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“We want to help our community”: fostering youth civic agency in a third space

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the conditions that provide new opportunities for youth of color to develop civic agency, paving the way to enact change in their schools and communities. This article shares findings from a qualitative study of an after-school program designed and implemented by the authors, in which 15 middle school-aged youth—including a majority of Latinx youth—participated in an after-school youth participatory action research (YPAR) program that included young adult literature alongside critical theories by authors and scholars of color. The authors used ethnographic methods to examine how three practices in the program—discussing YA literature and critical theories, conducting action research, and presenting findings and recommendations to peers and faculty—encouraged civic agency among youth participants. Drawing on the theory of third space, the authors argue that these practices fostered dynamic moments that opened new opportunities for civic agency that might lead to broader social justice-oriented change.

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Young people in the United States are witnessing the repeal of social and economic safeguards that took decades to establish, including affirmative action for equitable access to higher education; women's bodily rights; and diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in workplaces and schools. Likewise, rampant book banning related to anti-Black, anti-immigration, and anti-LGBTQ+ state legislation and school policies have aimed to significantly restrict access to the information and tools youth might need to address social injustices in their communities (Feingold & Reishart, 2023). Any curriculum designed to prepare youth, particularly youth of color, to challenge these injustices must acknowledge that civic engagement often extends beyond traditional activities like voting or volunteering (Anderson et al., 2021; Wood, 2014). Given how oppressions such as racism undermine their communities, civic agency must be conceptualized differently for youth of color (Anderson et al., 2021; Sinclair et al., 2023). Yet research on developing learning environments that foster civic agency is still emerging (Barber et al., 2021).

Our research addresses this area, exploring the conditions that provide new opportunities for youth to develop and exercise civic agency, paving the way to enact change in their schools and communities. We share findings from a qualitative study investigating an after-school program designed and implemented by the authors, in which 15 middle school-aged youth—including a majority of youth of color, some multilingual youth, and students receiving special education services—participated in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. In YPAR, young people typically co-conduct research with adults to investigate and address social injustices that

affect their lives (Caraballo et al., 2017; Domínguez & Cammarota, 2021). Our program included young adult literature alongside critical theories by authors and scholars of color that challenge deficit perspectives of communities of color. We used ethnographic methods to examine how practices within the YPAR space encouraged civic agency among youth. We address the following research question: In what ways did this YPAR program support youth civic agency? Our analysis points to three practices in the program: (a) reading and discussing young adult (YA) texts and theoretical concepts, (b) co-conducting research, and (c) sharing expert knowledge. We draw on the theory of third space, which emerges from collective learning (Gutiérrez et al., 1999), to argue that these practices fostered dynamic moments that opened new opportunities for civic agency. Ultimately, we demonstrate the importance of designing spaces that encourage civic agency possibilities for youth that might lead to broader social justice-oriented change.

In the sections that follow, we begin with a review of research focused on civic agency, YPAR, and young adult literature and explore the complementary aspects of these fields of study for developing youth civic agency. Next, we discuss third space and civic agency as conceptual frameworks for our research. We then detail our research design, including the curricular texts and pedagogies we used in the YPAR program. Lastly, we share the findings that resulted from our analysis and close with implications for future research.

Civic agency, YPAR, and YA literature

Traditional scholarship on youth civic stances and actions has used terms like “civic engagement” or “civic achievement,” focusing on racial and socioeconomic differences explained by either deficit ideologies about youth of color and working-class youth or disparities in access to civic learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Mirra & Garcia, 2017). In contrast, we use the concept of civic agency, which entails one’s capacity to employ a critical lens and work toward community change (Forestiere, 2015). We align with expansive understandings of civic agency that acknowledge adultism, racism, and other injustices, contending that adult views about what constitutes civic action are often privileged over youth perspectives (Mirra & Garcia, 2017), and that youth of color especially face intersecting oppressions (Anderson et al., 2021; Kirshner, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2023). Thus, civic agency for youth of color may include their desire and capacity to challenge systemic racism and intersecting forms of injustice, a departure from traditional notions (Domínguez et al., 2024; Mirra & Garcia, 2017). Likewise, civic agency or participation may encompass a wide range of youth actions or stances, including activism (Chang & Gamez, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023).

Youth enact and develop civic agency in a variety of learning ecologies. Activism and involvement in community organizations provide such contexts, as seen in studies in South Africa (Tivarange & Kirshner, 2021), Cabo Verde (Mendes Borges, 2020), and the United States (Domínguez et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2023). Classrooms can also support youth’s civic agency (Barber et al., 2021).

Youth participatory action research

YPAR has proven effective in providing opportunities for youth to enact and develop civic agency (Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Zaal & Ayala, 2013). In many forms of YPAR, youth researchers choose a local social justice issue to investigate, collect and analyze data, and present findings to promote change (Bertrand et al., 2017; Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Caraballo et al., 2017; González et al., 2019). The civic and sociopolitical development aspects of YPAR have been well-documented. For example, YPAR projects in Chile and the United States were found to create spaces of civic reasoning and citizenship learning among high school-aged youth (Lyiscott et al., 2023; Salinas-Valdés et al., 2021).

