Tracing Agency in a Middle School, Youth Participatory Action Research Class

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation study explored the literacies and socialization practices that middle school youth used while engaging in a school-wide Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class. The primary aims of the dissertation were to contribute to literature on YPAR and to examine the literacy and socialization practices that young people drew upon as resources in developing agentive identities.

Relying on what is named as an agentive ecological approach, this study built upon sociocultural theories of literacy and learning to emphasize young people’s development of agency through their shared participation in a YPAR class that was shaped not only by the multiple identities they carried with them into the classroom, but also by factors such as the pedagogy of the teacher, the philosophies of school administrators, and the sociopolitical context of school. This study also relied on the ongoing traditions of critical literacy and critical pedagogy to highlight the ways that YPAR served as a mediator of important critical literacies that allowed students to learn about and directly respond to the social, historical, and cultural contexts of inequality that they encountered.

Situated in one of New York City’s most ethnically diverse middle schools, this critical ethnographic study used multimodal and ethnographic methodologies to excavate the experiences of 7th and 8th grade students enrolled in a newly implemented YPAR course at their school. In this year-long course, students were apprenticed as critical social researchers of educational issues while simultaneously provided with opportunities to utilize digital media tools toward civic ends. Methods for this study included 112 hours of participant observation where
the researcher captured field notes, weekly memos, and photographs of classroom life across six months of the course; three semi-structured interviews each with six randomly selected students enrolled in 13 sections of YPAR; and multimodal literacy artifacts that included YPAR film materials, Google Classroom assignments, photographs, and digital stories. Three focus group interviews were also conducted with a group of students selected for enrollment in a “YPAR filmmaking course”, where they were tasked with creating a film about the impact of YPAR on the school. This group had a unique vantage point in that they participated in iterations of YPAR across all three years of their middle school experiences, affording a much needed phenomenological perspective. Finally, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teacher of the course, who also provided curriculum and planning documents for analysis.

Constant comparative method and Critical Discourse Analysis were the primary methodological tools used to analyze the data in the study. Major findings revealed how the cultivation of critical literacies in the YPAR course afforded youth the opportunity to identify and respond to barriers in their educational contexts, allowing them to assert more humanizing portraits of themselves and their communities. Moreover, students’ leveraging of digital media tools toward civic ends permitted them space to offer perspectives concerning issues like Islamophobia and global violence, assisting them in the brokering of sociopolitical identities that changed the way they saw themselves, others, and the world surrounding them. Findings from the YPAR filmmaking class revealed the ways that youth constructed stories about imagined futures and their perceived role in shaping those futures, signaling new ways that critical digital literacy practices might be cultivated in service of healthy social, civic, and academic identities.
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My Heavenly father, I thank you for your grace, and for carrying me through this journey.
DEDICATION

To my father, Robert Anthony Filipiak,
who was my greatest mentor
and the most brilliant writer I knew.

To Naomi Denee,
My sidekick.
My beautiful woman warrior.

To the students in the YPAR classes at North Bronx Middle School¹-
The future is in good hands.
Your creativity, insight, empathy, and brilliance
will change the world

¹ The school name is a pseudonym.
CHAPTER 1- BACKGROUND FOR THIS STUDY

Statement of the Problem

In an era of rapidly shifting demographics, educators nationwide are being challenged to adopt more dynamic approaches to teaching and learning that reflect the literacies and cultures of racially and linguistically diverse classrooms. (Irizarry, 2007; Paris, 2012). At the same time, stakeholders are also tasked with preparing students for success in 21st century work, civic and social contexts. As research has captured a digital participation gap that significantly aligns with the U.S. education achievement gap (Jenkins, 2009), there is no denying that educational equity hinges on the ability of schools to equip students with the requisite skills and dispositions to be not just critical consumers, but powerful producers in the digital age. However, more scholarship is needed that articulates additive curricular and pedagogical approaches that city schools are taking up in an effort to support students’ academic, civic, social, racial and cultural identities in the digital age.

