



# “No, We Should Do It”: Youth Training Youth in Activist Research Methods

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Published online: 18 August 2020  
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## Abstract

This article explores a 9-month process of youth research capacity-building, beginning with the training of high school and college aged researchers in qualitative methodologies and concluding with both tentative and comprehensive policy recommendations, at the behest of the youth, for altering the landscape of a major Southeastern city to ensure greater equity of opportunity in particular for minoritized youth and their families. Our analysis led us to consider the ways in which community-engaged youth and their adult partners created a culture of reciprocity and respect as they worked together to train other youth to conduct their own justice-oriented inquiry projects.

**Keywords** Youth participatory action research · Qualitative research · Youth activism · Literacy centers

## Introduction

It is April in the historic coastal city that these youth call home and we are nearing the end of a 3-h research planning meeting. The youth of the Yamacraw Center’s<sup>1</sup> Action Research Team (ART) have assembled in this well-worn, second-story church recreation room on a late Friday afternoon, after full days in various schools, to finalize plans for an experience they are building for their peers in the city.

Tomorrow, the handful of 16–19-year-olds gathered here will host their first of three youth summits, a scaffolded sequence of Saturday events spanning more than 5 months that will introduce youth organizations throughout the city to the

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<sup>1</sup> All names and locations are pseudonyms.

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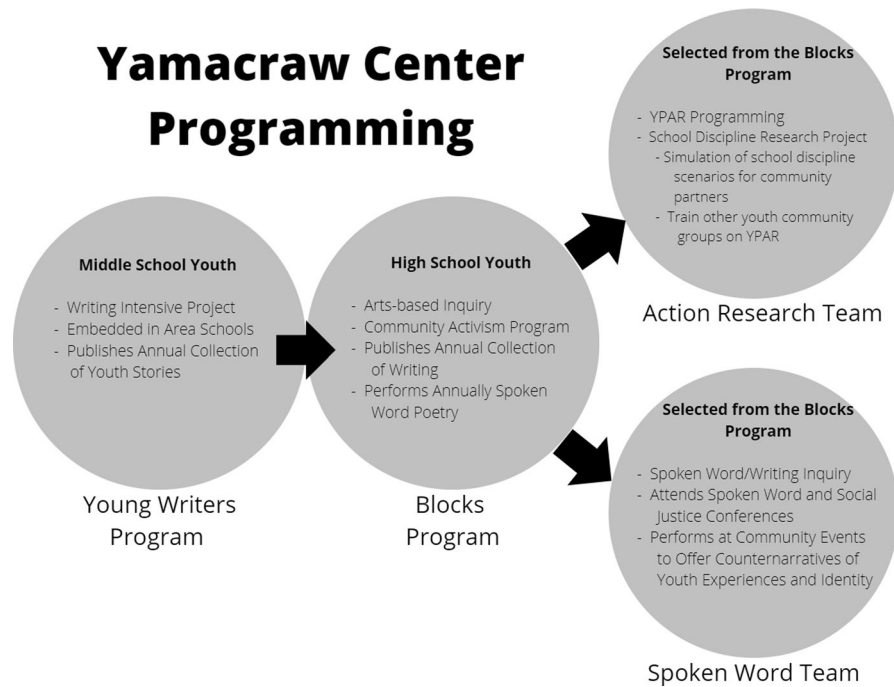
same research processes their team has used to investigate disproportionality in disciplinary practices in the county's schools. They have already determined during this first summit to present a brief overview of their findings, derived from survey data collected over the past 4 months, both to demonstrate what youth like them are capable of, and as a means to springboard training their peers to conduct similar work related to systemic violence and its effects on communities in the city.

The planning meeting is winding down, and the discussion has turned from the nuts and bolts of the next day's summit to the shape of the ongoing structure necessary for supporting peer-researchers beyond this planned induction into the research process. While lingering over possible ways to build in accountability for youth organizations to collect data for analysis in subsequent meetings, we, the adult researchers (who really ought to know better) wondered if it might be best to have an adult assigned to each group, not only as a point person for questions or concerns, but as a goad to keep the work on track. Although the gesture, in that moment, represented our attempt not to overload beginning researchers, we were clearly and immediately put in check by our youth partners.

"No," Cara, a young poet and scholar, who was there as the light turned over to dusk on her birthday, so committed was she to the work, said, "we should do it."

A quick look around at the other teens gathered on the floor and in chairs confirmed the assertion. The follow up contact, checking in on data collection across the city—it would mean more, coming from them. And so the planning casually moved on to how to implement the accountability system: youth researchers would build contacts on the day of the initial summit; they would follow up with their peers using whatever media made the most sense—as it turned out later, primarily through text message—and check in with each other's progress during subsequent ART meetings.

We were reminded, on leaving that day, of the danger of paternalism even in work that purports to center youth experiences and youth expertise, and of how often—however inadvertently—"institutions and adults involved in kids' lives perpetuate their feelings of worthlessness" (Kaplan 2013, p. 157). Perhaps we were a bit giddy at the end of a long day. Or: perhaps in that brief, hinging moment we were not really trusting the central tenets of youth participatory action research that guide our work to begin with, which are committed to the deep belief that youth, when trusted and supported, are best able to "represent themselves and their community within their own frame of reference" (p. 19). Whatever the case, we, the partnering adult researchers and authors of this article, were reminded of the need to continually interrogate the stances from which we operate and the methodological processes we bring to bear on this work, especially as they relate to how youth-led research rooted in activist principles and decolonizing epistemologies might allow for youth to "gain more than an academic education" and attribute to youth's larger sense of "their [own] worthiness" (p. 158), not only as experts in a field, but as civic agents in a city whose transformation they might yet bring about.



**Fig. 1** Organization of Yamacraw Center youth programming

## The Yamacraw Center

This article explores a 9-month process of youth research capacity-building, beginning with the training of high school and college aged researchers in qualitative methodologies and concluding with both tentative and comprehensive policy recommendations, at the behest of the youth, for altering the landscape of Southeastern City to ensure greater equity of opportunity in particular for minoritized youth and their families.

