THE EFFECTS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (YPAR) ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG YOUTH

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ABSTRACT: *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a critical form of action research used in educational curriculum that focuses and values on the youth point of view. YPAR stands for youth participatory action research. This learning process is based from action research, or research steps and techniques alongside community member action. YPAR can be a powerful process that unites youth and adults in research projects that improve our communities and conditions of youth lives. The information that results from the YPAR process is meant to be used to advocate for change in communities.*

As humans, we are always learning throughout our entire lives. As we grow older, we navigate a range of unexpected circumstances and experience the depth of our beliefs and values in the decisions we make. This makes K-12 education crucial in preparing for life. In education and learning, two largely regarded goals of schooling are to prepare students to be productive workers in society and to produce effective citizens that reflect our country's democratic values (Banks et al., 2007). The relationships built in and outside of school influence students in ways they may not fully understand. These relationships impact and shape personal identity. Learning and acquiring knowledge is constructed through interactions with others. This social component to learning makes Youth Participatory Action Research, or YPAR, significant to improving education. This paper is a literature review that seeks to answer: Among youth participants, how do YPAR programs affect their leadership development? The literature reviewed focuses on youth, leadership development and YPAR program research. YPAR programs support youth leadership development through its improvement in communication, critical thinking, and social relationship-building skills.

Definition of Relevant Terms

PAR and YPAR

In the field of educational studies, the topic of action research is a familiar one to educators. Participatory action research, known widely as PAR, is an empowering, self-reflective, and collective approach to learning. PAR involves participants working alongside researchers to understand and improve practices surrounding their lives. Participants are given the opportunity to improve their local community or environment (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). PAR follows a cyclic action research process of identifying a problem, collecting and interpreting data, acting on evidence, evaluating results, and improving next steps (Ferrance, 2000). Eventually youth became the focus of PAR.

PAR has led to the development and emergence of YPAR. YPAR is composed of widely regarded action steps taken by adults and youth participants in a research process. It is an opportunity for youth and adults to collectively address, question, theorize, and act against social injustice in schools and/or local communities (Scorza, 2017). Rodriguez and Brown (2009) conceptualized YPAR using three guiding principles that reframe its approach to focus on a meaningful learning experience

for youth. Those principles are: inquiry-based, participatory, and transformative. In this research process, young adults are encouraged to explore and inquire about an investigative topic related to their life experiences and concerns. The second principle, participation, is shown by the guiding behaviors from adults. Adults value and respect youth as equivalent researchers alongside them. This, in return, allows the young researchers to express their voice. Together, both parties collect and analyze their own data. Hence, project direction and power are equal in this educator-student relationship. Lastly, YPAR is transformative in the way it has improved the lives of marginalized youth and their communities. (Rodriguez &Brown, 2009). The equal nature of this adult-youth relationship requires a definition of collective leadership in the context of YPAR.

Collective Leadership

Collective leadership is a prominent characteristic in YPAR programs because students are positioned as researchers making collective decisions together (Fox, 2015). Friedrich, Vessey, Schuelke, Ruark, and Mumford (2011) define collective leadership as, "a dynamic… interdependent process in which a… set of leaders selectively utilize skills and expertise… (to solve) the situation or problem at hand" (p. 1). It is beyond the skills of one person; each leader is capable and applies his/her unique perspective and skills to influence the solution process. In YPAR, developing a student's collective leadership skills can lead the student towards becoming a knowledgeable and democratic citizen later in life. There is potential to support life-long learning beyond adolescence in deep and profound ways.

Theoretical Constructs

In this discussion about YPAR and leadership, the theoretical constructs used are a youth-based lens, equity lens, and life-long, life-wide and life-deep learning perspectives. In the first analyzing framework, a youth-based lens means that the perspective of youth is more than acknowledged, it is accounted for. Youth voice is incorporated as qualitative evidence that skill development does occur in leadership. According to Chen (as cited in Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, & Kirshner, 2015), youth voice refers to youth being respected for their ideas and opinions, as well as feeling empowered to share them to an organization or related program. When youth have a voice within contexts that affect them, opportunities for positive development arise. Their voice is an essential puzzle piece to successful service-learning programs (Chen, as cited in Kornbluh et al, 2015).

The second analyzing framework is about three distinctive learning perspectives. Incorporating these learning perspectives is useful for students in YPAR programs to transfer school learning and skills into the context of everyday life. The first, life-long, refers to how learning occurs throughout an entire lifetime. The second, life-wide, means that one learns a variety, or breadth of experiences. Lastly, learning is life-deep in the way it "embraces religious, moral, ethical, and social values that guide what people believe, how they act, and how they judge themselves and others" (Banks et al., 2007, p. 12). Learning occurs in formal environments such as at school. More commonly later in life, it happens in informal places such as at work, in sports teams, and within religious institutions. Using these three distinct perspectives is helpful for educators to improve teaching practices.

Lastly, this paper acknowledges and strives for equitable teaching practices in education. Equity is valued to serve and improve the lives of vulnerable groups of people. YPAR programs are used as a mechanism for students of color to not only navigate institutional systems, but combat oppression involved (Bertrand, 2018). Bertrand's research is one of many examples in the literature that show students develop agency and leadership skills.

