"Liberation Is a Praxis": Promoting College and Career Access Through Youth Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an emancipatory practice that may be used to facilitate meaningful discourse related to exploring post-secondary, college, and career pathways among youth. Through collaborative processes and consensus decision making, youth engage in YPAR as a process that develops collaborative research, teamwork, and shared leadership skills. We describe the applications of YPAR where school counselors work alongside youth to collectively examine constraints and opportunities related to college and career access. Engaging youth in YPAR has the potential to elevate young people's perspectives and experiences and give them a voice in promoting change in their local school communities. Often, outcomes of YPAR projects lead to action taken in the local school community, such as curricula changes and school–community projects. When youth feel empowered through these efforts, they may also feel more connected, thereby enhancing a sense of school community. In this essay and discussion article, we describe YPAR, including implications for school counselor practice.

Key Words: Youth Participatory Action Research, YPAR, student empowerment, youth activism, college access, high school counseling, middle schools, counselors, collaborative practices, voice, community, shared leadership

Introduction

School counselors are charged with preparing youth to develop college and career readiness skills (ASCA, 2012). Paving the way to college and career readiness requires systemwide support and collaboration with teachers and administrators as school counselors have ample opportunities to engage with youth through individual planning (Lapan & Harrington, 2010) and classroom guidance (Stone-Johnson, 2015). There are many valuable resources, strategies, and curricula available to develop these skills (College Board, 2010), such as through Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) programming (Bernhardt, 2013), parental support strategies (Leonard, 2013), and school–family–community partnership work (Gonzalez & Villalba, 2018). Counselors are also charged with supporting student success while engaging in empowerment-based counseling practices to meet students' unique needs and strengths (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

School counselors hold a key role in supporting youth with postsecondary transition, and the ways in which they implement counseling services influence college access outcomes for students of color (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004). For instance, Gast (2016) described how a one-size-fits-all approach, recommending four-year colleges through mass outreach, fails to meet the counseling needs of working-class and urban Black students. Further, a study of African American males' perceptions of school counseling highlights the need for "culturally relevant school counseling that supports the academic *and* personal/social development of urban African American males" (emphasis added; Owens, Simmons, Bryant, & Henfield, 2011, p. 173). School counselors can prioritize students' personal and social development in culturally relevant ways through engaging youth in Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Building from the extant literature on Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to promote positive youth development, school counselors can engage youth in YPAR as an emancipatory group research and process framework (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017) in the context of fostering college and career readiness. Drawing on the work of the educator, Paulo Freire, YPAR starts from the assumption that "liberation is a praxis," whereby a combination of action and reflection allows people to transform their world (Freire, 1970, p. 71). YPAR is a systematic research approach that promotes positive youth development through focusing on issues of interest and importance to students (Ozer, 2016). Through a research collective, YPAR is a collaborative process between the adult facilitator and students that encourages critical examination of knowledge to lead to emancipatory outcomes of change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Following Paulo Freire's (1970) vision for education, YPAR

disrupts the banking concept of education, so that students are no longer the passive recipients of knowledge or counseling services. Instead, through YPAR group processes, students develop research questions, lead investigations, and drive the decision making necessary to enact the changes they envision for themselves. Freire (1982, as cited in Torre et al., 2008) described YPAR as a decolonizing praxis where aggrieved communities or "the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world…[thereby] moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world" (p. 311).

YPAR has been widely documented as an effective tool of practice to promote youth development in the fields of education and social psychology (e.g., Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; McIntyre, 2000). Researchers have also begun to explore its application in counseling given its potential to effect change and empower marginalized youth (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017; Smith, Beck, Bernstein, & Dashtguard, 2014; Smith, Davis, & Bhowmik, 2010). Often, outcomes of YPAR projects result in local actions taken in the school community, where youth have a voice in contributing to school improvements and leading community service efforts. Through active engagement, when youth and community members' voices are prioritized, they may feel more connected and develop a positive sense of school community (Agbo, 2007; Hang, Ortega, Pergament, Bigelow, & Allen, 2017). For example, Smith et al. (2010) conducted YPAR with 10 public high school students facilitated by a team of counseling graduate students and a faculty researcher. To encourage the integration of critical pedagogy in their counseling approach, YPAR facilitators and youth participants engaged in a discussion on how and by whom knowledge is created. The group elected to focus their research on the topic of health and wellness education. As a result of the YPAR project, the school's administration approved the implementation of a health and wellness course and tasked the youth with developing a pilot curriculum in collaboration with school staff. Overall, Cook and Krueger-Henney (2017) described the use of YPAR in counseling as an emancipatory praxis of shared engagement that appreciates the positionality and perspectives of *all* youth. Although engaging youth in PAR in marginalized communities has the potential to build youth self-efficacy and promote change in their local school communities (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007), *all* youth in any context may benefit given that each young person is bound by a set of systemic power dynamics (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017).

