

# Why Teachers Integrate YPAR in Their Teaching: Cultivating Youth Wellbeing, Student Voice, and Social Justice

Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas, Rosalinda Godínez, Karmel Abutaleb, Gray Cooper, Margaret Rahill, Drew Retherford, Sarah Schwab, Taylor Zepp, and Adam Voight.

## Abstract

In this article, the authors share what they learned from considering a collection of narrative reflections written by six high school educators, all co-authors, who have integrated youth participatory action research (YPAR) into their instructional practice. Taken together, the written reflections shed light on teachers' reasons not only for pursuing YPAR but also for persisting with YPAR in their particular school context. The authors found that all teachers shared a commitment to social justice, yet their individual purposes for engaging with YPAR varied. Drawing on the teachers' written reflections, the authors delve into teachers' motivations for integrating YPAR into their teaching practice in order to conceptualize teachers' reasons for facilitating YPAR in school.

## Introduction

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) supports youth in identifying, researching, and addressing pressing issues they see in their schools and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). It is a collective activity led by youth and supported by adult allies. Procedurally, YPAR involves the selection and critical examination of an issue in participants' lives, systematic inquiry to generate new knowledge about the issue, and the use of that knowledge to inform change. There is evidence that doing YPAR in school improves attendance, engagement, agency, and wellbeing of participating students (Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Taines, 2012; Voight & Velez, 2018), can improve school climate and culture (Giraldo-García & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Voight, 2015), and can make schools more equitable (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). Because of the documented benefits of YPAR, a growing number of schools have integrated YPAR into the school day (Rubin et al., 2017).

Implementing YPAR in schools, however, is not always a straightforward task. YPAR's emphasis on student decision-making, critical analysis, and structural change often conflicts with the historically top-down organization of schools (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018). Although there is a growing body of literature on students' experiences and student outcomes with school-based YPAR, we do not know much about the motivations of teachers who facilitate YPAR in school or teachers' perspectives on why they facilitate school-based YPAR. Moreover, as shared by Chikkatur (2023), we do not know the impact of YPAR on teachers, including the professional learning opportunity YPAR offers adults (Means et. al, 2021). This can partly be explained because school-based YPAR is often the initiative of an innovative

teacher who finds a creative way to integrate it into a course (Anderson, 2020), or a university-based researcher who has initiated YPAR in partnership with a teacher or school leader (Caraballo, 2017). In the YPAR literature that considers teachers, the focus is primarily on the steps teachers take to implement YPAR, the challenges they face in enacting YPAR, and/or how they navigate those challenges (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Buttimer, 2018a; Ozer et al, 2013; Call-Cummings et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2017). How teachers find ways to navigate challenges to implement YPAR is essential, but we do not have much insight into the unique backgrounds, traits, and pedagogical beliefs of teachers who choose or are selected to facilitate YPAR in school. Our aim with this conceptual article is to develop a better understanding of what compels full-time high school teachers to not only pursue but also sustain this work in schools.

Given the potential of teacher-initiated YPAR for youth wellbeing (Ozer & Douglas, 2013), we believe it is critical to deepen our understanding of YPAR teachers' motivations for this work and the various ways that current YPAR teachers conceptualize and frame this work in their own classroom contexts. Our team approaches this work with the belief that there are various attributes and pedagogical stances that could contribute to being a successful YPAR teacher.

In this conceptual paper, we present a compilation of narrative reflections written by six high school teachers in the greater Cleveland area who have found a way to integrate YPAR into their classroom or school. Whether as an elective, extracurricular activity, or an integral part of a core content class, each teacher has integrated YPAR into their own school setting. Our intent is to explore the six teachers' perspectives, as represented in their writings, to help us conceptualize YPAR teachers' motivations for facilitating YPAR. Taken together, the teachers' stories shed light on the range and variation of reasons these teachers have pursued and persisted with YPAR as part of their instructional practice. All six teachers are participating in a federally funded, multi-year project dedicated to implementing YPAR in public high schools in Ohio. Not surprisingly, we found that YPAR resonates with all of the teachers' individual social justice philosophies, which are tied to uplifting and cultivating affective relationships with their students. The narratives illuminate the connection teachers see between YPAR teaching and teaching for social justice. Our team explores the teachers' reflections to deepen our understanding of the dynamic relationship between social justice and YPAR and tease out different enactments and interpretations of social justice teaching. YPAR's principles align closely with teachers' ongoing efforts to cultivate student voice, foster social and emotional wellbeing, and increase youth civic engagement. When we looked at the individual teacher stories, the purposes were unique and wide ranging. Teachers' purposes for integrating YPAR are diverse and comprehensive, ranging from Gray's emphasis on student empowerment to Maggie's innovative approach to reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, Taylor's dedication to social-emotional growth and mindset, Drew's commitment to organizing and taking action on pertinent issues, Sarah's exploration of relationships with students and critical thinking, and Karmel's perspective on YPAR as a powerful tool for advancing social justice. Although the teachers are drawn to YPAR for distinct reasons, we noticed a consistent connection between YPAR teaching and the pursuit of social justice across the teachers' written reflections.

## Literature Review

YPAR, whether conducted in school or out of school, stands out from other modes of youth involvement due to its emphasis on collective identity, research, and effecting fundamental change by tackling underlying causes of issues (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011). YPAR guides youth through a systematic process: they identify a problem within their community, gather and scrutinize original data to deepen their understanding of the issue, and leverage this newfound knowledge to drive tangible change. Through YPAR, youth cultivate research acumen and hone presentation skills, enabling them to amplify their voices and forge essential ties within their community.