As gifted as the five youth who helmed this project are, they are also fortunate.<sup>2</sup> Having grown up for years within the nested supports of the Yamacraw Center's youth programming (see Fig. 1), these young people have benefited from the guidance of dozens of adult partners and teaching artists from the local community who believe in them and their capacities for civic stewardship. They have also benefitted greatly from their peer network, out of which they have built intentional communities of care that transcend traditional familial lines. The

<sup>2</sup> Though the youth were fortunate in some ways, they were also subject to and deeply affected by the kinds of structural racism and systemic poverty that rendered Southeastern City first in murder rate per capita within the past five years as well as a 25% poverty rate for African Americans in 2017. As Sara Ahmed (2006) reminds us, those that move (relatively) easily still do not move freely (p. 136).

leadership qualities of these five youth and the shape of this particular project, then, became possible not only by the hard work of the Action Research Team and its immediate partners—most vividly, two employees of the Center who doggedly set the conditions and constructed the infrastructure onto which these young folks aptly stepped—but by the accumulation of years of dedication and care from a purposefully built “community of practice” (Stoecker 2013) meant to enfold youth in a village of support characterized first by peer respect, and then bolstered by the inclusion of artists, parents, pastors, researchers, political actors, and the staff of the Center themselves.

This village, the Yamacraw Center (YC), functions in the form of a continuously evolving community literacy center that operates in accordance with the principles of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Cammarota and Fine 2008) and the deeply held belief that young people, when supported as agents of civic transformation, are capable of effecting real and sustainable change. The center is beholden first and foremost to the local community and those within it who have historically been short-changed by gentrification connected to systemic and historic racism and excluded from decision-making processes because of racialized identity, ethnicity, class, gender, and/or age. Yamacraw youth, importantly, are not sheltered from these realities but are instead coached in restorative practices and complex systems-change processes by way of response and in search of healing (Burke and Hadley 2018; Hadley et al. 2019). Through a host of critical literacy and arts-based inquiry practices, they acquire the skills and necessary savvy to seek out unheard voices and ask hard questions about the official and unofficial narratives of their city, experiences that then give them the foundation from which to critique narratives of colonial progress, advocate for policy change, and imagine more-just futures for themselves and their communities.

We explore here the decision-making processes and under-examined intricacies that go into creating the structural conditions necessary for youth to undertake the process of training other youth in critically-engaged qualitative research methods—a dynamic which has not, to this point, been dutifully addressed in the body of literature surrounding youth-led community activism. The research questions that guided this study are:

**RQ1** What are the critical components of effectively training youth in activist research methods?

**RQ2** How do youth, trained in activist research methods, engage the process of training their peers to conduct similar justice-oriented inquiry projects?

**RQ3** How do youth-leaders and their adult partners negotiate the roles and responsibilities that they will be accountable for as they work together to build the research capacities of other youth?

Our purpose, then, is to consider key navigational strategies and negotiations brought to light by this effort to engage youth in training their peers to conduct

research in such a way that would eventually render adults superfluous to the process. In doing so, we suggest possibilities for scaffolding the research capacities of youth toward these ends and simultaneously detail the delicate, gradual, and sometimes difficult process of ceding responsibility to youth who in this case faced similar supervisory challenges in training their peers to conduct inquiry projects of their own.

## Literature Review

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an explicitly pedagogical research framework that engages youth as researchers of their own experiences and communities. YPAR stems from Participatory Action Research and shares many of these same characteristics; namely, a view of research as a collective and communal responsibility that necessarily engages stakeholders as primary researchers within the issues being studied and assumes a stance of critical inquiry that interrogates power in order to bring about social change (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Some of the most common outcomes reported by YPAR projects relate to youth agency and leadership, academic or career achievement, and social, interpersonal, and cognitive growth (Anyon et al. 2018a).

The explicitly pedagogical orientation of YPAR means that youth researchers are purposefully trained to be (usually qualitative or mixed methods) researchers who inquire into issues that concern themselves and their communities. This pedagogy is often hands-on and experiential, responding to the needs of researchers as they encounter them. For instance, in a Cahill et al. (2008) project that examined stereotypes of women that were harming young, urban women of color in their Lower East Side New York neighborhood, youth researchers reported that they “learned how to do research through *doing it*” (p. 100), which is a common refrain in YPAR literature (Ginwright and James 2002; Morrell 2004; Torre 2009).

Less attention, however, has been given in the literature to the role of youth researchers in training other youth researchers, aside from glancing references to the value of having returning youth researchers return to continued iterations of ongoing YPAR projects (Morrell 2008) or the ongoing culture of inquiry that is created in YPAR spaces with longevity. In fact, we ourselves have noted this culture of inquiry in relation to the Yamacraw Center in other spaces (Burke and Hadley 2018; Hadley et al. 2019).

Much more literature attends to the negotiation of power, roles, and responsibilities between youth and adult co-researchers in YPAR spaces. Power sharing between youth and adult researchers is a key tenet of YPAR work, which aims to “foreground the experiential knowledge of students so that young people and adults are ‘co-constructing’ the learning environment” (Akom et al. 2008, p. 12). However, in a review of articles relating to YPAR projects, researchers found that while the degree of youth involvement in the reviewed studies varied greatly, the majority of these projects did not fully integrate youth into all aspects of the research (Jacquez et al. 2013). In spaces where youth are deeply involved, reflections on how responsibilities and power are assigned or shared reveal the difficulty (and rewards)

of coming to consensus (Tuck et al. 2008) or purposefully circulating power (Anyon et al. 2018b; Minkler 2004). Even in youth centered research spaces, adults are often positioned as the most reliable owners of expert knowledge about research methods and analysis.

