

# A BRIEF PRIMER ON YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS

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This brief primer provides an overview of youth participatory action research (YPAR). YPAR is a promising approach for elevating youth voices in mentoring programs to create positive change. As mentoring programs aim to develop more equitable practices and contribute to societal change, it is imperative for youth to take the lead because they are the most impacted by conditions of societal inequality and are therefore best positioned to identify solutions<sup>1</sup>. Youth-centered relationships, a cornerstone of mentoring programs, are also a key component of YPAR. This provides a valuable foundation of shared values to build upon for programs that seek to incorporate YPAR into their practices.

## WHAT DOES A YPAR APPROACH LOOK LIKE?

YPAR is an approach to generating research evidence for social change in which youth learn about and lead change for social issues impacting their lives with the support of adults<sup>2</sup>. Beyond just simply talking about current events or acknowledging inequity, YPAR seeks to make a tangible change in programs and communities. YPAR often involves the following stages<sup>3</sup>.

**Relationship building and topic selection.** A group of youth and adult(s) gather to develop initial relationships and ground rules for working together. Youth identify an issue that is impacting their lives within the program or their community. Topics could include challenges within mentoring relationships, youth experiences of racism, or even a need within their local community, such as greater access to healthy foods.

**Research capacity building.** Youth learn what research is and the various methods that are used to gather information (e.g., photovoice, interviews, surveys). Adults help break down these topics into smaller chunks so that youth can identify which techniques they would like to use in their research project.

**Data collection and analysis.** Youth collect data related to their chosen issue and methods. They lead in selecting the data they would like to collect, which methods they would use, and what information they want to gather (e.g., survey or interview questions). Youth analyze and make sense of their data alongside adults. The goal of analysis is to understand the data and develop potential solutions to their selected issue.

<sup>1</sup> Weiston-Serdan, T. (2017). *Critical mentoring: A practical guide*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

<sup>2</sup> Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2008). Revolutionizing education. *Youth participatory*.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, A. J. (2020). A qualitative systematic review of youth participatory action research implementation in US high schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65(1-2), 242-257.

**Action and dissemination.** Youth propose change and solutions to the social problem they researched. ‘Action’ can take many forms, and could include sharing findings and ideas to stakeholders through a presentation, meeting with leading decision makers about a recommended policy change or organizing around a community need<sup>4,5</sup>. Together, the intended goal of YPAR is to change policies, practices, or processes within programs and/or communities that impact young people.

**Sustainability.** Adults and youth consider how their recommendations will be actualized and the above process repeated beyond an initial YPAR project. How will the youth’s recommended solutions be taken up by the program or community for actual change?

## WHAT ARE THE CORE VALUES OF YPAR?

**Youth as researchers with valuable expertise<sup>6</sup>.** In YPAR, youth lead the selection of the research topic, methods, analysis, and action(s). This approach is founded on the recognition that adults are not the only ones who can create knowledge and research about the way the world works – youth can, too. Typically, adults are seen as the experts, but YPAR shakes up this idea and places youth in the driver seat because youth are experts in their own experiences navigating mentoring programs and communities. YPAR leverages this expertise for change.

**Reorganization of decision-making power.** Much like in broader society, youth in mentoring programs are often the recipients of services developed by adults. The goal of YPAR is for youths’ perspectives to be authentically valued and to influence the settings that youth must navigate in their daily lives (e.g., school, neighborhoods, peer groups). YPAR places youth in the decision-making role of leading research for change in the program and community. Just like a program may adopt recommendations from outside adult researchers, youths’ findings should be valued to inform program policies and practices.

**Transformative and change oriented.** YPAR focuses on changing inequalities that occur within social systems (including policies, practices, and norms). And while there can be relational and developmental benefits for youth who participate in YPAR, the ultimate outcome of YPAR is to promote actual change in programs and communities that impact young people.

<sup>4</sup> Bertrand, M., & Lozenski, B. D. (2021). YPAR dreams deferred? Examining power bases for YPAR to impact policy and practice. *Educational Policy*, 08959048211019975.

<sup>5</sup> Anyon, Y., Bender, K., Kennedy, H., & Dechants, J. (2018). A systematic review of youth participatory action research (YPAR) in the United States: Methodologies, youth outcomes, and future directions. *Health Education & Behavior*, 45(6), 865-878.