There is evidence that when YPAR has moved into school, the actions that derive from the students' YPAR projects may produce positive changes in school climate and culture, including teacher-student relationships (Giraldo-Garcia & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012), changes to school policies and practices related to discipline (Christens & Kirshner, 2011), and social norms of empathy, trust, and cooperation (Voight, 2015). And while changing settings and social structures is a central goal of YPAR, there are also documented benefits to the wellbeing of individual youth who participate in YPAR, including a greater sense of ownership over their school (Voight, 2015), more agency and power in school decision-making (Giraldo-Garcia & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012), connectedness to school and confidence as scholars (Taines, 2012), critical consciousness, empathy, trust, and cooperation (Ozer & Douglas, 2013), attendance (Voight & Velez, 2018), and higher standardized test scores and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014). Given the potential of YPAR for fostering youth civic engagement, academic and research skills, and the development of youth voice (Buckley-Marudas, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Irizarry, 2011; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Ozer & Wright 2012), a growing number of schools are integrating YPAR into the curriculum.

Despite our evidence on students who engage with YPAR, we don't know much about the outcomes for teachers who facilitate YPAR (Chikkatur, 2023). With its roots in community organizing and an emphasis on challenging inequities, YPAR does not fit neatly within the structures of most public schools, which are often hierarchical and adult-led (Irizarry, 2011). Thus, YPAR requires a unique relationship between adults and young people. Adults are co-facilitators, and teachers must become students' allies in decision-making processes, allowing students to come to their own conclusions (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). This challenges teachers to allow students a sense of "ownership" while supporting the development of students' research skills (Ozer & Wright, 2012). YPAR positions students as co-researchers and aims to center youth perspectives, yet power relations in schools can be deeply entrenched (Buttimer, 2018).

Although we understand the nature of the necessary relationship between teachers and students and that school-based YPAR requires a reconceptualization of typical teacher roles, we do not have a clear understanding of the range and variation of professional motivations of teachers who implement YPAR in their classrooms. Few studies have focused on teachers' experiences (Buttimer, 2018) or the impact on the adults involved (Chikkatur, 2023). Buttmer's study shares insights into how two teachers navigate the institutional challenges of schools to implement YPAR in core content areas. In "Equity by Design" (Gonzales & Hong, 2022), the authors identify "critical and curious" as core traits required for an

educator to facilitate YPAR. The authors also highlight two action steps: doing “identity work” and building a classroom culture that honors students as knowledgeable and engages in regular discussions around social issues. Chikkatur offers a case study of one YPAR teacher in the Midwest to show the “transformative potential of YPAR on the adult facilitators’ view of youth as experts and of themselves as agents of change.” All three studies help us think about the teacher in relation to YPAR. Still, we need more information on teachers’ perceived value of YPAR and the connections teachers see between YPAR teaching and their professional learning. As YPAR efforts expand in K-12 schools and are integrated into teacher education programs (Bertrand, 2018; Irizarry, 2011; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Rubin et al., 2017; Valenzuela, 2016), it is critical to develop a more nuanced understanding of YPAR teachers’ motivations, especially given that the impact of YPAR projects depends on adults who are willing to take young people’s ideas seriously. Drawing on teachers’ written reflections on why they facilitate school-based YPAR, this paper offers insights into why teachers engage in this work and shares some of the possible outcomes and benefits for teachers who initiate and facilitate YPAR in schools.

### **University–High School Partnerships: Situating Teachers in the Collaboration**

This article stems from an inquiry that is part of a larger longitudinal and mixed-method collaboration of the Cleveland Alliance for Education Research (CAER), which is dedicated to implementing and documenting YPAR in schools to improve student academic achievement, engagement, and school climate. CAER comprises research-practice partnerships between the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at Cleveland State University, Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), and the American Institute for Research (AIR). Our team of authors (six high school teachers and three university-based educators) has extensive experience designing, implementing, and evaluating school-based YPAR. The nine of us are part of a larger team that includes teachers, university-based researchers, high school students, and graduate students working together to design and implement YPAR in public high schools in Cleveland and across Ohio. The larger team is in the middle of a multi-year project focused on integrating YPAR in four high schools in Cleveland and another multi-year project focused on implementing YPAR in 30 districts in Ohio.

The teachers co-authoring this article work in five different public high schools with different content-area specializations (see Table 1). All teachers have more than two years of experience with YPAR. Karmel Abutaleb has taught YPAR in her Math and Computer Science classes, Gray Cooper has integrated YPAR in his English class, and Maggie Rahill has embedded YPAR in her ninth-grade English class. Drew Retherford and Taylor Zepp work in the same high school and have taught YPAR in multiple settings: their classroom, as an after-school/lunch program, and during a collaborative English and Social Studies class they taught together. Sarah Schwab has taught YPAR as part of a school-wide YPAR curricular integration for all ninth graders. All six teachers came to YPAR at different moments and for different reasons. Some, like Maggie and Karmel, learned of the opportunity to join this larger YPAR team through a professional learning meeting and took the initiative to indicate their interest. Maggie had learned about YPAR during her undergraduate work and, prior to joining the team, had been integrating YPAR into her English Language Arts class. Taylor and Drew were recommended by their principal for the project. For

Sarah, YPAR is embedded in the school's curriculum, and any full-time content-area teacher could be asked to teach YPAR. Finally, Gray was invited to engage in the school-based YPAR work after several years leading YPAR with the First Ring Leadership Institute in Northeast Ohio, which is a program sponsored by the First Ring Schools Collaborative that guides over 100 high school students through YPAR as a way to encourage student voice and making change.