## Theoretical Framework

A number of braided epistemological frameworks guided our inquiry. First and foremost, the work began with the training of youth researchers in the tenets of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR stems from Participatory Action Research traditions that concern themselves primarily with a “belief in collaboration and respect for local knowledge”; “the commitment to social justice” and “trust in the ability of democratic processes to lead to positive personal, organizational and community transformation” (Brydon-Miller et al. 2011, p. 389). Given these central tenets, traditional notions of external validity and generalizability that often surface in research are necessarily troubled with a careful eye on the notion that “although participatory action research seeks social justice and encourages collaboration with stakeholders, it’s still research, which has the potential to dehumanize, colonize, misrepresent, and harm” (Winn and Winn 2016, p. 113). The driving force behind YPAR work, then, is that youth have much to say and, if given the opportunity, and with the careful undoing of a certain amount of learned helplessness, are capable of expressing themselves in impactful ways that quite often result in qualitatively different forms of representation than those derived from classically sanctioned research models.

As such, co-researchers in the project were further committed to Humanizing Research traditions which focus on building “relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” rooted in “... reciprocity and respect” (Paris and Winn 2014, p. xvi). The research itself, however, is not only about gathering—really, producing—data so much as it is about driving community change, most particularly in the case of YPAR, through teaching. The pedagogical stance in light of this preemptive work was thus drawn from Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris and Alim 2017). In what he framed as a “loving critique” of Ladson-Billing’s (1995) earlier case for educators to embrace a *culturally relevant pedagogy*, Paris (2012) put forth the term *culturally sustaining pedagogy* as a way to assert approaches to teaching and learning that did more than carve out a space for non-white, non-normative cultures in the midst of a streamlined educational complex, but rather positioned the pluralistic narratives, traditions and voices of students, themselves, as living and thriving alongside—not within, and if not independent of, at least in reflection upon and often in resistance to—dominant culture. This ostensibly semantic tweak altered the trajectory of what a more thoroughly democratic education might look like by positioning students’ linguistic and cultural identities as a central axis for educators to build upon rather than a welcoming means through which to teach an already-established curriculum.

What is often the difficult part of all this is that, too often, it falls upon already overworked classroom teachers to mindfully attend to the processes of learning about

their students and the communities they come from in order to develop instruction that nourishes their diverse histories and curiosities in an authentic manner—this amid a high-stakes, neoliberal regime that emphasizes very rigid definitions of success and makes high demands on a teacher’s time (Davies and Bansel 2007). It is here that community literacy centers such as the Yamacraw Center often do their most important work; namely, by building on the belief that “equity and access can best be achieved by centering the dynamic practices and selves of students and communities of color in a critical, additive, and expansive vision of schooling” (Paris and Alim 2017, p. 3). By encompassing research practice and policy change in authentic community forums, civic leadership development programs such as those established and sustained by the Yamacraw Center offer a highly productive means for youth to conduct important out-of-school critical literacy work that relates, immanently, to the lives that they lead.

## Methods

Representing a significant step up in terms of responsibility and scale, the design and execution of these youth summits presented a challenge unlike any the youth, their adult sponsors, or we, accompanying university researchers, had taken part in. Due to the deeply situated nature of this work, and of the Yamacraw Center’s rich relationship with the various communities of Southeastern City itself, we present here a descriptive case study meant to portray some—though certainly not all—of the contributive factors, deliberate moves, focal moments, and eventual outcomes of this particular undertaking. As such, our intent is not to supply generalizable “results” derived from systematic analysis of captured data, but rather to provide a semi-narrativized “descriptive case study [...] that can serve as part of a knowledge base” (Schwandt and Gates 2018, p. 598) about youth community programs and coalition-building processes driven by civically-engaged young people. We first provide a brief overview of the process in order to frame our subsequent analyses.

At the front end of this effort we, three university co-researchers, engaged with the ART in periodic training and re/visioning sessions to introduce not only the methodology (YPAR) but also the theoretical framework, which entailed reframing notions of what counted as data. ART members, as part of the iterative process, identified a research question:

How do the county’s public-school system’s discipline policies address root causes and accountability processes?

In order to address this question, ART co-researchers developed a survey as well as a narrative task to elicit stories from fellow youth in addition to designing a simulation to illustrate the Sisyphean nature of engagement with the disciplinary processes within and around the school system. After gathering data across these experiences from peers in the county, the ART analyzed the surveys, narratives, and short focus interviews for core themes and then utilized that process to train their peers in the steps of the research they had learned themselves. That is, after deciding on the question, gathering and analyzing the data, the ART engineered three

youth summits, gathering youth from organizations throughout the city, to teach them YPAR methods both as an aid in answering their own research question, but also with the intention of spurring other youth in the direction of creating and investigating research questions of interest to them. In short, the ART functioned as youth researchers mentoring and training other youth researchers in inquiry work that would move forward community change.

The first youth summit occurred in early April of 2019. Here ART members trained their peers in topic identification and the generation of research questions. This meant, on the front end, that the ART co-researchers did a great deal of scaffolded instruction with their peers in what it means to do activist research. Their instinct, from their extensive training through the Yamacraw Center, was to begin with their peers' stories, a confirmation of Guajardo et al. (2016) assertion that "in sharing stories, we create a new reality that is not the story of others but [their] own (p. 172). Beginning by asking their peers to first share their experiences with racial disproportionality in disciplinary practices in schools, the ART youth were simultaneously creating a space for "learning in public in safe and purposely planned" ways (p. 176) and also aiding in the reconceptualization of research as a space where youth might "be accurately represented in data" that might, in the future, "do more than count them as numbers" but rather, as we will see, "as promises" (Winn and Winn 2016, p. 127).

Youth being apprenticed into the research process were then given 'data' (stories) elicited by the ART over the course of the winter of 2018, and trained in the coding of themes with a persistent focus that stories 'count' as data and can be the stuff of research. Youth were then introduced to various methods for gathering data (photo elicitation; surveys; individual and focus interviews; narrative, document analysis). Groups were then formed around youth-identified issues of concern, from which research questions were generated and methods for data generation decided on. All participants were then sent on their way to gather data for the purpose of analysis at the next youth summit in the middle of May.

In late April 2019, however, it became clear that some youth were returning in May with data related to their questions, but also that new youth who had not yet been trained in the methodology nor methods would also be attending the second summit. As such, ART members planned a split youth summit that allowed youth who came with data to analyze it with peers as well as allowing youth without data to practice gathering it through photo elicitation, participant observation, and youth-guided walking tours. As before, youth were sent out from the summit with questions to answer and methods for gathering data.

