# Partnering for Youth Empowerment in Urban Middle Schools: An Autoethnography Examining the Synergies and Tensions between Positive Youth Development and Youth Participatory Action Research

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## Abstract

Youth empowerment approaches in school settings hold the possibility of increasing positive outcomes for youth and the school community. One method of youth empowerment is Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). As schools are bureaucracies that historically have not facilitated youth participation in significant decision-making, most school-based youth empowerment projects will include outside facilitators to support these activities. This autoethnography analyzes work with school-based adult leaders to promote the youth's ability to actualize a YPAR project. The critical roles of YPAR facilitators are presented for enhancing outcomes for youth, adults, and school systems when engaging in youth empowerment activities in public schools.

Historically and currently, institutional structures and community norms that limit youth and adult collaboration on important issues are extremely apparent in the public school system (Dewey, 1916; Sarason, 2003a; Sarason, 2003b). Youth advocates have stated, "Like many disenfranchised groups, young people often suffer from misinformed decisions and policies that are made without their input" (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003, p. 37). Some youth advocates consider young people to be one of the most powerless groups in our society: "Similar to the ways that Jim Crow laws limited democratic participation for African Americans, youth today are subjected to hostile laws and unfair policies but have no rights or power to change them" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006, p. xv).

In contrast, the San Francisco Juvenile Justice System Youth Evaluation and Research Report (1997) argues that organizations should treat young people as agents of change, not just as targets of service. Mounting evidence has suggested that young people who

take active roles in organizations and communities have fewer problems, are better skilled, and are lifelong, engaged citizens (Irby, Pittman & Ferber, 2001). Civic activism has been shown to be a powerful approach for reaching youth who are often left behind through conventional means, such as school, sports, and arts (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003). Community-based youth development organizations, such as 4-H, have been leaders in promoting youth empowerment through adult-youth partnerships in decision-making (Huebner, 1998; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008).

In the school setting, youth empowerment practices are less well developed, but two related approaches are emerging. One is youth participatory action research: students collect, analyze, and disseminate data to work toward school (or community) improvements (Ozer, Cantor, Cruz, Fox, Hubbard, & Moret, 2008). The other, service-learning, is more established in schools: students identify and address a school or community need that is linked to their academic curricula (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008). In practice, the two can be indistinguishable. However, service-learning is more likely to be embedded in a course; and therefore, finite, facilitated by a teacher, and culminating in service to another group or entity. Youth participatory action research is more likely to be an extracurricular activity without a predetermined end date, often facilitated by an outsider, and the culminating activity is to foster community change that is pertinent to the young people's lives. In both models, student voice, student meaning-making, and systematic inquiry are emphasized (Fletcher, 2005).

However, in most public schools, neither service-learning nor youth participatory action research have been institutionalized. The following is a discussion of positive youth development which is described as an holistic model for preparing young people for college, work, and life, and youth participatory action research;  a strategy for fostering youth development through building leadership skills, empowerment, and youth-adult partnerships, as they can inform work in schools.

## Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) is grounded in ecological systems theory and adolescent development, resiliency, education, and prevention research (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). PYD is designed to include all youth, not just youth deemed "at-risk," and to fully prepare them for life. Thus, PYD aims to proactively

address the five "C's:" Competence (in academic, social, emotional, and vocational development), Confidence (in one's identity and future), Connection (to self and others), Character (associated with positive values, integrity, and moral development), and Caring and Compassion (empathy and identification with others) (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). PYD advocates argue for providing youth with various protective factors, such as a strong relationship with a caring adult, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992). PYD experts acknowledge the developmental struggles of young people and that a supportive emotional environment cultivates cognitive and academic growth.

Public education is a youth development activity. However, intense debate abounds as to the function of public schools: Should schools address all five "C's" or limit their focus to the development of Competence? Currently, with increased pressures for concentration on standardized testing and accountability, public schools overwhelmingly emphasize academic competence, neglecting the other aspects of Competence as well as the other four "C's." Community-based and school-based organizations have stepped up to fill some of these unmet and critical areas of youth development, particularly in low-income communities, where opportunities and supports systems may not be as accessible as in other communities.

