

What Brought Us Here, What Keeps Us Here

Multiple Perspectives on Building and
Sustaining a Community-Engaged
Youth Research Partnership

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Abstract

The Youth Research Council (YRC) is a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project in which high school students, undergraduate and graduate students, and university-affiliated professors and administrators collaborate on consequential, justice-oriented research projects in their community. In this article, twelve

members of the YRC reflect on our reasons for joining and remaining active participants in this community-engaged research project. Our discussion and analysis of "what brought us here" and "what keeps us here" offers a window into strategies and struggles for cultivating transformational reciprocity and sustainability within research partnerships.

We are members of the Youth Research Council (YRC), a community-engaged, youth-driven research collective based in Northern Virginia. Twice a month, on Saturday afternoon, we take buses, drive, or are dropped off on George Mason University's campus to meet in a sun-filled classroom for two hours. Together, at round tables and over snacks, we work as a collective of university-affiliated adult and high-school student researchers to identify issues to tackle through equity-focused participatory research.

For example, for the past two years we have focused our research efforts on the impacts of racial microaggressions in high schools (Youth Research Council, 2023). We have collected over 700 surveys, conducted 120 interviews; engaged in quantitative, multimodal, and narrative analysis; and shared our findings with local school leaders, educational researchers, and the broader public on social media. The twelve authors of this article represent a subset of the YRC, which comprises 30 to 40 adult and youth researchers, and we each hold different roles and responsibilities in the group, as represented in Table 1.¹

¹ *In the interval between this article's writing and its publication, several co-authors graduated high school and began college, which explains discrepancies between demographic information in Table 1 (i.e., "high schooler") and author affiliations.*

Table 1. List of authors, their roles in the YRC, and self-described demographic information

Name	Role	Self-Described Demographic Information
Bethany	University researcher	Mid-30s, white, cisgender woman; university researcher and teacher
Meagan	University researcher	Mid-40s, white, straight, cisgender woman, middle class
Sara B.	Undergraduate mentor	19 years old, first-generation college student, Black, Ethiopian, cisgender woman, second-generation immigrant
Anahat	Youth researcher	High schooler, Asian, Indian, cisgender woman, immigrant
Oaklen	Youth researcher	Teenager, white, Middle Eastern, pansexual, genderfluid, immigrant, middle class
Widad	Youth researcher	High-schooler, black, Sudanese (North African), first generation immigrant, cisgendered woman
Liz	Youth researcher	17 years old, High-schooler, caucasian, straight
Amy	University researcher	Early 50s, white, middle class, cisgender woman, feminist researcher, research center director
Natale	Youth researcher	18 years old, white, cisgender woman, middle class
Khaseem	University administrator	Early 40's, African American, straight, cisgender man, university administrator and working class
Jeff	Graduate Assistant	Mid-30s, white, straight, cisgender man, high school teacher and doctoral student, middle class
Sara M.	Youth researcher	High-schooler, North African, woman

We know that “academia is poorly structured to scaffold the kinds of relational, justice-oriented, or world-making work associated with CER [community-engaged research]” (Amidon et al. 2023, p. 6), and one might wonder what compels a group of people from such diverse backgrounds to join and remain committed to a research partnership like the YRC. In this article, we explore that question in order to suggest what others who are interested in forming and sustaining research partnerships might learn from our experiences. We do so by reflecting on our individual motivations for joining and remaining a part of the YRC from our respective vantage points. These vantage points are determined both by our individual roles within the YRC and our individual identities, informed by our lived experiences and factors such as race, age, and gender. While each of our perspectives on the YRC is unique, tracing the overlaps and divergences between them reveals a multi-dimensional picture of how we collectively sustain—and are sustained by—our engagement with the collective.

What is the YRC?

