create change inside or outside schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Macedo, 2013; Patel, 2015). In the wake of a neoliberal education reform movement that incentivized and sometimes mandated teachers teach in standardized ways (Corbett Burris, 2012; Gude, 2013; Strauss, 2017b), the opportunities for critical, open-ended change projects led by youth have become even more restricted in schools. Therefore, public school classrooms are typically challenging places to engage in YPAR, especially in required core academic classes like English, history, math, and science, in which structural constraints like standardized testing and prescribed curricula have been felt most strongly (Kirshner, 2015; Rubin, Ayala, & Zaal, 2017). YPAR researchers Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) have acknowledged as much, stating that they organized YPAR summer programs for high school students outside “the time and logistical constraints of the K–12 classroom, which is not conducive at all to the research process” (p. 110). Rubin et al. (2017) proposed that “translating YPAR into a set of pedagogical and curricular strategies that are both suitable for classroom implementation and adhere fully to all of its precepts is challenging, perhaps even impossible” (p. 189). This is likely why YPAR “is most often conducted outside K–12 schools in institutions of higher education or in community-based organizations” (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 72–73).

Despite these potential challenges, an increasing number of university-based researchers have promoted YPAR as a pedagogical approach to be used in schools (see Kirshner, 2015; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Valenzuela, 2016; Wright, 2015). To date, however, only a handful of studies have captured the experiences of public school teachers implementing YPAR in required, core academic classes like English and math without the extended and intensive support of university-based researchers. Over the past two decades, the majority of YPAR projects in the academic literature have taken place outside K–12 classroom settings (Irizarry & Brown, 2014). Of the YPAR projects reported in the literature that have occurred in regular classrooms in traditional school settings, most have

either been implemented by university-based researchers (e.g., Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Yang, 2009) or implemented by teachers in elective blocks or special classes (e.g., Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Phillips, Berg, Rodriguez, & Morgan, 2010). In recent years, academic researchers have published studies focusing on teachers implementing YPAR in core academic classes without substantial, ongoing, in-class support from university-trained academics. However, I found only four such studies at the time of this writing: Kirshner (2015); Mirra, Filipiak, and Garcia (2015); Raygoza (2016); and Rubin et al. (2017). University-based researcher Dr. Julio Cammarota has also written extensively about YPAR implementation in academic classrooms in the Mexican American Studies program across several high schools in Tucson, Arizona. However, he has typically focused primarily on what students were doing (e.g., Cammarota, 2016; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Romero, Cammarota, Dominguez, Valdez, Ramirez, & Hernandez, 2008). This is critically important work, but it differs substantially from my study, in which the primary focus was on the understandings and actions of teachers. That said, if advocates want teachers to utilize YPAR in core academic classrooms in public schools, we need a much larger research base that captures how teachers approach the work given the structural constraints of classroom settings.

The study described in this paper contributes to this relatively sparse literature. I documented the experiences of two teachers who implemented YPAR in required core academic classes in urban public schools and examined the extent to which the teachers were able to engage students in a critical, inquiry-based process and to achieve the potential educational and action-oriented outcomes of YPAR. This paper reports on teachers' successes as well as the challenges they encountered while engaging their students in YPAR. It also compares their experiences to those of university-based researchers who have partnered with youth outside of schools or in non-core courses. Through a comparative case study, I sought to answer the following research questions: What are the consistent challenges and successes for two teachers implementing YPAR with students in required core academic classrooms in urban public schools? In what ways do these teachers' experiences converge with and diverge from the experiences of university-based researchers as reported in existing literature? The findings from this study can inform YPAR advocates and practitioners about the potential and possible dilemmas of expanding the use of YPAR to academic classrooms without extensive support.

### Literature Review

In this section, I examine the academic literature<sup>3</sup> on four aspects of YPAR relevant to teachers implementing it in schools: (a) the epistemology of YPAR, (b) the implementation

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<sup>3</sup> I make a distinction here and throughout my paper between studies *about* the use of YPAR as a research approach that are published in academic journals and books, and studies that *use* YPAR but do not seek academic publication because their purpose is solely to create community-based change; see We Charge

of YPAR's epistemological principles, (c) the outcomes of YPAR, and (d) the challenges of implementing YPAR in schools. This literature review is the foundation of my analytical framework, which I explain in further detail in my methodology section.

### **The Epistemology of YPAR**

As Fine (2008) points out, "PAR is not a method. . . . PAR is, however, a radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science" (p. 215). Grounded in the PAR tradition, YPAR is an approach to knowledge creation guided by a series of epistemological principles. Although university researchers lay out subtle differences and nuances in the epistemology of YPAR in the academic literature, in general most coalesce around the following overarching principles: YPAR (a) is critical in nature, (b) takes an inquiry stance, (c) is situated in the lives of young people, (d) draws on the unique knowledge and expertise they have as youth, (e) features robust youth participation in every aspect of the process, and (f) is designed to raise awareness about issues of injustice and create social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2010; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Valenzuela, 2016). The researchers cited above appear to differ over whether YPAR requires a collective approach. For example, Valenzuela frequently stresses the collective nature of YPAR as one of its core principles, whereas Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, citing McIntyre (2000), leave the door open for individual approaches: "McIntyre's third principle is that participatory action research involves the desire to take individual or collective action to deal with the stated problem" (p. 108).

Consistent with YPAR's guiding epistemological principles, proponents believe that the purpose of research is to create the knowledge necessary to enact social change. Unlike traditional research in which the link between research and action is sometimes unclear or at least less immediate, action is built into the research process in YPAR and is, therefore, an integral epistemological feature (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Further, YPAR belongs to a critical research tradition that places power, oppression, and resistance at the center of a problem-posing, inquiry-based research process and is, hence, both critical and inquiry-oriented (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra et al., 2016). Youth engaging in YPAR—typically youth of color from disenfranchised communities—use an inquiry-based process to interrogate root-level causes of inequity in their communities (e.g., white supremacy, capitalist oppression, misogyny) so that they can take action to change the inequitable conditions (Ginwright, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Torre, 2009). In addition, a YPAR approach to knowledge creation is participatory in that it requires robust participation by youth in the process, eschewing the traditional role of young people as objects of study and instead situating them as researchers themselves, or subjects in the research process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 2008). Because young people are often directly affected by the issues they choose to study through YPAR, they also

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Genocide (2014) and Rethink (n.d.) for examples of the latter. I do so because the authors in the academic pieces frequently reflect in detail on the epistemology and implementation of YPAR as well as its common outcomes and challenges, which is the focus of my study.

frequently hold insider knowledge about these issues that informs and guides their inquiries (Fine, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

### **Implementation of YPAR's Epistemology**

Though the YPAR process is fluid, contextualized, and non-prescriptive by design to meet the needs of participants and their contexts, some common approaches for engaging youth alongside adult facilitators emerge from the academic literature. Through YPAR, youth engage in an intensive, inquiry-based process similar to that of professional action researchers (Akom, 2009; Mirra et al., 2016). Consistent with an inquiry-based approach, YPAR youth researchers begin the process by choosing a research topic and developing a research question that seeks to address a problem affecting them and their communities. Adults often guide students' choice of the topic through activities prior to or at the beginning of the research process (e.g., reading critical literature, conducting autoethnographies) to ensure that the research is critical in nature and grounded in young people's lives (Cammarota, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Raygoza, 2016). Adult facilitators usually design the process so that youth conduct research together, either as a collective or in groups of research teams. In turn, the youth researchers often interrogate either a single issue as a group or several different issues in small groups that fall under one overarching topic, such as "the Opportunity Gap" (Torre et al., 2008, p. 27) or student mental-health issues (Schensul, LoBianco, & Lombardo, 2004).

In addition, youth researchers are expected to develop methodologies and employ research tools that experienced critical action researchers use, such as surveys, ethnographies, interviews, and focus groups (Cammarota, 2016; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). After collecting data, the young people conduct qualitative and/or quantitative analyses of the data, often guided by or in collaboration with adults who possess extensive research training (Fox & Fine, 2013; Kirshner, 2015). The research team then puts together an action plan based on their findings. Projects culminate with students taking action, arguably the most important piece of YPAR that will be discussed in the next section. Alternately, Rubin et al. (2017) and Tuck (2009) argue that action can and should take place throughout the process, not just at the end.

### **Outcomes of YPAR**

University-based researchers who have written about YPAR have posited that it has the potential to develop young people's sociopolitical lenses and activist identities. They have argued that YPAR increases motivation and engagement among youth because research topics are relevant to their lives and the process is empowering since students are able to take actions that have positive effects on their communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In addition, they believe that when students reimagine themselves as both scholars who conduct research and activists who can create change in the world through YPAR, students strengthen their identity development and critical consciousness (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Yang, 2009). In one of the four studies in the academic literature focusing on teachers implementing YPAR projects in core academic classes without substantial in-class support from university-based researchers, Mirra et al. (2015) wrote, "We find the most

revolutionary part of YPAR to be this re-envisioning of the capabilities and power of students” (p. 54).

Some adult collaborators have also contended that students who engage in YPAR develop literacy, numeracy, research, and presentation skills by reading complex texts, analyzing data using sophisticated methods, and presenting findings to authentic audiences who have the power to change policies and practices, such as school administrators or local politicians (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Whereas the immediate impact of YPAR projects on individual youth is sometimes difficult to measure—in part because “there is no predetermined list for what it is participants must learn” (Cannella, 2008, p. 191)—an increasing body of empirical research has demonstrated positive academic outcomes related to the implementation of YPAR. These outcomes have included increased literacy and math skills, improved test scores, and higher high school graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Van Sluys, 2010; Yang, 2009). Additionally, Mirra et al. (2015) and Raygoza (2016)—university researchers who wrote pieces reflecting on their time as teachers implementing YPAR in core academic classes—have argued that their students developed critical mathematical and literacy skills through YPAR projects.

Finally, adult researchers have pointed to the production of youth-informed, participatory research and change resulting from youth action as valued outcomes of YPAR. These outcomes include the production and dissemination of youths’ research reports, which are designed to raise awareness about social issues, and changes that can result from youths’ presentations to policymakers and community members, usually at the local level (Cammarota, 2016; Fox & Fine, 2013; Mirra et al., 2015; Mirra et al., 2016). In another study of teachers implementing YPAR, Kirshner (2015) wrote, “All seven teachers . . . facilitated sustained projects that enabled students to perform original research, develop tangible policy proposals, and assert their ideas on a public stage” (p. 140). However, Kirshner’s teachers and the other school-based YPAR projects also ran into challenges that were unique to classroom settings in schools and presented obstacles to adults and youth in attaining the outcomes valued by YPAR’s proponents, as outlined in the next section.

