[Image description: Group of high school students of varying racial/ethnic identities and gender expressions, standing around a table with a corkboard on it, creating a plan.]

MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity by Design:

YPAR for the Classroom:
A Guide for the Critical and Curious Educator

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YPAR for the Classroom: A Guide for the Critical and Curious Educator

Youth and children, who we will refer to as young people, are experts in what it means to be a young person. This sounds evident, but all too often young people are left out of crucial decision-making that impacts their everyday experiences in and out of school (Bertrand, 2018). Such omissions are compounded for historically resilient[1] young people, who seldom have decision-making power over their educational experiences. Historically resilient young people encounter social issues every day that they recognize as unjust or limiting, yet as adults, we all too often miss out on learning through young peoples' expertise.

There are many ways to support young people as experts in their own experiences. In this brief, we present Youth Participatory Action Research, or YPAR, as a transformative exploratory tool for critical and curious educators. YPAR has been defined as a collaborative method of youth, with the support of caring adults, participating in research to explore social issues that impact them, with the end goal of taking action to improve the social condition (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Lozenski et al., 2013; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

The Transformative Potential of YPAR

It would be easy to tout the pedagogical benefits of YPAR since it opens up opportunities for youth to engage in qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research. These research skills involve math, reading, writing, and problem-solving which are highly valued in schools. But, we would like to pull back on that excitement and shift our attention to the truly transformative possibilities of YPAR. Historically resilient young people face systemic and social barriers that can make the school curriculum feel unimportant or disconnected from their realities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 2001; Moje & Hinchman, 2004). YPAR opens up possibilities for young people to connect learning to the systemic barriers that impact their lives (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020; Torre, 2008). Learning takes on a very new shape, so that young people can re-envision academic skills as tools, or means, to shape their lives.

Tapping into this transformative power takes some reconceptualizing of teachers' roles, which is why we developed this brief for the "critical and curious" educator. We use the term *critical* meaning that this is for educators that are attuned to issues of power and is rooted in critical theories of

[1]Historically resilient youth refer to youth that endure despite facing historic inequities such as systemic racism and ableism.

learning (Esmonde, 2016). So, if a teacher is critical we are referring to them recognizing (or are in the process of understanding) how systemic inequities shape different experiences and outcomes for different people. They might understand that most spaces (e.g., schools and classrooms) and relationships (e.g., students-teachers, teachers-administrators, or different young people in the classroom based on various reasons) have power dynamics at play. We also see *curious* as a powerful trait for educators exploring YPAR, because these are the types of teachers that might be willing to step into discomfort and/or ambiguity to explore new teaching practices and new relationships with young people. These are the educators that might ask questions such as *what will happen if I approach this as a collaboration rather than me teaching them?* or *what if I prioritize a learning space where young people can investigate something impacting their lives or educational experience?*

What is YPAR?

YPAR may sound like a pedagogy, and in some ways it is, but it is really a research methodology that leads to new knowledge. YPAR is used by researchers in collaboration with young people (Checkoway et al., 2003; Mirra et al., 2015; Mitra, 2004; Ozer & Wright, 2012). Yet, we also recognize that research knowledge is often treated as something generated in institutions of higher education (Gore & Gitlin, 2004). We would like to push back on this notion and argue that educators and young people are also knowledge producers. YPAR can serve as a systematic means of generating knowledge that can function as critical data sources for schools. We further argue that not only can educators and young people generate this knowledge together, but that this knowledge is especially valuable as insider knowledge. Who better understands the day-to-day social context of schools than the people that work in and attend these institutions every day?

YPAR as a Method

What is the YPAR methodology? It is young people, in collaboration with adults, identifying a social or educational issue that impacts them (Bautista et al., 2013; Fox et al., 2010). The social issues are rooted in societal inequities (i.e., we are back to thinking about power imbalances). Youth-identified social issues may include inadequately maintained classrooms (e.g., broken air conditioners or restrooms that are often out of order), insufficient racial representation in their teachers or curriculum, or even the criminalization of students based on race. After youth have opportunities to identify the social issues

[Image description: Teacher looking on as two students speak to each other.]

impacting their education, they design a study to investigate this issue in their local context with adult support. The design can be qualitative (e.g., conducting interviews or observations), quantitative (e.g., collecting numerical data through surveys or existing school data such as graduation rates), or using mixed methods. The design is dependent on the types of research questions the young people are interested in asking and exploring. The team designs data collection tools such as interview questions or surveys, and they collect their data from the people they think they need information from (i.e., peers, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members).