<sup>6</sup> Rodríguez, L. F., & Brown, T. M. (2009). From voice to agency: Guiding principles for participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2009(123), 19-34, 11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.312>

**What YPAR is *not*:** YPAR involves adults following youths' leadership and expertise at every step of the research process, and ultimately, following their lead to improve programs and communities. YPAR should not be done as something to check off a list to simply fulfill a "youth voice" goal. Rather, it should be done authentically to create youth-driven change<sup>7</sup>. In instances where YPAR may not be able to be done in this manner, there are many valuable alternatives to involve youth and stakeholders in research. This may include conducting interviews with youth or engaging youth to analyze data from adult-driven research questions. Hart's Ladder of Child Participation and Ozer and colleagues' (2020)<sup>8</sup> decision tree of youth participation approaches (see resources) are useful tools to identify the appropriate approach for your organization.

## HOW CAN YPAR BE INTEGRATED INTO MENTORING PROGRAMS?

As already emphasized, in YPAR youth lead in selecting the issue to research. For youth in a mentoring program, this may include:

**Mentoring program needs.** YPAR can focus on topics within the mentoring program to generate change in existing policies, practices, or mentoring relationships. For example, youth may choose to investigate program youth's experiences about activities with their mentors. In doing so, they may find that mentees prefer more structured activities, which they recommend to program stakeholders.

**Community needs.** YPAR could also focus on addressing a community need outside of the program. In line with critical mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2007), programs can facilitate opportunities for youth to change policies at the root cause of inequalities they experience. For example, mentees may identify a debilitated local park as an issue within their community, seek to interview local residents about the history of the park and usage of facilities, and meet with local officials to share recommendations for greater equity in funding of community parks.

YPAR is a flexible approach that matches well with existing mentoring models. Below are a few existing program formats and how YPAR aligns with them:

**Group mentoring.** YPAR processes are deeply aligned with existing group mentoring models (e.g., team, one-to-many) that focus on group processes between adults and youth as well as amongst youth participants. YPAR in group mentoring models could look similar to project-based learning, in which the YPAR project is the focus of sessions.

**Youth advisory councils.** Mentoring programs can bring together youth who are served across various program models (e.g., one-to-one; group) to inform program

<sup>7</sup> Clay, K. L., & Turner III, D. C. (2021). "Maybe You Should Try It This Way Instead": Youth Activism Amid Managerialist Subterfuge. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(2), 386-419.

<sup>8</sup> Ozer, E. J., Abraczinskas, M., Duarte, C., Mathur, R., Ballard, P. J., Gibbs, L., ... & Afifi, R. (2020). Youth participatory approaches and health equity: Conceptualization and integrative review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 66(3-4), 267-278.

practices through formal leadership positions. These youth advisory councils (either existing or newly formed) could be a venue for youth to engage in YPAR as an additional activity at the organization (see example in resources: UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council).

**Virtual and e-mentoring.** Given the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities to engage youth virtually have emerged alongside new resources for conducting YPAR online. E-mentoring/virtual models can be leveraged to virtually engage youth who might be unable to be in-person or live in geographically diverse areas (e.g., rural youth, disabled youth). Youth can conduct YPAR projects with adult support via Zoom or a program-support secure platform.

**One-on-one mentoring.** Programs may consider engaging mentoring dyads in YPAR by bringing together multiple pairs of mentors and mentees to engage in reflection and action together. In addition to, or in place of, their regular activities and meetings, youth and adults in existing mentoring relationships could form a collective for social change alongside other mentoring pairs.

## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO DOING YPAR WITHIN MENTORING PROGRAMS?

### Benefits to youth, adults, and programs.

Research on YPAR in youth-serving settings suggests that youth often experience positive outcomes themselves, such as improvements to academic/career development, social-emotional and cognitive development, agency and leadership, sense of belonging, and critical consciousness<sup>9</sup>. These potential benefits are directly aligned with the aims of many youth mentoring programs as well as with those of critical mentoring<sup>1</sup> and future directions for the field (e.g., identity development, societal awareness)<sup>10,11</sup>.

Research indicates that adults also may benefit from their involvement in YPAR. For example, YPAR may improve adults' attitudes about youth, as well as strengthen youth-adult relationships through improved dialogue<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, YPAR has resulted in positive changes to youth programs and communities. Examples include improved program and agency services (e.g., creation

<sup>9</sup> Anyon, Y., Bender, K., Kennedy, H., & Dechants, J. (2018). A systematic review of youth participatory action research (YPAR) in the United States: Methodologies, youth outcomes, and future directions. *Health Education & Behavior*, 45(6), 865-878.