### **Challenges of YPAR in Schools**

First and foremost, educators who implement YPAR in schools run up against a series of structural challenges. A common structural challenge is convincing administrators and teachers to create space in the curriculum for YPAR—a challenge exacerbated by high-stakes testing and standardized curricula (Cannella, 2008; Ozer et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2010). Kirshner (2015) listed standardized testing and a lack of curricular space as two of the main structural challenges that teachers in his study faced when implementing YPAR in core academic classes. The other three studies focused on teachers implementing YPAR in core academic classes also identified standards-based curricula and assessments as challenges (Mirra et al., 2015; Raygoza, 2016; Rubin et al., 2017). This is likely why nearly all school-based YPAR projects in the academic literature have been conducted within elective blocks or special alternative programs, as these courses are not typically tied to curricular requirements or state tests. The typical scheduling for core academic classes presents another structural challenge, as it tends to limit YPAR projects to chunks of time that are fairly short (e.g., 45- to 90-minute blocks) relative to many out-of-school projects

that allow for blocks of several hours (Mirra et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2017). Furthermore, Rubin et al. found that the grading structure in schools led to the “schoolification” of YPAR, or “the transformation of the inquiry and action process from internally motivated and holistic to a series of graded assignments” (p. 183). Relatedly, grading structures have meant that school-based projects often become bound by hard deadlines, such as marking periods, which can lead to inauthentic time frames for research projects (Ozer et al., 2010).

Another set of challenges when implementing YPAR in schools is related to the professional training of teachers. Most teachers receive different training than university-based social-science researchers. The vast majority of teachers receive substantial pedagogical training in undergraduate and/or graduate programs and on-the-job professional development, but most do not receive training in conducting inquiry-based social-science research or research that is critical and action-oriented (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Macedo, 2008, 2013). Although pedagogical training is vital for creating effective learning environments in public school classrooms, a lack of YPAR training could potentially pose challenges to implementation consistent with its epistemological underpinnings. To this point, Kirshner (2015) found that teachers in his study struggled with sharing power and taking on issues of racism, oppression, and power in part due to teachers’ lack of experience and training in these areas. In a similar vein, Rubin et al. (2017) found that some of the teachers in their study may have missed opportunities to help students see epistemological and methodological links between research and action, leading many students to jump into action and question the value of inquiry. Further, they wrote that teachers struggled with their role in the YPAR process, oscillating between handing all responsibility to students—who could have benefitted from adult guidance—and taking full responsibility when frustrated with students’ lack of progress.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I use the four aspects of YPAR identified from my review of the academic literature—the epistemology, implementation, outcomes, and school-based challenges—as my conceptual framework. This framework allowed me to examine the successes and challenges that the two teachers in my study experienced along these four dimensions when implementing YPAR with students in core academic classrooms. I defined successes as instances in which teachers implemented the epistemological principles of YPAR, as defined above, that were: (a) critical in nature, (b) inquiry based, (c) relevant to youth, (d) based on youths’ expertise, (e) grounded in robust youth participation, and (f) action oriented. Further, I defined successes as teachers’ and students’ ability to achieve the educational, developmental, and action-oriented outcomes that university researchers have outlined in the academic literature. Regarding challenges, I used the school-based structural and professional challenges of implementing YPAR that have been captured in academic literature to identify whether the teachers in my study faced similar and/or new challenges in core academic classrooms without support from university-trained researchers. In comparing the teachers in my study to university-based academics, my goal was not to evaluate them against the university-based researchers, but rather to understand whether the experiences of teachers implementing YPAR with students in core academic classroom settings looked different than the work being done outside the constraints of the classroom.



### Methodology

I conducted this study of two public school teachers because their experiences implementing YPAR with students in core academic settings would add to the relatively sparse academic literature on teachers' enactment of YPAR in classrooms. I also sought to determine how their experiences compared to those of university-based researchers who have facilitated YPAR projects, given the differences in professional training and classroom settings. Doing so could help the field better understand what YPAR looks like in core academic classrooms in public schools and, thus, how we might support teachers to do this work. Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach, I collected data through interviews, field notes, teaching artifacts from classroom observations, and reflective conversations held with the two teachers in both planned meetings and ad hoc discussions. Additionally, I present my findings in the form of comparative cases because the narrative structure is best suited to capture the arc of the year- and semester-long YPAR projects.

I should note that my work with one of the teachers, Adam, originally started as an action-research project (Stringer, 2007), in which the sole purpose of my research was to support him and his students to implement YPAR. However, when I began to see larger patterns as Adam and his students struggled in implementation of YPAR due to structural and professional constraints, I took on more of an ethnographic approach. Since I am not attempting to make any generalizable claims about outcomes from this study, my dual role as an action researcher supporting the teachers in my study and also as an ethnographer capturing their experiences do not present a conflict.

A final note on my methodological approach: My study is not a presentation of the findings from the YPAR projects, but rather an examination of how teachers approached the work. Because of my study design, the voices and experiences of the teachers are centered throughout—a departure from YPAR's traditional focus on student voices.

### Study Context

**Adam: Central Middle School.**<sup>4</sup> In 2011–2012, I observed and worked with Adam, a 6th-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher who implemented a yearlong YPAR project with his students. Adam identified as a white man, and he was in his late twenties when I worked with him. We knew each other from our work in an educational organizing group. Adam was certified by the state to teach secondary English and held a master's in education from a local university. At the time of the study, Adam was in his fourth year of teaching at an urban public middle school that I will call Central Middle School (CMS). The student population of CMS is comprised predominantly of students of color from low-income backgrounds, with a substantial proportion identified as English language learners and special education students (see Table 1). Because of persistently low state test scores, CMS was forced to undergo a turnaround process two years prior to my study in which administration and a large portion (>50%) of the teaching staff were replaced. Following this process, the district granted the school a special designation that provided substantial

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<sup>4</sup> All names of people and schools are pseudonyms.

curricular autonomy, but the administration and staff—including Adam—also felt substantial pressure to raise test scores to avoid a state takeover.

Table 1  
*Approximate CMS Student Demographic Characteristics for the 2011–2012 Academic Year<sup>5</sup>*

Characteristic	Percentage of Enrollment (%)
Black	65
Latinx	20
Asian/Asian American	2
Native American	1
Other Racial/Ethnic Group(s)	12
Low-Income	80
Special Education	25
English Language Learner	15
First Language Other Than English	25

*Note.* Retrieved from the district's website.

**Gloria: Judith Jamison High School.** During 2013–14 and 2014–15, I partnered with Gloria, a high school humanities teacher in a public arts-based school located in the same district as Adam's school. When I first partnered with Gloria in Fall 2013, she was in her fourth year of teaching. Gloria identified as a Black/biracial woman, and she was in her mid-20s at the time of the study. She possessed a master's in education and state certification to teach secondary history. Gloria was working at a public high school that I will call Judith Jamison High School (JJHS). JJHS featured intensive, high-level arts-based training alongside traditional academic work and possessed the same designation as Adam's school in that it had significant autonomy over its curriculum, although this designation was given to support implementation of intensive arts curricula, not because of persistently low test scores. Students at JJHS spent approximately half the school day taking academic courses, such as math, science, humanities, and writing. During the other half of the day, students took classes in one of four arts majors—visual arts, music, drama, or dance—that intensively and technically prepared them to become professional artists. Graduates of JJHS often continued to pursue their craft at prestigious arts-based post-secondary schools. Whereas the mission and structure of the school is clearly different from traditional public schools, the core academic classes, such as Gloria's humanities class, looked similar to core classes in most traditional public schools. Additionally, the student

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<sup>5</sup> I avoided using exact numbers in an effort to anonymize the school; no percentage is more than 5 percentage points from the actual percentage.

demographics were similar to those of many urban public schools, including those in JJHS's district (see Table 2).

Table 2  
*Approximate JJHS Student Demographic Characteristics for the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 Academic Years*<sup>6</sup>

Characteristic	Percentage of Enrollment (%)
Black	40
Latinx	40
Asian/Asian American	3
Native American	1
Other Racial/Ethnic Group(s)	16
Low-Income	80
Special Education	15
English Language Learner	5
First Language Other Than English	35

*Note.* Retrieved from the district's website.

Additionally, both Adam and Gloria lived in and were extremely active in the community where they taught, participating in various organizing and activist groups comprised of teachers, youth, and other community members. They are what Picower (2012) would call teachers who “practice what they teach” (p. 86).

### Data Collection

**Observations, field notes, and pedagogical artifacts.** During the 2011–12 academic year, I observed Adam's implementation of YPAR one day per week across his four periods of ELA, documenting this process in field notes, including instances during which he was unable to implement YPAR due to structural constraints. Between September and June, I conducted 45 observations of Adam's classes. For much of the year, I sat at the back of the room taking notes. Toward the end of the project, however, I began working with students in small groups to support their YPAR projects at Adam's request, given my background as a middle school ELA teacher and my relative familiarity with YPAR's epistemology. In addition, I took notes about ad-hoc meetings and conversations I held with Adam—during which I supported him in developing the YPAR curriculum outside of instructional time (e.g., finding readings related to students' YPAR topics)—which were typically about 30 minutes long and occurred approximately once a month. In addition, I collected samples of student work (e.g., completed YPAR papers).

In my work with Gloria, I observed her two sections of semester-long, sophomore humanities classes one day per week starting in Fall 2013. Between September 2013 and

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<sup>6</sup> Again, I avoided using exact numbers in an effort to anonymize the school; no percentage is more than 5 percentage points from the actual percentage.

January 2014, I conducted 20 observations of Gloria's classes. The YPAR project started in November, at which time I began taking field notes on Gloria's implementation of YPAR, again focusing on the challenges and successes of conducting YPAR in a core subject. I also gathered notes from weekly planning meetings between Gloria and me—held every Sunday at a coffee shop during the YPAR unit—for a total of six meetings between November and December. In addition, I collected Gloria's lesson plans and other teaching materials as well as examples of student work, including students' final research papers and their end-of-project, in-class oral and written reflections.