Working from a youth empowerment model, some authors (e.g., Hughes & Curnan, 2000; Pittman, 2000) have argued that PYD programs should also strive to promote a sixth "C," Contribution. Contribution is defined as supporting youth in developing agency, the feeling that one is able to make a difference in one's environment. This perspective values youth as resources and change makers, as opposed to problems to solve, and capitalizes on the fact that all people learn best when they are meaningfully engaged and have real choice in the activities in which they are involved (Pittman, et al., 2003). However, including the development of youth agency moves the PYD framework from an individual strengths-building model to a political, action-oriented conceptualization that many PYD programs and youth-serving institutions have been unwilling or unable to accommodate. Benson and colleagues argue that "PYD is as much about the transformation of adults and systems as it is about working directly with young people to make change happen" (2006, p. 4).

Comprehensive, systems-challenging PYD programs are particularly difficult to implement in government agencies and bureaucracies such as public schools, because they do not possess the flexibility and local control necessary to promote agency. The result is that schools commonly limit the choices available to youth, which compromises empowerment and development opportunities (Amodeo & Collins, 2007).

## Youth Participatory Action Research

Building young people's research capacities is an effective PYD strategy (Sabo, 2003), as it addresses each of the aforementioned "C's" of PYD (Checkoway, Dobbie, & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Goodyear & Checkoway, 2003; Lau, Netherland, & Haywood, 2003; London, et al., 2003; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001; Pittman, et al., 2003). However, until recently, participatory research literature has largely overlooked children and youth as researchers (Flores, 2008). Participatory action research (PAR) is a systematic investigation conducted by professional researchers with the full collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied for the purposes of effecting social change that is meaningful to those affected (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Minkler, 2000). PAR targets "communities that have traditionally been oppressed or marginalized and through a process of democratic dialogue and action provides members of those communities with the opportunity to identify issues of concern to them, gather relevant information, and explore and implement possible solutions" (Brydon-Miller, 2002, p. x) to increase the well-being of the community and the individuals within the community. Although youth have previously played a limited role in participatory research or evaluation studies (Flores, 2008), they have unique perspectives and contributions to bring. Similar to the effects of engaging marginalized adults in PAR, ecological validity increases when researchers view and engage youth as the greatest source of knowledge about youth (e.g., London, 2007; Matysik, 2000; Sabo, 2003; Shaw, 1996; Wallerstein, 1992).

The purpose of engaging youth in PAR is to improve research, strengthen young people's social development, increase youth voice, and create community change (Checkoway, et al., 2003). Youth PAR (YPAR) "empowers young people by providing them with the tools to develop and validate knowledge and to direct the development of the programs and policies designed to serve their needs" (London, et al., 2003, p, 38). Thus, YPAR is ideal for building self-determination skills and agency (Burstein, Bryan, & Chao, 2005). YPAR addresses the youth's environment and how they can actively

work to change it (Pittman, et al., 2003). From this perspective, all youth are seen as able citizens with rights to participate, express themselves, and engage in efforts to create socially just communities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001). YPAR projects have largely been conducted through community-based organizations that support participatory and empowering practices, but some YPAR projects have occurred in schools (e.g., Ozer et al, 2008).

## Partnering for Youth Participatory Action Research in Schools

YPAR in schools holds the potential to provide a vehicle for youth voice in decision-making in an environment that is extremely significant in their development. The challenges of working for empowerment and change within a school bureaucracy should not preclude YPAR facilitators from engaging with youth in the setting where virtually all youth are present and spend the majority of their time. Public schools hold great potential for reaching many disenfranchised youth (Maton, 2008). With the right alignment of vision and attention to the power dynamics within the triadic relationship between the school staff, youth, and YPAR facilitators, YPAR holds the potential to be an effective tool for fostering authentic student involvement and generating meaningful school reform.