However, YPAR entails tensions that can impact its potential to create spaces of civic agency (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Lac et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2017). YPAR often involves competing goals: on the one hand, youth development, which positions adults as authorities, and on the other hand, dismantling youth-adult power dynamics, a goal that is particularly challenging in schools (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Lac et al., 2022; Rubin et al., 2017). Indeed, participatory projects may re-entrench oppressive power dynamics without a critical or decolonial approach (Lac et al., 2022; Tuck & Guishard, 2013), a concern many recent YPAR studies have overlooked (Muff et al., 2024). However, relational approaches grounded in reflexivity can address power dynamics (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Tuck & Guishard, 2013).

Youth literature and civic agency

Scholars have also found youth literature to be a successful vehicle for supporting youth civic agency. Studies in secondary English Language Arts classrooms, for instance, highlight how media, including literature, support students' engagement of social issues relevant to their lives (Durand, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Mirra et al., 2015; Saco & Durand, 2023). For example, Green et al. (2020) used "Puerto Rican diasporic literature, relevant news articles, pop culture and guest speakers" (p. 308) alongside pedagogical practices that valued students' cultures to create a third space where youth of color could bridge their out-of-school and in-school experiences and take on leadership roles.

Young adult literature is an especially useful tool for youth to discuss social justice topics, conduct critical inquiries, and engage in advocacy and activism (Castro & Williamson, 2024; Stover et al., 2017; Williams & Koss, 2018). This literature addresses social justice topics relevant to youth, including racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, among many others in accessible and enjoyable ways that "open up endless possibilities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue and debate of issues and ideas that truly matter to them and society" (Wolk, 2013, p. 43). For example, Bonner and Seglem (2016) used *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers in a YPAR unit to examine incarceration as a systemic issue. These studies suggest that engaging social issues through youth literature might support youth civic agency, especially when combined with critical pedagogical approaches and action research projects.

Our study built on research discussed in this section in envisioning a YPAR program grounded in youth literature that opened new avenues for civic agency. Specifically, we prioritized issues relevant to youth of color through literature and action research to create opportunities for them to be agentive community members.

Third space and civic agency

We frame our research within conceptual understandings of third space and civic agency. A "third space" is "a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened" (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 152). The concept of third space accounts for collective learning and change (Gutiérrez, 2008), which has implications for promoting civic agency. Third space traces its genesis to Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development," the distance between a learner's potential and actual development (p. 86). Later scholars considered interactions and activities related to group learning and change (Gutiérrez, 2008). A third space can be considered a collective zone of proximal development, a useful lens to examine learning and change within a group setting (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Gutiérrez et al., 1995).

A third space creates "the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (Gutiérrez et al., 1995, p. 152). Mediational tools—including language, structures of participation, and more—are the means through which

a third space is constituted. Generated through these tools, a third space is a dynamic and hybrid site for creating new understandings of ourselves in relation to others and the activity systems in which we operate (Gutiérrez, 2008; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). A third space can foster development, “as the transformation of the individual, the individual’s relation to the social environment, and the environment itself” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152) and, thus, can provide opportunities to develop civic agency.

Gutiérrez’s scholarship suggests at least two types of third spaces. First, a program can be a third space: Gutiérrez (2008) referred to the Migrant Student Leadership Institute as a third space encompassing a learning ecology that fostered hybrid language practices and imagination by using a variety of tools curated by facilitating adults. We view the YPAR program discussed in this article as a third space of this type, including the curation of the learning ecology with mediational tools and practices. Second, third space can refer to a temporally bounded moment or time, arising through co-constructed interaction, such as when a teacher’s “script” and the students’ “counterscript” intersect in a classroom and open possibilities for authentic dialogue across power differences (Gutiérrez et al., 1995). To avoid confusion, in this article we refer to this second type of third space as a “dynamic moment.” The YPAR program’s practices—including reading and discussing literature and theory, co-conducting research, and sharing expert knowledge—provided opportunities for dynamic moments to arise.

Some scholars have applied the concept of third space to YPAR (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020; Green et al., 2020). Morrell et al. (2013) used this lens to examine the unique opportunities that arose in an after-school and summer YPAR program that fostered critical media literacy. And Green et al. (2020) described how a high school English classroom became a third space through the curriculum. We build on these studies by considering how the YPAR program, as a third space, fostered youth civic agency. We align with Forestiere’s (2015) definition of civic agency: “the capacity of each individual, working alone or in groups, to view what happens in the world in a critical way and to think about how to bring about positive change” (p. 456). To that we add Fowler’s (2010) notion that civic agency entails a predisposition toward working in tandem with others with the aim of spurring change that benefits many rather than the individual. In short, civic agency is an ethos that provides a starting point for solving social problems (Forestiere, 2015).

The concept of civic agency illustrates the ways that practices in our YPAR program provided youth with additional opportunities to situate themselves vis-à-vis social issues and broader axes of power. The concept also helps us understand how the program shaped youth’s conceptualizations of research in relation to the community, themselves, and their potential for advocacy. Together, these conceptual lenses allow us to examine how dynamic moments—generated through program practices and mediational tools—opened new opportunities for youth to connect with the school community and take stances to advance collective wellbeing.