In my second year with Gloria, I increased the frequency of my observations and planning meetings. I met with Gloria on three occasions in Summer 2014 to plan the YPAR unit, taking field notes during each planning meeting. When the YPAR unit began in November, I conducted observations and took field notes three days a week on average, for a total of 28 days. This enabled me to observe 18 of the 25 school days that Gloria spent on the YPAR unit.

**Interviews.** I conducted three semi-structured interviews with Adam at the beginning, middle, and end of the YPAR project to learn about his experience engaging with his students, including his approach to conducting YPAR and his perceived successes and challenges (see Appendix A for interview protocol). The interviews lasted 30 minutes on average. Due to the relatively short timeframe of Gloria's YPAR unit (six weeks) and Gloria's time constraints, I only conducted one semi-structured interview with Gloria at the end of the YPAR unit during each year that I worked with her. Both interviews focused on her perceived successes and challenges (see Appendix B for my interview protocols). The interview concluding the first year lasted 90 minutes, and the interview concluding the second year lasted 30 minutes.

### **A Note About My Involvement in the Projects**

This study focused on two public school teachers attempting to implement YPAR in core classes without robust university partnerships. As described above, the two teachers did receive some support from me, a doctoral student who could be described as a university researcher. However, given that I only visited Adam's classroom one day per week—providing occasional logistical support as opposed to coaching or co-teaching—I argue that Adam's experience qualifies as YPAR implementation without the kind of intensive university support that one finds in other studies. For example, Kirshner (2015) and two other university-based colleagues developed a curriculum for the teachers in his study and then supported them through a graduate course dedicated to the curriculum. Rubin et al. (2017) convened a large team of educators—including “high school teachers, university professors (including the authors) and researchers who engaged with PAR with youth” (p. 179)—who put together a curriculum, and then the researchers supported the teachers at monthly professional learning community meetings while also providing in-class support (e.g., teaching lessons). Unlike Rubin et al.'s occasional support in teaching lessons, or studies such as Cammarota and Romero's (2011) in which “[u]niversity researchers, including the authors, inform the teachers and students about a variety of qualitative research methodologies and the steps for producing research findings” (p. 493), there was no co-teaching dynamic between Adam and me. Adam was at the front of the

room implementing the curriculum at all times. Compared to my work with Adam, I did provide relatively greater feedback and co-planning support to Gloria via the weekly planning meetings during the YPAR unit in the first year, the co-planning summer sessions in the second year, and in-class support to students individually and in small groups (e.g., providing feedback on their research projects) in both years, including multiple days per week in Year Two. Hence, the support I provided Gloria with in total more closely resembled some of the YPAR projects in the literature, such as the Kirshner, Rubin et al., and Cammarota and Romero studies mentioned above. Arguably, my support and presence were intended to assist the teachers in this study, and hence I cannot make claims about the kinds of success and challenges facing teachers implementing YPAR completely on their own. However, it is important to note that in this study the impetus to conduct YPAR came from the teachers themselves, and they maintained primary and significant responsibility for implementation, including the creation and execution of lesson plans and provision of support and feedback to students.

### **Analytic Strategy**

In my analysis, I identified the consistent challenges and opportunities that Adam and Gloria faced when implementing YPAR with students in core classrooms and examined how their experiences converged with and diverged from the experiences reported by university-based researchers working in different settings. I began my analysis by creating etic codes in Atlas.ti based on the four aspects of YPAR—epistemology, implementation, outcomes, and school-based challenges—identified in my literature review. First, I created codes based on the epistemological principles of YPAR (e.g., critical in nature) and the typical YPAR implementation approaches for youth (e.g., open-ended research questions and authentic actions) and adult facilitation (e.g., research team grouping). Next, I created codes for the outcomes (e.g., academic outcomes) and school-based challenges (e.g., testing) that researchers have established in the academic literature. Given the limited literature on projects done in core academic and classroom settings, I also developed emic codes that emerged from the data about the challenges faced and the supports teachers drew on to navigate these challenges. For example, when analyzing the challenges teachers faced, one that emerged from the data was coded as *a lack of research training* (see Appendix C for a list of etic codes and Appendix D for a list of emic codes).

I applied those codes to data from field notes and interviews. I examined the coded data to identify instances when Gloria and Adam's approaches aligned with YPAR's epistemological principles and implementation common in the academic literature and the extent to which they were able to achieve the outcomes contained in the academic literature. For example, from my observations and field notes, I determined that Gloria used examples of current liberation movements, like Black Lives Matter, to inspire students in choosing critical research topics for their projects. I coded this as Gloria implementing one of the epistemological principles of YPAR—that it be critical in nature and that the students pursue a relevant, critical research topic. In addition, when Adam told me—in an interview at the end of the project—that his students had achieved outcomes such as, “a love of learning” and being “curious” and “interested in learning more about anything,” I coded these statements as *engagement and motivation*—one of the desired outcomes identified in YPAR academic literature (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

I also coded student work (e.g., completed research papers) and written and verbal student reflections collected as part of my field notes from class observations. I used this student-level data to confirm and challenge Gloria and Adam's assessments, as well as my own, about successful implementation of YPAR.

In addition, I coded the data for instances where Gloria and Adam failed to adhere to the principles, implement the practices, and achieve the outcomes of YPAR, and I also coded for structural and professional constraints that may have prevented them from doing so. In my analysis, I first identified Gloria and Adam's interpretations of why they were unsuccessful in implementing YPAR, as captured in statements from interviews, planning meetings, and other conversations. Then, drawing again on the literature, and my disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, I identified challenges that Gloria and Adam faced that they did not articulate, providing my own interpretations of why they and their students were stymied and unsuccessful at times. Based on my literature review, I sought to understand the ways that Adam and Gloria's experiences converged and diverged from those of university-based researchers. For example, from my observations and collection of student work, I determined that Adam's students did not begin the YPAR process with an open-ended research question, one of the epistemological tenets of YPAR. I coded this as lack of research training, inferring this explanation from my knowledge of the kind of training—or lack thereof—that Adam had received in his teacher-preparation program. Finally, I used an emic process to identify new challenges that were a function of the settings in which Gloria and Adam were implementing YPAR (e.g., required core academic classes in public schools). As an example, both teachers struggled with large class sizes, a challenge that the academic literature has not identified to date.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

Consistent with a critical research stance, I do not claim to have been neutral in my involvement in the three YPAR projects, nor am I espousing objectivity in this paper (Luttrell, 2010; McCorkel & Myers, 2003). I am a strong supporter of YPAR because I believe it has the potential to be an effective, empowering, and liberatory pedagogy for teachers and students. Furthermore—as a former public school teacher and researcher who values an action-research approach—I intervened when asked to help the projects succeed. This study does not attempt to show the effectiveness of YPAR over another form of pedagogy or to make any generalizable claims. On the contrary, despite my belief in the power of YPAR, I observed how both teachers experienced substantial challenges in implementing YPAR in core classes in public schools. These obstacles raise some important questions about whether and how YPAR can be effective in core classes in public schools. In recognition of Brown and Rodríguez's (2009) claim that YPAR studies in the academic literature are sometimes “overly optimistic” (p. 4), I intentionally addressed challenges and failures in this study. In response to Brown and Rodríguez's call to researchers to be “clear about their study objectives, their methods, and the nature of power and participation among the researchers” (p. 4), I have endeavored to clarify my stance toward YPAR, my involvement in the project, my methodological approach, and the full spectrum of the experiences of these two teachers and their students, with the intention to avoid presenting YPAR uncritically.

Finally, I should note that I fall into every dominant societal category in the U.S., including being racialized as white and gendered as cisgender male. Undoubtedly, my analysis was shaped and informed by my position in society. Whereas I took steps to address potential misreading of the data, including participant checks with Gloria—who identified as a woman of color—and feedback from mixed race/ethnicity, mixed-gender writing groups, my forthcoming analysis and discussion should be read with the understanding that another researcher from one or more non-dominant groups might have had different interpretations and suggestions for how to move forward.

### **Findings**

In the following section, I present my findings as cases, using a narrative structure to capture the arc of Adam and Gloria’s work, and that of their respective students over time. The cases are organized around the successes and challenges each teacher faced.

#### **Case #1: Adam and CMS**

**A successful YPAR trial run.** Adam was a teacher who was deeply committed to developing both his students’ academic abilities and their commitments to social justice. In the spring of 2011, he attended a talk at a local university where the speaker, then-UCLA Professor Ernest Morrell, showcased the work of high school students who had engaged in YPAR projects interrogating inequitable schooling conditions as part of a summer seminar at UCLA (see Mirra et al., 2016; Morrell, 2008). The talk deeply inspired Adam: “The social justice aspect of the work captivated me, and I was eager to try YPAR in my own classroom.”

After attending Dr. Morrell’s talk, Adam implemented what he called a mini-YPAR unit with his four sections of 6th-grade ELA—about 80 students total—in the spring prior to my study. In an interview, Adam recalled that he called it a mini-YPAR unit because it was only a month long. During the mini-project, Adam’s students had chosen to research issues that affected them directly within their school (e.g., a lack of field trips, strict adherence to dress codes/uniforms, and the revocation of recess earlier that year).

According to Adam, the students were excited about and engaged in work that felt relevant, suggesting that Adam’s mini-unit was consistent with the epistemological tenet of YPAR requiring the research to be grounded in young people’s lives. In addition, students appeared to have successfully achieved action-oriented outcomes when the principal attended their final presentations and actually enacted one of the proposed policy changes: modifying the uniform policy. In addition, Adam stated that the students almost convinced the principal to reinstate recess and field trips, but ultimately the principal decided against making these additional changes. Adam felt that the students had also successfully achieved academic outcomes, such as improved writing, researching, and public speaking skills. In speaking about an additional outcome of increased student motivation and engagement, Adam stated:

It was really successful . . . 90–95% of the students were really engaged, really excited about their project, wanted to do research, wanted to create PowerPoints, wanted to give presentations to authentic audiences, and wanted to write really good research papers and drafts of them. . . . So I thought this year, let’s do it again,

let's maybe start it earlier in the year, let's make it bigger, let's make it better, let's expand it and go outside of the school.

Because he perceived that his students had achieved action-oriented and educational outcomes that he valued, Adam decided to embark on an extended YPAR project during the 2011–2012 academic year and invited me to observe.