It's About Action

Now, we want to direct your attention to the "A" in YPAR. The "A" represents action. YPAR is not just to collect and understand data. It is intended to create action that somehow addresses or attempts to address the identified inequities. This is another reason why attention to power differences is important; oftentimes, young people do not have the adequate institutional power to take action on their own. Consequently, the adult collaborators lean in with their support and networks to help take action.

Who Benefits?

We again wrap back around to the transformative possibilities of YPAR. Based on your reading this far, who might benefit from YPAR in the classroom? What are the benefits? Hopefully, there is some anticipatory excitement as you think about the young people who might benefit. We also urge you to consider the ways you could benefit as a teacher. What are some of the benefits of YPAR in the classroom? You and your young collaborators will build new relationships. Other school adults and peers might also begin seeing these young researchers in new ways, which may disrupt stereotypes some have about historically resilient young people. Young people can build new capacities—academic and so much more—to shape their communities. Scholars are now examining the ways YPAR may lead to more civic engagement in communities down the road (Bertrand et al., 2017; Korbluh et al., 2015; Zeldin et al., 2017). Ultimately, young people are able to tap into their agency and see learning as a tool for their lived realities.

[Image description: Five middle school-aged students of varying racial/ethnic identities and gender expressions, standing together in a classroom and smiling.]

YPAR in Action

The Algebra I Class

For a powerful window into YPAR being used in mathematics, we turn to the work of Dr. Mary Raygoza, a former East Los

Angeles high school mathematics teacher who is now an associate professor of education at St. Mary's College of California. Mary was committed to integrating YPAR into her mathematics classrooms, and like many educators, she worked under the expectations of specific content that needed to be covered and mastered. Yet, Mary decided she would do her best to meet these expectations while incorporating social justice into mathematics. One key element to doing this was by renaming her Algebra I course to "Viewing and Changing the World Through Mathematics" (Raygoza, 2016, p. 134). This essentially shifted the focus of the class to using mathematics as a tool, or as a means, to engage in social change.

Prior to launching the YPAR project with her students, Mary made a lot of important moves to keep the focus of her class true to the new syllabus. For example, she incorporated activities to build strong relationships in the classroom such as incorporating readings and poems that addressed systemic oppressions. She also opened opportunities for the students to "declare their rights in the mathematics classroom" of themselves, others, and their teacher (Raygoza, 2016, p. 134). This list opened up important avenues of understanding that a math teacher might not have considered, such as two of the demands included on their demands for learning list included, "Don't compare us to another class" and "Accept our invitations (to sports games, etc.)" (Raygoza, 2016, p. 149). Mary also attended to supporting students in developing mathematical identities (see more on mathematics identities here). For instance, she included a social justice mural from a local housing project where some of her students lived on the syllabus. Such a simple move created a syllabus that communicated—this math class is connected to you and your community.

Mary then moved into opportunities for her students to begin exploring and discussing social issues while simultaneously bridging math and social justice. She did this in a couple of ways. First, she shared the video If the World Were 100 People, which gave the students the opportunity to think through social issues while also estimating and recording the actual numbers, which they then converted to fractions, reduced fractions, decimals, and percentages. The latter part of this experience was not treated as math practice, but rather as a process that emphasized the importance of being able to come up with strong mathematical arguments in varying contexts. Mary then recreated a teacher-made version called "If East L.A. Were 100 People," accompanied by census data for the students to practice for homework. Students dove more deeply into exploring potential areas of inquiry through a unit on inequalities, where Mary had small groups of students explore graphs depicting inequalities related to race, incarceration, and more. These smaller units allowed Mary to teach required algebra concepts, support students in exploring social issues through math, and open up opportunities for youth to voice what social justice issues were impacting them.

These explorations lead to the youth-identified issue that would be their area of inquiry, which was school food injustice. This became the focus of their YPAR project. Mary, again, had to navigate the reality of

school-based constraints, as she steered the youth towards a quantitative design that would lend to more mathematics. The youth designed a school-wide survey that collected data from 400 students, which they then analyzed, graphed their results, and presented to school food officials.