Research methods

Our study draws on our conceptual framework and previous research to investigate the mediational tools and practices that foster civic agency with youth broadly, and particularly youth of color. Our program used YPAR as a method for youth to engage civically with their school community. We collaborated with youth participants on their research project; however, our analysis here does not draw on data they collected. We studied the program with our own research question: In what ways did this YPAR program support youth civic agency? We used ethnographic research methods to develop understandings of complex local situations and processes (Anderson-Levitt, 2006). We collected five sets of qualitative data to capture the practices and dynamic moments at play in the YPAR program: (a) field notes of YPAR sessions; (b) video recordings of 18 sessions; (c) 15 interviews of youth participants; (d) 12 interviews of teachers and administrators; and (e) 55 artifacts.

Research contexts

We collected data in Spring 2015, the first iteration of the afterschool program we designed and implemented at a K-8, Title I school. The school, a one-story, brick building located on the margin of a metropolitan city in the U.S. Southwest, served approximately 500 students, 87% of whom were Latinx. Approximately 10% of students received English language and special education services. During the study, Donald Trump's first presidential election campaign heightened anti-immigrant discourse, state legislation, and school policies, which affected the school climate.

Researcher positionalities

We played several roles in the YPAR program, including university researchers, program designers and instructors, and participant observers. During the study, Sybil and Melanie were university faculty members and Taucia was a doctoral candidate. Our multiple positionalities and intersecting identities afforded us opportunities and challenges. Sybil's identity as a Black Haitian woman aligned with some youth participants' experiences as immigrants and multilingual learners, but also diverged in terms of linguistic and cultural identities. Likewise, Taucia, a non-disabled, Chicana mother-scholar from working-class roots, found that aspects of her identities afforded connections with the youth, but her background as a public-school teacher risked replicating hierarchical systems. Melanie's positionality as a white woman—benefiting from the structural racism that the youth, Taucia, and Sybil face—had important implications for this work, hindering her capacity to understand the youth's experiences with racism and undermining connections with them.

Our positionality statement aims to disclose our access to and negotiations with power, which we examined through a reflexive process that included writing field notes about power imbalances, combining our diverse life experiences to better address analytic oversights, and frequently engaging in dialogue. One example of these reflexive negotiations arose when the youth began collecting data. Wanting to shield them from potential pushback from adults, we initially took over the survey distribution process but changed course when the youth critiqued our actions (see Bertrand et al., 2017). Likewise, we recognized the importance of youth voices in research and invited the youth researchers to contribute their expertise through writing. Although none chose to co-author, we remained committed to respecting their agency and ensuring that co-authorship aligned with their interests. Our discussions with the youth and with each other often challenged our collective thinking, which was essential for shifting our position as authority figures and fostering a space where the youth could voice disagreements, share their expert knowledge, and make decisions (see Bertrand et al., 2017).

Youth participants

Initially, 25 students provided signed parental consent and student assent forms. We considered assent as an ongoing process, reminding the youth that they could stop participating at any time, which some exercised. In all, 15 were regular program participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Gender	Race/ethnicity	Language & ability	Grade level
14 girls	10 Latinx (including Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican American, & Latino/a)	2 multilingual learners	9 seventh grade
1 boy	2 African American 2 White 1 Black & Native American	1 received special education services	6 eighth grade

YPAR curriculum: Fostering a third space

Broadly, the YPAR program curriculum consisted of: (a) reading and discussing YA texts in small, self-selected groups to engage with social issues relevant to youth; (b) discussing critical theories to examine affirming perspectives on communities of color; and (c) co-conducting and disseminating research on youth-selected social justice topics.

YA literature and critical theories

During an information session, we introduced books participants could choose (see Table 2); texts were specifically selected for their complex representations of young adults and social justice issues, which youth could explore together, a practice critical to building civic agency (Wolk, 2013). The stories feature characters of color in varied settings and social contexts, with intersecting linguistic, racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identities. The books earned several awards for their literary merit and representations of youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth.

We provided handouts describing Intersectionality and Community Cultural Wealth—critical theory frameworks for students to reflect on social issues in the YA books, their school, and their lives. Collins (1990) described intersectionality as identities (e.g. age, race, class, gender, sexuality, among others) intersecting along multiple axes within broader conditions of oppression. Community Cultural Wealth outlines six forms of sociocultural capital that communities of color cultivate, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

Timeline

In Spring 2015, the adult researchers met with youth participants for 18 weekly, 90-minute sessions. The 18 sessions fit into three phases that reflect YPAR practices. In the first phase, groups of three or four participants discussed the YA texts, learned theoretical concepts, and brainstormed topics for research. Youth researchers drew on the books, theories, and their experiences to select a research topic: bullying and its intersections with race and sexuality at school.

In the second phase, the youth researchers worked in groups of four or five to conduct research on (a) bullying at the school broadly speaking, (b) bullying related to students' race, and (c) bullying related to LGBTQ+ students. Youth and adult researchers collaboratively drafted research questions, developed interview protocols and surveys, collected and analyzed data (surveys of 6-8th grade students and interviews with selected teachers and students). As stated above, we do not draw on data the youth collected in this article.

Table 2. Reading groups.