Whether engaging in YPAR directly or indirectly, researchers have emphasized the importance of incorporating tenets of YPAR, social justice, and action research into counseling practice (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Rowell,

2006; Smith et al., 2014). Hipilito-Delgado and Lee (2007) argued that it is necessary to incorporate social justice principles as part of school counselor efforts to close opportunity gaps. Relatedly, Rowell (2006) described the relevance of action research to school counseling, suggesting that while action research has received much support and encouragement for use in school counseling practice, there have been no major initiatives to adopt action research as a standard of counseling practice in schools due to the perception that such programming may be seen as supplementary and as interfering with instruction. School counselors may also have competing administrative responsibilities and workload demands that impede them from providing comprehensive school counseling services (Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009) and from partnering with colleagues to carry out action research or YPAR initiatives (Smith et al., 2014). Therefore, to expand its application, it is important to address the challenges associated with implementing action research or YPAR that may arise due to resource limitations (Rowell, 2006), time constraints (Smith et al., 2014), and reluctance to challenging the status quo (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). Nevertheless, Smith et al. (2014) argued that YPAR aligns well with multicultural strengths-based school counseling and empowerment theory and encouraged school counselors to consider how YPAR might be a part of their repertoire of practices to promote the social and emotional development of young people and to strengthen school communities.

School counselors have unique expertise in facilitating classroom and small group interventions that focus on promoting student well-being and empowerment that transfers well to conducting YPAR (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017; Smith et al., 2014). School counselors are also charged with promoting greater equity and access to positive college and career outcomes (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In collaboration with teachers and administrators, engaging youth in YPAR offers school counselors the opportunity to promote youth development and college and career readiness. In this article, we describe the theory, practice, and applications of YPAR as a collaborative group process in which school counselors work alongside youth to collectively support college and career access. A description of YPAR curriculum implementation is presented, including implications for school counselor practice and further research.

Why YPAR? Application to College and Career Counseling

YPAR as a practice and method of research with youth as co-investigators can support youth in their pathways to postsecondary success. Smith et al. (2014) suggested the use of YPAR as an important framework to employ in counseling practice given its "potential to facilitate wellness, feelings of agency,

critical consciousness, and empowerment" (p. 9). There is also evidence for employing YPAR as a method to support vocational skill development (Tukundane & Zeelen, 2015) and college access (Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2014). More specifically, Scott et al. (2014) found that YPAR creates opportunities to build youth's critical understanding and awareness of existing structures of higher education, which, in turn, can open up possibilities for college access for marginalized youth. Similarly, YPAR with a focus on college and career readiness provides youth the opportunity to investigate and share experiences related to equity issues that may also be present within the school (Pyne, Scott, & Long, 2013; Scott et al., 2014). Through action-oriented research and in partnership with an adult ally, students may then communicate recommendations for making local improvements in their school to redress barriers related to college and career access.

Researchers have also successfully implemented YPAR with youth in schools and observed positive outcomes (Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013; McIntyre, 2000). In a review of youth engagement in participatory research, 399 studies with youth were identified; of these, 79% were conducted with middle-school aged children, and 39% were conducted with high-school aged participants (Jacquez et al., 2013). For example, McIntyre (2000) conducted YPAR with students aged 11–13 in which they reflected on feelings and experiences in their community and subsequently developed a school–community cleanup project and short-term career exploration program. McIntyre (2000) suggested that providing the opportunity for youth to speak about personal experiences and participate in developing action research to address concerns helped to inform their understandings, ultimately allowing the youth to create positive change in their local school communities and build pathways to postsecondary options.