Throughout the YPAR process, Mary's students began taking up and using mathematical language such as variables, coordinates, patterns, outliers, and more. They also demonstrated important developments in their mathematical literacy. But, we would like to highlight the transformative part of Mary's collaboration with her students. The students enacted change in their school. They worked with the cafeteria manager to create a comment card system that would allow students to communicate what was and was not working for them in a way that allowed the cafeteria staff to make adjustments. Mary's students were able to see how they used math to change an injustice impacting them. That is the transformative part of YPAR.

The Literacy Classroom

We now turn to how YPAR has been integrated in the literacy classrooms of Dr. Danielle Filipiak and Isaac Miller. Danielle, a teacher at a large Title 1 public high school in Detroit, Michigan, partnered with a teaching artist, Isaac Miller, to develop a curriculum for an in-school arts education program that pieces together digital media, critical literacy, and project-based learning. They named the curriculum, "Me and the D" (D for Detroit) with the aim to push their students to consider the ways in which they might transform themselves and their neighborhoods, as well as reimagine their literary identities. The yearlong curriculum in the English classroom involved digital media, critical and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks to facilitate civic engagement and a sense of collective agency which provided spaces for youth to critically examine and envision themselves within the larger systemic structures. These pedagogical practices encouraged students to embrace diverse views of literacy and to explore language beliefs that both influence and are influenced by the contexts they navigate every day.

Filipiak and Miller (2014) developed the year-long curriculum around four thematic units that employed various literacy modalities, or multiliteracies. The action-oriented themes were "Discover," "Create," "Resist," and "Transform," and they were accompanied by the following three reflective questions (p. 60):

- What is the relationship between language and power, and how does that manifest itself in my life?
- What role does education play in the health of a community?
- How can I use my literacy practices to rewrite my world?

In the first unit, "Discover," students acted and reflected upon the issues that mattered the most to their lives as they ventured into literacy work that was more reflective of their lives. The new curriculum disrupted the boundaries of what was traditionally framed as literacy, which convinced many students that they were not literacy-producers. Filipiak and Miller (2014) still included pencil and paper forms of literacy but also expanded literacy to include

multimedia such as Twitter feeds, movies, and photography. They were able to shape their educational space as they began to think of themselves as creators who could use their voice to be heard by the structures of power, rather than merely receivers of knowledge.

In the second unit, “Create,” students were asked to reflect on the essential questions through a self-portrait project. The youth took pictures of each other and added backgrounds using photographs, paintings, and words. They were also asked to submit analysis papers and give oral presentations that addressed the three essential questions around language, education, and power. For the third unit, “Resist,” youth were part of a media exchange with students in Jeonju, South Korea where they created “My Homeland” poems and media projects based on their writings. Students recorded videos of their neighborhood and created video poems that answered the three essential questions which led youth to create spaces of representation where they are in control of how others viewed them. Ultimately, the powerful pedagogical practices in “Me and the D” culminated in the final “Transform” unit, which allowed youth to reflect on the transformations they had seen in themselves and their communities. These transformations included their creation of counternarratives to the dominant portrayals of themselves as literacy users and producers and “from objects within narratives of exploitation and violence to active subjects in the transformation of the world” (cited in Filipiak & Miller, 2014, p. 65).

A YPAR Framework: Principles and Tensions

In this section, we introduce a YPAR framework that can function as a flexible path forward to piloting YPAR in the classroom. Along with the framework, we introduce three principles and tensions that need to be considered as you launch YPAR. As you read through the framework process, think about what it looked like in Mary’s Algebra I classroom and the way she considered and navigated some of these principles and tensions.

[Image description: Four high-school aged students of varying racial/ethnic identities and gender expressions, conversing, sitting on stairs inside a school library.]

YPAR Flexible Framework

YPAR can take on many different forms—incorporating art, performance, photography, and more. This flexibility may seem daunting in creating a solid vision of what YPAR entails, but we reassure you that the flexibility is accompanied by a framework. In the figure below you will see the YPAR framework represented as a research cycle—albeit with a few variations. You will

also notice a “critical agency” cog in the framework. This cog is a reminder that YPAR involves abundant learning, but it is really about supporting young people in exploring and addressing the ***critical*** inequities that impact their lives. YPAR allows them to explore their own ***agency*** in ways to potentially address and change those inequities. Without this attention to the transformative potential of YPAR, YPAR can become appropriated for teacher- or school-based goals rather than youth-based goals while reproducing inequities, or the ‘schoolification’ of YPAR” (Rubin et al., 2017, p. 183). The outcome of YPAR is

Identify

YPAR projects are generally rooted in the lives, interests, and experiences of young people, which lead the young researchers to an area of inquiry. Scholars and educators have taken a range of approaches to support young people in this process. This often involves introducing some sort of instructional “tool” to the classroom to explore social issues. This may be young adult literature, comics, documentaries, graphs and/or data, a guest speaker, or community walks. The tool becomes a means to open up a space for young people to discuss inequities, which then transition over to discussing the inequities impacting them. Though youth-driven, teachers may frame a space for the inquiry as it relates to a specific content area.