In the final youth summit, ART members spent time analyzing the data gathered with the youth present and providing a guiding vision forward for youth participation in community change processes.

## **Southeastern City**

Southeastern City, rich in history, diverse in culture, is nevertheless a city where resources are too often apportioned along stark racial and economic lines, where bus



lines run direct between wealthy neighborhoods and touristic promenades, and the very presence or absence of sidewalks in a neighborhood all too predictably discloses the means and privilege of those who call it home. According to 2019 demographic estimates (census.gov), approximately 54% of residents are Black and 39% are White, with over a fifth of the city's residents falling below the poverty line (compared to just under 12% nationally).

While informed by these kinds of numbers, the work of the Yamacraw Center is less about corroborating statistics and more about understanding the issues and concerns of communities who are often (mis)represented by such numbers. As such, our collective approach to YPAR is not just about teaching and learning qualitative methods, but about helping youth apply these methods to their own experience growing up in Southeastern City. ART youth, in particular, use these methods to substantiate and address injustices such as citywide maintenance and upkeep, school improvement plans, or juvenile discipline policies—issues that might often, on the surface, seem too big or too abstruse to meaningfully take on at first but which nevertheless affect them and their peers on a daily basis. Indeed, youth notice and frequently internalize these inequities, but rarely do they have the opportunity to share, authenticate, and map the extent of their effects together and with adults who listen to them. It is this dual mission of cultivating solidarity and accountability within Southeastern City that drives the actions of ART youth.

## Participants

All five members of the ART youth—three girls and two boys; one white, one latinx, and three black; four able-bodied and one who dealt with a physical disability—were between 16 and 19 years old at the time of this study and comfortably familiar with each other and their two adult partners (one a White female, the other a Coptic-American male who was himself a graduate of the program). As founding members of the ART, they were all, in their own ways, pioneers and de facto leaders of the Yamacraw Center's youth programming. But they were also friends who readily shared their vulnerabilities and eccentricities and kept each other up-to-date on the latest news about their families and various school-related activities (band, JROTC, first impressions of university course work, etc.). As big and complex as the work they were engaging in was, they were also very much, well...youth—youth who often needed to be dropped off and picked up by their parents, were excited for the school dance, and sold chocolate bars for club fundraisers.

Meanwhile, teenage participants from other organizations throughout the city who attended the youth summits (as many as 60 and as few as 12) were predominantly black and approximately two-thirds female. As a matter of recognition, participants from other youth organizations who attended the summits were also paid by the Yamacraw Center's grant and donation funds to tangibly and symbolically acknowledge their time, energy, and expertise.

## Research Positionality

Because we entered the Yamacraw community as researcher-participants (teaching early on, and eventually participating alongside and under the guidance of our youth partners), it will also be useful to provide a brief description of our own positionality. We were invited to enter this space as researchers by program administrators who were interested in engaging in qualitative research that would explore the value of training youth to lead their peers in conducting activist inquiry projects. This particular study draws from data collected during our third year with the Yamacraw Center, at a time when we were quite familiar with the youth, their adult partners, and program administrators. All of the authors identify as White, heterosexual, and cisgendered; Author 1 and Author 3 identify as males and Author 2 identifies as female. All of us are former secondary English teachers who share an interest in community literacies and youth centered community spaces.

Given our positionalities, we also feel it necessary to further unpack what it means for us, as three White researchers, to engage in this project alongside a population of predominantly Black youth, especially given the purported decolonial stance of the work and the personal commitments we each bring to naming and dismantling injustice in whatever ways we can. We of course cannot ever fully know what it means to grow up in black or brown skin. Nor are we ourselves natives of Southeastern City. As such, we held closely to the Humanizing Research paradigms described above by continually interrogating ourselves, our methods, and our actions, both individually and as a team, so as avoid falling into age-old dynamics of researchers not fully “mindful of the enormous role... their own and others’ racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing” have on what transpires at a research site, and how the effects of unanalyzed decisions from a placid stance of inquiry often produce results that “can be dangerous to communities and individuals of color” (Milner IV 2007, p. 388).

Cooperating in YPAR, we also remained mindful to both participate alongside youth and the YC’s adult partners and to step away at various points whenever and wherever they felt it was most appropriate for us to do so. We were, in other words, and in many ways, visitors, and we strived throughout the process to find a balance between being out of the way, helpful, and above all, gracious. Much of this balance, not coincidentally, required us to recognize and honor the fact that the ART youth, in sharing and relating to their predominantly Black peers, had a capacity that we, simply, did not—a race and age-related dynamic, to be sure, which only further illuminated the importance (and critical lack) of the work ART youth were setting out to do. All this to say: though we were there, in part, to teach qualitative methods, we neither positioned nor thought of ourselves as researchers passing on the analytical “tools of the trade” from a grand, scientific, objectivity-seeking enterprise; rather, we came as allied disruptors, hoping to help support them in using their own knowledge and expertise to think and do research differently for a change.

**Table 1** Codes under categories

Category	Code
Attention to scaffolding, modeling, establishing norms	Adults scaffold research knowledge learning for youth
	Youth scaffold research knowledge learning for other youth
	Adults model meeting design and planning for routines for youth
	Youth model meeting design and planning for routines for other youth
	Adults refer to established norms (i.e. “The Yamacraw Center way”) and ways of working together
	Youth establish norms and ways of working together with other youth
	Adults attend to individual capacity
	Youth attend to individual capacity
Coupling restraint with willingness to change	Youth increasingly take on more responsibility
	Adults consciously refrain from taking over
	Youth take responsibility for what might be changed in the future
	Youth express ways to improve the research training process and research supports
Valuing process over outcome	Adults and youth shift from numerative and quantitative ways of inquiring
	Youth reflect on the difficulty and frustrations of training other youth
	Youth reflect on personal growth as researchers, community leaders, and activists

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through a variety of ethnographic methods, including but not limited to interviews, field observations, reflective memos, collection of program materials, photographs, and samples of youth work. Because the Yamacraw Center is an 8-h round-trip drive from the partnering university where, currently, two, and formerly, all three of the corresponding authors work, long car rides and long conversations often took place on our way to and from visits to Southeastern City (roughly one weekend a month). What this meant in practical terms is that initial analyses of our data usually took place immediately following its collection, as we normally had ample time to share, process, and discuss what we had experienced afterward, whether in car seats, hotel lobbies, or restaurant booths.