We begin by describing the YRC and our commitments to transformational reciprocity and sustainability. The YRC is a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) collective formed by university-affiliated adults and public high school students, all of whom share commitments to engaging in social scientific research that furthers equity in our shared geographic region. YPAR projects are action-oriented research projects through which research motivated by youth interests and reliant on youth expertise can catalyze social and educational change (Caraballo et al., 2017; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Watson & Marciano, 2015; Mirra et al., 2015). As a YPAR collective, we prioritize research topics that our high-school-based researchers care about and have particularly

robust insights into because of their lived experiences, such as how youth experience and respond to racial microaggressions in schools. Our co-author, Sara B., who was a YRC fellow in high school and is now an undergraduate mentor, summed up the purpose of our YPAR approach well in a recorded discussion in which we were talking about how we center high school researchers' interests and perspectives. As she put it, this approach makes our findings "more reflective of the experiences of youth – just the fact that we are youth researching something that we're experiencing."

Much of the work of the YRC stems from and maintains our relationships with one another, some of which are based in shared identifications (i.e., our genders, races, workplaces, schools, ages, etc.), and some of which are built across differences in our positionalities. In reflecting on the role of identity and relationships in research partnerships, Green (2023) has described reciprocity as a "sustained and recursive practice" (p. 55) – not a one-time transaction, but a transforming and transformational process that evolves as relationships, needs, and goals change over time. In this article, we are interested in exploring transformational (rather than transactional) reciprocity and how it keeps us coming back to the YRC. A stance of transformational reciprocity is not a give-and-take approach to thinking about mutual benefit, which can establish and perpetuate a transactional relationship between "us" and "them;" rather, it is a commitment to building community, knowledge, and relationships together that are mutually constituted and sustained (Call-Cummings et al., 2023).

As a collective, we often consider questions such as: "What are my obligations to the communities that I am part of, and how might that be demonstrated through my work and research practices?" (Haywood, 2019, para.3) How can we ensure that our work is

mutually beneficial for all collaborators? How do different partners with different reasons for joining the work have their needs and desires met? Those of us who create and join community-engaged research projects are often concerned with these and other questions about reciprocity and sustainability (e.g., Cushman, 1996; Bernardo & Monberg, 2019; Powell & Takayoshi, 2003). In a recent keynote and article, Barker and Bloom-Pojar (2022) stressed the importance of sharing knowledge, data, and tools in a university-community partnership in ways that ensure such partnerships are not extractive; and, in their symposium, Uluak Itchuaqiyag et al., (2022) reflected on the ways in which access to each other's stories and data can easily become exploitative if questions of relationality, refusal, and power are not carefully considered and openly discussed. Following the lead of these scholars, the conversation that unfolds in this article is an example of how we are striving to make justice and equity not only a focus of the research we conduct but the way we collaborate toward those shared goals, as we strive toward the type of reciprocity Haywood (2019) characterizes as "a collective and gradual move with the communities we engage in a forward and socially-just direction" (para 13).

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Following the lead of many others who have shared practical examples of engaging in reciprocal, sustainable, and transformative community-engaged research (e.g., Drushke et al., 2022; Faver Hartline et al., 2020; Knight, 2022; Lorimer Leonard & Pappo, 2022; Shah, 2021; Caraballo et al., 2017; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Watson & Marciano, 2015; Mirra et al., 2015), we offer our diverse and grounded-in-the-work perspectives on how the YRC brought us together and keeps us engaged so that "we can learn to

build not only mutually beneficial partnerships but also mutually transformative ones” (Knight, 2022, p. 24).

By reflecting on our own experiences with the YRC in a dialogic, multi-perspectival format, we are responding to Green’s (2023) exhortation that: “Holding explicit conversations about how similarity, overlapping positionality, and difference operate in relation to one another. . . can offer a more complex vocabulary to describe our practices of reciprocity and move us away from a vein of discourse that tacitly centers on academics and academic outcomes” (p. 61). In order to speak directly to questions of reciprocity and sustainability in collaboratively writing this article, we each responded to the following prompt:

1. What brought you here?
2. What keeps you here?

We then engaged in a dialogic analysis of these responses, synchronously via zoom and asynchronously in a shared document. Below, we intersperse our individual reflections on “what brought us here, what keeps us here” with our analysis of their overlaps, divergences, and implications for community-engaged researchers.