In any collaboration, discussions of visions, values, norms, and policies are extremely important (Chavez, Duran, Baker, Avila, & Wallerstein, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Williams, Labonte, Randall, and Muhajarine, 2005). This is especially true when embarking on YPAR, as sharing decision-making power with youth may feel threatening or inconceivable to school personnel. Additionally, outside YPAR facilitators may have limited understanding of public schools' power structures and decision-making procedures.

Maton (2008) characterizes a "group-based belief system" as critical to establishing an empowering environment. This refers to the ideology or values integral to the culture of the group and the individuals' behaviors. It "encompasses a view of setting members [partners], including their needs and potential, and how they can work within the setting to achieve personal and setting goals" (Maton, 2008, p. 8). Although a shared vision is a necessary prerequisite to embarking on a partnership, it does not guarantee a shared framework. Frameworks and assumptions are based on the individual's life experiences, societal roles, and worldview and form the backdrop from which the individual's vision is based. A comprehensive group-based belief system is based on a

shared vision and includes the strategies for actualizing that vision. A shared framework and understanding of each others' assumptions maintains the commitment to the shared goals and allows each party to hold one another accountable when the inevitable problems and disagreements surface.

## Our YPAR Vision

Our vision going into this project was to promote social change: individual change within the youth, systemic change within the community center and school that capitalized on the youth's empowerment, and change within ourselves as we increased our understanding of how we could promote equity. In order to achieve these goals, we knew we had multiple roles. Our most comfortable role was to engage youth in research about their school's parent involvement policies and programs. We adapted Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Community's *Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL)* handbook (2001) to meet the needs of our project, topic, and context. With our experience working with young people, our comfort with research and PAR, and the resources of *YELL* and others, we believed that we could successfully facilitate a YPAR project. What we felt less confident about was our role as adults outside the community and school negotiating with the adults within the community and school and how this would affect the students' credibility and power in participating in the decision-making processes of these environments.

Youth In Focus (2002) outlined the organizational characteristics necessary to best support YPAR. These PYD practices – holding a strengths-based perspective; having strong and accessible communication between and among staff, youth, and the community; seeing diversity as an asset; engaging youth as leaders and partners in decision-making; and possessing organizational stability – are rarely seen in public schools, particularly public schools that are under extreme pressure for improvement, such as the one we were working with on increasing parent involvement. However, if researchers only conduct YPAR within optimal PYD organizations, then youth advocates will not be providing PYD opportunities to all youth and will leave out youth and organizations that could very possibly benefit from the most from these opportunities. We knew this task would be challenging as personal, organizational, and systems changes are difficult to achieve and sustain. Thus, we assumed that our role was to demonstrate and advocate that YPAR is an effective strategy and a worthwhile

tool for youth development that would simultaneously support the school's improvement goals.

Our framework rested largely in Strand and colleagues' (2003) guiding principles for Community-Based Research (CBR), with our added attention to youth. Our key principles were:

- YPAR is a collaborative enterprise between academic researchers (professors and students), community members, and youth;

- YPAR validates multiple sources of knowledge and promotes the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination of the knowledge produced; and

- YPAR has as its goal social action as well as personal and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice.

As we embarked on this project, we focused on how we could most effectively partner with the school and school-based community center to foster an environment that was conducive to successfully implementing and sustaining YPAR to address the school community and the youth's needs and desires. This autoethnography addresses the tensions and the synergies we found in partnering with a school-based community center to conduct YPAR to address their school community's concerns. Our goal in telling our story is to support others in fulfilling the role of facilitator of youth and adult collaboration to achieve the most meaningful and beneficial outcomes for youth and the environment that exists to serve them.

## Methodology and Methods

### *Autoethnography*

Autoethnography, a form of qualitative research, is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). Autoethnography focuses on the subjectivity in making meaning, including the moral, ethical, and intellectual decisions inherent in the project (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). Thus, autoethnography methodologically met our desire to examine the nuances of the YPAR process and relationships while also matching our philosophical need to allow the youth's research to remain unaffected by our desire to study the process.