This iterative process of collection and analysis enabled us to shape and rework various categories and themes overtime, which we then used heuristically in later, more specific rounds of data agglomeration and analysis. For example, during the first training session in January of 2019, it became clear that ART youth held somewhat restrictive views of data as something quantitatively bound to numerals and spreadsheets. By our second visit, however, we found that the ART youth’s conceptions of data were rapidly expanding, and that, concomitantly, so too was their sense of themselves as researchers capable of gathering impactful data. Regularly

attending to these changes allowed us to broaden our codes and create more inclusive and comprehensive categories over time, which helped us to identify patterns that developed throughout the process—such as, for example, broadened understandings of data (see Table 1). Put simply, this approach allowed us to be more present with the youth, both during the training sessions and the three youth summits. Consistent with the principles of Humanizing Research, such a move also afforded us opportunities to speak frequently and transparently with ART youth and their adult partners about what we were beginning to glean from our time together, not only because it felt natural to do so, but because it enabled us to corroborate joint experiences and co-construct further and more layered insights.<sup>3</sup>

These commitments eventually enabled us to move beyond descriptions of linked gatherings and their specific innerworkings to fuller, more perceptive understandings of the project as a whole—as an experimental, homegrown, coalition-building enterprise wherein young people, through varying degrees of what might be characterized as success *and* failure, worked together in learning to build a space where they and their peers might be seen, heard, and reckoned with more authentically. The patterns that we identified as being most central to this process were:

- The importance of scaffolding, modeling, and establishing norms upfront, and then scaling back over time
- Coupling restraint and an openness to continual adaptation
- Valuing process over outcome; learning to trust and not to control/determine

We unpack these categories in the following findings section by exploring particular moments, decisions, and observations that illustrate their importance to the overall process. It is important to note, however, that these categories are representative of recurring, much larger, and in many cases, more nuanced practices than we have room to fully detail in this article.<sup>4</sup> As such, the following examples, while representative of multiple instances of each category, should not be read as mutually exclusive or bounded in any way.

## Findings

Our analysis led us to consider the ways in which ART youth and their adult partners created a culture of reciprocity and respect as they worked together to train other youth to conduct their own justice-oriented inquiry projects. In this section, we examine how ART youth helped co-construct the necessary conditions to enrich the

<sup>3</sup> We also, importantly, had not the slightest intention of ending our relationship with the Yamacraw Center once this particular process was over; indeed, even as the Covid-19 pandemic currently keeps us housebound, we meet digitally and think together about what future directions we might take despite the circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the ultimate aims and purposes of YPAR, a forthcoming research article currently in the works, co-authored with ART youth, will detail issues and concerns that participating youth organizations brought to the fore over the course of the three youth summits.

research capacities of their peers, how complications that arose along the way were engaged, as well as some overall lessons that were learned.

### **The Importance of Scaffolding, Modeling, and Establishing Norms Upfront, and then Scaling Back Over Time**

For the 3 years in which we have partnered with the Yamacraw Center we have been assuring the youth and their adult partners that this work, of dialog, of identifying community needs, of “intervening in the power/knowledge/action cycle” (Stoecker 2013, p. 38) is research. And good research. But the youth and the adults in the Center have tended to see themselves primarily as artists, as authors and painters and writers and advocates. One of the persistent and sometimes head-shaking patterns of our work with the Yamacraw Center has been convincing people who are already doing good and thoughtful research that what they are doing is already the practice of youth participatory research.

Some of this comes from a pervasive notion that data and research are always quantitative. Before youth turned to training other youth as researchers, the ART team first completed their own research project examining equity in school disciplinary practices in area schools. When we as university researchers sat down with youth to train them in research methods for this initial research project, we asked them to identify data they already had and data they thought they needed to collect. Almost across the board, the answers were: we need to know how many people are suspended; we need to know the social identity categories of school administrators, teachers, and schools to understand how that might contribute to the issue; we need to know how many people drop out, how many people are sent to alternative schools or juvenile detention, etc. This focus on *how many* was the conception of Research (definitely with a capital R) that these youth carried, even though they were all products of a youth program that valued stories, experience, and art. As university researchers and partners, our responsibility was to convince them that the expertise they already possessed in creating their own stories, poetry, and art could lead them to collect an equally powerful form of data alongside those, admittedly, important quantitative measures. To this end, we led the team in data collection exercises that consisted of photos, stories, and other non-numerical data to show how their conception of useful data might be broadened. We also led them in activities that explored various methods for analyzing qualitative data and how codes or categories created from that data might differ based on research questions.

When we returned a month later for the first youth summit (where Yamacraw youth were now the positioned experts and trainers of other youth) we were unsure of what to expect. What we found was that youth and their leaders were developing serious qualitative research chops. Yamacraw youth stood in front of their peers and walked them through the process of their own research project: first, focusing on an important question that they wanted answered; second, deciding what kind of data could best answer the question that they had about school discipline; and third, analyzing data. Yamacraw youth handed out a narrative that one of their participants had told about school discipline to other youth and asked

attendees at the summit to walk through analysis with them. “Here, we’re just noticing what seems to be going on,” David explained. “So, when the person says that he didn’t get to tell his side of the story, we code it as “Not Being Listened To.” David shared the five final categories Yamacraw youth created from multiple stories, interviews, and narratives and then invited others gathered in the room to highlight (using different colors of highlighters) how they would code the rest of the passage. David then turned the floor over to Cara who, afterward, led youth in a discussion about how their group coding and discussion led to a clearer understanding of what was actually happening in school disciplinary situations, and what suggestions for improvement and change might come out of these understandings. Although we as university research partners with the Yamacraw Center had always believed these youth were doing powerful qualitative research without knowing it, the youth surprised us with just how much they had grown in a relatively short amount of time as a group of competent researchers and research trainers.