**Table 1**

*Backgrounds of YPAR Teachers.*

This table offers a biographical snapshot of the YPAR teachers in this project.

| <b>Teacher</b>  | <b>YPAR Experience</b>  | <b>Content Area</b>                          | <b>School</b>                              | <b>District</b>                        |
|-----------------|---|--|--|--|
| Karmel Abutaleb | 3 years teaching YPAR in her Math and Computer Science classes.   | Math & Computer Science                      | Facing History New Tech High School        | Cleveland Metropolitan School District |
| Gray Cooper     | 2 years teaching YPAR in English and 1 year supervising a group of student leaders as they completed a YPAR project.    | English                                      | Lakewood High School                       | Lakewood City School District          |
| Maggie Rahill   | 3 years teaching YPAR in English classes.   | English                                      | John Marshall School of Engineering        | Cleveland Metropolitan School District |
| Drew Retherford | 4 years teaching YPAR in extracurricular clubs, cross-curricular government classes, and his public health course.      | US History, World History, and Public Health | Lincoln-West School of Science and Health  | Cleveland Metropolitan School District |
| Sarah Schwab    | Involved in YPAR for 6 years, teaching it for the last 2 years.   | Spanish teacher                              | Campus International High School           | Cleveland Metropolitan School District |
| Taylor Zepp     | 4 years teaching YPAR in an extracurricular club, cross-curricular government classes, and in a senior capstone course. | English                                      | Lincoln-West School of Science and Health. | Cleveland Metropolitan School District |

## HighKEY Meetings and Teacher Perspectives

Our team of authors has convened monthly for the last three academic years for what we call “HighKEY Design Team meetings.” The meeting objectives change monthly, but the overarching goal is to delve into various facets of YPAR, from lesson planning and reflection on school-level implementation to building an online resource hub and analyzing data for the larger study. Our discussions have spanned the entire YPAR process, including its phases, challenges, and the practicalities of implementing it within school contexts, including specific core content areas. Drawing on practitioner inquiry traditions during our team meetings, we’ve introduced dynamic “write-ins” that one author brought to the team from her experience with the National Writing Project. With the write-in protocol, teachers respond to thought-provoking questions, fostering reflective discussions on their experiences. Write-ins allow all of us to engage in individual writing in a collaborative setting. The write-in prompts are tailored to the group every month and are intended to be responsive to the moment. The narrative writing generated during these write-in sessions, along with collaborative reflection, formed the basis of our team’s presentation at the 2023 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, titled “Amplifying Youth Agency, Expanding Community Connections: Designing, Enacting, and Evaluating School-Based YPAR in Classrooms and Schools in Ohio.”

In preparation for this conference presentation, during one of our HighKEY meetings, each teacher contributed written responses to a series of questions, all of which prompted teachers to delve into why they chose to integrate YPAR into their teaching practices. We engaged in this writing because we were genuinely interested in understanding the teachers’ motivations and because we hoped our presentation could highlight teachers’ perspectives on why they think YPAR is valuable. As a group, we made a long list of the core ideas and issues that, generally, came to mind when we thought about what, from the lens of a teacher, we wanted to communicate about YPAR. From there, we created a set of questions. These included: “Why YPAR? Can you please share with us why you were drawn to YPAR and why you have decided to implement YPAR in your classroom/school?”; “How has engaging with and teaching YPAR changed you?”; and, “YPAR is really about teaching social justice and prioritizing social justice and social change as part of the work that happens in schools. How do you see this YPAR work as social justice work?”

Using the write-in protocol, individual teachers responded to the question that resonated with them. After some silent writing time, we came together as a group to elaborate on the ideas in conversation. We encouraged everyone to continue to think and write about their chosen topics. In their responses, teachers explored the professional and educational value they perceive in engaging with YPAR. We draw on reflective writings to help us map out the different reasons why teachers embrace and persist with YPAR in their context. For our inquiry group, it was important to create space for teachers to name, in their own words, why this work has mattered to them and why they chose to engage with YPAR.

Below, we present written versions of what teachers shared during the NCTE conference. These case examples serve multiple purposes: they are narratives of their YPAR teaching experiences, reflections on their teaching practice and process, and advice to others who want to implement YPAR in schools. As you will see, teachers’ responses included examples that emphasized the ways in which teaching YPAR

was meaningful for their own professional growth and learning, as well as ways that they believed it to be meaningful for their students. While each teacher spotlights individual examples, the overarching narrative reveals commonalities, overlaps, and connections, providing a comprehensive view of our collective experiences with YPAR. Given the aims of YPAR to support youth agency and social change, it was not surprising to find that a thread that runs through all of the teachers' perspectives relates to social justice. However, these teachers' stories offer new details related to why teachers find meaning in the work and how they feel a sense of purpose in and through their commitment to YPAR, even though YPAR implementation at schools is met with administrative pauses (like testing), expectations to follow traditional classroom management practices, and constraints as well as curricular challenges (i.e., meeting subject-based standards), and student absenteeism.

### Gray's Words

"Student demotivation is experienced as pain—for students, for us, for everyone."  
(Stuart, 2023, p. xii)

Engaging in YPAR with students certainly leads to student empowerment, but it also empowers and rejuvenates teachers. As a 15-year educator, I know fully well the feelings of burnout, exhaustion, frustration, and demoralization that plague our profession. It's soul-crushing to stand in front of unmotivated, disinterested students day after day and try to reignite their love of learning. Learning should be a joyful endeavor. Anyone who has spent time with an inquisitive, curious 5-year-old should recognize that humans have an innate will to learn. So what happens between ages 5 and 15 that so many of our students find school to be joyless and boring? Certainly, schools do not deserve all the blame for this, but we should avoid wasting time focusing on things outside our control. What happens within our classrooms is still (mostly) within our control, and YPAR is something I believe any teacher can implement in their classroom to increase student motivation, belonging, and empowerment—necessary ingredients for reigniting the will to learn.

Unfortunately, many students do not feel engaged, valued, seen, or important in school. They experience school as something being "done to them." YPAR is an antidote to this problem. Empowering students to engage with issues that are important to them breathes life and joy into a classroom. When students are given the freedom to engage in learning that is authentic and relevant to them, it results in meaningful academic joy. When students realize they have power and agency, it's incredible to see how that changes the "vibe" of the classroom. As a teacher, it's invigorating to watch students reignite their curiosity and love of learning.