<sup>10</sup> MENTOR. (2022). Growing Insights and Innovations: A Research Agenda for the Modern Youth Mentoring Movement. Retrieved from <https://www.mentoring.org/resource/growing-insights-and-innovations-a-research-agenda-for-the-modern-youth-mentoring-movement/>

<sup>11</sup> Sánchez, B., Anderson, A. J., Weiston-Serdan, T., & Catlett, B. S. (2021). Anti-Racism Education and Training for Adult Mentors Who Work With BIPOC Adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 36(6), 686-716.

<sup>12</sup> Shamrova, D. P., & Cummings, C. E. (2017). Participatory action research (PAR) with children and youth: An integrative review of methodology and PAR outcomes for participants, organizations, and communities. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 81, 400-412

of a new wellness program) and more equitable community laws and infrastructure (e.g., more accessible bus routes)<sup>13</sup>.

### **Potential challenges to doing YPAR in mentoring programs.**

While YPAR is an exciting approach to transform programs and communities, it is not without challenges. One challenge in YPAR is for program adults to remain adaptable to supporting youth-led decisions. Adults may need to garner resources and other people to help make youth-led decisions come to life. For instance, if youth decide to conduct a photovoice project, adult staff may need to identify additional online resources (e.g., YPAR Hub [see resources]) on conducting photo-based data collection.

Another challenge in YPAR is ensuring that youth are compensated for their work. Just like a program may financially support adult researchers or consultants who inform their practices, programs should compensate youth for their time. Fair compensation is important for upholding the values of YPAR to equalize youth and adults' expertise. It also can help to reduce barriers (e.g., travel, childcare, provide food) that may exclude youth from participating.

Finally, a challenge of doing YPAR is that policy- and program-level change can be difficult. Some of the youth-led decisions or recommendations might make adult stakeholders uncomfortable, or adults themselves may be resistant to change for a range of reasons. For example, if youths' research findings suggest a need to reform a program practice of how mentors and mentees are paired to include more youth perspective, will program leadership be open to implementing this change? Adults supporting YPAR projects can gain buy-in from program leadership early in the project and help to negotiate these challenges with adult stakeholders to help buffer this challenge.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Taken together, YPAR is well-suited for mentoring programs given the shared focus on youth-centered relationships and promoting positive developmental outcomes. It also offers an effective approach to research that leverages youth's expertise for promoting equity within programs and in the lives of program participants.

For programs considering YPAR, remember that YPAR is one promising step along with other efforts to promote equity in your program and in the lives of youth. Check out the resources in the table below for getting started with YPAR at your organization.

## RESOURCES

TITLE	UTILITY	WEB ACCESS
Youth Participatory Action Research	Video overview of YPAR	<a href="https://youtu.be/wjxhiisuqf8">https://youtu.be/wjxhiisuqf8</a>
Polling for Justice	Video of YPAR example	<a href="https://vimeo.com/22363812">https://vimeo.com/22363812</a>
UC San Diego Youth Advisory Council	Example of YPAR through a Youth Advisory Council	<a href="https://ucsdcommunityhealth.org/work/youth-advisory-council/">https://ucsdcommunityhealth.org/work/youth-advisory-council/</a>
YPAR Hub	Free resources and YPAR curriculum	<a href="http://yparhub.berkeley.edu">http://yparhub.berkeley.edu</a>
Community Futures, Community Lore: An online resource to support YPAR	Tools support youth activists, educators, adult allies to design YPAR projects	<a href="https://ypar.cfcl.ucdavis.edu">https://ypar.cfcl.ucdavis.edu</a>
Center for Regional Change	Technical assistance with YPAR	<a href="https://uccalfresh.ucdavis.edu/yetrainingsresources">https://uccalfresh.ucdavis.edu/yetrainingsresources</a>
Leveraging the developmental science of adolescence to promote youth engagement in research and evaluation	A document for research funders on YPAR	<a href="https://developingadolescent.emel.ucla.edu/assets/uploads/research/resources/YPAR_Guide_2021_FINAL.pdf">https://developingadolescent.emel.ucla.edu/assets/uploads/research/resources/YPAR_Guide_2021_FINAL.pdf</a>
Ladder of Participation	Overview of Hart's ladder of participation, a tool for thinking about the roles of youth and adults in research	<a href="https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ASTC/00e37246-8bd9-481f-900c-ad9d6b6b3393/UploadedImages/Ladder_of_Participation_1.pdf">https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/ASTC/00e37246-8bd9-481f-900c-ad9d6b6b3393/UploadedImages/Ladder_of_Participation_1.pdf</a>