What made this shift possible were a few significant choices made at the front end of the process about how youth and adults would work together and position themselves in relation to their mutual goals for what this process would look like and how it would work:

1. Adults (and this includes university researchers and Yamacraw Center staff), though important to the process, increasingly functioned throughout the 9-month cycle as support staff for the youth. Early scaffolding for ART was relatively heavy and included exposure to and modeling of various research methods that might be employed with relative convenience. Once Yamacraw youth were trained in qualitative research methods and had collected data, they were the primary analysts of the data and results, with structured support offered by adult co-researchers. They then became the first-line trainers of their peers in the methods of data collection and analysis. By the first research summit, adults functioned mostly as organizers, cheerleaders, and resource-providers.
2. Yamacraw youth were positioned as experts in their communities, schools, and stories. They were engaged as co-researchers with adults in the research process and were active in the generation of research questions, issue identification, methods selection, data gathering, and then, most importantly, in the analysis of the data as well as the training of other youth in the process of the work.
3. Research summits were planned with the goal of providing research training and support for other community-engaged youth throughout the city. Although the ART team used their own research project to create a school discipline simulation to raise awareness throughout the city, the ART also agreed to use their own research process as a way to build youth research capacity and civic engagement beyond the ART and the Yamacraw center.

While the *what* and the *why* of this process are manifested in the choices that adults and youth made to center youth research expertise, it is just as important to consider the *how*—how did youth make such progress in their understandings of

research and in their confidence in themselves as researchers? Yamacraw Center's strength in research capacity-building relies heavily on their understanding that culture can be created not *ex nihilo*, certainly, but out of the valuable assets their youth bring to the community space regularly. If ART youth are hesitant to view themselves as difference-making researchers, Yamacraw Center adults figure out a way to shape and build a culture where that identification becomes possible. It is an outgrowth of the work of the larger Yamacraw Center programming that systematically creates a culture of youth artistry, youth writers, and youth activists.

What this culture-creation looked like in practice was clear in the structure of ART meetings. Meetings began with multiple routines that built community: “joy-bringers” or short improv games, an activist moment where youth watched a short YouTube video centered on a researcher or activist whose work was interesting or powerful, and a background playlist designed by one of the youth to keep the energy up. These norms and culture-building activities laid the groundwork for some of the most interesting moments in ART meetings, where youth asserted their desire to make decisions for themselves and refused the (very well-meaning) help of the adults. Importantly, the ART structured the community summits to establish and reflect the norms and sense of community and culture that was so vital to their own development as researchers. Youth planned joy-bringers, set norms, kept the energy up with curated music from their playlists, and opened the floor to other youth for sometimes difficult discussions—trusting that the community and culture they had built and were building all along the way would sustain those moments of discomfort.

While we note here the structures that built a culture of youth research, we should also point out the behind-the-scenes attention to individual capacity and individual choices within the Yamacraw Center ART. This attention to individuals was again evident in planning sessions, where adults and youth considered how the structures of meetings might influence researcher development and considered who would present what and why. While agendas were painstakingly planned by the whole team, individual assignments were built to cater to individual strengths. For example, one ART member expressed his hesitation about running a discussion about the research process, and an adult asked him instead to run a joy-bringer and work as a sort of usher, helping latecomers find their tables while answering general questions about the purpose of various activities. In preparation for the second summit, they provided even more support for this particular youth by giving him multiple opportunities to practice what he would say as he led a focus group in a discussion about policing and racism. He practiced how he might respond to certain possible answers from peers and what questions might lead to deeper analysis from other youth.

Such attention to individual capacity was key to the momentum of the ART. As a result, ART members showed a strong sense that other youth researchers would need careful scaffolding to build up their own capacity for research. One ART member stated at a planning meeting: “I want to support them as they start researching [so I want to contact them every week]. Like, we’re just going to throw them out there? I think we need to help them figure out how to interview.” This comment led to a discussion about how to best teach interviewing skills to youth who may not have interviewed before, which in turn led to a change in the amount of time allotted

to practice with interviewing. The planning and scaffolding that the ART developed for youth to learn about research questions, data collection, and analysis indicated a strong sense on the part of the ART that other youth were highly capable of taking on the persona of researchers; they just needed the kind of support that the ART had received from their own adult leaders.

### **Coupling Restraint and an Openness to Continual Adaptation**

As the opening scene of this article demonstrates, ART's adult partners (the authors included) experienced occasional difficulty striking a balance between providing the backend support that the youth needed and stepping back at critical junctures to let them take full command of the process. It is a tension that is perhaps familiar to researchers and teachers who have engaged in apprenticing and/or scaffolding efforts, but here, during these three meticulously planned and highly-orchestrated youth summits, it took on a heightened degree of public significance, as indeed, the stakes *felt* high. Of course, we all wanted for the summits to go as well as possible, for the young people who attended them to feel that their time was meaningfully spent (on precious Saturdays, no less). And yet, at the same time, it was important—indeed, vital to the entire process itself—for the youth to truly be the face and the beating heart of this project. As such, there were times when we and our adult partners had to take intentional steps back, regardless of whether we felt fully comfortable or ready to cede responsibility in a given moment. Never once did we regret these decisions; whatever stickler-instincts or appearances of authority we might have provided would have intrinsically altered the spirit of what we had all set out to do in the first place. We did, at times, however, have to resign ourselves to a measured trust that it would all play out in ways that would matter regardless—that small moments would hold meaning to whatever extent that we let them and that the Yamacraw Center's culture of care and support would sustain everyone throughout. Looking back, we believe (or, at least, feel that it has been affirmed) that this trust and concerted restraint, however, perhaps, unsteady, is critical for laying the groundwork of possibility that this work hinges upon.

Perhaps most specifically, this restraint lay in learning to recognize and honor youth leaders' insistence upon the value of authentic youth-to-youth interaction between themselves and other organizations wherever possible. In a short focus interview, Cara, who in the beginning of this article asserted that ART youth should be the ones to follow-up with other organizations, shared her thoughts on this critical component:

Our whole thing is youth led, adult supported. And I know what it's like to have adults take over leadership. And I think it's easy for youth to talk to other youth instead of adults because they have the pressure of being more professional where with other youth they can be more open and honest.