Literature Review

Literature surrounding YPAR largely concentrate around qualitative case studies that explore the effectiveness of programs from start to completion. Studies analyze program implementation, evaluation practices, methodologies, and relationship/power dynamics. One of many common outcomes adults and youth have described is the positive social change in one or more levels: local, national and (sometimes) international scales (O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2003). Most of the outcomes reported in youth, gathered from outside observance and self-reflection, include improvement in agency/leadership, social, emotional, interpersonal, cognitive, academic/career, and critical consciousness (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy & Dechants, 2018). By evaluating over 3,000 peer-reviewed articles using a progressive database system, researchers uncovered that the most common outcome connected with YPAR participation. This outcome is the development of agency and leadership (Anyon et al., 2018). In fact, the researcher, Ben Kirshner, is leading the pathway in studies of youth activism.

Kirshner (2007) uses youth activism to support the development of adolescents. Supporting development is done by reframing student learning environments to incorporate collective problem-solving and positive youth-adult interactions. Youth activism is an outlet for students to grapple with their identities meaningfully. Exploring one's identity is difficult, and it helps when adult educators are present for guidance. Additionally, youth build upon their knowledge and meaning of institutions. Students take their experiences of academic institutions and connect it with larger, civic institutions. Adults who care for the interest of youth tend to provide opportunities for them to experience identity development, healthy adult relationships, teamwork, and connection to civic systems (Kirshner, 2007). A common and key factor to these experiences is the skill, communication.

Communication

YPAR studies demonstrate that the research roles of young people provide ideal conditions for building communication skills essential in leadership development. Ferrance (2000) points out that participants practice many modes of data collection such as keeping field notes and journals, facilitating meetings, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and recording media. A portfolio of various types of data are sometimes be collected (Ferrance, 2000). For example, when youth showed interest in women's health, they used photos, field notes, interviews, and focus groups with a critical approach to enhance the state of women's health in their community (Wang, 1999). What's more, the participants of Powers and Tiffany (2006) gained public speaking skills and learned how to give presentations to a diverse audience. In a case study involving two girls in a three-year leadership program, each girl and their surrounding adult supporters confirmed improvement in communication skills (Conner and Strobel, 2007). One girl, Desiree, transformed into a "visible, direct, vocal, and articulate leader" who "led by doing", and "convey(s) her knowledge and understanding." The other girl, Celeste, transformed into a "encouraging and supportive presence," "careful listener," and "strong (small group) meeting facilitator" (p. 282). Though Celeste exhibited introverted qualities, observers found her "always willing to be part of the conversations, even if that meant listening more than speaking" (Conner & Strobel, 2007, p. 285). Additionally, Celeste highlighted that the program helped to find her voice and confidence needed to speak in front of others (Conner & Strobel, 2007). They each discovered communication skills for a leadership style suitable to themselves personally. Desiree and Celeste are not outliers. Conner and Strobel's study is one example from many case studies that are part of a greater common theme: When the participants

and adults involved in YPAR programs reflect upon their learning, they observed stronger communication skills.

Additionally, Govan, Fernandez, Lewis, and Kirshner's (2015) international studies demonstrate the impact of leadership activities on communication skills. In these international studies, young participants were supported by a range of leadership opportunities that school adults agreed would be useful for careers later in life, including facilitating workshops, recruiting peers for their action research issue, participating in hiring committees, public speaking, managing logistics for youth summits, and strategic planning/marketing discussions (Govan et al., 2015). In the context of their communities, YPAR's action research process provides tailorable leadership activities for young people to improve their communication skills.

Critical Thinking and Decision-Making

As communication skills progressed among youth, research studies also showed meaningful critical thinking and decision-making skills that followed. Students that performed action research presentations to key stakeholders also demonstrated improvement in public speaking (Tiffany & Powers, 2006). Following the presentations, youth participants clearly demonstrated critical thinking in the practices of answering the questions and answers portion. During these "Q & A" sessions, students form responses that advocate for issues of importance to them and show support for their peers (Tiffany & Powers, 2006).

Critical thinking can lead to developing different leadership styles and is also shown in conversations about the implications of social issues. Critical thinking is additionally shown when analyzing and interpreting data in the research process. For instance, Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, and Aoun (2010), determined that when youth engage in the data analysis step of YPAR, it promoted their critical awareness and

thinking concerning social issues relevant in their community. For example, in Conner and Strobel's (2007) case study student, Desiree, she actively and vocally shared her voice during meetings, tryingto comprehend and think of solutions using data to back her logical thinking. In contrast, the other case study student, Celeste, quietly applied her critical lens to focus on understanding youth issues on a personal level in her effort challenge the perspectives of adults. In this sense, Celeste showed leadership in speaking with peers one-on-one, and then banding together student voice and perspectives before coming forth with an issue. They demonstrated two different critical thinking approaches in their leadership style (Conner & Strobel, 2007).