A rapidly changing demography signals that preparing students with the requisite skills and dispositions to enter into and contribute to a technological society requires more than identifying a set of concrete skills for students to master, however. In fact, it could be argued that our education system is behind the curve in adapting to the true needs of the students it is serving, largely due to its insistence on the privileging of standardized, and arguably reductionist, forms of knowledge. Since 2014, classrooms have been comprised of a majority of students of color (National Center for Education Statistics), or what others have named as a “majority minority” (Pew Research Center, 2014). Nonetheless, those students labeled as academically successful come from mostly white, economically advantaged contexts (Sleeter, 2001; Sirin, 2005). Under the guise of addressing this “achievement gap”, educational power brokers have
ushered in egregious policy marked by a sharp increase in high-stakes testing and school accountability measures (Lipman 2004; Ravitch, 2013), positioning teachers as what Mirra and Morrell (2011) name as “conduits,” a term they note, “captures a passive vision of teaching as the mere transmission of information and characterizes teachers as middlemen between content standards and children rather than professionals and intellectuals” (p. 409). Subjected to regimes that are driven by sanctions and lack of autonomy, historically marginalized youth are most often not engaged as agents of inquiry or even experts about their own lives, frequently denied the opportunity to participate in school in ways that teach them that they are persons of worth, intelligence, and agency.

Instead, they disproportionately endure factors that quietly sanction their disposability, including ability tracking, de facto segregation, low expectations, and non-innovative curricula (Jocson & Cooks, 2011, p. 145), reading these as evidence of a social hierarchy that they sit at the bottom of. Also keenly aware of this hierarchy through their direct experiences of disparities engendered by extreme economic inequality, they are subject to damaging psychological and social effects arising from not only those consequences wrought from the disparities themselves, but also the raced, gendered and classed ideologies that support and reinforce them. Indeed, the deficits attributed to individual schools and specific racial groups have been frequently divorced from any discussion of the curriculums, pedagogy, and/or policy that have structured success or failure. As such, many young people attending schools labeled as needing “fixing” find themselves in perpetually dehumanizing learning environments that routinely ignore and criticize the skills and attitudes that they bring into the classroom.

Taken together, the cumulative effect of ignoring pluralism and the diversity that is our country; promoting hyper-standardized curricula and teaching, and promoting ideologies that
pathologize rather than address the real and pressing needs that students are facing, present challenges that extend far beyond the achievement gap rhetoric that has long saturated popular educational discourse. In thinking about how best to address inequities in schools in the digital age then, we must work diligently to promote policies and practices that drastically shift the educational paradigms that we are currently beholden to.

One potential catalyst in shifting our educational paradigms is considering how to reimagine literacy pedagogies that allow students to tap into the learning potential that new forms of media allow for. However, as we think about how to position youth as knowledge producers and as active members of society enabled by today’s media technologies, we must frame our interventions in ways that are attuned to, and willing to disrupt—larger institutional, systemic and media discourses that can be aptly described as dehumanizing and oppressive. We need pedagogical and methodological approaches to literacy that bolster students’ intellectual potential and actively resist interventions that disparage students’ cultures and identities. In the spirit of such a call, this dissertation illustrates the liberatory potential of implementing YPAR with youth in middle schools, highlighting the agentive literacy practices that emerge as students take on the task of identifying and addressing the social, political, structural, and cultural forces that shape their lives and more specifically—their experiences inside school.

In service of such an end, this study takes an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Christens & Peterson, 2011) approach (see Figure 1.1) in so much as it excavates the perspectives of various stakeholders who are in turn constructing the epistemological principles that have a bearing on the ways that young people are reading, writing, and communicating in the YPAR project. In short, young people’s engagements with literacy don’t happen in a vacuum. This aligns with what Brian Street (1984; 1995, 2003) and many others have argued, in that we can’t
create policy, curriculum, or teaching interventions that fail to take into account the ways that literacy and literacy practices are socially situated and thus far from being neutral. Single, or autonomous views of literacy that are divorced from any mentioning of the influence of dominant power structures tend to define literacy only as it benefits the dominant culture, treating the social processes of reading and writing as independent of ideology. In contrast to such a view, I examine the literacies that happen in the YPAR class as embedded within and reflective of the sociopolitical context of school, and include the perspectives and practices of adults in the school as part of my analysis in order to contribute to a larger conversation about how young people’s engagements with programs like YPAR are in part mediated by the ways that adults perceive and adapt them.

