

# How Participatory Action Research Can Promote Social Change and Help Youth Development

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**Participatory Action Research (PAR)** is a process through which people investigate meaningful social topics, participate in research to understand the root causes of problems that directly impact them, and then take action to influence policies through the dissemination of their findings to policymakers and stakeholders. Like other types of youth organizing, PAR promotes youth's involvement in their communities and the development of leadership skills. It emphasizes the development of young people's knowledge, skills, and abilities to be experts on issues of importance to them, and catalyze systemic change in collaboration with their peers and supportive adults.

**Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)** is a tool for increasing youth involvement in social movement organizing that can generate renewed enthusiasm for social change and create new opportunities for youth leadership.

**Educators, philanthropists, activists, and community leaders (young and old) work together** on all PAR projects. YPAR specifically employs a youth development lens to the process of PAR in order to ensure that young people have a direct role in shaping policies that impact them. As a method, YPAR offers a new tool for those working on social justice issues with youth to meaningfully engage in community change and personal leadership development.

**In YPAR projects, young people help determine issues of importance to them and their community.** Adults help elicit youth's unique perspectives and skills for understanding and addressing the problems. PAR integrates research and action and is useful for working with youth who are interested in broad issues and want to identify specific pathways to action. It is less useful when there are already clearly defined goals and objectives.

**Through research, youth participants learn how to make claims and create new knowledge about existing social conditions.** Young people use their findings to consider alternatives and identify points of "opening" where they can help change the status quo.

**YPAR leads to social change through actions ranging from educational outreach to political lobbying.** It can involve creative campaigns that take advantage of young people's unique experiences and skill with digital media.

## II. THE BENEFITS OF YPAR IN YOUTH ORGANIZING EFFORTS

**YPAR helps develop the quality of young people's engagement in community issues:**

- Youth help define issues and develop expertise about community needs through a collaborative research process with adults and other youth.

- Conducting research using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods and critical analysis aids young people in forming their own opinions about issues.
- Taking action based on their knowledge helps young people learn important literacy, communication, and strategic thinking skills.
- With adult mentorship, youth researchers gain concrete skills and access to networks that can be used to develop power, attain employment, and expand leadership

**YPAR helps increase the diversity of youth participation.** For example, it:

- Generates involvement from a larger cross section of young people when youth elicit opinions from their peers.
- Mobilizes young people to take action when they see their peers in positions of leadership about issues that matter to them.
- Improves the civic efficacy of young people as youth researchers from a range of backgrounds become informed, important, and involved citizens in a democracy.
- Catalyzes a wider range of young people to become involved when they see policymakers valuing youth input.

### **III. EXAMPLES OF INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SOCIAL CHANGE**

**The Youth Affordabili(T) Coalition (YAC)** is a group of 22 youth organizing groups convened primarily by the Boston-Area Youth Organizing Project (BYOP) and the Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project (REEP). Its goal is to hold public transportation in Boston more accountable to young people’s educational, health, and economic needs.

In 2009, YAC successfully campaigned to extend the hours during which its youth members they could use their school- issued student passes for public transportation, from 8 PM- to 11 PM. In determining the goals and objectives of this campaign, the youth organizers surveyed their peers to determine their transportation needs. These surveys and subsequent interviews with youth about their personal stories were part of a PAR process that empowered youth as the researchers to gather information from their peers in order to shape policy demands. In June of 2011, the Youth Way, a member group of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) coalition, presented a 20-page report with statistics from their surveys and individual stories of youth impacted by the “affordability crisis.”

In 2012, YAC launched as a formal coalition, continuing to work toward the implementation of a “Youth Pass” and successfully reducing both service cuts and a rise in fares. It worked

in partnership with Press Pass TV, a Boston-based youth media organization, to share its story.<sup>1</sup>

YPAR was an important tool for the Youth Affordabili(T) Coalition because it helped them to organize their findings in a way that gave their work weight when meeting with public officials, ultimately increasing their desired outcomes.

**Youth United for Change (YUC)** is a veteran youth organizing group in Philadelphia. It grew out of adult-led social service work into an independent youth organizing outfit in order to more effectively meet the needs of youth in its community. YUC organizers recruit at schools through the activities of school-based chapters, hold meetings to discuss youth concerns, reach out to other young people, conduct research through surveys and site visits, and cultivate relationships with adult leadership of schools to ensure that youth concerns and ideas are heard.

YUC embarked on a large-scale campaign in 2002 to restructure two large city high schools into smaller schools in order to hold those spaces more accountable to the young people at the schools and their needs. Youth organizers used YPAR when they conducted site visits at similar schools in several other United States cities, including Oakland and Chicago, to examine their models, as well as when they read pertinent research and incorporated youth surveys. Similar to BYOP and REEP, YUC had a youth-led research process that ensured that young researchers not only were surveyed about their experiences, but also were the ones designing the research itself. This had two potential impacts beyond including youth voice: (1) it ensured that applicable and relevant questions were asked; and, (2) it developed leadership skills in the youth conducting the research.

Working in coalition with adult allies and the Philadelphia Student Union, the group had their proposal for smaller schools accepted by the District in 2005. Youth Organizing continues to be a critical component of resisting top-down change in Philadelphia's public schools today. YPAR is an important tool in their work because it ensures that voices often left out of substantive conversations about "school reform" are heard in an equitable and organized way.

**FIERCE** is a member-based organization in New York City focused on building the leadership capacity and power of LGBTQ youth of color. It uses leadership development, cultural expression, media, and arts to engage youth in social justice activism. In January 2010, FIERCE published a report containing the results of their national survey of 62 LGBTQ youth organizations, projects, and programs. This report was designed by youth to

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<sup>1</sup> Youth Affordabili(T) Coalition (YAC) rally against the MBTA. (July 7, 2012). <http://youtu.be/eXpZfWX2doU>

present important truths about the experiences and priorities of LGBTQ youth. YPAR was a critical tool for FIERCE in this project because it enabled young people to identify important and overlooked truths about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in New York City and ensure that their priorities were presented in a clear way for local officials.