Collect & Analyze

Once an area (or areas) of inquiry is identified, young people will need support in thinking through how they can collect data to learn more about the issue. Young people may need help thinking through who they should collect data from, and in developing survey or interview questions. As they begin collecting data, they may also need support in learning how to analyze the data they have collected. Students may want to contribute to the analysis in different ways—some engaging in descriptive statistics while others work to listen to interviews to discuss recurring themes that represent the data.

Plan

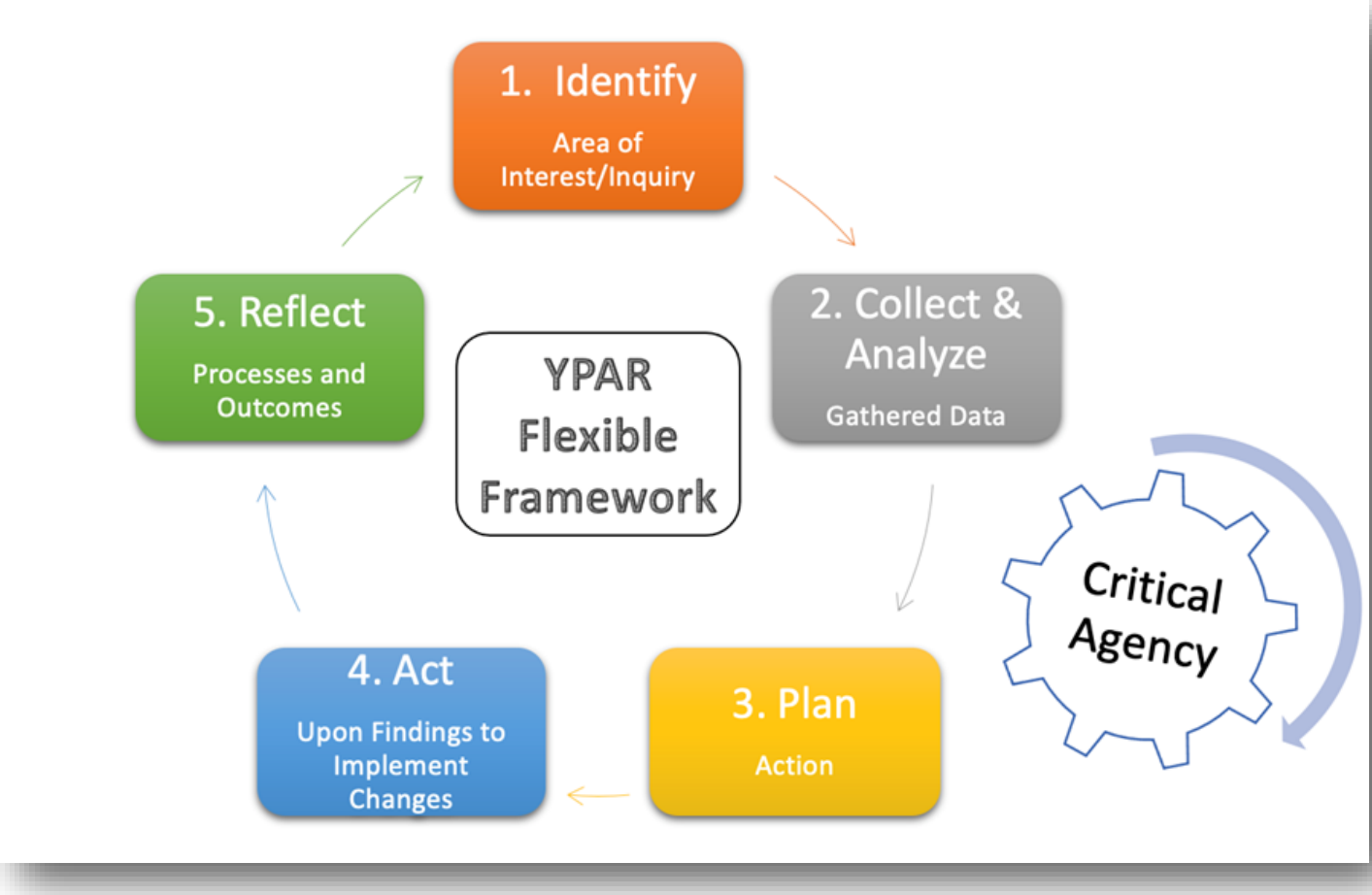
Once the students have their data, they will need to think about who actually has the power to change the policies and/or practices related to their findings. With adult support, they will identify who they should share their findings, with and how best to share the findings. This may include school administrators, families, community members, or their peers. They may decide to share their findings in a formal presentation, by creating a public service announcement, and by creating a more artistic dissemination plan.