Groups	Members	Title/author	Genre	Settings	Identities	Themes
2	8	<i>Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass</i> (Medina, 2013)	Fiction	New York	Cuban Dominican American Girl	Bullying
1	4	<i>American Born Chinese</i> (Yang, 2006)	Fiction Graphic Novel	San Francisco	Chinese American Boy	Racism Stereotypes
1	3	<i>Cuba 15</i> (Osa, 2003)	Fiction	Chicago	Cuban Polish American Girl	Cultural heritage
0	0	<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets to the Universe</i> (Sáenz, 2012)	Fiction	El Paso, TX	Gay/ Questioning Mexican American Boys	Ethnic, linguistic and sexual identities
0	0	<i>Brown Girl Dreaming</i> (Woodson, 2014)	Memoir in verse	South Carolina, New York	African American Girl	Black girlhood

The final phase included youth researchers finalizing, rehearsing, and delivering presentations about their research findings to peers and making recommendations to school faculty and administrators. We facilitated conversations asking the youth to determine the big ideas—the findings—that arose in the analysis. With our guidance, they distilled these findings into PowerPoint slides, short videos, and speaking notes for a presentation to faculty, administration, and peers. They also generated recommendations for change. With our prompting and feedback, they practiced their presentation, with many memorizing speaking parts outside of meetings. Throughout the phases, we aimed to foster a third space by using group seating, sharing snacks, and engaging in community building activities. These structures and conversations about literature, theory, and research, enabled us and the youth to build relationships and disrupt youth-adult hierarchies.

Data collection

In all, we collected five sets of data to document processes involved in the YPAR program. First, each author, as a participant observer, wrote analytic field notes for every session, turning jottings into full, typed field notes with conceptual memos (reflections on emerging understandings) produced within approximately 24 hours of each session. Field notes detailed sessions, paying attention to youth's participation, and reflecting on potential issues (Emerson et al., 1995). Our field notes also included reflections on conversations with teachers, administrators, and students during the school day.

Second, all 18 sessions were video-recorded with three video cameras recording simultaneously to capture youth participation from multiple angles. Youth participants had consented to being recorded but took a few sessions to grow accustomed to the cameras. Video-recordings were later indexed in five-minute increments using a whole-to-part inductive approach (Derry et al., 2010).

Third, all 15 youth researchers were interviewed once by one of the adult researchers in one-on-one, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews within a week of the presentations. These interviews, which were transcribed, averaged 25 minutes and focused on youth researchers' experiences in the program, including their thoughts on readings, research activities, and presentations.

Fourth, we conducted audio-recorded interviews with 10 teachers and two administrators, exploring their perceptions of the school and students, YPAR participants, and YPAR presentations. Finally, we collected 55 student-produced artifacts during the project, such as notes on the readings, written research reports, and presentation slides.

Data analysis

We used an inductive ethnographic approach (Anderson-Levitt, 2006 Saldaña, 2009) to analyze data, allowing for an iterative analysis during and after data collection (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). We used the constant comparison analysis method, beginning with three broad analytic categories from our conceptual framework and literature review (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Each author read all transcripts to generate codes, followed by a collaborative discussion to reach agreement on the codebook. We systematically coded transcripts using NVivo11 qualitative analysis software. Each data source, except student artifacts, was coded twice by different researchers.

Our research question and conceptual framework guided the first coding cycle, including coding for unexpected phenomena related to civic agency (Saldaña, 2009). The second coding cycle involved open coding 20 parent codes, resulting in 66 codes under three categories (Saldaña, 2009; see Figure 1).

We refined the codebook throughout the analysis. For example, although we created separate categories for Civic Agency and YPAR, some codes in the YPAR category (e.g. "YPAR as a tool for

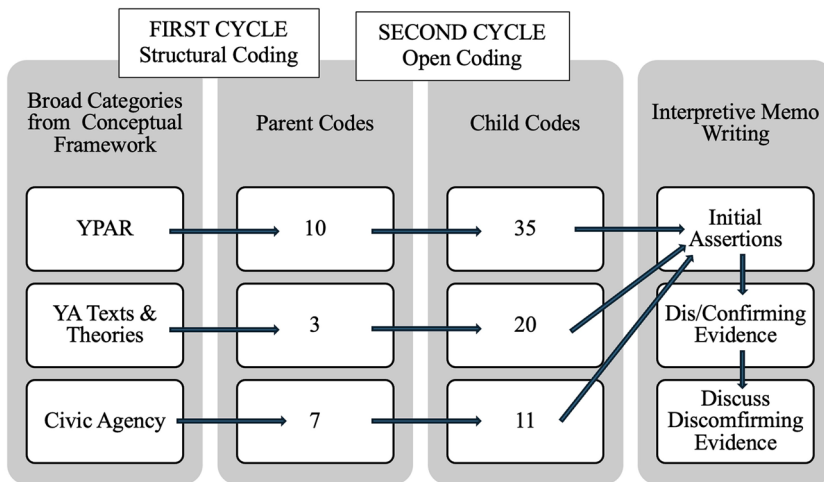


Figure 1. Coding cycle.

change”) also captured participants’ non-traditional civic desires and actions for social change. We thus revised our framing of civic agency to more accurately reflect participants’ experiences. This category also included codes that captured phenomena related to third space (Gutiérrez et al., 1999).

We wrote interpretive memos to develop assertions for each category and the research question (Erickson, 1986), while applying our conceptual lens. In these memos, we each noted dynamic moments when new possibilities opened for civic agency. The youth’s research presentation was one of the dynamic moments we identified, using codes such as “third space/reorganized relationships”—to indicate when youth researchers asserted themselves as experts in conversation with school faculty—and “new discourse from YPAR”—to indicate youth researchers presenting a novel perspective on a school problem. From this analysis, we asserted that the practice of presenting research findings can foster dynamic moments when youth position themselves as experts, which then opens avenues for civic agency as youth take advocate stances for the collective.