As an emancipatory framework, YPAR may assist youth who are transitioning to adulthood through the opportunity to build their skills as leaders (Ozer, 2016). Researchers have suggested the use of YPAR in counseling as a framework to support holistic youth development through connecting academic achievement (action research investigations) to social and emotional well-being (critical consciousness discussions; Smith et al., 2014). Seeing the direct application of research to issues of personal relevance may shift a young person's perspective from viewing schoolwork as a means to an end (e.g., a grade, college acceptance, acknowledgement, avoidance of negative consequences) to one of inherent value that is rewarding and meaningful in itself. Scott et al. (2014) explored the impact of YPAR on promoting college access and found that high school participants developed more personally relevant and critical understandings of the realities and barriers that underserved youth

encounter in relation to postsecondary transition. Through this knowledge and awareness, YPAR supported youth to reconstruct college and career pathways that were responsive to contextual factors and engendered more equitable realities. Tukundane and Zeelen (2015) suggested that YPAR creates a space for students to better understand their world, speak out on social inequities, develop a better understanding of research and its purpose, and develop new visions of a more just world. Thus, it behooves school counselors to consider YPAR as a supportive and collaborative group process that can promote social justice in postsecondary educational and vocational access.

Given the positive impact that YPAR has demonstrated in supporting youth development (e.g., Ozer, 2016; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Smith et al., 2010), vocational skill development (Tukundane & Zeelen, 2015), and college access (Scott et al., 2014), exploring its connections to college and career counseling presents the opportunity to ensure that young people's positions and perspectives guide the postsecondary planning and preparation process. Through positioning youth as experts of their lives, YPAR provides all young people, including socially marginalized youth, access to and participation in a collaborative group research process that raises awareness of institutional racism and oppression (Irizarry, 2009). In this way, young people—in collaboration with adult allies (school counselors)—contradict the dominant discourse of deficiency to actively refute the social injustices that perpetuate inequity (Cahill et al., 2008).

Principles of Youth Participatory Action Research

YPAR is a group research process in which knowledge is produced through shared inquiry, inclusive discussion, and consensus decision making, and it is guided by issues of relevance that are of direct concern to youth, their communities, and the institutions that support them (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). There are several core group processes and sequencing of activities that unfold. The collaborative research process that evolves between young people and the school counselor actively promotes critical analyses of extant knowledge sources and social hierarchies inherent within institutions. Indeed, YPAR itself should not be understood as a "corrective" that fully escapes the issues of power and structural violence, but as a tool for praxis (Glass et al., 2018, p. 3). In other words, YPAR cannot liberate youth from the extant structural and sociopolitical constraints given that schools as systems tend to operate in ways that perpetuate unjust practices and outcomes. It is through acknowledging the systemic barriers and harnessing the capacity of youth and facilitators that YPAR promotes transformative change.

Group processes aim to influence local change and achieve desired goals through developing and practicing research skills, building strategic thinking skills, and engaging in intentional power sharing and perspective taking through open discussion (Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013). A key process of building awareness of power dynamics that operate at institutional levels involves openly discussing power differentials among the youth researchers and facilitator so that they may be collectively unraveled as they directly impact the outcomes of the YPAR research collective (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). This happens through two-way discussions where the school counselor creates a context for sharing thoughts and concerns openly and honestly. While fulfilling these core YPAR processes throughout the duration of the research collective, YPAR progresses following a step-by-step process that includes: (a) initial screening for participation, (b) youth-driven topic selection, (c) youth-led data collection and analyses, (d) collaborative and negotiated action planning with adults, and (e) dissemination of findings (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). During the YPAR investigation and as the research collective engages in its analyses, the counselor actively encourages youth to regularly question taken-for-granted stances. In this way, based on a critical framework of praxis, YPAR engenders the development of critical consciousness so youth become aware of dominant social structures and their effects on youths' daily lives and future trajectories (Smith et al., 2014).

YPAR Implementation

Counselors have conducted YPAR groups in school and community-based settings, at times in partnership with university researchers (Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012; Smith et al., 2010). Youth are encouraged to share leadership responsibilities with the school counselor throughout all phases of group work to align within a framework of empowerment where young people are acknowledged as experts of their lives (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). Consequently, youth collaborate with the school counselor in recruiting co-researchers, selecting the research focus, examining and discussing data analyses, and disseminating findings (Krueger-Henney, 2015).