**A successful start to critical research and action.** At the start of the 2011–12 school year, Adam told me he intended to dedicate substantial curricular time to a YPAR project that spanned the entire year. He planned to introduce students to projects in the fall, ask them to conduct research over the winter, and have them to finish writing up research reports and taking action in the spring. During the first 6 weeks of school, Adam had the class read a novel as part of the district's ELA curriculum and began to put procedures and processes in place for YPAR. Next, Adam prepared his students for the critical mindset required of a YPAR approach, incorporating what he called a "critical literacy" unit in which students were asked to analyze and critique images from popular media, including television advertisements. Adam told me that developing students' critical lenses was an important step for preparing them to critique oppressive systems and structures in their local communities when working on YPAR projects.

To introduce students to potential critical topics of study for their projects, Adam invited various community activist groups into his classroom, including a youth-led community organization that campaigned around issues affecting young people (e.g., advocating for a youth transit pass and cleaner fuel emissions from city buses). Adam also arranged for the same youth-led organization to take his students on a "toxic tour" to visit the most polluted sections of the city. Following the toxic tour, Adam and his students attended an evening rally at City Hall for a hearing about a proposal to decrease "dirty diesel" emissions spewed disproportionately into low-income neighborhoods of color by the city's bus system. Through these activities, Adam exposed his students to potential critical research topics that affected students directly and that they could address through YPAR. When it came time for students to choose their topics, many of them gravitated toward issues of power and oppression that they had learned about during this time.

**Structural challenges of competing curricula and testing.** As the fall semester progressed, Adam ran into a challenge unique to doing YPAR in core academic classes: He felt obligated to teach from a standardized curriculum provided by his district, which crowded out curricular space available for YPAR. Toward the end of November, Adam told me he intended to take a brief break from YPAR to read a novel from the district curriculum with the class, planning to return to the YPAR curriculum in early December. Unfortunately, the novel unit ran far longer than Adam expected, leaving him unable to revisit YPAR until January. As a result, his students spent nearly two months without engaging in the YPAR process.

Though the district did not mandate Adam implement its ELA curriculum, Adam's administrators had purchased the curricular materials with funds allocated by the district, so Adam felt obligated to implement pieces of the curriculum at least part of the time (e.g., starting off the year with one of the curriculum's novels). The district-wide ELA curriculum consisted primarily of five core novels and readings from a commercially



packaged anthology. As Adam explained in an interview, “when [administrators] buy into [the district curriculum], get allocated funds for that, then . . . it’s a safe move for the principals to buy into that, right? If you reject that, then you better have a pretty good plan.” The curriculum was also purportedly aligned with the standardized tests with which Adam’s school had been struggling and had high-stakes consequences for students, teachers, and schools. Because Adam felt compelled to balance the ELA curriculum with the YPAR curriculum, he ran out of curricular space for the latter.

When asked about the possibility of teaching the novel unit and the YPAR unit at the same time, Adam did not believe that would be an effective approach. The novel from the district curriculum, *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, is about a 13-year-old boy who overcomes obstacles in the wilderness after a plane crash, which is an arguably difficult—albeit not impossible—text to connect to YPAR projects focusing on oppression in urban communities. However, Adam felt that attempting to merge the two curricula would be too challenging for him and his students:

You can’t necessarily do both, do YPAR and do novels. You can build certain skills into the novels that make sense for YPAR but . . . I didn’t feel like I could launch [their YPAR projects] and read a novel in class at the same time. It’s a lot to do and it’s a lot for 6th graders to put their head around.

Adam did say, however, that in a “perfect world” he would merge novel reading with YPAR by getting “enough money to buy 80 books of [a] novel that I want to teach that I think would work well with YPAR,” implying that he did not think *Hatchet* would work well with the students’ YPAR projects, but that a different novel might have if he had access to 80 copies. That said, Adam did concede that this first year of implementing YPAR was a “trial run” of a “three-year plan,” and he left open the door to amending his approach, stating that he wanted to “take a look back and see what are some things that we could integrate both with the district curriculum and YPAR to make it more seamless.” An important factor to note here is that Adam—like Gloria—received no training on implementing YPAR in the classroom either in his teacher preparation program or on the job. Whether or not Adam was correct in his assessment that the two curricula could be merged, his uncertainty here seems to be at least partly a function of a lack of professional training and support.

When Adam returned to the YPAR curriculum in January, he taught his students about the importance of young people engaging in a participatory approach to research and action in their communities. In order to inspire his students, Adam showed videos of similarly aged youth around the country engaging in research and activism, including presentations from the previous year’s mini-YPAR project. He and the students brainstormed issues in their community that they wanted to research and help change, circling back at times to the work of the community organizations that Adam had brought into his classroom in the fall. Ultimately, Adam and the students produced a list of seven overarching research topics: cruelty to animals, dirty diesel, domestic violence, affordable housing, youth violence, drug abuse, food justice, and affordable youth transit. These were topics that students wanted to address and that directly affected them, consistent with the epistemological tenet of YPAR requiring that work be grounded in students’ lives.

The beginning stages of YPAR led to excitement among students about researching their topics. Unfortunately, after about three weeks, Adam ran into another challenge that prevented him from consistent implementation: frequent testing and test preparation. Throughout the academic year, Adam's district required all schools to participate in a series of practice tests leading up to the high-stakes statewide tests in the spring. For Adam, the practice tests interfered with his YPAR unit, not only because test administration consumed curricular time, but also because results influenced Adam's curricular decisions, again prompting him to redirect instructional time that he had planned to spend on YPAR.

Adam had intended to work on the YPAR projects—moving into the next phase in which students would develop research tools and collect data—until late February, at which time he would have begun test preparation ahead of the high-stakes state tests in March. However, in late January Adam received word that his students had scored poorly on a district-wide test that was supposed to assess their ability to analyze poetry. As a result, Adam decided to switch from the YPAR project to a poetry unit to prepare for the statewide tests. His decision was likely informed by the high-stakes nature of the tests, which included a state takeover if scores did not improve.

Because of Adam's decision to begin test prep earlier—coupled with the actual statewide tests that required most of the instructional time during March—Adam was not able to return to sustained work on the YPAR projects until April—8 months into the school year. Speaking about the issue of frequent testing impeding YPAR, Adam stated,

I mean we do a lot of tests at this school so that does eat up time . . . four practice [tests] and then the real [statewide test], and the days are all messed up on the four [statewide test] days, so there's not always a lot of time to get stuff done. Plus, they're just taking tests for two hours, so the students aren't psyched to get a lot of work done after that anyway, which I understand. So, yeah, it gets in the way.

Balancing three competing curricula—YPAR, the district ELA curriculum, and test prep—and the belief that they could not be merged effectively challenged Adam and his students to implement YPAR in fragmented chunks separated by months-long gaps.

**Questions about Adam's approach to facilitating inquiry-based research.** When Adam and his students returned to a sustained focus on the YPAR projects in April, they undertook a research process that sometimes diverged from the inquiry-based approach to creating knowledge that is an epistemological feature of YPAR. Consistent with the framework, Adam's students had begun the process by choosing a topic that affected them and their peers. In an inquiry-based approach to learning, students would develop an open-ended question about their topic and conduct research to answer it. Instead, Adam instructed his students to take a position up front. In the first section of their research reports, Adam required students to develop thesis statements about their topics, such as "Homelessness is an issue that is negatively affecting the community." Adam then instructed students to seek out evidence to support their positions.

Adam's students engaged in the other parts of a YPAR project, but again they diverged at times from the inquiry-based epistemological requirements. For example, Adam's students read articles related to their research topic. In an inquiry-based approach to conducting research, students would seek articles by conducting a literature review to find

out what is already known, and what is not yet understood. In Adam's class, students sought information contained in articles based on research others had done in order to support the claims they had made in their theses, sometimes alongside, and sometimes in lieu of, original research that the students themselves conducted (e.g., surveys, interviews). In an inquiry-based approach, students would include a "methods" section in their reports detailing the procedures and data sources they used to obtain their findings. In Adam's class, students included a methods section that listed their secondary research along with original research. The methods sections of some students' papers also included what probably should have been considered actions, such as sending letters to elected officials at the beginning of the YPAR process asking them to take action on their topics. Though some university-based researchers (Rubin et al., 2017; Tuck, 2009) have argued that such action can and should take place throughout a YPAR project, it would be hard to argue that sending letters would qualify as a *method* for collecting data, though this would likely be considered a method of influencing powerbrokers in an activist, organizing approach. Furthermore, Adam instructed students to include the information they gleaned from reading secondary sources with original data in a section entitled "Claims," which most closely resembled a "Findings and Discussion" section in a social-science research paper. At the end of the research process, students created a "Demands" section based on their findings, in which they outlined the changes they wanted made regarding their topic (e.g., survivors of domestic violence should be provided with counselors and shelters). Adam told me he borrowed this idea of a demands section from Ernest Morrell's presentation (Mirra et al., 2016).

Hence, Adam's approach to implementing YPAR appears to have veered at times from the epistemological and methodological approaches found in the academic literature. It is important to note that—having had no training in research or inquiry-based learning in my teacher-preparation program and only two years in a doctoral research program at the time of observation—I did not initially recognize Adam's approach as divergent; hence, I did not advise him to do anything differently. It was only upon later analysis and reflection that the divergence became clear. Again, the lack of professional preparation among teachers in YPAR implementation appears to challenge fidelity to the epistemological tenets of the framework. That said, Adam instructed his students on the value of conducting original research as well as the advantages and disadvantages of using research instruments such as surveys and interviews. In turn, several students with similar research topics worked in teams to create surveys, and others interviewed peers to solicit opinions on research topics. However, conducting original research was optional, and about half of the students limited their research to secondary sources.

In addition—unlike most of the YPAR projects facilitated by university researchers—Adam asked his students to work individually on their YPAR projects. He did so because he believed that allowing students to choose individual topics would increase motivation and engagement. Adam explained, "I could pick a topic or two and force everybody to do that, and it would be much more manageable, but then it wouldn't be as authentic, and there wouldn't be as much buy-in." Although Adam limited the number of overarching topics that students could explore to seven, each student conducted research primarily on their own and wrote up their research paper individually. Therefore, Adam became responsible for supporting 80 individual YPAR projects. With the partnership of an

additional adult in the classroom at times (i.e., Adam's special education co-teacher and me one day a week), the total student-to-adult ratio of 40:1 was substantially larger than that of most YPAR projects in the literature, some of which have been in the single digits (e.g., Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Van Sluys, 2010). In speaking to this issue, Adam lamented that the participatory, project-based nature of YPAR "makes it difficult to run with 80 students."