The report was based on a survey designed for and by LGBTQ that asked relevant and engaging questions. By surveying their peers, youth researchers were better equipped to: (1) listen to the perspectives of young people who may not already be engaged in traditional service spaces; (2) reflect priorities that were relevant to their experiences; and, (3) present perspectives that may have been unexpected to those outside of this population. For example, one of the surprising findings of the survey was that marriage equality was not a high priority for many LGBTQ youth; they were more concerned about housing security and safe community spaces. Someone outside of their community may not have known how to construct questions that were not biased toward issues more widely recognized in the mainstream narrative.

FIERCE youth articulated the most urgent issues facing LGBTQ youth, the gaps in current services, and recommendations for how to move forward in better service of LGBTQ youth, especially noting gaps in investment in LGBTQ youth of color. Based on their findings, FIERCE made recommendations to policymakers in order to move forward in line with the needs of LGBTQ youth. They highlighted specific actions, such as “Coordinate regional and national LGBTQ youth organizing summits to provide the opportunity to hold trainings, technical assistance, and peer exchanges with LGBTQ youth organizations.” The overall emphasis of the report’s recommendations was on increasing access to political education and leadership development for LGBTQ youth, to better enable them to organize for structural changes that would improve conditions for themselves and their peers.

#### **IV. CREATING A YPAR INITIATIVE**

Organizations and educators need to consider how they will sustain young people’s participation by addressing physical, social, and intellectual access. Because YPAR projects value young people’s own experiences and ask them to engage in critical reflection about issues, recruiting a diverse group of young people and keeping them involved is an important part of creating an effective project.

**Get students there and keep them involved** by organizing programs in locations and at times that youth can participate, in of their other commitments and resources. Organizations should consider the pros and cons of after-school, school-based, and summer settings for different groups of students, and consider if transportation, stipends (in place of other income from jobs), and flexibility in attendance requirements are necessary.

**Set the right tone** by creating spaces for youth to learn about and value differences. Programs should be clear in establishing norms that value differences and promote respect and understanding. Culturally responsive, anti-racist, and social justice curricula can be important resources for putting these ideals into practice.

**Make everyone's knowledge count.** Adults have a role in teaching skills and strategies and in helping young people make connections with experts. They can also elicit young peoples' interests and knowledge and provide support for young people as they engage in rigorous intellectual activities.

**Allow young people to be catalyzed by issues that are important to them.** Youth may bring forward issues that are not typically brought to public discussions, including sexuality, self-expression, and violence. Allowing young people to explore delicate topics and helping them make connections to systemic issues can lead to rich and insightful lines of inquiry.

**Flexibility in communication** encourages young people's curiosity and growing expertise with digital media. Youth involvement may lead organizations and educators to embrace a variety of forms of communication. For example, young people may share what they have learned through digital stories, proposals for art projects, or suggestions for website and social media development.

**Multiple venues for action** may be necessary for youth participants to communicate what they have learned and take action based on their findings. Young people's comfort and interests should be taken into consideration when determining audience, venues, and degrees of publicity for the outcomes.

## **V. MAKING THE MOST OF PAR INITIATIVES**

**Expect some tensions and dilemmas to arise,** because PAR activities are likely to challenge institutional norms and practices including conventional adult-youth relationships. This is true of many youth leadership initiatives, especially those using youth organizing as a tool for youth development. There may be more tension in YPAR because youth challenge the institutional power of traditional forms of research while they make demands for social change through their organizing efforts. By engaging in reliable and sound research practices, youth confront the commonly accepted truth that data and knowledge come solely from institutions of higher learning and adult experts and not from their own lived experiences.

**Organizational leaders should consider how they will respond to youth requests that challenge existing policies and practices.** Many youth-serving institutions welcome "student" or "youth voice," without explicitly defining what this means. PAR initiatives provide an opportunity for organizations and adults to reconsider authentic leadership

opportunities for young people. Programs often serve youth based on what adults perceive to be in their best interest. In PAR, young people may engage adults and educators in conversations about uncomfortable topics and challenge adults' conceptions about issues that have been previously uninvestigated.

**Adequate resources for programs** include access to facilities for meetings, tools for communication and research, Internet and digital technology to support the research process and dissemination of youth's findings. Partnerships with local universities, schools, and organizations might help leverage community-wide resources, including technical skills and creativity. Organizers should clarify goals of youth leadership and ownership of the final product at the outset.

**Rethinking program evaluation** may be necessary with PAR projects because it is both a research process and tool for social organizing. Organizations may consider factors like the persistence of diverse youth over time, fluency with multiple forms of communication, variety of audiences reached, integration of digital media, and emergence of new adult-youth relationships as indicators of success.

**Young people, adults and social movements benefit from youth organizing** that addresses social issues of import, promotes socio-political development among young people, and increases the quality and diversity of youth participation. By making YPAR a component of this organizing, youth have the opportunity to challenge the dominant perspectives on how we know what we know, endowing a "legitimacy" on youth-produced knowledge based on research that is reliable and valid.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

YPAR is an effective and versatile tool for increasing youth involvement in social organizing, and also shows great promise for expanding commonly accepted models of "expertise" as it pertains to research about justice issues. Organizations, community leaders, educators and young people can begin incorporating YPAR principles into their efforts for social change. This can be done to varying degrees by identifying areas where YPAR might help to leverage young people's unique perspectives in defining issues and action.

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