Like so many young people who have grown up with little apparent agency on the bottom side of overt or tacit hierarchies, whether they be with parents or in schools, ART youth intuited that relationships formed amongst peers would take



on a fundamentally different and, perhaps, less assuming character. Though unreported to us by our youth co-researchers, this dynamic was in all likelihood exacerbated by the fact that our positionalities as adults helping to facilitate this process, in many instances, represented a form of racial and cultural alterity relative to the ART youth, and especially the youth participants with whom they engaged in this process. When asked why it was important for ART to establish direct contact with youth from other organizations, David replied, “I just think there’s empathy between youth and sometimes adults filter things based on their own priorities.” Part of our job, as adults, was not to get in the way of this sense of solidarity, as it is precisely these connections, and these suspicions, that make the promise of such participatory work, where youth train and support other youth and render adults like us all but moot, so compelling.

Interestingly enough, and perhaps predictably in such cyclical, generational work, the ART youth leaders soon began to experience a similar sort of solicitude in regard to their hopes to build in accountability processes for other youth organizations while, at the same time, being careful not to come across as too on-the-nose or hand-holding in their reminders, instructions, and follow-ups between summits. Oftentimes these concerns surrounded anxieties about attendance, wishing for prompter responses, or suggesting, in potential future instantiations of this work, that the time between face-to-face gatherings not be so long. David, looking back, shared his sense of why the project lost some of its momentum between meetings:

I wish we’d planned it tighter, more condensed. Like, they’d come for an afternoon and the energy would be great, but then we wouldn’t see them again. Not for so long. And we’d just hear stuff through the check-ins. And only sometimes, you know? So by the time everyone, or some of them, came back, that energy was faded.

We were reminded that experiencing firsthand these messy and sometimes frustrating transitions into enhanced leadership roles was, again, part of this endeavor, but also that collective change-making efforts entail more than commitment and occasions to collaborate; they also, perhaps even more critically, entail continuous structural support and a sense of sustained fellowship.

One final way that both the youth leaders and their adult partners were kept on their toes regarded the shape and direction that particular groups’ primary research questions took. What was originally the concern for one group sometimes became the concern of another group during a subsequent summit, while other issues were set aside for ones entirely new and different. Speculating on why the issues that individual groups focused on were so fluid, ART youth suggested more than once it should not have been all that surprising. The mere passing of time, for one, certainly played a hand in how final themes took shape. Seasonal changes and the ebb and flow of daily life inevitably came to effect what youth were able to focus on and how. One youth researcher, for instance, suggested that it might easily have been the case that the early focus on the institutional devaluation of school lunches waned by the third youth summit because it occurred in late August, “when the new school year had not yet gotten back into full swing.” On the other hand, summer, a time when kids are most able to play and roam around on their bikes, had just ended, and

a greater emphasis on neighborhood aesthetics, safety, and other boundary-related issues may well have surfaced as a result. And yet through all these changes ART youth continued to recognize and even emphasize that such sensitivities to change, to new homes, new feelings, and other ephemera—rather than signifying caprice or the mere vagaries of adolescence—are part and parcel of why youth voices matter; indeed, these careful, immediate, entirely present attenuations yield insights that busy adults frequently bypass.

### **Valuing Process Over Outcome; Learning to Trust and Not to Control/Determine**

The parabolic arc rising over our work with the Action Research Team was a simultaneous, and not at all disconnected, effort by the Yamacraw Center to produce, publish, and present on, its first comprehensive policy brief meant to reframe and eventually drive the conversation about youth thriving in Southeastern City. Immediately following the third summit, in fact, the entire staff of the Center, in addition to youth from the Action Research Team, held a kind of soft-launch of the document for prominent adults sympathetic to the work of the Center from around the city.<sup>5</sup> We were reminded, in this juxtaposition, of the messy, iterative instantiation of our youth work with the nearly fully polished presentation of the policy document, that though both represent legitimate and necessary research, in some cases, as Stoecker reminds us, (2013) “the research is in fact a result of the project” (p. 78). Or, put another way, and to play off of a maxim that the youth always used at the front end of their summits to set the tone for all of us: the person isn’t the problem, the problem is the problem. The process was the valuable part alongside the product; indeed the process was the product in many ways. The point here being that our work together was meant to focus on systemic issues that engineer structural inequity into a city; the idea is not to let individual bad actors off the hook but to center youth on the ways in which the problem must be tackled in large-scale even in the face of individual intransigence and fallenness.

There is a moment at the end of the third summit that stands out here. One of the participants, a young African–American woman, Shari, spoke of her individual research which involved documentary analysis in addition to interviewing a judge with an abiding concern about the ways in which the juvenile justice system underlines and reinforces inequity in Southeastern City. She spoke of disproportionality and the fact that her brothers were more likely than others to end up in the system which had, in her research, shifted dramatically in the 1980s away from rehabilitation and toward prolonged punishment-as-deterrent. In the midst of her reporting, Cara stopped her and asked why she hadn’t, to that point, mentioned race at all as an underlying factor and prominent variable in her research. Shari pronounced, almost wonderingly “I left that out because I didn’t want to make it racial based.” Cara, in response, in a reassuring but firm tone said, “I just want to put it out there that it is about race.”

<sup>5</sup> The document can be accessed here: <http://www.deepcenter.org/deepcenter/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-Deep-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

If, rather than Cara, an adult had interjected, the moment would surely not have stood as still in the minds of everyone present. Developing the seemingly-forthright, by no means automatic, but nevertheless critical confidence in the knowledge, of self and of place and of systems, to name the problem and say it aloud is no easy matter. And it is here, most assuredly—through this difficult, slow, nurturing, largely-invisible work—that we believe the Yamacraw Center and the transformative nature of such a project does indeed keep its promises. Here, differently, then: the research is the project and the project is the research. Which is to say that one of the central takeaways for the Action Research Team and for us, their co-researchers, was the notion that the research was the point; the summits themselves were the point; the planning was the point; building capacity was the point: the people in the room were the project, and the research and they were, most emphatically, the point.