Meagan, University Researcher:

Ever since I began to learn about participatory action research while completing my doctoral program, I have been drawn to the idea of centering the experiences and expertise of youth in knowledge creation. I had seen a few examples of YPAR groups supported or gathered by other universities. I was interested in that model but worried about the possibility of trying to “shove” youth and youth knowledge into academia in ways that would co-opt the

liberatory goals of participatory inquiry. When I spoke with Amy about my vague ideas of starting a youth research council, she loved the idea! She immediately responded that she, as the Director of the Center for Social Science Research (CSSR), would be excited to host what came quickly to be known as the YRC at the CSSR. She saw the CSSR as an incubator of ideas like this, and thought it was a perfect fit. She invited me to present the idea to a faculty research group for feedback and to garner additional support. We started a Google Doc to consider a mission and plan. We invited my friend and student, Khaseem, to collaborate with us as he had already built the amazingly successful Early Identification Program. And the rest is history!

What keeps me engaged? It's the quite brilliant, innovative, timely research the youth choose to do. *These* are the questions we should be asking. *These* are the methods we should be using – the methods youth already use every day to generate knowledge and make meaning in their lives. I am energized and humbled every time we meet when the YRC Fellows share data they have collected or analyze data in simple, dialogic ways.

Widad, Youth Researcher:

As a high school freshman, I discovered the Youth Research Council through an email from the Early Identification Program, a college-prep program I am a member of. Its mission immediately piqued my interest. Even though I wasn't sure about what I was getting myself into, I saw an opportunity to make a difference in my community and took it. Honestly, I was skeptical at first because I had heard promises of change before, but trusting the Early Identification Program's email, I applied. The YRC proved to be more than just talk. It became a beacon of hope to make an actual difference through research.

Joining the YRC turned out to be an experience that continues to reshape my perspective and gave me confidence to speak up. In the meetings I realized that I was not alone. The diversity of perspectives focusing on a common goal was inspiring.

Hearing peers' appreciation for being heard through interviews made me realize these issues are impacting everyone and gave me an even deeper appreciation for what we do. Being able to amplify the voices of peers has been empowering.

This journey with the YRC has been about more than just research; it has been a personal exploration of my beliefs, through reflection and connection. The YRC has given me a voice and confidence to speak up and take action for meaningful change in my school and through participating in conferences through the YRC.

The mission got me through the door, but the people, the atmosphere, and change and hope for a better future for the youth kept me invested. As I enter my third year as a fellow, I credit the YRC for fueling my passion for social change and will forever treasure this experience.

Our experiences have taught us that research partnerships like the YRC are inviting and sustainable when they are set up in a way that makes it simple for collaborators to join. In the case of the YRC, it is easy for interested youth fellows to just click on a hyperlink they receive in an email and then show up to the first meeting to "feel it out." Another reason why we have felt comfortable in the YRC is because we all choose to be there, a feature of our work together that has come up repeatedly across multiple conversations. The YRC is not a class or a requirement. In other spaces, such as classes we have taken or taught, we have tried to engage in deep, meaningful conversations about issues like microaggressions or other forms of discrimination, but, often, these conversations have

been nowhere near as deep or meaningful as when we have discussed these topics in the YRC. We believe this is because people are not always choosing to be in those spaces; they have not made the decision to explore those topics for themselves. The elective nature of our partnership means that we know we are with a group of people who also want to dedicate their time to this work, and this facilitates a depth of trust and intellectual commitment to our research.

Liz, Youth Researcher:

I first learned about YRC in the fall of 2022 through my school's advertisement. Seeing the opportunity to collaborate with other youth researchers, I immediately jumped on it and applied. It's not every day that as a high schooler, you get the chance to be part of a community of like-minded youth working together to push for social equity in your community.