**Success with some YPAR outcomes, structural barriers to others.** In mid-June, as the end of the school year approached, students began to work on actions related to their findings. Adam indicated that a lot of students created posters and pamphlets to distribute in their communities. In addition, students created "sound collages," in which information collected during research projects (e.g., interview sound bites) was mixed with musical samples and beats. Similar to Adam's previous mini-YPAR unit, students presented their findings to peers. In sum, Adam's students appeared to be successful in raising awareness—at least among peers—about the issues they had researched.

However, due to structural challenges that limited time and curricular space, along with students presenting late in the school year, Adam felt he lacked time to arrange for a broader audience. Unlike the previous year when the principal attended the presentations, members with policy-making power were missing from the audience. Despite starting almost six months earlier in the school year, Adam and his students ran out of time for the type of authentic actions that had led to tangible policy change during the mini-YPAR unit. Adam recognized this fact, stating,

I think one of the things this year that we didn't have enough time for were the actions . . . some students did an excellent job with them, but not everybody was given the time nor the tools to come up with a great action, which is unfortunate.

Beyond the action-oriented outcomes, Adam believed that the YPAR process was successful. When I asked what his biggest successes were at the end of the process, Adam responded that one of the two main achievements was that his students attained educational outcomes related to motivation and engagement, such as developing "a love of learning," being "curious," and being "interested in learning more about anything." He also spoke about students' development of a critical, activist lens regarding community issues and creating change:

The other piece is highlighting issues in the community that are troublesome . . . [Students] already know a good deal about them, so it's doing a lesson on issues in the community but then it doesn't stop there because if it did, it would be like "Oh man, this sucks to live in this community." So it's learning a lesson on the community, but then also saying, "But look, it doesn't have to be this way. If you want to create change in your community, it's going to be difficult but it can be done. It's going to take more than a year, it's going to take more than a semester, but it's totally possible.

Although Adam lamented the fact that he ran out of time for substantial, collaborative, and authentic actions targeting specific policies and practices, he believed that YPAR was a

valuable process, citing that his students achieved academic outcomes, and developed motivation and sociopolitical mindsets.

### **Case #2: Gloria and JJHS**

During the 2013–14 (Year 1) and 2014–15 (Year 2) academic years, I partnered with Gloria, a sophomore humanities teacher in a public arts-based school. After hearing about Adam’s implementation of YPAR from a mutual friend, Gloria contacted me because she wanted to implement it in her classes. She planned to substitute YPAR for the current final project in her sophomore humanities course, which was a traditional civics project: in-class debates about controversial topics in which students take on the roles of government and community actors. Gloria planned to implement YPAR during the semester-long sophomore courses that took place during the first half of the 2013–14 school year. She allowed me to observe her class, provide feedback when necessary, and return the following academic year

**Successful launch of critical research relevant to students’ lives.** Gloria—an Africana studies and visual arts major in college—took a critical approach to teaching humanities and history consistent with the epistemology of YPAR. In her sophomore humanities course, Gloria taught U.S. history organized around the sociological concepts of race, gender, class, and citizenship. By taking an ethnic studies stance, she ensured that the stories of oppressed groups were told alongside the “master narrative” (Takaki, 1993). Her overarching question for students was: Who has power in the United States and why? In addition, she wove in relevant current events (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement, student protests against standardized testing, and street harassment of women). In describing her approach to teaching, Gloria stated,

I’m really interested in students developing a critical and creative perspective about the world they live in—particularly U.S. society—and that means looking beyond just individuals and understanding systems. . . . So, I think one central goal is for students to really understand how their lives are shaped by systems of power and privilege and oppression, and with that understanding to develop a consciousness around transformation to see themselves as actors of change in this capacity.

Gloria’s overarching goals—combined with her essential question for the course, and her attempts to integrate issues that mattered to her students—demonstrated her critical stance toward learning history and analyzing society and her commitment to ensuring that learning was tied to students’ lives.

Hence, when it came time to select YPAR topics, students chose issues of oppression in their community that affected them directly and that they felt they could change through action, including police brutality against Black and Brown youth, street harassment of women, policing of young people’s bodies through dress codes and body shaming by teachers, and women’s reproductive rights, including abortion. Many, including teachers, have considered these topics too controversial to address in schools. However, Gloria’s critical approach to teaching and learning, which centered power and oppression in the curriculum, inspired young people to tackle these issues, and she fully supported students’

choices. As a result, Gloria and her students successfully implemented the tenets of YPAR that require the work be critical and grounded in students' lives.

**Course structure and time as challenges.** Gloria, by virtue of teaching at JJHS, was immune to some of the pressures that Adam faced at CMS. For example, the headmaster and the staff in general at JJHS were averse to standardized testing and curricula because the school valued creativity, non-conformity, and alternative arts-based expressions of knowledge. Additionally, the school had an excellent reputation among students, teachers, parents, and administrators in the district, despite struggling to make adequate yearly progress on statewide tests during the years I worked with Gloria. However, during the course of the study, district- and state-level policy makers considered giving "turnaround" powers (e.g., firing staff) to schools like JJHS that had previously been reserved for schools in the lowest category of test-score progress (e.g., Adam's school). Within a broader political context in which neoliberal educational reform had gained dominance (Cannella, 2008; Macedo, 2013), the state had recently adopted regulations requiring that teacher evaluations be based, in part, on test scores. As a result, there was pressure on everyone at JJHS, including Gloria, to improve test scores to avoid the punitive measures that Adam's school had gone through.

However, the bigger challenge facing Gloria was the time constraint inherent in the course structure. Gloria's course was more history- than ELA-focused and there was no state test for history; therefore, Gloria did not feel as compelled as Adam to implement test-prep pedagogy that would have limited curricular space. Instead, Gloria was burdened by having only one semester in which to implement all aspects of her curriculum, including YPAR. Even with JJHS's substantial curricular autonomy, Gloria was required to cover core concepts that she and the rest of the humanities department had deemed important (i.e., the sociological concepts of race, gender, class, and citizenship, explored through the use of historical case studies). Because of the semester-long structure of her course, Gloria had only about 17 weeks of school, accounting for vacations, in which to cover these major sociological concepts and finish a full YPAR unit. This resulted in Gloria allocating 21 days in Year 1 and 25 days in Year 2 to the YPAR projects. During this time period, students were introduced to the concept of YPAR, completed the research process from start to finish, and created final presentations for a community forum at the end of the semester.

**Successful implementation of YPAR's tenets (with help).** Remarkably, given these tight time frames, Gloria succeeded in implementing YPAR projects that adhered to the main tenets of YPAR's epistemology, albeit with great struggle. Consistent with the tenet requiring robust youth participation, Gloria's students participated in every step of an inquiry-based research process. In addition, students selected research topics that were relevant to their lives and based in a desire for change, and they developed open-ended research questions conducive to an inquiry approach. Further, students demonstrated their insider knowledge by choosing topics that affected them and their peers (e.g., the desire to major in two different arts at the same time, or the differential treatment of students at JJHS based on race/ethnicity).

Similar to Adam, Gloria wanted her students to stake out a position and support it from the outset of the project. In Gloria's case, this was due in part to JJHS's focus that academic

year on developing students' persuasive writing skills across disciplines. By this time, I had gained more knowledge about research practices from two additional years in a doctoral research program, and thus I recommended to Gloria that she ask her students to develop open-ended research questions to engage in an inquiry-based process. In speaking to her misunderstanding, Gloria stated,

[You and I] had some conversations where I was like “Oh, really? You can't have a position [at the beginning of the research process]? You're not supposed to have a position?” So, yeah, I really don't have a lot of understanding . . . I don't feel like I have a lot of background doing and teaching research. So, I just understood it really abstractly. I didn't understand it concretely, so that was hard.

Again, similar to Adam, Gloria had minimal experience conducting research in her teacher-preparation program, and she had never received training on a PAR/YPAR approach either. She had read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2008) in college, which gave her an abstract understanding of PAR, but she felt she lacked the practical or concrete knowledge to implement YPAR's epistemological underpinnings.

Despite Gloria's lack of practical understanding of YPAR, she and her students successfully implemented projects consistent with its epistemological tenets. For example, students read literature related to their topics and created literature reviews. Next, students learned about the advantages and disadvantages of various research instruments—including surveys, interviews, and focus groups—and they developed instruments to suit their research questions. Again, drawing upon their unique knowledge as youth, students tapped into their social networks to find peers to participate in surveys, interviews, and focus groups. Gloria's students used tools like Google Forms to collect data, from which they pulled out the most salient information to answer their research questions. In the final steps of the research process, students wrote formal research reports and made recommendations based on their findings. Consistent with the praxis required of YPAR, students planned and participated in various actions related to their research projects. In short, Gloria's students successfully participated in a critical, inquiry-based process, designed to create change, and were exposed to high-level research skills.

**The challenges of time and large class sizes affect the quality of the research.**

Although Gloria's students successfully participated in all steps of the YPAR process in ways that were consistent with the epistemology, it was not without challenges. In both years, because of a lack of time due to a shortened window allotted for the YPAR projects, students only had a total of seven days to develop research tools, collect data, and then analyze the data. Among experienced researchers, it would be nearly impossible to complete three major steps in the research process in a week's time while adhering to high standards. Unsurprisingly, this was true for Gloria's novice researchers. Because they only had a few days in which to collect data, students had difficulty finding a sufficient number of respondents to their surveys, sometimes ending up with response rates in the single digits. In addition, some students limited the analysis sections of their research papers—which they wrote over only a couple days—to only two or three pieces of evidence from their original research but still made sweeping, unsupported claims based on this limited evidence. Given the extremely tight time frame and hard deadlines, students had no time

to be iterative in their data collection and very little time to revise written analyses to reflect high-quality research writing.

Another school-specific challenge that affected students' ability to engage successfully in YPAR was the number of students Gloria was responsible for supporting. In both years, Gloria had two sections and over 50 students working on YPAR projects, which was substantially larger than most projects in the literature. In speaking to how difficult it was to implement YPAR for the first time while supporting over 50 students essentially on her own, Gloria stated,

It was hard going into [YPAR] without having any understanding of the process. I felt frustrated a lot because I had large classes—27 students, 25 students—in a full inclusion classroom with no sustained support. I was the only consistent person in the room every day. This kind of work requires that there be more support for it to be done well, especially in a full inclusion classroom.