YPAR participants may include a classroom of students or a smaller group of students who come together to engage in group work as small or large groups (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). They are open groups, not limited by individual characteristics or backgrounds, and inclusive of all youth from different ages (e.g., grades 9 to 12), genders, and cultures (see Smith et al., 2010). Although it can be helpful to restrict participation to particular populations—for example, by race and ethnicity—to engender comfort and trust, all youth are

bound by the same sociopolitical power structures that constrain some and give privilege to others. Thus, YPAR groups that are formed within and across group differences can aid in addressing the unequal power dynamics that implicate *all* individuals (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). After identifying interested participants, the school counselor can enlist participation and assent from youth and written permission from parents or guardians through providing informed consent and distributing information about YPAR and sample research topics. During initial YPAR sessions, a collective agreement is created to summarize the agreed upon ground rules related to group dialogue, limits of confidentiality, and parameters of distributing findings from investigations.

A critical lens is adopted throughout investigative activities and discussions, referred to as a *critical process of investigation* (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; see Figure 1). To start, youth collaborate with the school counselor through open dialogue to select a research topic of focus about a critical issue of importance encountered in their daily lives that embodies young people's race, class, religion, and gender-specific lived experiences (Fox & Fine, 2015). YPAR topics can focus on a variety of youth-identified issues, ranging from mental health wellness (e.g., suicide, trauma, violence, substance abuse prevention) or social–contextual factors (e.g., school discipline practices, impact of media and social media, poverty, school–family partnerships) to academics (e.g., achievement gap, preventing school failure, postsecondary transitions, college access, financing college). Although youth are charged with selecting a topic for YPAR, the school counselor can focus the range of issues to coincide with the demands of the counseling curriculum (Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015), such as addressing college access issues or preparing students for college and career readiness, so long as the issue deeply resonates with students.

YPAR implementation unfolds with dual processes that include action research and dialogic discussion. As depicted in Figure 1, YPAR includes collaborating with youth in data collection, data analyses, planning actions, dissemination of findings, and reflection on outcomes. The A, for Action, is a key component of YPAR, whereby youth work alongside the school counselor to learn and conduct research with action-oriented outcomes to improve local situations. Engaging in shared discussions provides opportunities for developing communication skills with youth and adults, challenging the status quo, and achieving individual and group-identified goals (Ozer et al., 2013). Youth also develop critical thinking and leadership skills to influence change, overcome obstacles, and reach shared goals (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010). Emphasis is placed on revealing the hidden power structures that sustain educational inequities to thereby improve conditions and reduce unjust systems.
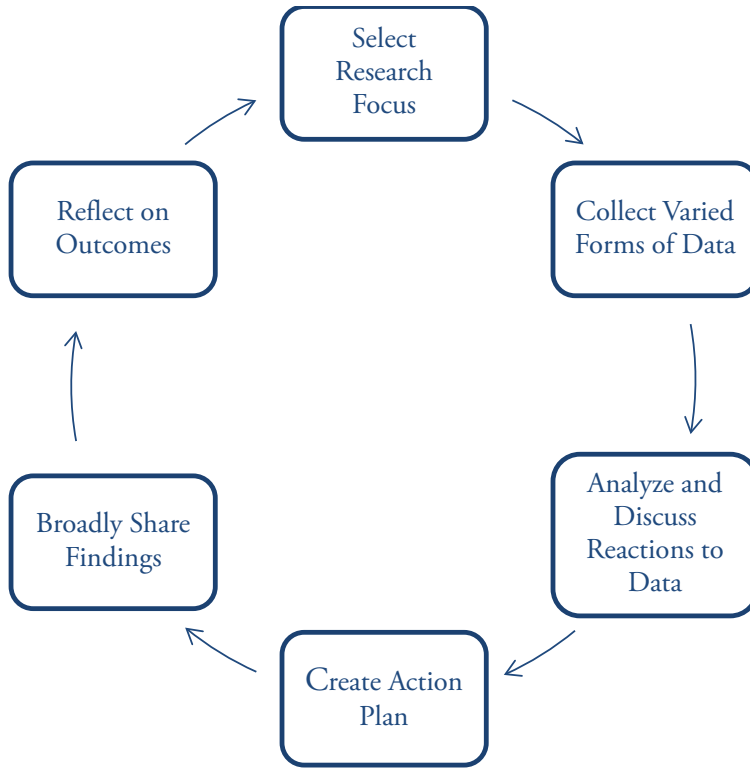
Figure 1. Youth co-lead the YPAR investigation and engage in open inquiry with the facilitator through a critical process involving topic selection, data collection, data analyses, planning actions, dissemination of findings, and reflection on outcomes.