*FIGURE 1.1 Agentive Ecological Framework*
Toward this end, I traced agency as it lived through the leadership philosophy of school administrators, through the pedagogy enacted by the teacher of the course, and later through the literacy practices and identities that students took up as they became critical social researchers of educational issues that they cared about. For the purposes of this study, I drew from Akom, Ginwright, and Cammarota’s definition (2008, p. 2) of agency, which they express as, “young people’s ability to analyze and respond to problems impeding their social and academic development.” The guideposts of agency undergirding this study included agency as critical literacy, agency as cultural representation, and agency as healing, in order to tease out more nuanced understandings of how literacy engagements in the YPAR class are leveraged against factors that are frequently captured in the literature as being hindrances to students’ academic success in city schools. It has been well-documented, for instance, that young people from historically marginalized communities don’t see themselves represented enough in curriculums or teaching (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2010); disproportionately endure traumatic events that impact their experiences inside of school (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Dutro & Bien, 2014), and could benefit from teaching approaches that prepare them to engage with texts critically for the purposes of navigating hegemonic discourses (Morrell, 2008), to hone critical social thought (Gutierrez, 2008), to interrogate media (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000) or to explore relationships with language (Fecho et al., 2006). Thus, my research aims to highlight the affordances of YPAR as a generative starting point for facilitating engagements with literacy that prepare students to challenge dominant power structures while simultaneously constructing positive literacy identities both offline and online.

In lieu of gaping inequities between rich and poor; the massive frenzy of intolerance and hyper-polarization across public discourse; and fractured global relations, a focus on the
cultivation of agency might create the space necessary for students to work collaboratively toward more fully realizing their human potential. Schools have long been lauded by many as “the great equalizer”, as a means of social mobility for all young people to become educated and participate more fully in society (Duncan, 2010). However, school reforms and more specifically- literacy reforms, have a long way to go in preparing students as global citizens who are equipped to enact the empathy, critical thinking, love, and resourcefulness necessary to preserve healthy social, civic and academic futures. It is my belief that better understanding what happens in a program like YPAR, which democratizes decision-making and centers youth epistemologies, can point policy makers, teachers, and educational stakeholders in the right direction, toward policies and practices that humanize and sustain young people. And it is my hope that what is revealed in this dissertation study helps provide a better understanding as to how youth leverage literacies toward interrogating and transforming the social and material conditions of their communities.

**Explanation of the Study**

This critical ethnographic classroom study utilized qualitative research methodology to investigate how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shaped their development of agency, with literacy events (Heath, 1983) being the primary unit of analysis. Expanding on Heath’s definition, I interpret a literacy event as “any occasion in which a text is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes.” By “text” I mean anything that can be decoded to construct meaning, including both in print form and those constructed by digital tools. Some examples of text in this study includes journal entries, student media projects, brainstorming documents, advertisements, policy recommendations, census data, or survey results.
Though not restricted to only “digital literacy events”, it is important to mention that I paid special attention to those events where digital tools were being used because there is a growing need for ethnographic work in schools that documents the ways in which underserved urban youth in particular are leveraging technology in ways that reflect the content and/or context of their digital lives (Watkins, 2011). As research has captured a digital participation gap that significantly aligns with the U.S. education achievement gap (Jenkins, 2009), better understanding the role of digital culture and literacies inside of formal learning environments is an issue of equity and cannot be divorced from the exploration of agency that this study aimed to take up.

Specifically, I focused on “literacy events” (e.g., instances in a normal class day when the teacher initiates a reading/writing prompt and students respond, a presentation of students’ research projects to a community member or legislator, a discussion of a school survey that students construct for distribution amongst their peers, a debate about solutions to identified social issues) because it stresses the situated nature of literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 2000), acknowledging the myriad social, cultural and historical contexts that literacy is “situated” or couched within. This approach encourages consideration of how literacy works within the social ecosystem of which it is part. As it relates to my study, this allowed for the necessary flexibility to examine larger social, cultural and historical systems as they both shape and are shaped by young people inside of a very specific school context (for example school and district policies, history of topics that students are studying, tracing evidence of cultural sensitivity in curricular documents) At the same time, it afforded me the opportunity to excavate more nuanced understandings of agency that were embedded within the experiences, beliefs, and values that students brought with them to these events, which inevitably changed through their participation.
in the project. My hope was that operationalizing agency through the examination of literacy events would permit me space to examine both the discourses within YPAR that students identified as either supporting or resisting student agency as well as the unique literacy and socialization practices that young people took on as they became active in YPAR discourse communities, with hopes of better understanding how these frame identities and opportunities for agency.

The research site where I conducted my research was located at a public, general-admittance middle school located in the North Bronx, NY and required several phases of data collection through the months of February through June, 2016. During the first iteration of my dissertation study, I reviewed lesson plan and curricula documents created for a YPAR course that all 7th and 8th graders attending the school were enrolled in across the entire school year. I collected these documents from the sole teacher of this course and invited him to participate in two semi-structured interviews in order to discuss his approaches to planning for the class, students’ projects, and his perceptions of YPAR as a program adopted by the school. This data helped to provide a snapshot of the epistemological stance that informed the way he framed the course and opportunities for literacy, helping to make visible how his position as a YPAR teacher was constructed and enacted so that power relationships can be more broadly understood within this study.