***Act* (see examples of youth taking action *here*)**

The young people put their plan into place with a clear plan of action. This plan should include who they think is best situated to take action and what kind of action they hope to see. This may include community members, school staff, school administrators, a school board member, or a city council person. The teachers should also be leveraging their power as adults to support the young people in gaining the support of the people with institutional power to enact policy and practice changes.

Reflect

Creating change is slow work, so teachers can support their students further by treating YPAR as cycles of research, action, and reflection. Young people need opportunities to reflect on the process and consider what worked well, what are other potential avenues for action, and/or what are related areas of inquiry that they could build on to continue the momentum.



[Graphic description: Smart Art depicting a process. In the middle is "YPAR Flexible Framework." Surrounding this phrase is: 1. Identify: Area of Interest/Inquiry; 2. Collect & Analyze: Gathered Data; 3. Plan: Action; and 4. Act: Upon Findings to Implement Changes. Off to the right is a graphic of a gear with the "Critical Agency" written in the middle. An arrow is curved around the gear.]

always focused on the transformative potential young people have of acting on the social conditions impacting them.

Principles and Possible Tensions

There are principles that should undergird this framework, along with potential tensions that can arise. Here we identify three principles and related possible tensions to be aware of.

Power Differences in Adult-Young People Relationships

YPAR is more than just a research methodology (Fine, 2008). One of the principles of YPAR lies in adjusting the traditional notion of hierarchies of power, and the roles between adults and young people. When adults and young people are in horizontal (non-hierarchical) relationships, the process of teaching and learning entails seeing young people as those who possess valuable experiential knowledge and expertise. The driving force of YPAR occurs in its attempts to dismantle existing power and privilege rooted in traditional hierarchies of power, relocate the power to young people, and understand them as experts of their own lives (Baldwin, 2012). This commitment is critical because the power of YPAR gets severely diminished if it is used to perpetuate the status quo and/or school-based inequities.

Young People as Knowledge Creators

Once adults learn to recognize their roles and potential power imbalances that can disrupt youth-led work, opportunities open up to redistribute power to better support knowledge production that is youth-led or youth-centered. The underlying premise of YPAR is that young people are already in possession of the competencies to think critically, discern the inequities found within or across the systems in their lives, and generate new knowledge. YPAR is guided by the belief that those who are most impacted by inequities should be the ones taking the lead in framing the questions, the design, the methods, and the modes of analysis in research (Tuck, 2009). This youth-centered knowledge can become a robust data set to guide school decision-making.

A Shared Commitment to Social Change

Another principle in YPAR is that there is a shared commitment to conducting research and creating knowledge to change policies and practices that will improve schools and communities for young people. YPAR not only entails valuing and privileging students' prior knowledge but also empowers young people to enhance and expand their "problem-solving inclinations" (Pacheco, 2012, p. 130) with an end goal of solution-driven actions. Therefore, the flexible framework of problem-solving inquiry that drives YPAR ultimately encourages young people to strive for action and nurture their potential in transforming and (re)imagining their new possible futures.

Piloting YPAR in the Classroom

If you, the critical and curious educator, have read this far and are open to bringing YPAR into your classroom, we ask you to start with some preparation. We then encourage you to step into YPAR through smaller cycles of inquiry and reflection.

Identity Work

One element of preparation work to reflect on is whether you have had opportunities to engage in your own identity work as an educator. We know that there are vast identity and demographic differences between teachers and their students (see Schaffer, 2021). These differences include things such as age, race, ethnicity, dis/ability, language, socioeconomic background, religion, immigration experiences, LGBTQ+ identities, and more. These differences make it likely that even if you are approachable and caring, it is very likely that you have not faced many of the systemic barriers the young people in your class may have to navigate. If you have not had the opportunity to engage in identity work, we encourage you to start by seeking out opportunities through readings, professional development opportunities, or through this set of Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Resources.