The main data in autoethnographic research are the researcher's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Data collection consists of extensive and rigorous reflective journaling on the researcher's experiences and the literature that emerges as relevant to the project. This introspection requires the researcher to openly discuss her vulnerability and subjectivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as well as her political and ideological agendas (Richardson, 1997). This openness requires the researcher to admit to her private experiences and thoughts that would ordinarily be deemed negative by others for the purpose of demonstrating the complexity of experiences and decisions.

We engaged in individual reflective journaling after each contact with the youth, school, community, and university partners (including each other) and the literature involved in this project. Guiding questions for our reflections included:

- What was the goal and strategy for the encounter?

- What actually took place?

- What went well in terms of facilitating youth empowerment, fostering partnerships that support the YPAR project, and catalyzing change?

- What might have been a better strategy for achieving these goals or what do you wish you had done differently and how?

- Next steps?

The data analysis process in autoethnography consists of analyzing and summarizing the data to tell a cohesive story that is grounded in the particulars of a project or culture. Then, the researcher analyzes the story again for themes that tell a more meaningful and evocative story to a larger audience. Triangulation is often used to judge the credibility and validity of qualitative research. Autoethnography, however, utilizes the concept of "crystallization." Crystallization acknowledges that there are more than three sides to any given subject matter and that "what we see depends upon our angle of repose" (Richardson, 1997, p. 92). Crystals serve as a metaphor for autoethnographic texts in that they grow, change, reflect externalities, and refract within themselves (Richardson, 1997). Crystallization is demonstrating a "deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic" (Richardson, 1997, p. 92). Crystallized autoethnographic texts paradoxically increase what we know while also increasing what we doubt.

We analyzed the data concurrent with implementing the project to inform our practice, as well as our investigation. After Engelman transitioned out of the project, she analyzed the process from her perspective to tell her story. Hazel did the same when the partnership dissolved due to funding and the Community Center's move to another neighborhood school. After reflecting on our individual involvement, we analyzed each other's story to tell one comprehensive story from our shared perspective as YPAR facilitators. Our analyses addressed the question, How do we, as YPAR facilitators from outside the community, ensure the most fruitful outcomes for the youth and the community and further the social change agenda of promoting youth voice in decision-making processes that affect youth?  The findings we share here focus on how our frameworks and assumptions differed from those of the adult staff, even with our shared vision, and the power dynamics between the youth, adult staff, and adult YPAR facilitators that complicated the triadic relationship.

## Results

The results section has been organized in three parts. First, we present the context of the project, followed by two themes – frameworks and assumptions, and power.

### *The YPAR Project Context*

Here we provide a brief background of our project. The university and the community center had worked together for many years prior to this particular project; however, we, the YPAR facilitators, were new to this community and collaboration.

For the 2004-2005 school year, the demographics of the students in the middle school were such that 92% identified as "Hispanic," 93% qualified for free or reduced priced lunch, and 18% received services as English Language Learners. The school was rated "low" according to the state's student assessment program and was threatened with closure. The school itself was a beautiful historic building from the outside; however, the inside was poorly maintained. The school housed a community center. The community center provided various services, but the majority were after-school activities for the middle school students. The after-school program was funded primarily by the school district and managed by the district; the community center director and her staff were employees of the school district.

The community center director was Latina and she was an extremely dedicated and stable figure in the school and community. We are Gringas (white women). Our

connections to the school and its community were through the university's relationship, living in the larger metro area in which the school community exists, and our commitment, as school/community psychologists, to supporting schools and community-based organizations in meeting the academic and developmental needs of all of the children they serve, particularly those who come from more disenfranchised backgrounds.

The project began as part of a service-learning assignment for a program development and evaluation course taught by Hazel. Engelman was a doctoral student enrolled in the course. Based on the community center staff's previous assessments with students, parents, and school and center staff members, the community center director identified a need for the course's service focus: increasing parent involvement at the school and community center for the purpose of increasing the students' academic achievement. Hazel was involved with this project from October 2004 through December 2006 and Engelman was involved with this project from January 2005 through May 2006. Engelman began working with the students in March 2005 and, on average, met with the student researchers for two hours twice a week as an after-school activity. Hazel met with school administrators and community center staff two or three times per month throughout her involvement, attending the community center's weekly staff meetings at least monthly. Starting with the fall semester of 2005, Engelman attended the community center's weekly staff meetings. Engelman and Hazel met weekly throughout the duration of the project.