There were other moments, too, leading up to the third summit, when the ART and members of the Yamacraw staff fretted about dwindling contact with youth from prior summits and grew concerned about the lack or quality of the data that youth who had confirmed attendance might proffer. It was in these moments that we had to remind ourselves, and our co-researchers, that the process counted as data too. We are reminded of prior work (Burke et al. 2017) that argued for making a relationship to failure as part of the everydayness of YPAR projects most particularly because failure is often about a lack of vision in relation to the successes that are already occurring. It is not that the culminating policy brief was unimportant: in fact it remains brilliant in its nuance, comprehensiveness, and mix of hope and the jeremiadic. But our work in the youth summits was never meant to produce anything akin to the policy brief; rather our work in the youth summits was threefold: (a) to collaboratively train youth as research leaders while (b) also training a different cadre of youth as researchers at the same time that we (c) validated the stories, and very existences of the youth who came to us, no matter their number.

## Discussion

Attending here to the capacity-building culture of the Yamacraw Center, the ever-adaptive mindset that this work entails, and the ultimate significance of process over outcome, allows us now to step back and consider this project with a degree of hindsight. Before we consider anything akin to implications, however, it is important to note that we use the word project here not simply as a means to convey “a discrete unit of human time and labor, such as a research project, class project, or [even] youth project...” but as a way to gesture toward “a worldview combined with strategy combined with motive combined with practices and habits. (Tuck and Yang 2018, p. 7). All this is to say that this project is ongoing, is happening now, in South-eastern City and beyond; that this article, too, is part of the project, as are whatever strands of insight it is able to impart to its readers, who are themselves, also, part of the project. Our notion of hindsight, then, is largely imposed due to the closing of this particular iteration, or chapter, of our partnership with the Yamacraw Center. And in fact another has opened in the interim: immediately prior to the closure of the state due to the Coronavirus the ART youth and their adult partners drove west

to the authors' affiliated university and presented on this project at a research symposium that regards the intersections of art and social justice. The youth decided amongst themselves to dress casually so as not to cater to what Cara referred to as the "politics of respectability" frequently associated with gatherings in white institutional spaces, which is to say that the work, indeed, lives on.

Still, looking back, perhaps the most vexing outcome for the team was the fall off in attendance. The truth is that we are not entirely sure why our numbers shrunk over the course of the three youth summits. We have hunches: it probably did not help, for instance, that there was a hurricane watch hanging over the city in the days leading up to our final meeting; the months-long gaps between gatherings also likely led to attrition; and we further recognize that the ongoing scaffolded support from adults (a critical part of the formula for success for Yamacraw) was lacking as part of the model for outreach to the youth from other organizations due to major logistical constraints. However: useful, too, we think, is the notion of thinking of some of the drop-off as part of a strategic refusal on the part of some of the youth. Tuck and Yang (2014) write of refusal as "theoretically generative, expansive" where refusal is "not just a 'no,' but a redirection to ideas otherwise unacknowledged or unquestioned" (p. 239). Part of acknowledging and honoring the research capacities of youth means also honoring their decisions to decline to continue in the work at least in the form most easily recognized through formal research processes. The truth is, again, that we do not know why many young people did not come back, but we do know that they were part of the process, and that the process continues in the ways in which they live their stories anew. We ought be less concerned, in other words, with 'capturing' the data (what a violent metaphor) and more interested in the fact that the refusal, the absence itself, is a story worth thinking about, without necessarily determining its meaning, pinned like butterfly wings to cardstock under glass.

Nevertheless, this slow leak in attendance, by youth in various empowerment groups throughout the city, bespeaks a problem that bears witnessing. Certainly the degree to which we caused or mitigated harm with this research project in youth not involved directly as members of ART is hard to know. One version, as Tuck and Yang (2014) suggest, is to look at how minoritized youth voted with their feet. In that sense we think of the future of the work as that which needs to look beyond the youth situated as primary movers and toward the experiences of those who, in their leaving, might be working to redirect our gaze in new, fruitful, and perhaps more equitable directions.

## Conclusion

One of the goals of this strand of the project, then, is to offer a brief overview of the critical conditions necessary for youth to take control of the process of training their peers to conduct their own activist inquiry projects. It is important to emphasize that, at a fundamental level, these conditions take both time and trust to build. Over the course of the three youth summits, the participating youth organizations began, more and more, to conceive of their everyday lived experience as valuable substance for analysis—as data. From both our initial trainings sessions

with ART and our experiences playing supportive roles during the three youth summits that they orchestrated, it is clear that youth, in general, undervalue their potential contributions to research and public policy. This is a learned reaction, and adults, wanting to think about structural change, have to undo a great deal of learned helplessness from kids who are either not used to being listened to when it comes to ‘serious’ or adult conversations or else fall victim to the impression that “knowledge”—always and forever bounded up with power—is accessible (and, for that matter, exclusively producible) by way of lofty, regulated channels and not intimate, embodied involvement in particular contexts. If we want youth to thrive, then we need to help them lead. And we help them lead by building infrastructure around them so that they are confident in their knowledge. This involves building a culture of care and accountability, creating a space for youth expertise to manifest itself, and scaffolding through practical and applied experience.

Furthermore, in the summer of 2020, the Yamacraw Center, in partnership with a program created to “reduce the number of youth being committed to the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ)” built a podcast aimed at providing a “platform for marginalized youth to tell their stories” which, according to one staff member was in answer to a dilemma: her “love” of “seeing pictures of Black and Brown youth doing positive things” which fail to provide an “accurate representation of reality” of what many minoritized youth in Southeastern City are “going through.” This in the midst of structural oppression, virulent racism, and now, increased financial precarity. Our hope is that the research here allowed youth in Southeastern City to, similarly, produce a different kind of accurate representation of reality as to the lived-experience of, especially, minoritized youth. The ongoing work will be in thinking through how to extend the space of summits like this, or podcasts like those above, to youth outside of the immediate circle of the Yamacraw Center. Further research needs to build out from the ripples created from experiences like this; we think it’s often best done by carefully trained youth partners.

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