The second part of my study relied on critical classroom ethnography. It is a methodology that is well-suited for my exploration of how shared engagement in classroom literacy practices within a YPAR course shapes agentive identities because it accounts for the wide range of mediators in human literacy learning and practice, including those embedded within relations of power. Characterized by its call for thick description of how communities
make sense of their situated experiences in the world (Heath & Street, 2008), the two methods most often employed by critical classroom ethnographers are interviews and observations. For this portion then, I engaged in ethnographic participant observation of approximately 230 seventh and eighth grade students enrolled across thirteen sections of Youth Participatory Action Research classes and one eighth grade YPAR filmmaking class, both meeting once per week Wednesday through Friday. I engaged in observation of these students across five months, from February through June of 2016. The data that I collected from these observations was centered on my primary unit of study, which was the literacy event, and helped me learn more about how students and teachers negotiated identities as YPAR participants through shared engagements in literacy practices. Additionally, I randomly selected six students from the general YPAR classes for participation in three, semi-structured interviews to discuss how they engaged adults in their YPAR projects, their experiences in the YPAR class and the work they have developed along the way, and about the ways that they defined themselves as students participating in the YPAR class. Every student who agreed to an interview was also given a demographic survey to complete that yielded general information to be kept completely confidential. Participants’ narratives as recorded in the interviews, student work, and my observations in the classroom helped me to document the literacy and socialization practices that young people adopted/enacted as they became active in YPAR discourse communities; this helped me to better understand how engagements with literacy framed identities that either resisted and/or supported opportunities for agency.

The third and final portion of my study highlighted 18 eighth grade students enrolled in a YPAR filmmaking class. This particular group of students had a unique vantage point in that they not only participated in YPAR across the three years of its implementation across the
school, but also chose to use YPAR methods to investigate and then document the impact of YPAR on the school community through film. This use of film as both a research and narrative tool at once captured a more dynamic portrait of the assets, knowledge, and lived experiences that young people engaging with YPAR possessed and exercised across a multitude of spaces—digital and otherwise. It also afforded me as a researcher an additional layer of focality by which to explore agency: their peers researched social issues that mattered to them; they researched what they believed was the impact of the YPAR project on the school, and I as a researcher analyzed their interpretations of YPAR’s importance as reflected in the videos and other data points such as journal entries and focus group interviews, which I explain below. This exploded the traditional co-research relationship that characterized YPAR methodology beyond a co-investigation and critical addressing of an identified social issue. Instead as in part co-researchers, we both studied YPAR itself and this exploration was amplified by a methodological tool devised by students, positioning them as expert eye and earwitnesses of YPAR.

As part of my co-researcher methodology, I requested student volunteers from this group who wished to co-develop possible prompts for interviews for my study. I also inquired of them what kind of data they wanted to collect to document the development of agency within students participating in the YPAR program. Finally, I invited all 18 students to participate in three focus group discussions at the end of months February, April, and June of 2016 to discuss their film projects, readings they have selected, and reasons they have selected particular themes to explore about YPAR happening across the school. Five total accepted the invitation.
Aims of the Study

My critical ethnographic classroom study of approximately 230 students enrolled in 13 sections of seventh and eight grade youth participatory action research (YPAR) classes were guided by the following questions:

- How do students use leverage YPAR to critically engage adult stakeholders in identified social issues, both inside and outside of school?
- How is literacy conceptualized and enacted inside of the YPAR classroom?
- How does change happen in the YPAR classroom space, and how do students describe it?

Significance and Rationale

Efforts to describe ways to instruct and teach in ways that equip students to effectively address academic and economic inequality are often limited to single lessons or interventions that fail to significantly shift the learning environments that students are invited to enter into. This is important because while learning is an epistemological venture it is also an ontological one; students are learning new content but just as important they are learning about who they are and who they wish to become as well. Turning a more focused lens toward programs that seek to intentionally cultivate agency inside of classrooms and across literacy engagements improve efforts to understand how to leverage more equitable learning opportunities for students across the nation because it takes into serious consideration the ontological “stuff” of learning. That said, more studies are needed to contextualize the way that youth identity and practice is shaped by their experiences with school, and an even greater need exists around excavating the important ways in which the introduction of new media tools are implicated in the learning process as students become integrated into communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
committed to building and sustaining agency.