We tested our final assertions to ensure that they were supported by data and answered our research question. The findings draw on our analysis of all three coding categories to examine the practices involved in fostering dynamic moments in the YPAR program and to determine whether and how YPAR practices supported youth civic agency.

Findings

Given the study’s timeframe, the data collected did not capture whether the youth’s research on bullying and its intersections with race and LGBTQ+ identities resulted in the change they were seeking. Our purpose was not to study results from the youth’s research but to examine the program itself—the youth’s perceptions of their capacity to engage civically and the practices that supported this. Study results indicate that program practices—reading and discussing literature and theory, co-conducting research, and sharing expert knowledge—within the context of YPAR as a third space created possibilities for dynamic moments that then supported youth civic agency. First, discussions of YA texts and theoretical concepts served as mediational tools for youth participants to explore their experiences and intersecting identities. These discussions fostered opportunities for civic agency through dynamic moments when youth participants situated themselves within social issues and thought collaboratively about making change. Second, the program involved co-conducting research, leading to dynamic moments when members reconceptualized the purposes and processes of doing research relevant to the community, themselves,

and their potential for advocacy, thereby supporting civic agency. Finally, the YPAR program included youth researchers sharing their expert knowledge—lived experiences and research findings—with peers, faculty, and administrators. This created additional dynamic moments and opportunities for fostering civic agency as youth researchers collectively advocated for change.

Exploring social issues through theory and youth literature

In the YPAR space, sharing stories and ideas in response to theories and literature was the catalyst for dynamic moments to emerge. We frequently invited youth participants to share examples from their lives that challenged or were mirrored in the literature and theoretical concepts. As youth participants engaged the texts and generated new understandings, they began situating themselves individually and collectively within social justice issues and began envisioning social action, thereby setting the stage for civic agency.

First, engaging critical theories helped youth participants reflect on social issues in the texts, their lives, and their school. Small groups identified and shared examples from their lives and the books that reflected theoretical concepts. For example, Zamora, a Latina 8th grader, volunteered an example of aspirational capital, “the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structural inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77): “How Latinos still have hope that one day they will become U.S. citizens even though there is a lot of conflict in the White House with the immigration [laws].” Zamora’s group also identified Community Cultural Wealth in the YA book *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (Medina, 2013): “We chose linguistic capital...because they [characters] spoke Spanish as well as English.” Other groups similarly identified examples of social capital in life and their book. Thus, using critical theories to examine life and literature provided affirming ways to approach social issues.

Intersectionality—how individuals’ social locations intersect with systems of power that produce oppression (Collins, 1990)—provided an additional lens to reflect on identities in connection to social issues. A dynamic moment emerged during a discussion about bullying that followed an identity mapping activity where youth participants explored conflicts between their identities and community constructions of these identities. Leila explained:

[I]t’s to the point where that person takes it too far and the victim just feels a little bit...a little bit insecure about their race. But then they want to change it, but they really can’t because it’s them and it’s who they are. I’ve experienced it before because I’m Hispanic, but mostly people don’t believe it ‘cause I’m freaking white. And then when I see my friends get called [names], I have to step in and defend them because I’ve been there, and I don’t want them to feel down. I don’t want them to feel what it’s like to be judged about their race.

Leila began with a broad example about bullying related to race, shifted to herself, and then how she intervened on her friends’ behalf. Leila’s switch from the general, to the individual, to the group, was a dynamic moment that suggests an ethos for civic agency, connecting individual needs to collective ones.

Second, engaging youth literature through critical lenses and youth experiences opened possibilities for enacting civic agency through research. We asked youth participants to brainstorm research topics from conflicts in the novels that reflected their experiences. Leila, who had listed “Hispanic” and “bisexual” in the identity mapping activity, wrote her research topics in this order: “judgment on sexuality, bullying, drugs, abuse, race—name calling (why do people do that?), feeling the need to change/not tell your identity, identity.” Leila’s list reflected topics from the books—identity, racism, and bullying—and also topics from her experiences and interests like sexuality, drugs, and abuse.

One group that read *Yaqui Delgado* discussed bullying as a major conflict, with the main character accused of “shak[ing] her ass too much and [being] a skank.” Students who read *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) wrote terms like “ethnic stereotyping” and “being embarrassed of family,” referring to the main character internalizing a sense of shame about his cultural background and

family in response to discrimination. These conflicts evolved to research topics like “sexist stereotyping,” “racism,” “cultural shame,” and “bullying,” which youth participants also witnessed at school.

A dynamic moment emerged when another group that read *Yaqui Delgado* discussed the relationship between Piddy and her mother as a conflict in addition to bullying. Zamora explained, “Her mother is very judgmental, that’s why. Her mother doesn’t want Piddy to make the same mistakes as she did.” Dora elaborated, “[Piddy’s mother’s] always calling people lower than her as chusma. Like, she doesn’t want to be like those kind of people because she’s been there [...] because of a guy. And so, like, she’s so overprotective of her [daughter].” In their initial articulation of the conflict, Zamora and Dora stayed close to the text—Piddy’s mother is judgmental and does not want her daughter to associate with people who might lead Piddy to repeat her mistakes. Sybil and Taucia asked follow-up questions: “So, what would we call that?” and “Are adults different than youth?” Dora and Zamora responded:

Dora: [Piddy] has this conflict because parents really don’t understand us. Like, they [don’t] want us to make the same mistake but we know what’s going to happen if we make those mistakes and we want something different than you, than what our parents had. [...] We know better, like, we know. They think that we don’t know, but actually we know. [Everyone laughs]

Sybil: So, is the conflict then how adults think about young people?