The act of student empowerment is messy. To empower students, we must honestly assess and reevaluate power dynamics within our classrooms. To empower students, educators must lean into the discomfort of ceding some of their own power. Teachers must be willing to move from the role of "captain of the ship" into the role of "lighthouse" as students navigate their YPAR projects. This will likely lead to discomfort, missteps, and obstacles, but how can we expect our students to adopt a growth mindset without modeling it ourselves? Take a risk. Give students the freedom to leverage their learning into something they care about. Empowered students are engaged and motivated. In my experience, working with engaged and motivated students has brought joy back into the classroom.

## Maggie's Words

If an outsider entered my classroom during our YPAR unit workday, they would encounter a classroom that looks (most likely) very different from their notion of what a classroom looks like. They'd see students in groups, talking loudly (sometimes over one another) with their next idea. They may hear one group discussing which interview question best fits their goals, another group looking up the best beat to make their rap song to, and another group with puzzled looks on their faces as they try to make their school-wide poster designs come to life. All the while, they may see me, the classroom teacher, sitting at my desk, working on my project, contributing to various groups when I can, or simply watching my students work. Sitting at my desk, I often reflect that if I had been observed in this lesson, I might not have met all of the expectations of our evaluation process, specifically regarding classroom management. This classroom is loud and spirited, and from an outsider's point of view, it may seem out of control because, as a matter of fact, it is out of control. As the teacher, I am no longer seeking to control everything happening, and that is where YPAR becomes a revolutionary tool in education.

The notions of classroom management and control of students' behavior and learning are deeply ingrained in our modern educational policies, theories, and practices. This idea that if teachers can control students, then they can teach them is nothing new. This focus on controlling students has resulted in our school designs today. While most would say control is a necessity to facilitate learning, many fail to recognize the harmful impacts this power imbalance has on students in general, particularly students of marginalized identities. Schools where students of historically marginalized communities make up the majority of the population have long suffered from extremely disciplinarian policies. Students of color have often been most subject to the model of sitting still, listening, and producing work as quietly and quickly as possible. If this expectation is not met, students of color are at a far greater risk of extreme disciplinarian policy such as suspension or expulsion. The school then uses the power of discipline to control students' behaviors. This model loses the freedom of thought, expression, and agency of learning.

YPAR is the exact opposite. It allows students the opportunity to take their learning into their own hands. It provides space for marginalized groups to be the researchers rather than the researched. So rather than me as a native English speaker who teaches English assuming I know what is best for my ESL [English as a Second Language] students, I saw the data a group of my students collected on the treatment of ESL students within our school, from a group of students who, at one point or another, had all been ESL students. Instead of attending PDs [professional development] or sessions on anti-racist teaching presented by professionals detached from the power dynamics of being a student, specifically a student of color, we learn from the experiences of students of color through projects like "How Interpersonal Racism Impacts the Classroom." Through these projects, students can take the power of learning into their own hands. They can learn how they want, about what they want, and have the freedom and agency to do something about the issues they see within their lives daily. In these moments, we begin the revolutionary shift of power-seeking control over students to creating power and agency for our students to not only engage in the most relevant type of learning possible, but also give them the space to teach us how to better educate, understand, and work alongside them.



## Taylor's Words

When I first heard the term YPAR, I had no clue what it was. I was a fifth-year teacher adjusting to a brand-new school building during a global pandemic. I wasn't exactly eager to add anything extra to my plate, but I was interested enough to learn more. Throughout my time using the YPAR framework, I have used it in English 2 courses and an extracurricular club in my school. Though this work has only been happening for three years, it has made a significant difference in my students and myself.

One of the ways that I have seen this work benefit my students is in their social-emotional growth and mindset. If we look at the CASEL framework for SEL [social and emotional learning], it pairs perfectly with the work students do in a YPAR cycle. Through doing this work, we are asking students to work together, develop self and social awareness, and build empathy. Recently, I asked some of my students what impact they felt YPAR had on their high school journeys, and I was surprised at how many of them brought up points that fall under the lens of social-emotional learning. One of these students, who is usually quiet and sticks to themselves, said, "It made me feel like I had a voice in something. I felt smarter, and my grades went up." Another student, one who was initially hesitant to work in groups, said: "I had to work with a person I didn't like, but I still got the project done. It teaches you how to work with people." These statements really made me see the fundamental impact of this work. Not only are we empowering students, but we are helping them build the skills they need to collaborate and work with others in the larger world.

While the social-emotional benefits are significant, they do not happen overnight. The way I have seen the most positive outcomes is through the synergy between project-based learning and YPAR. When this is paired together, the SEL benefits come naturally. YPAR, at its core, is a form of project (or problem) based learning (PBL). By definition, PBL is a framework for students to develop skills and knowledge while working on a project collaboratively for an extended period of time.

In the English Language Arts classroom, I make this work through the lens of argumentative reading and writing. Over the course of a few weeks, students set their own contracts, conduct research, and make plans of action. While for the students, it may seem fun, and to an outside eye, the classroom may look chaotic, they are deeply engaged with reading and writing standards. Through sustained inquiry in a group setting, they are growing academically and socially. This work is just one piece to help them enter the world as engaged and action-minded adults. As one of my students said, "I like how it brings us together and brings new ideas. You see kids actually try to fix problems from a younger perspective. It shows you that we can really come together and fix stuff."

## Drew's Words

I became a Social Studies teacher because I want to save the world. I mean that sincerely. I want to instill a value of citizenship in kids beyond the superficial activities of voting and watching the news; I want to give students the skills and the desire to organize and take action around issues that affect them on their own behalf. I wouldn't say I succeeded in doing those things before I started YPAR. In fact, the two most impactful moments of my teaching career occurred this year, and both came from students who participated in YPAR. The first was receiving a card from Kandah at her high school graduation in which she said that she was going to commit to fighting for human freedom. The second was running into Issac, another YPAR student of ours, in the hall and having them tell me that I taught them about power and how to challenge power. These two instances were the first time in my seven years as a social studies teacher that I felt I had done my job successfully. The first-ever confirmation that I may be able to save the world, and I think YPAR has tremendously helped me have that impact on kids.