Given the collaborative nature and power-sharing approach of YPAR research teams, school counselors would collaborate with all key school community stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and administrators (Smith et al., 2010). Cross-collaboration helps to inform all aspects of YPAR, from the selection of a research focus to implementation of research activities and dissemination of findings. When carrying out YPAR with a classroom of students, close collaboration with the teacher helps to connect and reinforce content matter covered in the classroom. For example, topics related to conducting research, survey development, data collection, and analyses could be areas that align with the academic curriculum, thereby allowing aspects of the YPAR investigation to be completed by or with the classroom teacher. Furthermore, teachers can be important allies in partnering with school counselors and students to solve problems and carry out the action plans that emerge from YPAR (Smith et al., 2014).

Additionally, YPAR implementation can be flexible to align with school scheduling requirements and constraints as well as fit within a comprehensive

school counseling program. YPAR projects may be carried out in various ways, such as in small groups during lunch, as an afterschool program, as part of a social studies curriculum, or as the focus of a school club (Smith et al., 2014). Given there are six phases to YPAR implementation (see Figure 1), ideally students would have 10–12 sessions to carry out and process YPAR investigations. Adding YPAR as one of many possible tools of school counseling curricula gives counselors the flexibility to consider its application. To aid in further building knowledge and skills related to YPAR, school counselors could refer to online resources for information and training, such as YPAR Hub (yparhub.berkeley.edu) and The Public Science Project (publicscienceproject.org), as well as consider reading how-to texts, such as *Doing Youth Participatory Action Research* by Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) and *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* edited by Cammarota and Fine (2008).

Understanding Opportunity Gaps Through Critical Pedagogy, Discussion, and Research

YPAR can be utilized to strengthen youths' understanding of the opportunity gap through critical pedagogy, open discussion, and research. Critical pedagogy, unlike many teaching methods which prescribe fixed practices, is an approach to education that is particular to the unique histories of the students and the social context in which education takes place (Giroux, 2011). While other methods attempt to convey a limited subject matter through specific strategies, critical pedagogy seeks to build participants' sense of agency and capacity for reading the world through a shared performance, which draws attention to patterns of social relations, authority, power, and how forms of knowledge are distributed and produced (O'Loughlin, 2016).

Education research has traditionally focused on the *achievement gap* between White students and students of color in the United States. Critical race scholars have critiqued this framework; however, arguing that this construction assumes Eurocentric standards of education to be accepted as the measure of learning and places responsibility for failing to *measure up* on populations that have been historically oppressed and marginalized (Krueger-Henney, 2016). In response, Hilliard (2003) argued that the *achievement gap* might be better referred to as the *opportunity to learn gap* or the *opportunity gap* (see also Gorski, 2015). The discrepancy in educational outcomes between minority and majority group students and the accompanying debate over how to discuss these results lends itself to a critical pedagogical and participatory action framework quite well. These approaches draw attention to the ways in which inequality is reproduced by institutions, such as schools and universities, through the lenses

of race, gender, and class by facilitating students' exploration of how these issues manifest in their day-to-day lives. As such, critical pedagogical approaches can be used to engage students in discussions about the structural inequalities and their effects on measured achievement (Morrell, 2009).

The research element of YPAR, conducted within a critical pedagogy and social justice framework (Cammarota & Romero, 2009), invites students to act within their social environments to initiate change. More specifically, Cammarota and Romero (2009) designed and executed a YPAR program with a focus on the opportunity gap for Latino/a students in their junior and senior years of high school by supplementing curriculum requirements with studies in critical pedagogy and critical race theory; the intention of their YPAR work supported the opportunity to "reclaim the political space that silence[d] their voices by filling in the missing element, student knowledge, for developing effective policies for young people" (p. 54). The action research component that involves interactions with local officials and community members, such as through interviews and presentation findings, can shift perspectives and create policies that promote equity and access (Ozer et al., 2013).