In Year 2, Gloria received more adult support. Tara, a teacher candidate from a local university, was placed in Gloria's classroom full time and supported Gloria and her students throughout the YPAR project. In addition, I was in Gloria's classroom three days a week, and I now had experience collaborating on two different YPAR projects with teachers, including Gloria in Year 1. In the three years of my study, this team of adult collaborators was the only set-up that verged on resembling the teams of experienced university researchers often found in the YPAR literature (e.g., Fox & Fine, 2013; Kirshner, 2015; Mirra et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2017). Unsurprisingly, on several occasions Gloria expressed that her students were far better supported in Year 2 than in Year 1 and that the research process and final products were of higher quality. Because we could divide large class sizes into more manageable groups of seven or eight students per adult, we were almost always able to check in with every student each class period. In turn, in both Gloria's assessment as well as my own, students wrote stronger literature reviews (an area in which they struggled in Year 1) and created surveys and interview questions that were clearer and free of spelling and grammar errors. These improvements undoubtedly led students to include more trustworthy, extensive, and accurate data in their research papers and presentations.

However, the overall quality of the research that students completed and wrote up, even in the strongest papers, was less than Gloria would have liked. As such, questions remained in Gloria's mind, as well as my own, as to the extent to which her students achieved the academic outcomes portrayed in the literature, such as improved literacy, numeracy, and research skills. In my interview with Gloria, she reflected on the quality of her students' research:

So, was their research high quality that way? No. . . . They did get the understanding that if they want to go find some information about something then they can go write a survey and do it, for example. I don't think they learned how to do that necessarily well.



When asked why they were unable to do high-quality research, Gloria responded: “Well, time. Time. We had 5 weeks to do the whole thing. That’s just not enough time.”

**Success in achieving sociopolitical development and action-oriented outcomes.**

Despite the substantial challenges of doing YPAR in a public-school classroom, Gloria’s students were highly successful in presenting their research to a variety of audiences through multiple formats. For example, students posted their research papers to a publicly accessible website with the goal of sharing their work with a wider audience. Gloria and I promoted the website through our various networks, and several teachers from the district emailed us stating they had read the research reports and shared the website with their students.

By far, the most successful and impactful action students took each year was holding a community forum. At the end of the projects in both years, students organized a community forum open to the general public where they presented their YPAR research findings. Consistent with JJHS’s focus on the arts, as well as some of the projects in the YPAR literature, Gloria asked students to present their research in an artistic way. In front of about 60 audience members comprised of family, friends, teachers, and administrators, the students presented their artistic representations of their YPAR projects in four- to five-person teams grouped around big themes (e.g., school culture, gender and sexuality, racial oppression). Examples of group presentations included a modern dance interpretation of students breaking free from oppressive dress code policies, spoken word pieces about young people dealing with police brutality, and a documentary in which young women shared their experiences of being sexually harassed. In addition, Gloria encouraged students to interact with the audience, so student presenters asked audience members to share their thoughts about their research findings, engaging in dialogue with them. In turn, young people from the audience connected to the projects by sharing their stories of going through the same experiences, parents expressed mixed opinions on topics such as the value of standardized testing, and teachers asked the student researchers questions about how they could make their curriculum and classroom practice more culturally relevant.

Gloria felt that this action piece of the YPAR project was a major success, referring to evidence from the reflections that students filled out in class the day after their performances. After Year 1, she shared,

I was so proud the night of their [community forum] where they were presenting to their communities, to their parents, to their teachers, to their peers. . . . They did really innovative, creative stuff. And I think every single person that presented felt empowered. I really believe, almost everyone—we reflected afterwards—felt really good about what they did in front of people. And in the reflections, they talked about realizing that they had power, which to me was really important, and that’s not something you forget. You will forget facts, you will forget content, but you won’t forget that.

In their written reflections, the vast majority of students expressed that the community forum was a positive experience, and many spoke highly of the research process leading up to the forum, often framing it as hard work but worthwhile in the end. Further, many students made statements indicative of an increased belief in their power to be heard and

to raise the consciousness of others around issues that were important to them. The sentiments of the following two students—shared during a talking circle in class the day after the forum in Year 1—were representative of many of their peers:

In the future, I'd like to do more in changing people's views on my topic. I'm definitely taking away more knowledge about my topic and other [students'] topics. Also, [the students in] this class got to know each other much better through the [YPAR] project.

[The community forum] for me was an experience that changed me. When you share your opinion with someone, a lot of people may disagree with you but some will agree with you. Even though I'm not a grown-up, people *felt* what I had to say. They could understand my work. It felt like a revolutionary movement. Okay, maybe I'm not changing the whole world, but those people who were there, at least they have a different state of mind now.

After the community forums in both years, another major success of the YPAR projects was that about 10 to 12 students continued to present their artistic research representations with Gloria and me at several conferences, including a research conference at a prestigious university, a social justice conference organized by local teacher activists, and a professional learning conference organized by the district teachers' union. In speaking about a student who presented with us at a university-based research conference, Gloria highlighted the power that YPAR can have on a young person's sociopolitical development:

[This student] has mentioned multiple times in multiple public spaces how that conference shifted her perspective about what she can do, and also her leadership and her connection to other young people and what they can do, and the motivation for continuing to be an activist.

### Discussion

By following Adam, Gloria, and their students as they engaged in YPAR, I wanted to add to the relatively sparse knowledge base on teachers who implement YPAR in core academic classrooms mostly on their own. Specifically, I wanted to determine the challenges these two teachers faced when working within the structural constraints of these settings, as well as the successes they achieved with their students on the various educational, identity development, and action-oriented outcomes valued by university researchers who have written about YPAR in the academic literature. Further, given the differences in the training of most teachers compared to university-based researchers (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Macedo, 2008)—coupled with the fact that many university-based researchers do this work either outside schools or within special classes in schools, like electives (Irizarry & Brown, 2014)—I attempted to capture the ways that Adam and Gloria's experiences converged with and diverged from the majority of existing studies.

In this section, I compare the cases of Adam and Gloria to illuminate the common challenges that were largely a result of structural constraints, but also a function of their professional training. Further, I integrate YPAR studies from the academic literature to demonstrate how Adam and Gloria's experiences converged with and diverged from those of university researchers and the handful of studies in which teachers implemented YPAR in core academic classrooms. I conclude by illuminating and comparing the successes that Adam and Gloria achieved despite the challenges, comparing their experiences to those captured in the academic literature.

### **Challenges**

**Curricular requirements, testing, and lack of time.** Both Adam and Gloria cited lack of time to implement YPAR because its extended, fluid, project-based nature requires weeks—if not months—to implement fully. Adam was at times stymied in his attempts to implement a full-year YPAR program because of the competing ELA curriculum. In addition, Adam faced the need to administer frequent practice tests to prepare students for the statewide test in March, and the scores on one of these tests drove his decision to implement an unanticipated poetry unit designed to remediate students' supposed weaknesses in this genre.

Standardized testing is a uniquely school-based challenge. Some teacher-implemented, school-based YPAR studies have identified high-stakes, statewide testing as a challenge (e.g., Kirshner, 2015; Raygoza, 2016). However, the extent to which testing interrupted Adam's efforts to implement YPAR on multiple occasions throughout the year—in addition to the two weeks of actual statewide testing—appears to be a new finding. Further, avoiding standardized testing might have been the reason that all three teacher-implemented YPAR projects in Mirra et al.'s (2015) study—in which testing was briefly named a concern by one author—took place in English classrooms in the 11th grade, a grade in which statewide testing was typically not required at the time. Similarly, while the teachers in Rubin et al.'s (2017) study taught mixed-grade classes that included some 10th graders required to take statewide tests, the YPAR projects took place in history classes—a discipline often exempt from high-stakes testing. The authors do speak to the challenge of “the need to assess at particular intervals” (p. 182), but that assessment appears to have been teacher-generated and related to the course, as opposed to district- and state-mandated standardized testing. Further research is needed to determine whether—and to what extent—high-stakes, standardized testing derails the implementation of YPAR in core academic classrooms, paying attention to differences in grade levels and disciplines in which the work is being done.

Finally, Adam's belief that the YPAR curriculum diverged too much from the ELA curriculum, and therefore could not be merged, mirrors the experiences of two teachers in Kirshner's (2015) study who “did not see a way to integrate” (p. 144) the YPAR curriculum with their science curricula. Whereas curricular requirements are not an issue for out-of-school projects, several of the classroom-based projects in core academic subjects have demonstrated the challenge of aligning YPAR projects to curricular standards (Mirra et al., 2015; Raygoza, 2016). On the other hand, Rubin et al. (2017) characterized the “Active Citizenship in the 21st Century” standards newly adopted by the state of New Jersey as “motivation” to create a YPAR curriculum with and for high school social studies teachers

(p. 179). That said, the teachers in Mirra et al., Raygoza, and Rubin et al., as well as university-based researchers in other classroom-based studies (e.g., Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Yang, 2009), appear to have had substantial, and perhaps complete, freedom in some cases to design curriculum, so long as they could tie standards to what they were doing, unlike Adam's ELA curriculum that required specific texts.

In short, the challenges Adam faced in implementing YPAR due to extensive, competing demands of testing and a prescribed content-area curriculum have been largely undocumented and underexplored in the academic literature, though this is an increasingly common reality for teachers in urban public schools. These challenges prevented Adam and his students from taking on authentic actions targeting people in power who could change policies and practices.

Gloria also struggled with the challenge of finding time to implement YPAR projects, but her circumstances were different than Adam's. While testing was only a secondary issue because she did not teach in a tested subject, the structure of the course—a single semester—left her with only 21 school days in Year 1 and 25 days in Year 2 to complete YPAR projects from start to finish. Though it is difficult to tell in some cases, it appears that most—if not all—of the teacher-implemented YPAR projects in core academic classes documented in existing research had course structures that lasted the full year, including Rubin et al. (2017), Raygoza (2016), Kirshner (2015), and at least one of the three co-authors in Mirra et al. (2015).