## Sarah's Words

As a Spanish teacher who strives to keep the target language at the forefront of my classroom, I sometimes struggle to get to know my students in those deeper ways. I know what sports they play or their favorite foods, but I'm always a bit envious of the deep conversations my colleagues in the English and History departments get to have. At our school, YPAR is a stand-alone class, and so when I was presented with the opportunity to teach two sections, I jumped at the opportunity. YPAR breaks down so many barriers not only between teachers and students, but also among the students themselves.

The issue identification and exploration in YPAR can be a very soul-baring process for both teacher and student, and so I find that I often have glimpses into deep fears and passions, frustrations, and fascinations, with opportunities to discover what truly drives my students because they are honest in ways they aren't or can't be when pushed by a curriculum. As a bonus, students benefit in the same way in their relationships with each other—and good relationships almost always lead to good learning. Because we are ultimately changed most by knowing people deeply, it is my students, through the YPAR experience, that have changed me.

Another very exciting part of facilitating YPAR is that it engages students in such a way that they learn *how* to think on their own. It pushes students to think critically—beyond what they see and hear in the next TikTok video. Along those lines, I think even in programs and curricula that try to be student-centered, teachers often assume that we know what our students care about or how they will care about it. However, YPAR has helped me reach that uncomfortable place where I can push them to think critically while they maintain their voice and their moral core.

When schools allow students to voice concerns, I think we often push directly to take action. The YPAR cycle asks students to use their own lived experiences, but then to carry out real and original research, think critically about it, and only then take action. It's those two middle parts of the cycle that I think are so often overlooked and yet lead to the best kind of action. One group of students last year had identified police brutality as their issue and were very fired up to "get all the cops fired." However, after going through the process of surveying their community members and doing some observing of the police in their community, they decided, instead, to focus on finding ways to repair and enhance the relationship the police have with the community. On those days when kids aren't feeling motivated or are getting frustrated, I remind them that the research they do is one-of-a-kind—they are truly the only ones asking those questions and talking with those people. Once they have experienced YPAR, they will have a cycle that they can return to over and over again in their life to be change-makers in their communities.

## Karmel's Words

*"I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole."* Malcolm X

In an era marked by democracy, freedom, and social justice, it's reasonable to expect a prevalence of unbiased perspectives. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Some people are still fighting to this day to be seen as human beings and treated equally. YPAR, as a revolutionary and impartial instrument, eradicates bias from the heart while guiding the mind with evidence-driven data.

By granting students the opportunity to investigate current social justice issues at school, in the community, and around the world through YPAR, we are preparing tomorrow's productive citizens in the pursuit of a more equitable society. Teachers plan by providing unbiased resources, facilitating content learning, teaching data analysis techniques, supporting discourse, and promoting critical thinking to find resolutions. On the other hand, students unbiasedly research, explore, analyze, interpret, discuss, discover, recommend, and resolve. The power shifting and power-sharing prepare students to grow where unity and equality triumph over any differences. With YPAR, the marginalized can confront oppression by sharing a data driven narrative with the world.

Over the last two years, a recurring theme in my classes' YPAR projects has been enhancing the school experience for students. The students have candidly expressed their concerns, providing me with valuable insights into the challenges they face. Their voices illuminated the school's deficiencies, such as a lack of motivation, engagement, and inspiration. The absence of clubs, afterschool programs, and sports further contributed to a disconnect, leaving students without a sense of belonging or school spirit.

In response to these identified needs, I undertook a Computer Science training, successfully passing the state exam. This paved the way for a groundbreaking initiative: the introduction of a Computer Science elective course at the school. This course not only addressed students' desire for more enjoyable electives but also offered them the opportunity to earn a Tech Seal and college credit. The impact of YPAR extended beyond academic offerings. The school's staff organized motivational trips based on students' recommendations to foster achievement encouragement. YPAR became a catalyst for radical improvements, particularly benefiting students from minority backgrounds with low socioeconomic status. This transformative change represents a significant achievement in social justice.

In the current academic year, the central theme of YPAR projects revolves around promoting social justice and equity, both within the school and on a global scale. While we often focus on instilling a sense of citizenship in our students within their communities, it is crucial not to overlook our responsibilities to the broader world. Quoting the words of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, who emphasized that "A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," we recognize the interconnectedness of justice. As someone of Palestinian descent with a lineage marked by refugees escaping genocides since 1948, my empathy extends to all historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples and people of color. In this context, I foresee the transformative power of YPAR in helping shape my students, instilling in them the courage to seek truth, embrace fair perspectives, and advocate for the liberation of oppressed groups. The goal is not merely the absence of tension, but the promotion of peace through disseminating justice, and YPAR stands as the key to achieving this noble aspiration.

## Discussion

Taken together, the collection of teachers' perspectives as facilitators of YPAR in their classrooms provides insights into their motivations for teaching YPAR as part of their teaching practice. The narrative reflections also shed light on teachers' reasons for committing to this work. We found that the open-ended nature of this reflective writing provided an opportunity for all six teachers to elaborate with some detail on their personal and professional commitment to YPAR. Teachers had the freedom and flexibility to focus on the aspects of YPAR that were meaningful to them. Keeping in mind that our aim in this article is not to analyze teachers' writing as empirical data but, rather, to explore the writings as case examples

of why teachers engage and persist with YPAR, we offer the following discussion around some of the themes across these case examples. Given our intent to understand the range of teachers' motivations for and persistence with YPAR, we pay attention to the synergies and differences across teachers' stories.

We found that the focus areas across teachers' written reflections are diverse and comprehensive, ranging from Gray's emphasis on student empowerment to Maggie's innovative approach to reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, Taylor's dedication to social-emotional growth and mindset, Drew's commitment to organizing and taking action on pertinent issues, Sarah's exploration of relationships with students and critical thinking, and Karmel's perspective on YPAR as a powerful tool for advancing social justice. Although focal areas overlap, they are unique to each teacher.