YPAR is a model and theory whose success is tied in part to ideologies privileged within the social ecology of a given school. I posit that a useful window into one aspect of a school’s ideological ecosystem, particularly as it relates to youth agency, is the ways that young people are engaging with literacy, which research has shown can be a powerful mechanism for either disrupting (UNESCO; Algeria) or reinforcing (Macleod, 1987;) social inequality. Inherent in this interpretation of literacy as a mechanism towards either achieving or hindering freedom is an acknowledgement that literacy both as a skill and act is intricately tied to notions of power and agency, and in some instances, can provide a way to speak back to current trends that promote deficit perspectives of young people of color. The focus on literacy events happening within a newly instituted Youth Participatory Action Research class is meant to provide a glimpse into what additive approaches to literacy look like in terms of pedagogical practice and what these approaches mean to students. I designed a study that allowed for three iterations of data collection that engaged multiple stakeholders and leveraged different research tools at each juncture to explore how agency was shaped across the life of this classroom and school. In doing so, I hoped to better understand how students and adults engaged with, related to, and acted within a community that aimed to honor students’ multiple identities, languages, and literacies, and asked them serious questions about their worlds to evoke personal, academic and civic change.

Overview of Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Following the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 is comprised of literature reviews for sociocultural learning theories, youth participatory action research, critical literacies and pedagogies, and plural approaches to literacy-
a category I leverage to account for cultural pluralism and new technologies that have shifted the ways we perceive and practice literacy. Chapter 3 provides an overview of my research design, which is a critical ethnographic study of YPAR. It also includes a brief description of the exploratory Life History study that I conducted with school administrators at the same site. This study had a direct impact on trajectory of my dissertation, particularly as it relates to pursuing agency as an overarching concept for my inquiry. Chapter 4 outlines the curriculum and pedagogy of the YPAR class and discusses the emergent curriculum, instances of civic engagement and action in the course, and a brief discussion of the teacher’s pedagogy as it relates to the iterations of agency that this study traces. Chapter 5 explores the significance of YPAR on student agency, offering vignettes of student experiences that highlight agency as it plays out in students’ engagements with literacy inside of the YPAR class, with the conclusion of each section documenting major themes across the data. Chapter 6 explores the digital literacy practices that students in the YPAR filmmaking course engaged in, and is preceded by an explanation of Digital Social Imagination, a concept I introduce to make the case for a more humanizing digital pedagogy in schools. Chapter 8 concludes my dissertation with a synthesis of responses to my research questions, a discussion of the study’s limitations, and key takeaways concerning the implications for research, practice, and policy.
CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

As introduced in the first chapter, the primary aim of my research was to explore the ways in which agency was shaped by young people’s experiences in a Youth Participatory Action Research class. My research questions and my methodology are informed by epistemological assumptions about how agency is both instantiated in and informed by certain factors in educational spaces that must be unpacked in order to account for the decisions I make in my data collection and analysis. For example, this study’s emphasis on young people’s development of agency through their shared participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research class is situated in understandings of literacy and learning that that resist positivist dispositions toward knowledge that have long saturated mainstream educational discourse; given this, my literature review will begin with an introduction of sociocultural learning theory to account for the ways in which agentive identities were conceptualized within this study, focusing in particular on sociocultural theories of literacy being that literacy events are the primary unit of analysis in my study.

Using these understandings as a guide, I then provide a brief overview of YPAR and situate it within the ongoing traditions of critical literacy and critical pedagogy that inform it. This exploration stresses the importance of agency being rooted in mechanisms that allow historically marginalized students to learn about and directly respond to the social, historical, and cultural contexts of inequality that they encounter.

From here, I trace pedagogical stances that draw attention to the need for curriculums and teaching to be more reflective of what is becoming an increasingly pluralistic society. This review will not only discuss those theories that have generated urgency around more culturally relevant, responsive, or sustainable instruction, but also those that point to the cultural shifts
signaled by new media and issues of equity that have surfaced along the lines of race and class in new digital educational spaces. Within this discussion, I emphasize the use of texts as cultural tools in the classroom and the potential for digital media tools to be leveraged by students toward the ends of healing and self-love. This review looks to highlight the ways in which the three guideposts that mark the conceptions of agency in this study: agency as critical literacy practice, agency as cultural representation, and agency as healing might be better understood within the context of literacy events happening inside of youth centered programs like YPAR.