To me what keeps me engaged in the YRC is the findings of our research and the change we can push for with our findings. This fall, we started our research by collecting surveys and speak-back interviews on high school students in the Northern Virginia area. The findings were shocking. One statistic that stood out to me was the answers to the question, "Thinking of this experience that has most affected you, where has it occurred most often," with answers ranging from different locations young adults spend their time such as hallways, school-sponsored events, school clubs etc.

Out of the 732 surveyed students, 399 (over 50 percent) reported experiencing these microaggressions in classrooms. When we pause to reflect on this, it becomes evident that during a school year of 180 days or 1,080 hours, where attendance is compulsory, students spend a majority of their time within classroom walls. Ironically, it

is within these very classrooms that a significant number of microaggressions are encountered by the youth. In a world of divided politics and conflicting views, my involvement in YRC is fueled by a simple belief: every person should agree that schools must be safe, supportive places for students to learn, not environments where they face microaggressions.

As a YPAR project, the YRC lays the power in youths' hands to direct and shape which direction we take (Caraballo et al., 2017). We choose our own goals, which makes us more equal. For example, collaboratively choosing our research focus – the impact of racial microaggressions in schools and how students respond to them – was one way in which we built a foundation of shared goals and values that makes our work continuously interesting. We all care about this topic. And even though we all also care about lots of other topics, collaboratively researching a shared and agreed-upon problem helps us come together and be closer to each other. We know that we are all here to make positive changes in our communities and that we all have the power to do that.

Jeff, Graduate Assistant:

I started working with the YRC as a graduate assistant for Meagan as part of my doctoral work at George Mason. I had taken several classes with Meagan and was looking for a way to put some of the concepts I'd studied into action. When this opportunity came along it seemed like an easy decision to get involved. I wanted a space where I could see if these youth-led, change-oriented practices were everything they were made out to be in the literature. And boy were they! I've been a teacher for more than fifteen years, so I know what student engagement looks like and the YRC is it! Watching these youth choose to give of their time and expertise because they are hungry for change is so inspiring and energizing. Their personal transformation–

both as individuals and as a cohesive group—has been remarkable. I've been fortunate to see them grow as leaders and researchers in the group and for the group to begin to take on a real identity. They are so bold and fearless in both the questions they ask and in sharing their own experiences. The YRC seems to be a great model for how youth can channel their experiences into real change, and that keeps me excited as we enter a third year of this important work.

Sustained engagement in YPAR projects is often built on sharing justice-oriented goals, cultivating an ethic of care, and centering youth agency (Warren & Marciano, 2017). In the YRC, many of us stayed engaged because we felt comfortable being with other people who are like-minded, who are as passionate as we are, who are welcoming and kind, and who push against racial discrimination in their own lives. Although we are many different people with many different perspectives and many different voices, our goals are shared, and we have moved forward in our similarities instead of our differences.

Khaseem, University Administrator:

Youth voice. What attracted me to this endeavor was the ability to help amplify the voice of young people. Oftentimes, researchers conduct studies on youth, it is rare to see research conducted with youth and further, to have young people guide and inform research practices and share what matters to them. I can recall during our very first session, our youth scholars were conducting a group activity. During these activities, I usually walk around to listen to what is being shared, and I can recall an exchange between two researchers, and what they shared had a profound impact on me. One young lady said, "adults try to shield us from the world, but we see and experience what they are trying to shield us from." Later on, I would listen to

this same scholar share how she and her peers have had to contend with racism and microaggressions, most often perpetuated by their teachers since the age of five. After hearing this my heart grew heavy. As a Black male I was able to relate to what this young lady shared, and it bothered me deeply to see that our students, colleagues, friends, and children are having to experience the evils of racism from such an early age and in places that should be safe. The Youth Research Council, and the work that our scholars produce is transformational. The impactful work of our young scholars is what has brought me here and continues to keep me here!