Gray, for example, elaborates on how many of his students who do not feel engaged, valued, seen, or important in school are empowered by engaging with issues that are important to them, bringing "life and joy into a classroom." We noticed that the perceived value of YPAR for Gray as a teacher is YPAR's capacity to spark students' interest in school. His story illuminates an example of a teacher who is committed to embedding YPAR in their instructional practice because it invites young people, especially youth who may feel disconnected from school, into meaningful and challenging academic work. For Gray, this work resonates with him because of the learning environment that it fosters for *all* students.

Maggie's story offers another perspective on the perceived value of YPAR for teachers. Maggie describes how YPAR allows for reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, changing a classroom from being "managed" and students from being "controlled." For Maggie, a teacher who sees collaboration and respect as critical elements of her classroom, the core tenets of YPAR are well-aligned with her pedagogical approach. YPAR's emphasis on teachers and students as allies in the learning process supports Maggie's interest in positioning students as knowledgeable generators and challenging the typical scripts for teachers and students. In Maggie's story, we see a telling case of a teacher who is motivated to integrate YPAR because of the priority YPAR places on positionality and power. Maggie persists with YPAR, given the synergy with her pedagogical beliefs. In Taylor's case we see a similar synergy between YPAR and her pedagogical commitments, but the focal points for Taylor are different. Taylor's story shows how her students benefit from YPAR socially and emotionally. As such, students feel like they have a voice, improve academically, and develop a sense of togetherness. YPAR matters to Taylor because of the benefits and outcomes she observes in her students. YPAR has provided a pathway and a framework for Taylor to address the increasing emphasis on students' social and emotional learning.

Drew's story offers another case example of why YPAR matters to teachers. Drew shares how his former students expressed his influence in becoming students who challenged power and took action for justice. For Drew, the value of integrating YPAR is tied to the professional joy and pride he feels when his students recognize and act on their ability to make social change as young people. In Sarah's example, we see that she values YPAR because of the priority YPAR places on building relationships with students. Sarah, a veteran Spanish teacher, illustrates how the nature and focus of YPAR naturally allow teachers to get to know students in different ways than in non-YPAR classes. Sarah sheds light on the significance and the value for teachers to be able to relate to and come to know their students in and through their research, especially through the kinds of problems they care about and how they think about the

problems. Finally, Karmel's story illustrates how, through YPAR, students become leaders who focus on social justice and who can make tangible changes in their school community. For Karmel, YPAR matters to her personally and professionally because YPAR provides her with the framework and the tools to teach math for social justice. In her case, we see how integrating YPAR has also supported her, in collaboration with her students, not only to navigate but also to change some of the problems she faced at the school.

These identified themes encapsulate the range and variation in teachers' commitment to integrating and persisting with YPAR in school-based contexts. As we elaborate, teachers' purposes for engaging with YPAR are unique and varied. Across all of the cases, however, we found a commonality. All of the perspectives shared by our group of teachers illustrate teachers' intent to foster social justice through education. This teacher-driven commitment finds tangible expression through the implementation of YPAR. Each teacher, in their distinctive approach, is dedicated to instilling in students leadership qualities, empowering them to articulate and address societal injustices. Undergirding the teachers' efforts and perseverance in enacting YPAR is a commitment to young people's social and emotional wellbeing, both now and in the future. They know their students' stark realities, including poverty and structural inequalities. They are dedicated to effecting tangible change in students' lives, as guided by students. Karmel, Gray, Maggie, Drew, Sarah, and Taylor are actualizing their intentions through their YPAR pedagogies, everyday actions, and interactions as they converse about pressing issues affecting students' lives. The overarching aim is to cultivate a sense of agency within students, fostering the understanding that they possess the capacity to effect positive change (through critical discussion, advocacy, and action research) within their communities and the broader society.

These educators recognize the importance of acknowledging and addressing the power dynamics embedded in the traditional educational system. For example, they diligently work hard to deconstruct traditional teacher-student roles and relationships, forging new dynamics and prioritizing open and candid dialogues. They have open dialogues, allowing students to articulate their concerns and perspectives on various social and school-based issues. And they do so in a way that works towards creating an atmosphere where students feel heard, respected, and valued. Furthermore, they establish genuine connections with their students by breaking down hierarchical barriers. These connections create an environment where honest conversations can flourish, creating meaningful relationships that are heartfelt. It is evident from the teachers' narratives that this work is not easy or without challenge. Gray's experience highlights this as he first implemented YPAR outside of the school day with a group of selected students because they had been identified as leaders. Now, engaging YPAR as a teacher in the classroom, he recognized that there is more legwork on the front end to set all kids up to see themselves as leaders and to build and manage relationships between students and administrators.

Teachers' efforts for social justice are not perfect and happen amid challenges. Yet, they find avenues and spaces for YPAR to unfold in various contexts (during after-school clubs, lunch, and in multiple courses they teach). They have found that teaching YPAR also involves explicitly addressing school standards, navigating administrative relationships, re-formatting curriculum objectives, and balancing the dynamic process of designing and implementing studies co-guided by students and led by students. It's

a delicate balancing act that requires educators to play multiple roles—educators, participants, researchers, collaborators, peers, and advocates. In this intricate dance, teachers in YPAR must discern when to steer the ship, bring students back to focus, step back, and recognize when students have taken the lead and completed their part of the journey. This builds on Chikkatur’s (2023) idea that school-based YPAR requires “a willingness of adults to let themselves be transformed through deep listening and letting go of the idea of control” (p. 10). This collaborative and nuanced approach ensures that YPAR is a shared venture where students actively contribute to shaping the research agenda and steering the course of inquiry. The teachers’ purposes offer important ideas for thinking about how and why teachers might be able to work with students and, importantly, not only honor their ideas and action steps as legitimate and credible but help them connect with key stakeholders and take action, especially when the action steps may challenge the decisions or policies of building or district leaders.