Zamora: So, it’s like what my friend says, they want us to act like young adults, but they treat us like children. [...]

Taucia: Is that only at home or does that happen at school too?

Multiple Youth Participants: Everywhere/At school/The teachers.

In this excerpt, youth participants moved from discussing the text to drawing on their experiences to explore youth-adult conflicts. Their statements shifted the conflict from “Piddy’s mom is always on her case” to challenging adults’ perceptions of youth as children who do not “know better.”

These examples demonstrate youth-centered discussion as a practice that can foster dynamic moments, leading to further opportunities for civic agency. Sharing personal anecdotes, opinions, and ideas in response to the texts engendered a dynamic moment—a third space mediated by youth literature, critical theories, and interactions between youth and adult researchers—that allowed youth participants to take the lead and set their research agenda. This finding echoes Green et al.’s (2020) assertion that sharing is essential to construct a third space because sharing “mediate[s] reflection of personal histories and collaboration, allowing for texts to emerge from the lived experiences of all participants” (p. 311).

These findings also suggest that discussing critical theories and youth literature provided entry points to discuss social issues and identities, which are needed to develop civic agency. Further, generating research topics from stories and personal experiences with the goal of taking action on social justice issues was an additional opportunity for civic agency. Bullying, as a research topic, emerged from discussing themes across several books. Youth literature supports developing “civic habits of mind” and reading groups reframe reading as a social activity, using books “to inquire into important ideas that matter to adolescents, society, and the world” (Wolk, 2013, p. 45). Activities that promote critical thinking, asking questions, and problem solving are essential for developing civic agency (Forestiere, 2015).

The research process: Self and community

The research phase of the program formed the crux of youth participants’ expanding civic agency and offered them opportunities to explore their identities in relation to the work. Dynamic moments emerged during our interviews with the youth as they articulated different

conceptualizations of research: research as looking up predetermined answers and research as creating new knowledge to enact social change. Additionally, they negotiated and created new knowledge of themselves as researchers as they reflected on the research process. Overall, the practice of co-conducting social science research supported the development of civic agency.

As the youth engaged in research, it became evident that school-based and YPAR-based research approaches collided within the YPAR program. Youth brought previous school-based experiences, relying on computer-based or book searches to answer questions, positioning them as consumers rather than contributors to public discourse. This contrasted with research methods used in the program to explore social issues impacting their school. They used these contrasting experiences to reconceptualize research from an individual consumer process to one bridging individuals to their communities through research for social change.

For example, Malia, a Latina 8th grader, shared in an interview that, before YPAR, she thought “research was just like just going to Google and everything. Not really like going deep in investigating.” Likewise, Diane, a white youth researcher in 7th grade, explained:

Going onto the computer and looking up articles and stuff. I knew what research was, but in our case, [...] I didn't think we were going to think of something we wanted to talk about and then actually survey people and stuff. I didn't think we were going to do that kind of research. Only because it's a club in school.

Diane and Malia's comments shed light on their previous engagements in research and how YPAR methods disrupted their former experiences by having them choose their own topic and investigate it using qualitative and quantitative methods. Diane's comment, “only because it's a club in school,” further highlighted their recognition of narrow learning experiences offered in school.

Although school classes and YPAR both rely on data to answer research questions, the youth described contrasting research experiences. When books and internet search results were data sources, the youth described their search as “looking up” already established facts. However, in YPAR, youth participants described their roles as knowledge creators. Daniela, a Latina 7th grader, explained, “We used our brain instead of asking Wikipedia or something like that or Google.” Likewise, Sydney, an African American 8th grader, reflected:

Before [YPAR], I didn't have much knowledge about what research is. Basically, learning in school, you think research is like reading textbooks and pulling out information from the books. But during this program, you're able to think outside the box and getting involved in your environment and learning different things.

As Sydney articulated, conducting research and “getting involved in your environment” emphasized research as active and knowledge as situated rather than passively looking up predetermined facts.

These dynamic moments of rethinking research were entry points to expanded youth civic agency. The program highlighted for some youth how their experiences are worthy topics of research and how this research can benefit the larger community. Sydney explained: “[I]t's not [that] you're just reading books, but you're also getting inside your community and learning different things in your community and how they feel about something.” Malia shared similar ideas; she came to understand research as “a process of finding an answer that can help communities or societies.” In these dynamic moments, youth participants reconceptualized research in relation to the community and its potential for social change.

These illustrative excerpts reveal how the research process fostered dynamic moments for youth to reflect and expand their understandings of research. While books and internet sources were predominant secondary resources in youth participants' research experiences, introducing social science research methods proved critical in reshaping their understanding of research as an engaged process that centered their experiences and issues impacting their school community.