Reflecting on our individual motivations for joining and staying in the YRC has also shown us that learning from each other is central to the success of the YRC and our feelings of comfort and safety there. Learning about experiences that may be similar to but not exactly one's own allows new ideas to spark, creating a chain reaction. Participants in community-engaged partnerships can have eye-opening realizations when hearing about experiences that overlap with their own (Green, 2023), and, in the YRC, when we learn from each other, it makes our research more robust. But it is only because we know that we share the same values of anti-racism and inclusivity that we feel safe enough to contribute to the reality of our different experiences.

Bethany, University Researcher:

About two years ago, my ears perked up while I was talking with Khaseem in a hallway, and he mentioned a youth research council at GMU. I told him I would love to learn more about the YRC and to get involved, and he introduced me to Meagan and Amy, who invited me to join as one of the co-facilitators. While this work was unpaid, I was eager to jump in because I was looking for a new research site

that would build on my previous work with youth, and I also wanted to learn from people who had been doing YPAR work for longer than I had. I was also finishing up my graduate studies and looking for a permanent job, and I hoped that making connections at GMU might help with this goal. Now, I have secured a permanent job at a different nearby university, but I still drive to GMU twice a month to continue working with the YRC. I do so because I have made a commitment to this work that I want to uphold and because I always leave YRC sessions having learned something new: a new method for conducting research, a new insight about youth culture, a new piece of information about a collaborators' family or hobbies. At the YRC, I am constantly reminded of the limits of my own perspectives and enriched by the varied and rich perspectives of others. In short, I remain a part of the YRC because it is a space where I can do work I care about with people I care about.

There is value in our differences and our similarities. Several of the adult facilitators identify as white, are older than the youth researchers, and do not experience the same kinds of microaggressions and discrimination. Negotiating these types of differences in power and positionalities as a team of co-researchers is a common feature of participatory and community-engaged research projects (Monea et al., 2023; Powell & Takayoshi, 2003), and one that we have negotiated as a collaborative as well. These differences in our perspectives are essential to the work we do because adult facilitators are often dependent on the expertise of youth researchers to understand the significance of microaggressive discrimination so we can collectively move toward change.

Anahat, Youth Researcher:

Last fall, I had the opportunity to attend a talk by Dr. Storelli from GMU's Department of Sociology as a part of my sociology class, and it was through there that I first heard about the YRC. Through my sociology class, we discussed and researched how race, gender, culture, and more pertained to the various communities we belonged to. Although we could not dive too deep into the specifics of each of our experiences, it had become clear through these conversations that microaggressions, in particular, were an all-too-common experience. Later, when I looked into the YRC's missions and goals, which emphasized student-led research regarding topics that were relevant to our high school experiences, I knew I had stumbled upon an opportunity to delve deeper into the discussions in my class and more importantly, have a chance to enact positive change.

A significant reason for what has kept me involved in the YRC, however, in addition to its mission, has been the culture. Although all of us have had different experiences with microaggressions and belong to different communities, it has never led to an unwillingness to listen or understand; it has only led to a more enriching and layered approach to our research. Secondly, it's the fact that we not only explored students' experiences with microaggressions through sheer numbers, but we delved deeper to find the stories that lay beneath them through artwork, speak-back surveys, and interviews. This created research that explored both the width and depth of students' experiences with microaggressions, making it all the more meaningful to research and be a part of.

We work to cultivate a culture of comfort and to alleviate stress and anxiety in the YRC through building trust in our commitments to our shared cause and in our shared power. All members of a

research partnership need to trust each other in order to do this kind of work in ethical and transformative ways. In the YRC, we collaboratively formed and frequently revisited community agreements, a commonly espoused practice within community-engaged collaborations (Guishard et al., 2021). Since trust and interpersonal relationships are a foundation for the YRC, it has been crucial for us to also set aside time to build a culture of belonging and trust. We can sign our name on a piece of paper promising to honor our communally-agreed-upon commitments to each other, but we also need to know each other well enough to believe that we share these values. The times where we have just been hanging out, or talking about our lives, or eating snacks or going to a conference together, those are the times when we have gotten to know each other as people in a way that helps us trust that we have shared values. We continually fall back on these shared values as we navigate uncertainty.