Sociocultural Learning Theories

The way that people come to understand knowledge and their relationship with it is shaped by the realities of the world that they live in and the systems that have been put in place to address their needs. Across the country, there is no denying that capitalism and the neoliberal rhetoric that accompanies it has influenced what is considered “worthwhile” knowledge. Under a paradigm where everything is assigned a numeric value based upon its worth in the “marketplace,” what is considered worthwhile knowledge is restricted to that which can be measured. Consider the manner in which the corporate logic of profits and privatization have infiltrated educational policy at every level: “objective” measure of teacher quality has been implemented across the nation in the form of “valued-added” measures; “low-performing” public schools have been closed down and swiftly replaced by charter operators with little evidence of breaking the cycle of educational failure; and most children are now evaluated based upon a set of “college readiness standards.” All of this despite workers of all races having more education than ever before (Anyon, 2014, p. 43).

While seemingly well-intentioned in their professed commitment to increased student achievement, proponents of these policies place most responsibility for success on individual
students or individual schools, without taking into consideration the contexts in which young people learn or even how they learn. In turn, one-size-fits-all approaches that reduce teaching and learning to mastering an objective body of knowledge dominate the educational landscape, and the inequitable social structures that currently plague students from low-income communities of color go largely ignored. And while it has been thoroughly documented across multiple disciplines that these models fail to adequately address the academic, social and economic needs of young people today, they stubbornly persist as a kind of metaphorical rite-of-passage into what is becoming an increasingly fragmented society, exacerbating the impact of rampant structural inequality shouldered mostly by people of color.

Sociocultural learning theorists, beginning with Lev Vgotsky, present an alternative view of learning that does in fact account for the social, historical and cultural contexts that learning interactions are entangled within and influenced by. Framing learning as a social phenomenon was a major advance on previous theories such as those of Piaget, who viewed learning as being fixed by the physical development of the brain across discrete stages that were consistent across individuals and societies. Vgotsky’s concept of a “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) was informed by the idea that learning is a social, interactive, collective process. It said that the area between where a learner is and where she can potentially reach is mediated by human activity and thought, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (Vgotsky, p. 34). Taken in this light, learning is something that occurs at the level of the individual as well as through social interaction.

Moreover, sociocultural theorists also argue that development can be viewed as a cultural process involving people’s changing participation in the cultural activities of their communities
(Rogoff, 2003). That is, learning happens inside of specific cultural contexts and the ways one participates in learning is connected to the activities and discourses of those contexts, “Learning is seen as a function of ongoing transformation of roles and understandings in the sociocultural activities in which one participates” (Rogoff, 1994, p. 210). Some who embrace these learning theories point out that current reform efforts are not directing enough attention toward addressing the problematic discourses proliferating from inequitable school and classroom contexts themselves, (Knapp, 2008; Nieto, 2015), arguing that what happens at the institutional level dramatically impacts the relationship that students have with each other and with learning inside of the classroom. This aspect of sociocultural theory is especially important to my study because the introduction of YPAR into the site that I am researching was meant, in part, to address this problem. I was interested in how the roles and understandings of students change over time through their participation in this particular context, which took an proactive approach in centering young people’s perspectives.

Finally and especially important for my study, a significant belief of socio-cultural learning theorists is that the tools that students use to learn are important mediators of that learning (Wertsch, 1991). These semiotic tools reflect cultural, psychological, and social processes that have a significant bearing on the co-construction of knowledge, and include language but also other techniques and systems that we make use of for social and individual functioning. Vygotsky (1981) listed a number of examples of semiotic means such as: "language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs and so on” (p. 137). Each of these represents sociocultural practices and the evolution of those practices over time, internalized through active participation within communities where those
practices are shared. This includes but is not limited to language itself. As it relates to my study, the relationship that students had with language and other semiotic tools surely influenced the ways that they learned and expressed knowledge in the classroom. I was particularly interested in how their learning was mediated by not only their language use around YPAR in the classroom, but also through their engagement with artifacts in their school and surrounding community. For those enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking class, an additional layer of analysis was added because students were specifically imagining how to use film as an interpretive tool to represent what they perceived to be the impact of YPAR as a program. Film is a unique semiotic tool that may capture learning happening in YPAR that an analysis of peer-to-peer discussion or other artifacts may not yield.

Socio-cultural learning theory focuses on the social nature of learning and acknowledges the contexts and respective discourses that influence the ways that learning happens. Within these theories are a group of scholars who pay specific attention to literacy. An exploration of the development of sociocultural theories of literacy follows in the next section.