## Frameworks & Assumptions

We came to the project and relationships with a YPAR framework of youth empowerment and shared decision-making. The community center and school held a limited PYD viewpoint. The constraints on their visions of youth empowerment were representative of the educational system that they worked within and its policies and pressures, particularly given its poor academic standing. Our shared overarching vision and commitment to positive youth development allowed us to embark on the partnership; however, the shared vision did not preclude tensions arising due to our differing frameworks and assumptions. As we embarked on the work with the youth, the following points of tension emerged, which warranted consideration and thoughtful attention prior to as well as during the YPAR.

*Creating and sustaining a partnership.* When we proposed conducting YPAR to the community center and school partners, we heard an enthusiastic "yes!" from the adult leaders. Hearing what we wanted to hear and still forming alliances with our partners, we did not probe their willingness to provide youth with the tools and opportunities to challenge existing power structures. We did not engage the school and community leaders in a strategic discussion to align our visions and strategies for involving youth, as recommended by Gosin and colleagues (2003). We did not make sure that we meant the same thing when we used the same words. Our community partners did not engage in other participatory youth practices and had limited knowledge and experience with such activities. As the benefits of such practices were unknown or unclear, the partnership would have benefited from more extensive discussion of potential advantages, disadvantages, and requirements of such approaches.

For example, we should have discussed YPAR in terms of its impacts on the involved students from a developmental assets perspective because that was the PYD framework they utilized. We should have engaged in a discussion about the impact the YPAR project might have on the community center's and school's parent involvement programs and practices, academic achievement, and school-community relationships. We should have also inquired about the policies and pressures that they experienced as influencing this project and its direction. Our hasty decision to move forward on what we saw as a great opportunity without having a well-defined, shared framework with our community partners plagued the commitment and engagement level of our adult partners as we (unknowingly) challenged their norms and assumptions. Additionally, our presuppositions about the positive value of youth empowerment and our familiarity with YPAR as an effective strategy for PYD led us to be less sensitive to how sharing decision-making power with the youth might have been a bigger leap than we anticipated for these PYD advocates. Our commitment to the sixth and newest "C," Contribution, was where our own and school staffs' conceptualizations of PYD differed the most.

*Definitions of leadership and youth voice.* We discovered that the most critical presupposition to have addressed with the community partner was definitions of leadership and the parameters around youth voice. This YPAR project was considered a leadership activity by the school and community center, offered through the center's after-school program. Students had to have good grades and positive discipline records

to be considered for leadership activities. The school and center adults viewed participation in leadership activities as a reward. We did not agree with this limited definition of a leader, as PYD includes all youth, not just those with demonstrated competencies. We saw youth voice in research as a tool to engage all students in learning and skill development opportunities by cultivating a meaningful project that offered them a sense of responsibility and agency (Monard-Weismman, Liptrot, & Wagner, 2008; Flores, 2008). We expected that students with poor grades and/or discipline problems might gain greatly from involvement in the group. For the comprehensiveness of the research project, we wanted representation from all student sub-populations, including those who were less academically engaged.

However, we did not share our definition of leadership when the community center staff began recruiting students that met their profile, as we appreciated their support and respected their expertise and time. Later, as word spread about the group, we did not uphold the community center's membership criteria, but instead left the group's doors open to anyone who expressed an interest and commitment. Taking this passive aggressive approach backfired when a student who did not meet the community center's definition of a leader joined the group and the community center staff treated her differently than the other students that they had hand-picked. This student exhibited exemplary leadership skills throughout her involvement and had we been more forthright about our criteria and frameworks, we may have been able to negotiate a probationary period for this student to demonstrate her capabilities to our partners. A lesson we learned was to discuss these beliefs, definitions, and assumptions prior to beginning a project and to revisit student membership criteria and expectations throughout the project.