## Ongoing Collaborative Inquiry

Our collaborative inquiry into teachers’ motivations for doing this YPAR work in schools and understanding what it means for teaching, learning, and young people’s wellbeing is ongoing. In this section we share what we learned when we paused to look at teachers’ motivations as a collective because this shared look is important to our work as an inquiry group. Although the majority of this work has focused on our reflection on the individual writings of the six YPAR teachers, it is also important to understand that we are doing this as part of a larger community of teachers across the region. In this way, we spent time thinking about how we might represent our work as a collective. We opted for a visual collage given its capacity to allow us to work together on one item.

Given our belief in the potential of arts-based inquiry to connect our motivations for engaging YPAR in school, we wanted to engage in collaborative creative composing to offer one visual representation of what it means to us—individually and collectively—to engage with YPAR in schools. Drawing on the shared composing tools available in Canva, our team created a collage (see Figure 1) to visually represent the ideas from the written narratives that surfaced as most salient to us. Similar to the teachers’ written reflections, this work was completed during a HighKEY Design Team meeting, although this meeting was virtual. From behind our individual screens on a synchronous Zoom meeting, we composed this collage in response to the following prompt: 1) What sense do you make of our team’s collection of teachers’ narratives? Like DeHart’s (2022) “poetic encounters” approach, we reflected on the narratives to artfully and playfully capture our individual thoughts in the shared space. Slowly, we juxtaposed words and images on the blank template to visually represent the themes we noticed within and across the collection of teachers’ narratives.

Similar to the explanation by Doerr-Stevens et al. (2023), the artistic inquiry and creativity embedded in this composing process created room for imagination and professional agency. The result was a collage combining images, words, and phrases highlighting agency, vision, and justice. There are images that reflect a spirit of collaboration and teamwork and represent concepts such as equity, advocacy, and justice. The collage also includes images of graphs and charts, reflecting the centrality of research, and pictures of megaphones, speakers, and protest marches that reflect students sharing, raising, and

amplifying their voices. Building on the written narratives, this collaborative collage showcases the interrelationship between YPAR and social justice, particularly regarding teachers' commitments to YPAR. This collaborative composition offers our team's perspective on how the teachers' individual motivations and purposes for integrating YPAR are tied to their commitment to students.



Fig. 1: Collaborative collage. Our team created the collage using shared composing tools to visually represent teachers' motivations for implementing YPAR in school and the value teachers see in YPAR for student learning and wellbeing.

## Closing Thoughts

This collection of teachers' perspectives offers six detailed cases on why YPAR matters to them. YPAR teachers can come to the YPAR work for different reasons, and it will fuel different aspects of their professional goals and identities. The examples are helping our team map out why teachers are driven to enact and sustain YPAR as part of their teaching practice. The detailed accounts of why YPAR matters to these teachers and the value of pursuing YPAR point us toward understanding the potential professional learning and outcomes for teachers. We hope this work will inform school leaders and teacher educators who are promoting YPAR in schools and districts. We also hope that sharing what we learned from inquiring into teachers' motivations for YPAR opens a larger and much-needed conversation around why teachers commit to this work in their classroom, what the benefits, according to teachers, are for those who commit to this activist-oriented work, and what value current YPAR teachers think it has for young people.

By sharing examples of multiple teachers currently enacting YPAR in different schools and different content areas, we hope to extend existing conceptualizations of school-based YPAR teachers. Our emergent conceptualization of teachers' motivations for facilitating YPAR is important for several reasons. First, given the reciprocal nature of YPAR work, and the necessity for teachers and students to work together, the new insight on teachers' motivations helps us tease out more information about why teachers would be willing to engage in this work. This will be helpful in thinking about who is a good candidate for teaching YPAR in schools and, especially in encouraging candidates who may not be the most obvious choice. We found that our teachers really do have a wide variety of reasons for being drawn into this work, and that it serves them in different professional ways. Second, it is becoming clear that we need to know more about teachers' motivations because oftentimes the success of a YPAR project hinges on how teachers make room for young people as decision-makers and leaders. This inquiry helped our team realize how critical it is for teachers to see the ways in which YPAR enhances and develops their own professional and personal learning and identity. All the YPAR facilitators are motivated by the student outcomes associated with YPAR, but this inquiry illustrates how it shapes, drives, and enhances their professional commitments. We believe this is critical for teachers' and students' wellbeing. Finally, this emergent conceptualization of YPAR teacher motivations is critical to the conversation around implementing YPAR in school because the trajectory and success of students' projects and in turn, student outcomes, depend on working with adults who are willing to listen to young people.

## Notes

All of the authors are part of the YPAR Teacher Inquiry Group.