Further, as previously mentioned, the teachers in these studies, as well as other classroom-based ones, particularly those in elective-type classes, appeared to have had substantially more curricular freedom than Gloria, who was responsible for teaching U.S. history from pre-European invasion up to World War II through the lens of four sociological concepts. The structural issues Gloria and her students faced demanded quick turnaround times on various aspects of the YPAR process (e.g., collecting and analyzing data, creating research reports), which Gloria felt led to lower quality work than if she and her students had had more time.

To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has examined teachers implementing YPAR in a single-semester course and the subsequent challenges they faced. This appears to be an area for further research to capture the experiences of teachers in core academic classes who face curricular content requirements but only have a semester in which to fit a YPAR project.

**Large class sizes and multiple sections.** Another structural challenge unique to classroom-based settings and—except for a handful of studies (e.g., Kirshner, 2015; Phillips et al., 2010)—this study of Adam and Gloria's situations, was their responsibility for implementing YPAR with large classes across multiple sections. In most of the out-of-school YPAR projects, either a single university-based researcher implemented the projects with ten young people or less (e.g., Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008; Payne, Starks, & Gibson, 2009; Tuck et al., 2008), or a team of university-based researchers—sometimes including their doctoral advisees and/or other community-based researchers and organizers—supported a larger number of young people, thereby lowering the youth-to-adult ratio to single digits (e.g., Fox & Fine, 2013; Mirra et al., 2016). In the school-based projects, the majority of studies were implemented in a single section of a course, often an

elective course (e.g., Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Ozer & Douglas, 2013, 2015; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Van Sluys, 2010; Yang, 2009). Therefore, in the majority of YPAR studies, the adults did not face situations in which they were responsible for facilitating projects with groups of 20 or more youth at a time or upward of 50–80 youth across multiple sections. These challenges led to both Adam and Gloria noting difficulty supporting student engagement in relevant research. Raygoza (2016) recognized the challenge of implementing YPAR across multiple sections:

While I hoped to integrate YPAR into multiple class periods in the same school, I recognized as I began to plan the introduction of the unit that I did not feel prepared to facilitate multiple different action-research projects at once, so I chose one class period of Algebra I. (p. 131)

The other teacher-implemented studies in core academic classrooms have not explicitly listed class size and multiple sections as challenges, but it is difficult in some cases to determine whether these teachers were implementing YPAR across multiple sections of large classes. Regardless, this appears to be a new finding in the academic literature—one that deserves further examination as urban districts, in particular, face continually shrinking budgets, which often leads to fewer teachers and larger class sizes.

**A lack of PAR/YPAR training.** As previously noted, most public school teachers receive different training than university researchers, with the former receiving general and content-specific pedagogical training, and the latter receiving extended social-science research training. Further, university-based researchers who have implemented and written about YPAR have likely had additional training in critical, action-oriented epistemological approaches. Both Gloria and Adam stated that they received no formal training in YPAR at any point during their teacher-preparation programs or any coaching, curricular resources, or other forms of professional development related to YPAR from school administrators or the district. Both teachers built their YPAR curricula from scratch, with Adam trying to emulate what he saw Dr. Ernest Morrell present in a single talk, and Gloria remembering what she read in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2008) coupled with a single teacher research project she had conducted in her teacher-preparation program, which was neither participatory nor involved youth as researchers.

Without training, resources, or support using YPAR as a pedagogical approach, it is unsurprising that Adam implemented a version that was not consistently aligned with the inquiry-based tenet of YPAR's epistemology, or that Gloria almost did the same. Adam's approach to implementation was likely a function of the training he received to become an ELA teacher. I know from my training as an ELA teacher that, in our discipline, we are prepared to teach students to make claims and support them with evidence, usually in the form of analytical essays that begin with a thesis. The 6th-grade ELA Common Core State Standards for writing, for example, contain the word "claim" in seven different places, whereas the word "question" only appears once (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). In addition, though one of the research standards speaks to answering a question, another standard (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9) highlights the practice of using textual evidence in research papers in the ELA classroom: "Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research" (Common Core State

Standards Initiative, 2018). Consistent with his discipline, Adam asked his students to enter the research process with a claim that they were required to support with evidence. In addition, the secondary research articles, or texts, that students read about their YPAR topic were used as evidence to support a claim, rather than as a body of prior scholarship upon which to build an original, inquiry-based research project. Research has shown that professionals in the different disciplines are trained to think, argue, read, and write in very different ways from each other, essentially in different epistemological approaches (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Therefore, it is probable that Adam was trained to think and teach as an ELA teacher in very different ways from scientists—including social scientists—and science teachers, who are trained to enter into an inquiry-based process with an open-ended research question and hypothesis that can be complicated or contradicted by the findings. It seems unreasonable, then, to expect Adam—or Gloria, who was trained in the discipline of history—to approach research in a different manner than his disciplinary and pedagogical training. Combine this differential training with the structural challenges listed above (e.g., a lack of time, large class sizes), and it is easy to see why Adam, Gloria, and their students struggled to engage in YPAR consistent with the epistemological tenets outlined in the academic literature.

Many teachers who want to implement YPAR with students in core academic classrooms do not have research training or the extensive university partnerships that many projects in the academic literature have possessed. As mentioned earlier, Kirshner (2015), for example, appears to have developed the curriculum with two other university-researcher colleagues who had funding from the Spencer Foundation. Kirshner and one of those colleagues then provided coaching and feedback to the teachers implementing the curriculum, including through a graduate-level class. Similarly, Rubin et al. (2017) brought together a large team of educators and researchers to develop a curriculum, and then they supported the teachers through monthly meetings while providing in-class support, such as teaching lessons on occasion. Unfortunately, most public school teachers will not have this level of support and, hence, may struggle with implementing the epistemological tenets and YPAR's methodological and pedagogical practices. To the best of my knowledge, this study raises this issue for the first time in the academic literature—an issue that deserves more attention in the research and theorizing around YPAR.

**Successes.** Despite structural and professional challenges, it is important to note the various ways that Adam, Gloria, and their respective students were successful in adhering to and implementing the epistemological principles of YPAR, while also achieving important outcomes that have been valued by researchers in the academic literature. First, Adam and Gloria encouraged and supported students to take on research topics that were critical in nature, centering issues of power and oppression despite working in an institution (i.e., a public school) that is often hostile to this work. Unlike some of the teachers in Kirshner's (2015) study, Adam and Gloria had no reservations or discomfort with tackling issues of racism or other forms of structural and interpersonal oppression. Further, students and teachers did not face opposition from administration, colleagues, or outside forces to the projects, whereas the academic literature contains several examples of both teachers and university-based researchers working in schools where projects were terminated by those in power (Cabrera et al., 2014; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Kirshner, 2015). Potential

explanations for their success include Gloria's arts-based, counter-hegemonic school culture, both teachers' school administrators who directly supported the projects at times (e.g., Adam's principal attending student presentations in the mini-unit; Gloria's assistant principal buying pizza for the community forum), and also a laissez-faire school culture, in which teachers were trusted to do their jobs effectively. However, further research is needed on the conditions that allow teachers to successfully implement critical YPAR projects.

In addition, although the process was uneven in Adam's case and rushed in Gloria's, students in both classes participated as researchers in a PAR process that drew on their knowledge and capacity and was designed to create change on issues relevant to their lives. In both classrooms, students had virtually full control of the topics they addressed, and they set their own research agendas. These students were exposed to sophisticated qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups), and they analyzed data themselves, developing emerging social-science research skills. Gloria and Adam's students all strategized and took action based on their research findings, raising the consciousness of peers as well as community members around their issues—even changing school policy in Adam's students' case. Further, Adam's students took actions throughout the process (e.g., attending a protest on dirty diesel, writing letters to local politicians), consistent with one of Rubin et al.'s (2017) recommendations on teachers implementing YPAR in a core academic class.

Despite the substantial structural and professional challenges, Adam and Gloria's students participated in a process that was primarily aligned with YPAR's epistemology and achieved important educational and action-oriented outcomes. In addition, it seems clear from Gloria's students' remarks—including the comment about a revolutionary movement—as well as Gloria and Adam's statements about what students gained from the process, that the students achieved important sociopolitical and identity-development skills with regard to their beliefs about their capacity to conduct research and create change in their communities. A final indicator of the success that Adam and Gloria felt in conducting YPAR with their students was that Adam continued to implement YPAR for 3 successive years after I worked with him, and Gloria implemented YPAR for the next consecutive year, during the 2015–16 academic year, before leaving the classroom. These successes—in combination with those of other teachers in a small but growing number of studies on teachers implementing YPAR in core academic classrooms—should provide hope to those of us who want to see more teachers engage in YPAR with students in these settings.

### **Implications**

While Gloria, Adam, and their students provide reasons for hope, the challenges they faced and successes they achieved despite those challenges provide guidance for supporting teachers and students in this work. I close this paper by outlining two important implications for teachers, administrators, policymakers, teacher educators, and university-based researchers.

### **Teachers Must Receive More Training and Support**

If we want YPAR to expand into more core academic classrooms where teachers are confident using YPAR as a pedagogical approach, we need to start preparing and supporting teachers in the epistemology and methodological approaches of PAR/YPAR. A natural place to begin this training would be in teacher-preparation programs. To this end, Valenzuela (2016) recently published a handbook for teacher educators looking to grow “critically conscious teachers” with two chapters dedicated to YPAR. In the handbook, Valenzuela and her co-authors provided a model for what teacher training might look like, documenting their Grow-Your-Own Teacher Education Institutes initiative that prepares Latinx teachers to support Latinx students, a major component of which is YPAR. Teacher-training programs, like Grow-Your-Own Teacher Education Institutes, that seek to train teachers to implement YPAR must prepare teachers for the school-specific structural challenges that will likely require them to modify and adapt the YPAR process. My study provides further guidance to teacher educators about structural challenges in core academic classes, adding to and expanding on the work of Kirshner (2015) and Rubin et al. (2017) in particular.