When the school adults' commitment to the partnership waned halfway through the project, Engelman met with the adult partners to revisit the community center's mission and how the YPAR project fit into their mission and goals. We reaffirmed that our shared goal was to support the students in their learning and positive development. However, had we been cognizant at the time of our different conceptualizations of our shared terms, we could have capitalized on this opportunity to develop a communal definition of leadership and the boundaries of youth voice, relative to this shared goal and the environmental limitations. However, we continued to assume that we shared similar definitions of our mutual terms and that the community partner understood our

framework of the benefits and process of empowerment practices since they participated in many positive youth development, service-learning, and after-school program trainings and workshops. This assumption resulted in us missing opportunities to educate and advocate for empowerment practices and its benefits to students, their programs, and their school, as well as missing opportunities to enhance our learning about our partners and their realities. In hindsight, we believe facilitating dialogue about youth empowerment within the school system was one of the critical roles we needed to play.

The ultimate loss, due to these missed communication opportunities, was for the youth. The success and sustainability of the group's product rested on the director, our gatekeeper, with whom we had built an unstable foundation. It was difficult deciding how far to encourage the group to take their project when we did not know if the community partner would be supportive of their activities. We wanted the youth to experience success so that the hope that they still possessed in making a difference in their world was supported and strengthened. Motivation and engagement was hard to maintain for both the youth and us when our involvement and work was not given the attention and credit we had anticipated. We made a priority of attending the weekly staff meetings, which enhanced logistical communication and was helpful in relationship-strengthening, but did not necessarily lead to comprehensive understanding of each other's presuppositions or a shared belief system.

*Control of the research question and design*. Aligning youth's research goals and the larger community's research goals is a challenge (Fernandez, 2002). We were told by the community center director that parent involvement was a concern that students, parents, and the community wanted to address. As outsiders of the community, we did not presume to know what the middle schools students wanted and needed in their family-school relationships to support their development and academic achievement. Just as with PAR or CBR (Strand et al., 2003; Greenwood et al., 1993), YPAR enabled us to combine our expertise in research and school/community psychology with the youth's expertise regarding their community, school, concerns, and recommendations. From our review of the literature on Latinos, Latino culture, and Latinos' views, experiences, and values for education (i.e., Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999), we also believed that the best way for the parents, school faculty, and community center staff to

come together was through the students, as they were the reason the different groups needed to be in a relationship.

As the youth discussed the research topic, they reframed the topic to address improving relationships between their parents and teachers/school staff. Their research question evolved into: "How can parents, students, and school staff unite to improve the school climate?" This was a much more collaborative conceptualization of home-school connections than the school's goal of increasing parent involvement, which implied change needed primarily from families (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). The students emphasized safety within and around the school building, which was a palpable but publicly down-played concern within the school. Positive school climate is a precursor to home-school collaborations (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001), which the students were able to deduce. When the student leaders' research interests evolved into addressing the school's climate and safety, the community center and the school administration did not perceive this topic as addressing their immediate need to improve academic achievement, to avoid school closure due to their students' poor standardized test scores, or their secondary need for increased parent involvement in order to meet district guidelines and fill some of the gaps that the district's budget cuts left the resource-limited school struggling to address. Therefore, the adult partners were less enthusiastic and committed to the evolved research topic and subsequently, their support for the youth's work diminished. In retrospect, we realized the importance of having initial and on-going discussions regarding youth voice within the research project, in order to better help youth to promote their agenda while being sensitive to other expectations. Evolution of the research question is common in participatory methodologies, particularly those of a qualitative nature. Although this is understood by researchers, community partners are less familiar with this process. Therefore, it was our responsibility to have communicated this likelihood to them early in the project and to have helped students advocate for the evolution of their research topic. Another significant role for the YPAR facilitator was to explain the YPAR research process.