## References

- Anderson, A. J. (2020). A qualitative systematic review of youth participatory action research implementation in U.S. high schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 65*, 242–257.
- Bertrand, M. (2018). Youth participatory action research and possibilities for students of color in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly: EAQ, 54*(3), 366–395.
- Brion-Meisels, G., & Alter, Z. (2018). The quandary of youth participatory action research in school settings: A framework for reflecting on the factors that influence purpose and process. *Harvard Educational Review, 88*(4), 429–454.
- Buckley-Marudas, M.F. (October 2018). Amplifying voice, facilitating agency: Engaging youth participatory action research in an urban, public high school. *English Leadership Quarterly, 41*(2).
- Buttimer, C. J. (2018). The challenges and possibilities of youth participatory action research for teachers and students in public school classrooms. *Berkeley Review of Education, 8*(1), 39–81. <https://doi.org/10.5070/B88133830>
- Buttimer, C. J. (2018). *What happens when YPAR moves into the classroom? A study of teachers' understanding of the epistemology of Youth Participatory Action Research*. [Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.]
- Cabrera, N. L., Milem, J. F., Jaquette, O., & Marx, R. W. (2014). Missing the (student achievement) forest for all the (political) trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(6), 1084–1118. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214553705>
- Call-Cummings, M., Sheanain, U.N., & Buttimer, C. (2020) School-based YPAR: negotiating productive tensions of participation and possibility. *Educational Action Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1776136>
- Cammarota, J. & Fine, M. Eds. (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. Routledge.
- Caraballo, L., Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., Morrell, E., & Meiners, E. R. (2017). YPAR and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking Education Research. *Review of Research in Education, 311*.
- Chikkatur, A. (2023). Being in “Their house”: Impact of youth participatory action research on adult learning at a rural high school. *Thresholds, 46*(3), 387–398.
- Christens B.D., Kirshner B. (2011). Taking stock of youth organizing: an interdisciplinary perspective. *New Directions for Child Adolescent Development, 2011*(134), 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.309>
- Diemer, M. A., Voight, A. M., & Mark, C. (2011). Youth development in traditional and transformational service-learning programs. In T. Stewart & N. Webster (Eds.), *Problematizing service-learning: Critical reflections for development and action* (pp. 155–173). IAP Information Age Publishing.
- DeHart, J. D. (2022). Poetic and visual explorations in pandemic teaching. *LEARNing Landscapes, 15*(1), 129–140. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v15i1.1064>
- Doerr-Stevens, C., Layden, T., & Goss, S. (2023). Collaboration beyond words: Using poetic collage to cultivate community with students and colleagues. *LEARNing Landscapes, 16*(1), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v16i1.1094>

Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. Peter Lang Inc.

Giraldo-García, R. & Galletta, A. (2015). "What happened to our sense of justice?": Tracing agency and critical engagement in a youth participatory action research project. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching and Research*, 11, 91–98.

González, T., & Hong, J. (2022). *YPAR for the classroom: A guide for the critical and curious educator. Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Irizarry, J. (2011). Buscando la libertad: Latino students in search of freedom in school. *Democracy in Education*, 19, 1–10.

Means, D., Blackmon, S., Drake, E., Lawrence, P., Jackson, A., Strickland, A., & Willis, J. (2021). We have something to say: Youth participatory action research as a promising practice to address problems of practice in rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 41(3), 43–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i3.1074>

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.

Ozer, E. J., & Douglas, L. (2013). The impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(1–2), 66–75.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9546-2>

Ozer, E. J., & Wright, D. (2012). Beyond school spirit: The effects of youth-led participatory action research in two urban high schools. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 22(2), 267–283.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00780.x>

Ozer, E. J., Newlan, S., Douglas, L., & Hubbard, E. (2013). "Bounded" empowerment: Analyzing tensions in the practice of youth-led participatory research in urban public schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 52(1/2), 13–26. <https://proxy.ulib.csuohio.edu:2096/10.1007/s10464-013-9573-7>

Rubin, B. C., Ayala, J., & Zaal, M. (2017). Authenticity, aims and authority: Navigating youth participatory action research in the classroom. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 47(2), 175–194.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2017.1298967>

Stuart, D. (2023). *The will to learn: Cultivating student motivation without losing your own*. Corwin Teaching Essentials. Sage Publications.

Taines, C. (2012). Intervening in alienation: The outcomes for urban youth of participating in school activism. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(1), 53–86.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211411079>

Valenzuela, A., Ed. (2016). *Growing critically conscious teachers: A social justice curriculum for educators of Latino/a youth*. Teachers College Press.

Voight, A. (2015). Student voice for school-climate improvement: A case study of an urban middle school. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 25(4), 310–326.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2216>

Voight, A., & Velez, V. (2018). Youth participatory action research in the high school curriculum: Education outcomes for student participants in a district-wide initiative. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 11(3), 433–451.



**Mary Frances (Molly) Buckley-Marudas**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Levin College of Public Affairs & Education at Cleveland State University. Her research interests include youth-led research, adolescent literacies, digital literacy, and English education.



**Rosalinda Godínez**, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University. She received her PhD in Social and Cultural Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Washington State University. As an education ethnographer, Rosalinda is committed to establishing collaborative and action-based partnerships that document and honor people's everyday life and community, movement, and education practices.



**Karmel Abutaleb** hails from Palestine but was born and raised in Jordan. She is a secondary Math educator at Natividad Pagan International Newcomers Academy in Cleveland, Ohio. Kamel has implemented YPAR in her classes for the past three years with a focus on social justice. Hoping for a more equitable world for all humanity, she helps the students find their voices and challenge the system through research and actions. She believes in YPAR as an invaluable tool to pursue her research interests: social justice in education, student engagement and motivation, and school attendance and its impact on performance.



**Gray Cooper** is a high school English teacher at Lakewood High School in Lakewood, Ohio. His research interests include student motivation, teacher development, authentic learning, and educational leadership.



**Margaret (Maggie) Rahill** teaches ninth-grade English at John Marshall School of Engineering in Cleveland, Ohio. She is deeply interested in understanding how YPAR can serve as a tool to enhance student agency, teacher practices, school and community climate, and restorative practices.



**Drew Retherford** is a secondary Social Studies teacher at Lincoln-West School of Science and Health in Cleveland, Ohio. He is deeply committed to serving the people of Cleveland through ensuring their children receive a high-quality public education. He has implemented YPAR for the past four years in both classroom and student club settings. He has a background in labor and anti-war organizing and sees YPAR as a method of empowering students and passing organizing skills on to younger generations.



**Sarah Schwab** teaches World Languages (Spanish) and serves as an International Baccalaureate Coordinator at Campus International High School in Cleveland, Ohio. Her research interests include school culture, world language instruction, and, of course, YPAR.



**Taylor Zepp** is a secondary English teacher at Lincoln-West School of Science and Health in Cleveland, Ohio. Her research interests include project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and YPAR as a vehicle for student empowerment.



**Adam Voight**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Levin College of Public Affairs & Education at Cleveland State University. His research interests include school climate, youth civic engagement, and urban education.