Furthermore, in a school closure study, Kirshner, Pozzoboni and Jones (2011), points out that high school and higher education students struggled managing personal bias against "disconfirming or alternative evidence" about their school (p. 140). Yet, participants on their own still made logical decisions in their projects that showed support for the school. The internal tension and bias one feels shows that students were tackling critical thinking and decision-making. Schools are social structures and institutions. When a school undergoes something serious like a closure, it can provide opportunities for students to collaborate, reflect, and express their voice in the interest of doing what is best for the school.

Most interestingly, critical social analysis is also part of YPAR programs, sometimes, to develop critical thinking. Govan et al. (2015), describes critical social analysis (CSA) as a constructive process involving collaborative and reflection-based discussion that is embodied by visual expression and narrative. In these facilitated conversations, participants make the connection between real experiences and social structures including systematic forms of power and oppression (Govan et al., 2015). When YPAR programs demonstrate CSA in their learning, young people are encouraged to find

their critical lens and eventually, their overall voice (Govan et al., 2015). In the context of their communities, the action research process provides tailorable leadership opportunities for youth which have been demonstrated to improve their critical thinking skills. Additionally, participation in the action research process also can build meaningful relationships.

Improvement in Relationship-building

YPAR programs help young people improve their social skills and build relationships. Preparing youth with these invaluable social skills helps them to build positive and healthy relationships, which in turn, creates a positive impact on their learning in life-wide ways. Positive relationships are important sources of social support for youth, and in particular, when established between adult staff and youth learners, it helps build communities, strengthen trust, and provide encouragement for one another (Govan et al., 2015). Govan (2015) dives even further and explains how these sources of social support can cause youth to display additional commitment to their action research project and demonstrate evidence of leadership development.

YPAR relationships help prepare youth to be colleagues with adults in the future, versus the typical hierarchical school structure that students commonly experience. In preparing to work with adults, youth experience intergenerational relationships. Intergenerational relationships in YPAR are when adults and young people of all ages and generations organize collectively to empower organizations and/or schools so that it gains additional insight in furthering their mission (Govan et al., 2015). Intergenerational relationships between adults and students promote tolerance and inclusion of other cultures (Mitra, 2005). Kornbluh et al. (2015) explains that these relationships have the potential to help the adults in direct supportive roles; it can strengthen their leadership, group facilitation, and instructional practices.

Strong relationship skills are helpful for young people to heal in life-long ways as well. Young people have reported improvement in their mental health when programs focus on healing from oppressive experiences (Govan, 2015). Research by Govan et al. (2015) describes how "deep and intentional relationships, focused on healing and solidarity, engender trust, a sense of family, and commitment to transforming systems of oppression" (p. 92). A continuous focus on healing one's self is important to cope with in order to grow into a strong leader.

Significance of YPAR

Identity and Intergenerational Partnerships

By participating in action research, youth not only reflect on their positionality, but also learn in life-deep ways. This happens when they discover their personal beliefs or issues they deeply care about. There is substantial evidence of identity development for youth (Bertrand, 2018). In many cases, youth find themselves interested in and taking action on are social justice issues. Supporting identity development is beneficial for youth to learn about themselves in life-deep ways and can help students become confident when building relationships with adults.

When young people are placed into the position as researchers, youth-adult partnerships are formed and can benefit all parties involved. Youth-adult partnerships are when youth voice and their perspective are valued equally alongside school adults (Govan et al., 2015). When youth are given opportunities to explore improving their school or community, this can lead to meaningful experiences because they are guided by their educators and leaders from the organizations they work with (O'Donoghue et all , 2003). When students work with an organization, the organization's leaders are in a role just as significant as school educators. As a matter of fact, Bertrand and Rodela (2018) have found that all parties involved: youth, school educators, and the organization's adults develop

leadership skills. Adults and educators are in the direct position of being an excellent role model for students, especially when students have the opportunity to interact with them outside of traditional school settings. Valuing and centering youth perspective in these projects can benefit the educational research process in unique and positive ways.

Conclusion

When a YPAR program promotes authentic and meaningful involvement, youth have opportunities to discover aspects of their identity that lead to strong connections with others (Friedrich et al., 2011). Focusing on leadership skills can create stronger pathways to identity development and intergenerational relationships. The leadership skills built from previous YPAR programs resulted in youth exhibiting stronger communication, critical thinking, decision-making, and relationship-building. Through meaningful service-learning experiences, young people are likelier to learn in ways that are life-long, life-deep, and life-wide. Accounting for the three learning perspectives when building curriculum is one way to ensure student learning remains a focus in education. The field of education and schooling has a responsibility to prepare students to be productive workers and effective citizens in society. For all students to grow into effective leaders, it is important to tailor the approach to the individual. John W. Gardner (1990) once described leadership style by saying, "Leaders come in many forms, with many styles and diverse qualities. There are quiet leaders and leaders one can hear in the next county. Some find strength in eloquence, some in judgment, some in courage" (p. 5). Fostering and improving YPAR programs is a useful educational tool to accomplish the goals of schooling and impact every student. Concentrating on personal leadership growth in youth can play a dynamic role in advancing the future of educational studies.

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