Oaklen, Youth Researcher:

I heard about the Youth Research Council through a Zoom meeting I attended for another George Mason program I was participating in. At that point in my life, I had developed a great desire to partake in real academic research, albeit I didn't know how I could find this kind of an opportunity. Thus, after hearing about YRC, I was very excited to apply and see where it could bring me.

As I was heading to the first YRC meeting, I wasn't sure what I expected to see. I remember feeling nervous about talking to new people and excited to make a tangible difference in people's lives. Regardless of what my expectations were at the time, the meeting exceeded them all. That day, we began to brainstorm ideas for our project, which felt not only really impactful but also interactive and fun. All of the other fellows were extremely kind and

welcoming, and I really felt like I belonged. This feeling of belonging was one of the reasons why I stayed with YRC. There, I have met many diverse and amazing individuals, who really cared about the communities they live in. With them, I found another reason to stay a part of YRC, which was the real difference we were making in the lives of our peers. We allowed students from all over Northern Virginia to voice their experiences and concerns with the discrimination and microaggressions they experienced in their schools and shared all we found with adults in positions of local authority or with connections to those who do. However, I know that there is much more that needs to be done to truly change students' experiences in our high schools, and I stay with the YRC to do just that.

As diverse as our reflections on “what brought us here, what keeps us here” are, it’s important to acknowledge that they are not necessarily representative of the perspectives of the many others who are affiliated with the YRC. Not everyone finds the same meaning in this work that we do, and not everyone stays involved. In fact, every year we see about a 20–30 percent attrition rate in youth research fellows. At first, this concerned us and made us worry that we were doing something wrong. But, as we discussed this, we realized that some people try out the YRC and realize it’s not for them, or they get interested in other things or busy in other ways. Attrition is a natural and common aspect of participatory, community-engaged work (Warren & Marciano, 2019); the elective nature of such partnerships that is central to their ethos also means that participation can fluctuate over time depending on participants’ changing goals, desires, and contexts (Monea, 2022).

Sara B., Undergraduate Mentor:

I first joined the Youth Research Council in high school out of curiosity and a long-standing interest in social issues.

Since joining in 2021, I've felt called to come back because it's one of those things that just feel natural to do. The YRC has been a journey of learning about research methods, data collection, and how to ask the necessary questions. But it has also been a personal journey of learning to piece things together, through dialogue, thought, reflection, and connection. I've been lucky to learn about the other fellows' experiences and to see how uniquely we've all experienced the world.

Now having wrapped up my first year of college and gaining an interest in psychology, I wonder how these experiences of microaggressions can warp one's self-perception and alter their interactions with the world. Recognizing an increasing awareness of how impactful microaggressions are, the research we do becomes that much more important to me. When I hear everyone's stories and contributions, observations on what needs to change, it's heartwarming to recognize what this research group has created. The YRC is polar to many environments that I've encountered, encouraging where you have been demoralized, accepting when you have lacked a sense of belonging, and optimistic in the face of so many spaces and experiences that discourage hope. It's transformative in that way. If you ask me, I think there's something revolutionary in being given the chance to internalize faith in a better future, and that's what keeps me around.