We found that presentations and opportunities for interaction were imperative to maintaining young people's engagement and adults' relationship and commitment to the project. The youth's excitement for and commitment to the work surged when planning to present their findings and recommendation to adults. Simultaneously, these presentations served as needed opportunities to keep the adults engaged in the youth's

work, and after each presentation, the adults provided increased latitude for the youth's vision.  Thus, it was critically important to build and maintain a relationship with the adults who held the power for action that materialized from the students' work in order to sustain youth and adult commitment, despite the additional time it required. These successes identified another YPAR facilitator role: timing the youth-led events so that they maintain youth and adult momentum, highlight the youth's accomplishments, and are responsive to the school community's calendar.

## Power

YPAR facilitators can be internal or external to the community. Each positioning has benefits and limitations. We will address the power we held as outsiders and how we utilized that power to promote youth voice and leverage external partnerships to build support for the youth within the school system.

*Promoting youth voice.* The goals of PAR are to demonstrate that the marginalized group has a legitimate and credible voice and presence and to challenge existing stereotypes about the group (McIntyre, 2006). In the case of this project, the adult partners' commitment to actualizing the youth's recommendations was critical to determining the level of empowerment and agency that was experienced by the youth in their efforts. One of our critical roles was to facilitate the promotion of youth voice.

Findings showed that at some moments, adults saw the youth as having a credible and legitimate voice and at others, adults utilized the student leaders to meet their own needs without hearing the students' voice. One of the recommendations the youth made was for continuing students to provide school tours for incoming 6th grade students and their families during fall orientation. The youth's goal for these tours was to establish a relationship with the new student and his or her family so that the student could come to the first day of school having experienced a friendly face and knowing someone to turn to with a question. Despite initial support from the director, her plans changed and the youth researchers ended up making last-minute edits to and distributing flyers about the community center during registration,  as opposed to giving guided tours. Utilizing involved youth as "volunteers" for traditional purposes as opposed to creating a supportive environment for youth was in direct conflict with the goals of YPAR, as well as PYD; however the youth had not been prepared to advocate for their recommended activity. Reaffirming and maintaining one's purpose was an important skill that we needed to work with the youth to develop so that when

their power and leadership were threatened, they had the communication skills to negotiate a mutually respectful agreement.

*Cultivating external support and allies.* Public schools are difficult organizations to align with for change, which is why most YPAR is conducted through community organizations unattached to such institutions (Amodeo & Collins, 2007). With YPAR, the facilitator becomes the liaison between the youth and the community – listening for opportunities to highlight their common goals as well as to build buy-in and support for the youth's ideas and efforts. One role that we played that appeared highly important was to increase school-based support for the YPAR project by developing outside alliances.

One of the most effective ways that we garnered internal support was to cultivate external support for the youth and their leadership. Other adults, who worked peripherally to the school , recognized the benefit of the youth's efforts and their voice. A leader from a statewide parent coalition worked with the youth to facilitate a meeting she was conducting at the school with the parents. A respected community organizer came to a meeting with the youth because he had heard of their work. A grant officer from a prestigious community foundation, which ultimately granted the youth funding, met with the youth to discuss funding possibilities. These external parties already held visions of youth as leaders and were more readily able to see the value of the youth themselves and this project.

Our connections to community youth empowerment leaders were helpful in providing the youth with receptive audiences. The respect that these outsiders showed to the youth and their work increased the school and community center administrators' opinions and support of the youth's leadership. Our ability to forge these networks was important to helping the school environment became more embracing of youth empowerment.

The external support also helped to cultivate the most visible outcome of this project: an event that the youth organized at the school to lay a foundation for positive relationships between families and school staff. Organizing for the event led to students, parents, and school staff realizing that they were all concerned for school members' safety. Through dialogue, the parents and students recognized that they

desired to take coordinated action to make the school a safer place for the students to learn, which led to the formation of a parent engagement committee.

From this experience, we learned that when other adult stakeholders and gatekeepers (parents, other community agencies, and representatives from funding institutions) found the youth credible, they and their work increased in influence within the school setting. This then led to increased alignment in change agendas and positive impact on all parties involved.

## Discussion

A guiding question to determine if YPAR is a worthwhile partnership to enter into is, "What new and important actions [*and PYD experiences*] would such a partnership accomplish that could not be accomplished without it?" (Williams, et al., p. 301). To realize the sixth "C," Contribution, attention to the environment and the relationships that make up that environment is of paramount importance.