Classroom Culture

Another area of preparation is creating a classroom culture that is a ripe context for YPAR, which entails two core beliefs. One, that students are seen along with the valuable resources and knowledge they bring into the classroom. This hinges on the teacher's understanding that all students bring valuable knowledge from their communities (Yosso, 2005). The second thing that you will find in a classroom community ready to incorporate YPAR is regular discussions about social issues that are impacting communities and young people. Being attuned to social issues through an equity-centered perspective, recognizing that these issues might be impacting students, and being willing to make space to discuss them in the classroom are important foundations for YPAR.

Elicit Support

YPAR addresses social issues that are sometimes considered contentious, so we also recommend that you elicit support within your school. Consider which school leaders (e.g., administrators, academic coaches, veteran teachers with institutional power) you can sit down with to share your plan to try YPAR. Let them know what your plan is, and what some of the anticipated tensions you are prepared to address in the process. Most importantly, share how you think this work will support young people and yourself in growing as an educator.

Reflective YPAR Cycles

Our final recommendation is that you think about experimenting with *reflective* YPAR cycles rather than one grand unit. This will allow you to dip your foot into YPAR while getting valuable feedback from young people and learning more about your role as an adult collaborator. Be sure to stop and reflect during the process and at the end of the research cycle. YPAR not only opens space for critical reflection but also guides you and the young people in developing and emerging multiple identities as learners, experts, researchers, and community members.

In closing, we are continuously inspired by the transformative potential of educational spaces that are reconfigured in ways that center the voices, experiences, and knowledge of young people. YPAR is a potentially transformative tool for

reconfiguring the classroom, a promising approach to advancing educational equity for students that have experienced inequities based on race, gender, religion, or other perceived differences. It is also a potentially transformative tool for educators to grow and develop new capacities to support historically resilient young people to take action on the inequities that they face.

Learn More About YPAR

Check out the following YPAR resources to delve more deeply into using YPAR in the classroom:

Resource	Description
Doing Youth Participatory Action Research Transforming Inquiry with Researchers, Educators, and Students By Nicole Mirra, Antero Garcia, Ernest Morrell	This book provides more than a "how-to" guide and draws upon how youth inquiry revolutionizes the traditional ways of conducting research.
YPAR Hub http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/	The YPAR Hub is a platform where practitioners, facilitators, and youth come to share robust resources and studies of YPAR practice. The curriculum hub contains lessons of YPAR curriculum that could be used in your classrooms.
Community Futures, Community Lore (UC Davis) https://ypar.cfcl.ucdavis.edu/index.html	This website provides 9 Stepping Stone guides and tools to support youth activists, adult allies, and intergenerational teams to design YPAR projects of your own. The website presents extensive YPAR activities and resources that you can apply to fit your unique needs.

Resource	Description
Stanford University's Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) Handbook By Yolanda Anyon, Katrina Brink, Marie Crawford, María Fernández, Mary Hofstedt, Jerusha Osberg, and Karen Strobel https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/youth-engaged-leadership-and-learning-yell-handbook-program-staff-teachers-and	The YELL Handbook, with over 300 pages of structured agendas and planning resources, is a resource to help support youth leadership development and action. This resource is available for free download.
Transformative Student Voice https://transformativestudentvoice.net/	This website offers a set of curated curricular units to support action civics and youth participatory action research. This is an open-source curriculum including lessons and facilitation guides that we encourage you to try out and adapt for your students when piloting YPAR in the classroom.

About the Authors

Taucia González earned her Ph.D. at Arizona State University and is now an assistant professor of special education at the University of Arizona. Her research addresses issues of equity and inclusion for dual language learners with and without learning disabilities (LD). She is currently examining how Latinx and Hmong bilingual youth with and without LD use *testimonios* to rewrite their experiences with inequities. Dr. González teaches undergraduate and graduate courses that prepare future practitioners and researchers to create more inclusive educational systems across intersecting markers of difference.

Joan Hong is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the College of Education at Oregon State University. Her research interest broadly focuses on the relationship between the educational contexts and cross-racial understandings among youth of color. Her line of research also aims to provide spaces where students are at the forefront of constructing knowledge through deepening their critical social thought to (re)imagine the future and their roles in advancing equity.

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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