In another project focused on the opportunity gap, Fine and colleagues (2001; as cited in Torre et al., 2008), developed a YPAR initiative involving more than 100 students from high schools in New York and New Jersey. In their *Echoes of Brown* project, students met through research camps, held for two days at a time at universities and community centers, and were taught research skills and social justice approaches. Next, the students worked with researchers to design a survey of students' views and experiences of "race and class (in)justice in schools" (Torre et al., 2008, p. 30). They then translated and disseminated the survey, analyzed the results, and explored the policies, attitudes, and systems that produced the opportunity gap and called attention to practices that could be undertaken to challenge the "gap." Torre stressed the importance of opening up "contact zones" within YPAR, where "differently positioned youth and adults are able to experience and analyze power inequalities, together" (Torre et al., 2008, p. 23). Using YPAR projects to open up such "contact zones" invites participants to reflect on how their identities are constructed in relationships with one another and ask questions concerning histories of race, age, religion, gender, and sexuality (Torre, 2006).

School counselors are well positioned to work with youth through a critical pedagogical approach, as they are trained to work with students to process thoughts and emotions that might arise during open discussions of histories and experiences of oppression and inequality. For example, school counselors are equipped to facilitate group counseling as well as process-oriented approaches that can assist in consciousness raising. Indeed, counseling has been

influenced of late by forms of critical, community, and liberation psychology that are (like PAR) founded on the works of Paulo Freire (Goodman et al., 2004). For example, Goodman and colleagues (2004) suggested that counseling psychologists engaging in social justice-oriented work do so through (a) ongoing self-examination, (b) sharing power, (c) giving voice, (d) facilitating consciousness raising, (e) building on strengths, and (f) leaving clients the tools to work toward social change.

YPAR Implementation With a Focus on College and Career Readiness

Educational disparities persist in urban school settings, where infrastructure, technology, and academic programming tend to be underresourced (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). Consequently, opportunity gaps persist with students of color often being disadvantaged with respect to college access (Flores, 2007; McKown, 2013). Applying a focus on college and career readiness to a YPAR investigation in which students select a topic related to college access could aid in mediating some of the equity issues. Students might start by sharing their unique lived experiences about messages related to college. These narratives should then be examined alongside extant data and the extent to which they support or negate their experiences (Linville, 2014). Through the sharing of personal experiences and research reviews, youth come to appreciate each other's perspectives on the issue (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010). The type of data collected to inform their understandings may include a variety of statistical information related to the college opportunity gap, such as demographic variables, geographical distributions of gaps, constraints related to college financing, and resources available to mediate inequities. Student researchers can gather data focused on the institutional structures that sustain college access gaps as well as how local school and community members have responded (or failed to respond) to issues concerning college access. In addition, students may research what undervalued skills and practices are performed in their homes and communities (see, e.g., Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and where they might find opportunities for apprenticeship or other avenues to develop skills for technical and vocational careers (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014).

Data collection can incorporate various formats, ranging from internet searches and article reviews to surveying and interviewing key stakeholders as well as documenting school-level data. For example, students can interview fellow classmates, teachers, community members, or administrators to learn their perspectives on an issue. They could research information on Google Scholar or other accessible and relevant online databases to access information. As

data are collected, the school counselor encourages YPAR participants to engage in open dialogue to process and analyze data. Emphasis should be placed on exploring what the data mean, how they affect their postsecondary pathways, and what next steps can be taken to improve college and career access in their school. The counselor should also encourage open discussions to promote greater awareness of sociopolitical factors and systemic inequities and how they may coincide with personal and school-related barriers to college and career access. Then the students collaboratively plan local actions to raise awareness, such as creating an information flyer for distribution; holding a public event for students, teachers, administrators, and parents; and/or planning a lobbying initiative at the local city council or state level. YPAR participants are encouraged to lead the decision-making process concerning local actions, thereby giving them voice and permitting shared ownership of research outcomes (Sonn, Grossman, & Utomo, 2013). In disseminating YPAR findings, the purpose is to communicate recommendations for local improvements or changes to work toward redressing issues of college and career access. For example, inequitable access to Advanced Placement (AP) courses may be targeted for change by asking policymakers to broaden the evaluation criteria used to determine which students can take an AP course. As findings are disseminated and action items are executed, the school counselor serves as an ally to safeguard and prioritize youths' well-being, as well as working with youth to advocate for change, particularly in the face of adversity and when encountering obstacles to change.