When professional researchers engage in YPAR at an urban middle school, there are multiple opportunities and constraints. The project that we have discussed in this article had peculiarities: threats of school closure, funding instability, and a strong community center housed in the school; however, none of these conditions is rare. We believe that YPAR facilitators from institutions outside the school, as well as service-learning facilitators will resonate with the lessons we learned.

## Frameworks and Assumptions

As our results outlined, the frameworks and assumptions that the various adult partners hold are critical in determining the opportunities for positive youth development, such as youth empowerment, and for systems change, such as youth-adult partnerships in decision-making, that will be realized in the YPAR project. YPAR has the potential to be transformative for the individuals involved, as well as the community and institutions of which they are a part. Sarason (1996) has noted that in order for schools to change, there both has to be support for change from within,  as well as strong external pressures for change; YPAR has the potential to be a catalyst for internal support and external pressure for positive change.

However, as Khanlou and Peter (2005) point out, the researcher must weigh the risk and benefit of engaging in YPAR as youth's confidence, agency, and outlook on the future are all developing. This makes it all the more critical to engage in relationship

building with the adult partners to create shared definitions and strategies for the YPAR project to ensure that the youth's experience will be an empowering one. From a systems-level perspective, if school personnel have rewarding initial forays into YPAR, these adult leaders could be much more inclined to engage in YPAR and other youth empowerment activities in the future; similarly, negative experiences might increase future reticence. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the parties' frameworks and assumptions must be attained and sustained.

## Power

To successfully implement a YPAR project in a public school, traditional power relationships will have to be altered. As our results showed, in YPAR, there are relationships between students, school staff, and community organizations to negotiate, and different relationships will have different histories and shared understandings. Therefore, YPAR becomes exponentially more challenging by engaging a triad, as opposed to the dyad that the literature on PAR typically depicts (Chavez, et al., 2002; Strand, et al., 2003; Williams, et al., 2005). The successful YPAR facilitator will be a liaison, bringing multiple parties together for a shared purpose and to share power in order to achieve that purpose.

## Conclusion

The literature on establishing a comprehensive group-based belief system begs the question of how to address differences in frameworks and assumptions while affirming a shared overarching vision and commitment. We would argue that, the complex relationships associated with YPAR, prevent the formation of a fully aligned vision and commitment; however, successful partnerships do need to develop shared values and goals, common language, and respect for disagreements. Accordingly, what are the critical roles that a YPAR facilitator must play to support Positive Youth Development and community change in school-based YPAR? From this autoethnography, we concluded that the following roles are important:

- Facilitator of dialogue regarding youth empowerment, its value, and its process: for both youth and adults, establishing how youth empowerment does or does not align with the school system's vision for youth's leadership, engagement, and positive development;

- Facilitator of understanding the research process of YPAR: for both youth and adults, establishing how YPAR does or does not align with the school system's vision for program development, evaluation, and school improvement planning;

- Facilitator of maintaining momentum throughout the YPAR process: facilitating youth-led "products" or events within the longer research process as needed by students and adults that respond to the school's calendar and the adults' and students' commitment and motivation levels;

- Facilitator of youth voice: promoting dialogue as to the opportunities and limits on youth voice in the school system, and promoting the youth's development of competence in advocating for their own voice to be heard and considered; and

- Facilitator of outside alliances that will promote the YPAR process within the school-system.

Garnering support for school-based Youth Participatory Action Research projects is not easy, but this article offers lessons about how to fruitfully build triadic relationships to engage youth in knowledge creation and decision-making, while simultaneously fostering Positive Youth Development. Building a collaborative partnership with a shared vision and approach should be awarded the time and support necessary at the beginning and throughout to increase the projects' productivity and sustainability (Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004; Schorr, 1997). When involving young people, the conversation also needs to establish PYD goals in order to ensure the most developmentally enriching experience for the youth. Such a process will hold each party accountable for the youth's positive development while also working for shared systems change.

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