As the youth developed new understandings of research, they also reconsidered their own identities. Dynamic moments emerged from their reflections on what constitutes a researcher within broader

axes of power. Youth participants defined researchers along a continuum that ranged from having specific skills to inherent qualities. Jeanette, a Latina 7th grader, disrupted traditional power hierarchies by asserting that anyone could research as long as they had math and reading skills. For Rachel, a white student in 7th grade, curiosity was an necessary quality as she positioned herself as a researcher: "I haven't actually labeled myself, thought of myself as the name researcher. I've always been curious, but now that I think about it, yeah, I kind of would be labeled as a researcher." In addition, Rachel shared that participating in YPAR helped her understand research in a new way: "I saw that researching was not just looking up answers, it was actually asking questions and being sincerely curious about what the answer was." Likewise, Ramona, an African American 7th grader, framed research as an inherent quality of being human: "Research starts at birth...putting [your] mouth on things and finding out what stuff is." Collectively, the youth participants identified skill sets and dispositions that researchers draw from and positioned themselves as researchers, disrupting traditional framings of researchers while centering their civic agency to solve social issues.

Some youth referred to the utility of research as a factor in considering themselves as researchers. Brenda explained that conducting interviews and collecting surveys helped her view herself as a researcher and made her feel like, "We're doing this because we want to help our community and do something right." For Brenda, research could address issues that affected her community. Zamora also shared this sense of civic agency: "I think I would say I'm knowledgeable in that [research topic] area, I guess I would say. I'm not an expert, but I have information that is useful, and I have data to back it up." Thus, conducting research helped some youth participants reposition themselves as emerging advocates and agentic knowledge producers.

Interviews with youth participants revealed that dynamic moments occurred during reflections on conducting research. Their responses demonstrated a synergistic process of learning and becoming and highlighted opportunities to rethink how to structure and support youth through YPAR. Although not all youth researchers articulated a new conceptualization of research as a tool for social change or adopted new identities as researchers, the dynamic moments discussed in this section suggest that the YPAR practice of conducting research and reflecting on the research process can contribute to developing civic agency. Our findings align with Forestiere's (2015) argument that activities that support civic agency must include "skills that students can utilize in their lives" (p. 456), like problem solving and asking questions. Over time, such skills enable youth to develop an ethos for civic agency by viewing the world critically and figuring out how to make positive change (Forestiere, 2015).

YPAR presentations and dynamic moments

Another avenue for dynamic moments to arise within the YPAR program was through youth researchers sharing their findings with fellow students, faculty, and administrators. The presentations were fertile ground for the youth to express and expand their civic agency, speaking out on behalf of student wellbeing in general. In this way, the dynamic moments that arose in the presentations provided a bridge between the youth researchers' concerns for the school as individuals and their stances for collective action. Below, we illustrate this phenomenon as it arose during the youth's presentations to the faculty and administration.

The presentation, held during an after-school faculty meeting toward the end of the school year, involved 12 YPAR youth presenting to about 30 teachers and administrators. During the presentation, the youth researchers introduced themselves and provided an overview of the research topic—bullying at the school, specifically as connected to race or sexuality. They then presented their research findings via videos they created, illustrating the magnitude of bullying at the school and how it was connected to racism and homophobia. The youth researchers ended with recommendations, including a call for safe spaces and counseling.

The dynamic moments that arose through this presentation unfolded during the question-and-answer period. The recommendation for a counselor in the presentation formed the nexus of a two-part dynamic moment. In the first part, the principal asked the youth researchers why they thought “one of the solutions to the bullying situation should be counseling.” Dora, in a conversational tone, explained:

We decided to have counseling because a lot of kids... A counselor is supposed to keep your secrets. Like, you should feel comfortable talking to them. So, if kids don't feel comfortable talking to [...] their own teacher, they'll feel comfortable, maybe, talking to someone they trust, maybe a counselor.

Here, Dora brought up two main points: a counselor keeps students' secrets and students may feel more comfortable speaking with a counselor than a teacher. The principal's question provided Dora an opening to share her well-considered rationale for the recommendation. And in this dynamic moment, she unhesitatingly took this opportunity, exercising civic agency and speaking up on behalf of “a lot of kids.”

Moments later, a teacher asked whether the students wanted an adult or peer counselor. An exchange developed between the teacher, Dora, Brenda, and Diane:

Dora: An adult counselor.

Teacher: And what made you think if they don't go to a teacher, they would go to, like, another adult counselor?

Brenda: ...Let's say you have a kid. She or he will keep secrets from me they don't want to tell you, so they would tell another person, and that would let out the negative or depressed energy to them, so they can find a way to be happy, and so they can move on and move forward.

Dora: Also, a teacher has to, like, has to take care of all these other kids, and they can't just, like, be with one kid and understand them. And if you have a counselor, you have more time with that person, and you, the counselor gets to know more, like, how the kid thinks, and they'll help, maybe help them out more than a teacher can.

Diane: And maybe...they think you're [teachers are] probably going to go talk to that student that's bullying them, and they don't want to talk, and they don't want the bully to think that you're a snitch. So a counselor might be someone to help them.

Each speaker built upon or questioned the ideas previously discussed. After Dora clarified that the YPAR youth were recommending an adult counselor, the teacher questioned this choice. Brenda entered the exchange, adding an explanation of the psychological benefits of students talking to a counselor. Brenda's discussion of “secrets” mirrored Dora's earlier comment. Dora then added to the rationale that a counselor has more time for one-on-one interactions with students. Finally, Diane returned to the idea of keeping secrets, building upon the momentum of the discussion.