After discussing all of our individual reasons for joining and staying in the YRC, we realized that this work seems to be transformative for all of us in some capacity because it is inspirational and hopeful work (Matheiu, 2005). Like other youth-led research partnerships that have made meaningful impacts on both the participants and their communities (Fine, 2017), the YRC inspires those of us who are involved as well as those who attend our presentations. Although we conduct research that is focused on discrimination and inequity, our goals are to provide recommendations and solutions anchored

by the experiences of youth research fellows and our peers. These recommendations provide concrete possibilities for change in the schools where we are enrolled. That is hopeful work. Yes, when we conduct our research, we learn about moments and experiences that are disappointing; however, sharing in this collectively built space that centers the work of change means we also build skills to sustain ourselves and each other in this work, especially in the face of disappointment.

Although we are sometimes frustrated by the pace of change and the difficulty of connecting with leaders and policy makers to create sustainable, tangible changes based on our research, we acknowledge that this work cannot be done in one academic year, and we are hopeful that over several years we will be able to create and see the effects of the tangible changes we seek. We are trying to make a real difference in real people's lives: to enact what Bay (2019) describes as "research justice" that is equally accountable to all participants' needs and desires (p. 8). It is transformative when we collectively feel like change is possible.

Sara M., Youth Researcher:

I first learned about the YRC from an email I received. I didn't really know what it was, but from reading its mission and the internship responsibilities, I decided to apply. I agreed with the message, and the work seemed manageable and interesting. When I actually got to the YRC and we started to work, I knew I made the right decision. Instantly I felt like there was a common feeling that everybody understood, heard, and related to each other. Whenever someone shared their experiences, it would create a chain reaction among others, and I believe that's what started our great work. Instantly we had ideas of how to get data, what we wanted to see and ask, how we were going to share. All around me I saw hard working,

intelligent people that were working for a common cause, and the cause was one that I really loved. That's what kept me coming and what motivated me to do the work we conducted at the YRC. When there was a task that needed to be done, I would try to help as best I could because I knew of the kind of impact we could create, which we eventually did. Seeing us get the opportunity to go to a conference and present made all of our work seem worth it and real. We got to share to the world the cause we all worked so hard for, and it is opportunities like this that made me join the YRC and also stay.

Another one of the ways in which the YRC has been transformational for each of us is in its foundation of shared power. For many of us, collaborating with other researchers and doing social-science research is – as one youth fellow put it – “just so cool!” but the reality of doing collaborative research can be challenging. Where do we start? Where do we go? Where do we find people to do research with? The research process can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate without the support and structure of a collaborative, supportive group like the YRC.

Amy, University Researcher:

This project quite literally landed in my lap. One of my wonderful co-conspirators (Meagan) floated the idea of a youth research council and I loved it from the start. So many unknown conceptual and methodological bends and twists. I was instantly hooked. Since then, it has felt a lot like a “building the road as you walk it” type of project, with lots of hands in the pot. For sure, that element of collaboratively building something new is why I keep coming back. And I also love the idea of juggling balls in the air: advancing social science, laying professional pipelines to social research, stretching the bounds of research inquiry and logic, building civic capacity through social

research, being in community, and learning with and from young people.

I've been a youth researcher for 25 + years, mostly engaged in ethnographic forms of inquiry and I've been pretty well steeped in Critical Youth Studies, feminist and interpretive modes of analysis to understand the unequal opportunity landscape where youth live. But I've rarely looked to young people who participate in the research projects I undertake for answers. I wonder what my earlier projects would have become, but they didn't, had they centered more collaborative inquiry with youth as co-researchers? I am totally energized by this work we do of putting into practice a social science that is accountable to young people, guided by an ethos of justice, and a set of sensibilities that center the good. It enriches our collective existence, nurtures our inner being and thickens forms of democratic participation.

In the YRC, the distributed "doing" of collaborative research is spread out among us according to our differing resources, knowledge, and skill sets. For example, the university-affiliated adult researchers do much of the facilitation work for the YRC—sending out the application forms, setting meeting dates, reserving rooms, creating agendas, and (importantly!) bringing the snacks. The youth research fellows take the lead on the decision-making and knowledge-gathering. During Saturday meetings, having shared goals to achieve by the end of a particular session rather than structured agendas and plans helps us maintain flexibility while managing uncertainty during this process. For example, in one meeting, we wanted to finalize our interview questions, and instead of keeping to some rigid agenda, we just let the conversation flow. In this way, we were able to explore the topic we were all interested in in a way that felt natural and authentic to what we wanted to learn and how we wanted to learn it.