Barriers to Implementation

While much of the extant literature on YPAR in school settings focuses on the implementation and outcomes, the settings and institutions in which these projects take place can pose significant barriers to success (Ozer et al., 2013). For example, when an ecological model was used to examine the tensions that occurred in the process of establishing an afterschool YPAR program for fifth graders, the researchers found that organizational context, social climate, and adult and youth involvement all weighed heavily on the project (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011). Their analysis further revealed three key areas of tension between the school and the YPAR initiative: challenging assumptions about youth, structural challenges, and conflicting theories of change. Obstacles may also manifest within the school and local community that restrict youth during different phases of YPAR project implementation, such as being constrained with respect to the selection of YPAR topics of focus, agreed upon action steps, and perceptions of YPAR findings (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). For example, an analysis of decision makers' responses to a year-long YPAR project pointed to a "discourse of surprise" as a constraint

on the transformative potential of YPAR (Bertrand, 2016, p. 3). More specifically, "by focusing on surprise at the expense of a thoughtful consideration of the students' research insights, some decision makers failed to respond to the transformative element of the students' presentations—the challenge to educational inequity" (Bertrand, 2016, p. 22). Bertrand (2016) suggested that the assumptions of those in power concerning students' capacity as researchers, professionalism, and motivation, reflected within this discourse, served to reinforce the status quo and constrained the transformative potential of the students' work.

The way in which YPAR invites students to lead in decision making and the critical evaluation of decisions "directly challenges common assumptions about youth, especially within the school setting where young students of color are expected to be controlled by the system rather than in control of the system" (Kohfeldt et al., 2011, p. 34). Within a system where school counselors are overburdened with large caseloads often exceeding 300 students (Bray, 2017) and where teachers are under constant pressure to improve students' scores on standardized exams under state and national policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act or Race to the Top, counselors are often burdened with unrelated administrative and clerical tasks (Moyer, 2011) while teachers are incentivized to run their classrooms in a top-down manner (Ingersoll, 2011). The way in which YPAR is more free and intentional in its efforts to engage students in decisions about not just content, but how the group might function as a whole, can create a tension within the school context. Likewise, school counselors may unwittingly communicate to students that the skills and knowledge needed to become successful adults center on achieving academic excellence and other characteristics in accordance with top-down, prescribed standards. As Corwin et al. (2004) made clear, "macro-level constraints on guidance often make the articulation of counseling extremely difficult at a micro level" (pp. 454–455). Due to the ever-increasing focus on accountability, school counselors may inadvertently define and prioritize personal success as related to academic performance rather than recognize and support holistic youth development that appreciates both academic and social/emotional foci. The extent to which school counselors and educators are actors within these institutional structures places tangible constraints on engaging youth in authentic and liberating ways. Consequently, it behooves school counselors to be cognizant of these dynamics so they are more likely to overcome such barriers to YPAR implementation. With an increasing focus on accountability and measuring outcomes, tensions exist between documenting measurable impacts at the individual level and observing whether collective and sociopolitical changes occur as a result of

YPAR projects (Lykes, Hershberg, & Brabeck, 2011). Thus, it is of key importance to understand the different ways that hierarchically imposed policies and practices can constrain school counselors in their work with youth (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017).

Furthermore, the analysis of structural challenges reveals the ways in which the motives and intentions of a YPAR project can diverge from a school's system of practice. Kohfeldt and colleagues (2011) discussed an example in which the professor implementing the project was encouraged to have the students focus only on positive aspects of their school rather than the negatives. This urging was in response to a previous project in which students documented their distaste for cafeteria lunches. This request demonstrated the ways in which organizational concerns can impose problematic limitations on students' experiences in a YPAR project. While the potential existed for students to engage in action projects to improve this aspect of their school experience, they were instead pressured to act in accordance with administrative requests out of concern that "negative things can spiral downhill" (Kohfeldt et al., 2011, p. 36). Findings from this research suggest the importance of understanding and navigating the power hierarchies present within the broader school system throughout YPAR implementation.