For teachers already in the classroom who need training and support in taking on YPAR as pedagogy, possible solutions include creating professional learning communities (PLCs) in which teachers learn about the epistemological tenets of YPAR and support each other in implementation. Administrators at the school and district level could provide funding for PLCs to support this work. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Kirshner (2015) and Rubin et al.’s (2017) ongoing partnerships with teachers, PLCs could be an opportunity for university-based researchers to collaborate with teachers, adding their knowledge of social science research to the pedagogical knowledge possessed by teachers. Finally, for teachers who want to do this work but do not have access to PLCs or university partnerships, YPAR advocates might consider providing easily accessible resources on YPAR’s epistemology (e.g., open digital learning modules) and possibly even curricular examples at the granular level that teachers can access as models (e.g., lesson plans, student work). Of course, YPAR is not a standardized series of steps that teachers can copy and drop into their context. However, there are parts of the YPAR process that will likely not change in substantial ways across settings; for example, the advantages and disadvantages of using interviews versus focus groups are not particularly context specific. This and other examples could be included in a YPAR curricular framework that teachers could flesh out and adapt to meet the needs of their students and contexts.

For YPAR researchers who balk at generalized YPAR curricular resources, perhaps an acceptable alternative would be for researchers, teachers, and youth who write up YPAR studies in the academic literature to include more details about the pedagogical practices they used, the obstacles they navigated, the student work they created, etc., with a caveat being: This is the way we did it; you will have to tailor it to your specific context. This level of pedagogical detail that many teachers would find helpful is missing from the vast majority of the current academic literature on YPAR. Raygoza’s (2016) self-study of her math classroom, which included numerous references to specific pedagogical practices and teaching artifacts, was a powerful exception, though far more examples are needed. Examples of such resources are beginning to appear online, such as the Berkeley YPAR



Hub and the Public Science Project. Valenzuela's (2016) new book is a step in the right direction as well, with activities listed in the appendices and a detailed narrative from Cammarota in the last chapter of the book. Unfortunately, none of these resources were available when Adam and Gloria were building their curricula from scratch; at the very least, neither they nor I were aware of them. Of course, if teachers are not aware of these resources, they effectively do not exist. Hence, teacher-preparation programs and school-based instructional leaders have a responsibility to point teacher candidates and teachers to these resources.

### **Structural Barriers Must be Mitigated and Removed**

Adam and Gloria, consistent with teachers in the other classroom-based YPAR studies in the academic literature, faced substantial structural barriers. The first barrier—high-stakes testing—caused Adam to dedicate huge chunks of curricular time to preparation for and administration of statewide testing. I agree with calls from the growing movement of students—including those in Gloria's classroom—teachers, parents, politicians, academics, and other community members to dramatically lower the frequency and high stakes of testing and, at some point in the near future, end high-stakes testing (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2017). Doing so would free teachers to engage students in the extended, fluid, iterative knowledge-creation process that YPAR entails. The punitive test-based accountability plank of the neoliberal education reform movement has increasingly been shown to be a failure, both in desired outcomes (e.g., improved student outcomes) and unintended consequences (e.g., cheating) (Strauss, 2017a; Welner & Mathis, 2015). YPAR advocates seeking to influence policymakers on this issue might point to the Performance Standards Consortium in New York State, school members of which are exempt from most statewide tests and instead use “practitioner-developed, student-focused performance assessments” (New York Performance Standards Consortium, 2018, p. 6). This allows and encourages teachers to engage in inquiry-based learning with students instead of test-prep pedagogy. Consortium schools outperform both local and national averages on a range of outcomes.

In addition, teachers must have the curricular freedom to implement extended YPAR projects. At the school level, administrators should do what they can to hand off curricular decisions to teachers while resisting the urge to purchase or require the use of commercially packaged, standardized curricula. District-level administrators should grant school staff the ability to implement curricula that they believe will best respond to their students' needs, as Adam and Gloria's district did. Further, both teacher educators and instructional support personnel in schools should learn from Adam's experience, as well as that of the two science teachers in Kirshner's (2015) study who felt the curriculum they were required to teach was too removed from the YPAR projects to be merged. Although these assessments may, in fact, have been correct, it is also at least possible that curricular connections may have been missed. Teacher educators in preparation programs and instructional support personnel can support teachers in thinking about content-area curricular connections with YPAR, which must come sooner than in the cases of Adam and Gloria who were building their YPAR curricula as they were teaching their content-area curricula simultaneously. Rubin et al.'s (2017) curricular-development retreats and ongoing team meetings that

consisted of teachers, university-, and community-based YPAR researchers provide an example of what this might look like.

Finally, Gloria and Adam's large class sizes and their total number of students highlighted a unique challenge for public school teachers looking to implement YPAR in their core classes. Gloria and Adam's average class sizes (25 and 20, respectively) and the total number of students across sections (50 and 80, respectively) were lower than those of many teachers in urban schools, where class sizes are sometimes over 30 and as high as 40. Still, Gloria and Adam felt unable to support all students to the extent necessary for YPAR. In addition to schools and districts lowering class sizes and course loads for teachers, one possible interim solution to the issue of class size and the number of projects Adam and Gloria had to support would be to break students into research teams or to interrogate a single research question as a class. However, Adam and Gloria both felt that students choosing their own individual research topics led to greater engagement and motivation, which is supported by the academic literature on autonomy being linked to increased motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This argument seems to hold merit given that students did not opt into the YPAR projects, like they would in electives or afterschool programs. However, even if teachers were to ask students to work in small groups or as one large group on the same project, the difficulty of supporting large numbers of students across multiple sections with only one or two adults remains. As such, one takeaway for teachers doing this work would be to solicit the support of other adults (e.g., building colleagues, university partners, community organizers, parents), thereby lowering the student-to-adult ratio. In addition, teachers might consider expanding YPAR projects across disciplines, enlisting the support of other teachers while also addressing the issue of curricular space in a single course/discipline.

### Conclusion

YPAR has the potential to provide empowering learning experiences for students to conduct critical, action-oriented research designed to challenge systems of oppression that affect their lives and communities. As such, YPAR is being adopted by an increasing number of public school teachers in core academic classes as a pedagogical approach designed to create critically conscious students who can create change. My study adds to and expands on a small number of studies looking at the structural challenges of implementing YPAR in core academic classes—including testing and curricular requirements, as well as large class sizes, multiple sections, and single-semester course structures. In addition, Gloria and Adam's experiences raise the issue of training and on-the-job support for teachers who want to take on this work within core academic classrooms. If we mitigate these barriers and provide supports, additional teachers can inspire more revolutionary movements in core classrooms where students imagine and work toward radical possibilities through YPAR.

### Author Biography

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**Appendix A**  
Interview Protocol for Adam

**Interview #1: Prior to Start of YPAR Unit**

Questions on the purposes and goals for engaging in YPAR:

- Why did you decide to take on YPAR this year?
- What does YPAR mean to you?
- What are the specific academic goals that you would like the students to achieve while engaging in YPAR?
- Are there any goals beyond strictly academic goals that you think students might achieve through YPAR?
- How will you know if you and your students have achieved these goals?
- How will students choose their research topics?

**Interview #2: Halfway Through YPAR Unit**

Questions on the progress of the YPAR unit:

- What are some of the successes you and your students have had so far?
- What are some of the challenges that you have faced in implementing YPAR?
- How much autonomy do you have to deviate from the district-wide curriculum in order to implement YPAR?
- What role, if any, does standardized testing and test prep play in hindering your ability to implement YPAR?
- What resources have you drawn upon to implement YPAR successfully?

**Interview #3: End of YPAR Unit**

Questions on the evaluation of the YPAR unit:

- What are the successes you and your students achieved in doing YPAR?
- What actions did your students take based on their research projects?
- What were the biggest challenges in implementing YPAR?
- What would you do differently in implementing YPAR next time?
- What advice would you give to teachers who want to do YPAR with their students?



**Appendix B**  
Interview Protocols for Gloria

**Year 1**

Overarching questions about her humanities course:

- What are your main goals in teaching your humanities course? Can you speak a little bit about your approach to teaching the course?
- Do you consider your approach to be critical pedagogy?
- How do you determine the curriculum?
- In what ways is the curricular autonomy at a place like JJHS liberating? In what ways is it challenging?
- Do you believe it is necessary to have this type of curricular autonomy to teach the way you do?

Questions about YPAR specifically:

- What made you want to change your final project to a more action-oriented project, specifically a YPAR project?
- How much did you know about YPAR before this past semester? Did you have any prior training in collecting research?
- Can you tell me about the artistic piece of the YPAR project, and why you felt that was important to include?
- What surprised you about doing YPAR with young people? Did you feel prepared to teach young people how to be researchers?
- What do you think the biggest success were in implementing YPAR?
- What do you think students learned by doing YPAR?
- What were the biggest challenges?
- What resources did you draw upon to implement YPAR?
- What resources would have helped you to implement YPAR more successfully?
- What would you have done differently, if you could go back and do it again?
- Do you plan on doing YPAR again with your students, either next year or at some other point?
- What advice would you give to others who are trying to do this type of work with young people?

**Year 2**

Questions about doing YPAR a second time:

- Why did you decide to engage in YPAR again this year?
- What, if anything, was different about doing YPAR this year as compared to last year?
- Something I captured in my field notes this year was that you felt the research process was more successful and more rigorous this year. Can you give examples of why you felt that way?
- What were the biggest challenges this year?

- In what ways, if any, did having two additional adults in the room for most of the YPAR project help mitigate some of these challenges?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages to allowing students to work individually on a topic of your choosing, as opposed to working in small groups on the same topic or even the whole class working on the same topic?
- What were the greatest successes?
- What, if anything, will you do differently next year?

**Appendix C***Etic Codes*

Aspects of YPAR in Conceptual Framework	Etic Code
Epistemological Tenets	Critical in nature Situated in the lived experiences of youth Youth as key participants in the research process Inquiry-based Students' unique knowledge valued Action as necessary part of research process
Implementation	Relevant, critical research topic Open-ended research question Read relevant literature Write literature review Develop research instruments Conduct data collection Conduct data analysis Write research report Develop action plan Take actions
Outcomes	Engagement and motivation Sociopolitical development Academic knowledge and skills Youth-informed knowledge production Changes in policies and practices
Challenges	Standardized testing Content to teach/lack of curricular space Short blocks of time Grading Inauthentic deadlines A lack of research training

## **Appendix D**

### **Emic Codes**

#### Challenges:

- Lack of research training
- Lack of YPAR curricular resources
- Disciplinary training
- Large class sizes
- Adult-to-student ratios
- Individual research topics
- Individualized nature of schooling
- Competing curricula
- Test prep curricula
- District-wide testing
- Semester-long courses
- Lack of rigor in the research process
- Lack of rigor in the research products

#### Supports:

- Administrative support—active
- Administrative support—laissez-faire
- Community organizations