At each critical juncture we face, the youth research fellows direct us—guiding our decisions about research topics and leading our data collection efforts. During the analysis process, university-affiliated researchers offer different frames for thinking through our data, but the analysis itself reflects the work and thinking of youth researchers whose lived experiences give them epistemically privileged insight into the data (Campano, 2007; Moya, 2002). When disseminating our findings, adult collaborators leverage their professional networks to convene local stakeholders to whom youth collaborators present our research, and university-affiliated members find venues such as conference presentations and writing projects (like this one) where we can share our collaboratively-produced work together.

Natale, Youth Researcher:

I wanted to join the Youth Research Council because I wanted to make an impact in my community. I was tired of feeling helpless with how my community acted on many social issues. With the Youth Research Council, I was given opportunities to do research on issues that I am passionate about. I was also able to meet so many other high schoolers that are passionate just as much as I am. I love how in meetings, a discussion topic will be introduced, and many times the conversation will last half an hour or more because everyone has something to contribute with their own experience and perspective. I keep engaged with the Youth Research Council, not only because I believe the work we do is important, but I also have been introduced to the world of research, while still only being in high school. I love learning all the different methods of how to attain data and how to present the information from the data to a group of people that can use their power to make the changes. I also was able to present our findings at two conferences with people from all over the nation, and some even being from other countries, and it felt so empowering

to know that people cared about what we had to say and wanted to know more about our council and the research we conducted. I believe it is important to be involved with my community and not only think that something should change, but also actually do something that can create change, which is why I stay with the Youth Research Council.

Conclusion: Navigating Uncertainty and Making Change

Reading back through our individual reflections on what brought us to and keeps us engaged in the YRC, we noted that our perspectives read somewhat like a list of five-star Yelp or Amazon reviews. In concluding this article, we want to be clear that our experience with the YRC is much more nuanced than that, and that we have also faced and worked to overcome challenges together, such as the uncertain and unpredictable nature of our work—a common feature of participatory and community-engaged research that necessarily shifts in response to the changing circumstances, participants, and goals it brings together (LeCluyse et al., 2021).

This research often feels like “building the road while you walk it,” as Amy put it in her reflection. With the YRC, we do work that is exciting and rewarding, but also a little bit scary. There is a sense of uncertainty about where we are going because we are the ones who are figuring it out and establishing how we want to go about conducting research. That sense of uncertainty can be difficult to manage, but, at the same time, we believe that “the key to enacting research justice is responding in just and humane ways to unexpectedness” (Bay, 2019, p. 21). In fact, there is power in navigating the unknown together—with nimbleness, flexibility, care, and responsiveness—because in “building the road as we walk

it” together, we find opportunities to imagine new, unforeseen possibilities for our work.

Our shared values, hope, relationships, and power anchors us in our work and helps us trust both the process and each other. In this way, the uncertainty, rather than being paralyzing, is exciting because it means there are so many possibilities for what new research methods, topics, and ideas we could come up with and how we can implement changes from our research. Being in the YRC helps us feel like our ideas matter and that there is an importance to sharing them. We also see the YRC and its work as reparative and healing, affirming the power of all members’ voices, knowledge, and agency. It feels powerful to bounce ideas off of one another in a space where these concepts are valued and being put toward something meaningful: real, concrete change in schools we know and attend every day. This research hits close to home, whether it is honoring the experiences of friends who have contributed their stories, or seeing every day how our research findings play out with our own teachers and counselors. In this way, the YRC is transformative work, and work that needs to continue – it’s a conversation that doesn’t end because we all have so much to share.

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