The Development of a Sociocultural Approach to Literacy

Numerous scholars in recent decades have troubled the idea that literacy exists on a continuum of development from oral to written (Heath 1982; Street 1995; Lave 1996), and question whether an actual decline of literacy skills as measured in school settings actually exists. Nonetheless, schools still attach certain populations to labels that are associated with deficit naming and framing: words like “achievement gap”, “at-risk, minority”, and the like have saturated everyday academic discourses. In turn, educators who work within urban school settings find themselves in the position of reinforcing colonizing language pedagogies, whereby the complex socio-cultural identities of young people are often ignored.
Juxtaposing itself against more traditional approaches to literacy, “New Literacy Studies” (NLS) frameworks position literacy as “not primarily a mental phenomenon, but rather a sociocultural one” (Gee, 2000). In highlighting literacy as a social and cultural achievement, NLS scholars create space for anthropological and ethnographic work that highlights the rich, multiple, and varied literacies that students are engaged with but are often dismissed inside of classrooms, as well as the meanings and functions that young people attribute to these literacies. NLS’s framing of literacy as an inherently social and cultural phenomenon offered a generative framework for me to explore how engagements with literacy supported or hindered the development of students’ agentive identities in the classroom.

Important to note is that the use of the word “new” as it relates to literacy refers to two different but important connotations, as Lankshear and Knobel (2011) explain: a “paradigmatic” one and an “ontological” one (27). For this section, I will explore only the former as the latter refers heavily to what the Lankshear and Knobel refer to as “the stuff” of new literacies, highlighting the fact that technology and global currents have fostered changes “in the character and substance of literacy that set new literacies as fundamentally different from conventional literacies (p.28). I am reserving this discussion for later when I discuss texts as cultural tools and the role that digital media might play in transforming classrooms, as it is better suited for that discussion. Here, I will touch only on the sociocultural framing that the former presupposes, but thought it important to delineate these categories early on.

First, the paradigmatic “New Literacy Studies” (capital N) refers to work around socio-cultural approaches to understanding and researching literacy (27): what is “new” in this case is a research paradigm that conceptualizes literacy within a more social and less psychological framework. That is, reading and writing are viewed are not solely viewed as cognitive,
technical, and neutral processes that take place largely in people’s heads or a mental achievement to work toward, but are instead theorized as being embedded in social practices and discourses. This is important because for much of the 20th century, scholarship that relied on purely psychological or cognitive frameworks for understanding and theorizing literacy were privileged.

The arguments against the framing of literacy as attached to cognitive ability and psychological processes are long-standing, most notably in response to Goody and Watt’s (1968) seminal historical work that argued social change can be traced to changes in a society’s communication systems, especially those adopting a writing system. Goody & Watt posited that with the introduction of an alphabetic system, new cognitive functions emerged that allowed for specialized modes of thought based upon linguistic awareness and formal logic, affording societies “historical sensibility” and taxonomies of knowledge (17). Overall, they saw the development of these skills as aiding the development of civilization itself. They privileged the written word over orality, even naming oral societies as primitive and seeing their thought processes as simple.

Olson (1977) was also in agreement with Goody & Watt in seeing literacy along a continuum from speech to writing, or “utterance” to “text”. He notes, “oral language is an instrument of limited abstract power for exploring abstract ideas” (189), naming what is written as “objective truth”. This position towards literacy discounts the role that the reader plays in constructing meaning, while also only validating experiences when they can be recorded and most often only by an elite and privileged upper-class. In failing to recognize the nuanced ways that texts are embedded within context, ideology, culture and readers themselves, these scholars elevated text to a form of scientific authority, fulfilling the objective of positivism- which is universal truth. Appropriately, many scholars began to problematize the dichotomies presented
in these historical accounts of literacy, edging toward what has been referenced as the “social turn,” or a philosophy emphasizing social practice and interaction (Gee 2000).