Similarly, researchers have documented the tensions that can arise in YPAR projects over the selection of action research topics and identification of action plans (Ozer, 2016; Ozer et al., 2013). More specifically, Ozer et al. (2013) identified a central source of tension between sustaining strategic alliances by working on similar topics over several years with different students versus giving each new group of students the power to select the issues and topics that are important to them. In an effort to meet two competing values in YPAR, generating meaningful action and allowing youth control over the topic selection and project implementation, the authors emphasized the importance of facilitating buy-in and ownership among all students across cohorts and empowering youth to engage in shared decision making through remaining stages of the YPAR project, even if they are confined to working with an issue that was generally preselected. The school counselor can collaborate with students in exploring interests and connecting personal preferences and experiences with the goals of the greater group collective.

The action and research dissemination phases of YPAR can also present significant barriers. As students come to identify injustices within the institutions and systems in which they live, the action research projects they choose to engage in may be met with political pushback (Ozer, 2016). There may also be pragmatic concerns, such as insufficient funding or access to resources (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). These barriers, while themselves fertile ground for

discussion with students, may have to be navigated by school counselors facilitating the project. Indeed, Ozer and colleagues (2013) identified the YPAR facilitator as the "navigator of social and political structures" that may act as a "buffer" between the systemic barriers and the students (p. 23).

Overall, sources of reduced empowerment vary and can stem from school policies and requirements, differing stakeholder perspectives, and misperceptions of youths' ability to execute action plans. Group facilitator values may misalign with school stakeholder values when youth are not fully trusted to implement intended plans for action (Ozer et al., 2013). It is vital for school counselors to be aware of the tensions and obstacles that may arise during YPAR implementation so that they can prepare for their occurrence and mitigate their effects.

Conclusion and Implications for Integrating YPAR in College and Career Counseling

In the current atmosphere of continued systemic and interpersonal racialized violence and movements for resistance, YPAR offers potential for addressing issues of power and community marginalization (Sandwick et al., 2018). The continued advancement of college and career counseling that explores the application of YPAR to promote educational equity and access is warranted. YPAR as an emancipatory group research praxis positions youth as leaders in guiding the learning and awareness they seek for themselves and their communities (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). As youth observe and experience concrete changes in their local community and school as a direct result of engaging in a YPAR project, they may develop a sense of agency and awareness that can transfer to addressing other issues and challenges in their lives (see, e.g., McIntyre, 2006). Integrating YPAR in college and career counseling also heightens young people's knowledge and awareness of higher education structures and pathways, thereby building capacities to seek social justice and equitable postsecondary options (Scott et al., 2014).

Engaging in YPAR group processes promotes the development of action research skills and shared leadership expertise, which are important skills in postsecondary environments (Jones & Weigel, 2014). School counselors have a unique set of skills and expertise that involve leadership, collaboration, and advocacy roles to promote systemic change and positive youth development (ASCA, 2012; Hines et al., 2017). They also hold an integral role in implementing equitable counseling practices for students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Through YPAR's explicit focus on power sharing and cooperative partnerships

among participants and school community stakeholders, its implementation directly supports school counselors in their efforts to encourage youth and schoolwide improvement. The experience of having an impact on one's community and observing changes (even minor improvements) can empower young people to persist despite the barriers of injustice and inequality that racially and socioeconomically marginalized youth experience. Skills related to critical consciousness, inclusive dialogue, and shared leadership that youth learn through YPAR can become valuable assets as they prepare for and navigate postsecondary transitions. In solidarity, school counselors can promote college and career access by joining *with* youth through engaging in YPAR projects that address issues of importance to youth and are related to breaking down barriers to postsecondary transition.

The development of critical consciousness and the organization and participation in activism which may result from YPAR participation, while opening up possibilities for systemic change and personal growth, can also place stress and an increased sense of responsibility on students. In addition, YPAR often takes place within a context that places increasing financial and personal demands on students, limiting who can participate in the projects, but also affecting the mental health and well-being of those involved. That is to say that students with limited social and economic resources, those who may have the most to gain from YPAR involvement, may find it difficult to participate in programs that require time and attention beyond school requirements, while those who do participate may be strained under these increased demands. Unfortunately, to date little research has assessed the connection between YPAR and mental health outcomes, which is likely due to the recent emergence of YPAR applications in counseling. Studies are needed to assess the connection of YPAR participation to protective factors, such as a sense of belongingness, meaning, and purpose in life, and to social supports. Despite the challenges of YPAR implementation, when students' voices are heard and subsequent improvements are made, there is the potential for supporting youth development and facilitating school community change.

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