In this way, a dynamic moment unfolded as five different speakers—three YPAR youth and two faculty members—discussed the idea of confidentiality with counselors, with Diane elaborating on the others' comments and contributing a previously unmentioned reason for a counselor, which was also a solution to the danger of being perceived as a snitch. In this way, the three students took advantage of the context of the YPAR presentation to co-construct a dynamic moment.

This dynamic moment, engendered by the YPAR practice of sharing expert knowledge, opened possibilities for the youth to collectively exercise and expand their civic agency as they responded to the adults' questions and advocated for themselves and their peers. Specifically, the moment allowed youth participants to exercise their capacity to “think about how to bring about positive change” (Forestiére, 2015, p. 456), and they did so collectively, showing their predisposition toward working in tandem with others (Fowler, 2010). Thus, the YPAR presentations provided opportunities for youth to further connect with the school community and take stances for its improvement.

To be clear, there were missed opportunities for dynamic moments during this presentation and others. At some points, the faculty's questions and the youth researchers' responses did not

result in dialogue between or among either group (Bertrand et al., 2020). For instance, the principal asked if the youth had any findings about the effectiveness of the “[anti-bullying] stuff we already have on campus.” The youth researchers looked at each other and no one spoke. The principal then said, “That would be a no,” in a joking tone. Thus, we do not claim sharing expert knowledge as a surefire way to bring about dynamic moments. Instead, this sharing created possibilities for dynamic moments to arise. These, then acted as bridges for the youth to expand civic agency and move toward a collective stance for the common good.

Implications and conclusion

This study examined an after-school program in which 15 middle school-aged youth engaged in YPAR in the urban Southwest. Our findings are thus context specific. However, they offer implications for supporting youth, especially youth of color in the U.S., to develop new understandings of themselves as civic agents able to enact change in their schools and communities and to resist state and school policies designed to limit their access to information, diminish their civil rights, and invalidate their experiences and expert knowledge. Our conceptual framing of third space highlights practices that can inform future approaches to designing spaces that provide opportunities for youth to develop civic agency. We argue that the program and its practices encompassed two types of third space (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez et al., 1995). First, the YPAR program functioned as a third space by virtue of being an extracurricular program housed on the school campus as well as the learning ecology curated within the program via the tools and practices previously listed. This aligns with studies that discuss YPAR as a third space (Caraballo & Lyiscott, 2020; Green et al., 2020; Morrell et al., 2013). Second, our data yielded evidence of the second type of third space discussed by Gutiérrez et al. (1995)—dynamic moments created by interactions between youth and adults that allowed for authentic dialogue. The YPAR program’s practices mediated these dynamic moments—for example, youth and adults co-constructed new understandings through sharing varied perspectives and lived experiences during activities such as discussing theory and literature or developing research questions.

Our study contributes new insights about how third spaces, YPAR, and youth civic agency are interconnected, and has implications for doing this work with youth of color. For example, program practices effectively curated a learning ecology centered on the cultures and experiences of youth in general, and youth of color in particular, via literature and critical theory, and via pedagogical activities that invited youth to share their experiences and expertise, collaborate with peers and adults to investigate social issues, and produce and share new knowledge. We posit that the combined practices of youth drawing on their lives—informed by critical theories and literature—to identify and research social issues affecting the school or community created opportunities for them to move from individual concerns to collective advocacy. Thus, these activities are aligned with those needed to foster civic agency, which include “skills such as community building, problem solving, asking questions, engaging in constructive debate, [and] developing empathy” (Forestiere, 2015, p. 456). Although we cannot claim that civic agency is the inevitable result of the practices used in the YPAR program, we argue that using these and similar mediational tools can create new opportunities for dynamic moments to arise and for youth to take the lead.

While our program took place after school, our findings align with studies that embed YPAR as part of classroom curriculum and instruction (Green et al., 2020; Mirra et al., 2015). For instance, we found that the activist context of YPAR reframed traditional academic practices such as reading literature, conducting research, and delivering a presentation as tools for understanding social justice issues and taking action that benefits communities. Like Green et al. (2020), we found that “students defined the class as a space for social justice work and one in which they could see themselves as activists” (p. 313). In addition, our use of books by authors from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds contributes to research on using young adult literature within YPAR projects (Bonner & Seglem, 2016; Williams & Koss, 2018). Our findings suggest that young people, and

youth of color in particular, benefit from reading YA texts alongside critical theories that name injustices and offer transformative directions. We argue that reading texts with characters that are not only peers, but also embedded in racialized communities facing complex issues, creates opportunities for youth of color to see their experiences and identities mirrored in literature (Bishop, 1990) and to situate themselves in social issues they want to change. Engaging such texts as part of a youth-driven action research curriculum provides a pathway for youth to strive towards solving social problems in their lives (Williams & Koss, 2018; Wolk, 2013). More research is needed on the affordances of including youth literature in a YPAR curriculum—for instance, what happens when youth researchers first identify a relevant social issue and then read a related book.

In conclusion, our study contributes insights about how middle school youth can develop and enact civic agency (Sinclair et al., 2023 Wood, 2014; Kirshner, 2015). Our research focused on the program texts and activities by attending to the dynamic moments that support youth to take local action. Third space as a conceptual and analytic lens helped us identify and better understand key moments and practices that highlighted how the youth were understanding their capacity to create social change. This study raises important questions for future research about the relationship between civic agency and later civic engagement.

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