Graff (1982) argued that the “oral and literate compliment and augment each other” (86), and that historically, there has been no “universal” or linear route to universal literacy, pointing to instances where learning to read was often tied to integrating and hegemony-creating functions. For instance, Sweden’s literacy campaign was sponsored by the state church rather than through formal schooling, with a special priority on women and mothers who they hoped would obtain values like piety and civility as a result of becoming literate. deCastell and Luke (1983) argued that models of literacy instruction have always been tied to having mastery over ways that culturally significant information is coded, with the skills taught presented as “ideologically neutralized” (171). They demonstrate that conceptions of literacy have gone through several phases in American history, from a “classical view” that sees literacy as a tool to cultivate a “civilized” person, to a progressive view that attaches literacy to an expressive tool in child development, and last to a technocratic view that embraces functionality. If there is anything to be learned from these scholars now, it is that literacy and literacy instruction cannot be viewed narrowly if our aim is inclusivity and literacy achievement for all. Otherwise, it serves as a sorting mechanism that negates the oft times politicized ends that literacy is embedded within. As Scribner crystallizes, literacy “is a social achievement,” not an individual attribute (1984). This points us toward the direction of understanding literacies as plural, rather than singular, as every social situation is seeped within a set of values and outcomes. Focusing on any one approach to understanding literacy then, would therefore neglect the needs of others. We have seen this at play most especially with young men (and women, for that matter) of color,
who are pegged as being in a perpetual crisis of (ill)literacy. Perhaps in this light, we might view them as grossly misunderstood rather than as failures (Kirkland 2013).

In the first wave of sociocultural theory, Scribner & Cole’s (1981) anthropological ethnography looked at how the Vai people in Liberia, a multi-literate society with a phonetically unique writing system, had acquired literacy without any formal education. The authors wanted to know if indeed there were cognitive “consequences of literacy”, and concluded there was a dearth of evidence for generalizations about the dependency of cognitive skills on writing, “the assumption that logicality is in the text and the text is in school can lead to a serious underestimation of the cognitive skills involved in non-school, and non-essay writing, and reciprocally, to an overestimation of the intellectual skills that the essayist test “necessarily” entails” (61). Instead, they found that writing served a variety of social functions for the Vai, and that reading and writing were only important when applying knowledge for specific purposes is specific contexts of use. This view of literacy necessitated the examination of how it is used or practiced across contexts and uses, and thus the sociocultural approach to literacy began to take root.

*Literacy Events*

At this time, there was a substantial amount of work happening across fields such as anthropology, history, cultural studies, social linguistics, and still others that suggested literacy involved more than encoding and decoding of print; in fact, it was embedded within meaning-making processes that were attached to contexts. For instance, in Heath’s seminal 10-year ethnographic of communication study (1983), she discovered a major disconnect between the language expectations of one of the schools she studied and the values and expectations of the working-class, African-American communities that her participants resided within. Heath
documented how different ways of interacting contributed to different literacy outcomes. She did this through focusing on what she named *literacy events*, which she defined as, ‘any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role’ (p. 386). This concept permitted Heath to understand in a more comprehensive way the different events and practices around literacy, by isolating specific instances happening across different contexts and describing them in detail. She posited that teachers would be better equipped to teach to the specific needs of students if they better understood how young people learned and practiced language at home. Understanding language as a mediating force, I too chose to use literacy events as my primary unit of analysis because it permitted me to concentrate on the literacy systems and practices that mediated students’ learning experiences inside of the Youth Participatory Action Research class. I was most interested in what characterized their engagements as well as the ways in which new media tools shaped students’ learning and interactions with each other.

*Literacy Discourses*

When James Gee first used the term “New Literacy Studies” (2000) to account for the varied communication systems that people use to read different kinds of texts in ways that meet multiple needs or purposes, he was drawing upon and bringing together the work like Heath’s that he saw happening across disciplines, and this introduced a seminal paradigm shift that scholars have continued to explore.

An important and influential contribution to literacy and language studies that Gee made to the fields of language and literacy studies as a New Literacy scholar was his re-conceptualization of discourses. While traditionally, sociolinguists have used the term *discourse* to refer to exchanges and the ordering of utterances between speakers and listeners, Gee’s theory
explores the interrelationships between social relations, contexts, social identities, and specific situations of language use. (1996). In this light, Discourses (with a capital D), can be described as,

a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (Gee, 1996, p. 131).

Unlike what Gee calls little “d” discourses, as in “connected stretches of language that make sense” (Gee 1990), capital “D” Discourses are ways of being in the world. Words are surely part of this, but so are body gestures and clothing, attitudes and perceptions, habits of mind and biases. Gee posits that meaning is not found in language itself, nor is language the only communication system that we call upon to generate meaning. Words are instead said to be “situated” in contexts, and meaning is something we generate in the moment, activating cultural models that are used by cultural or social groups that we are familiar with, each attached to their own Discourse or “identity kit” (Gee 1989/2001).

Gee makes a distinction between primary Discourses, or those which we are socialized into in our homes, and secondary Discourses, which we gain through our choices to participate in interactions that happen within social groups, institutions, or organizations. Inherent in this distinction is that one can achieve Discourses beyond those learned at home. However, Gee asserts that secondary Discourses cannot be achieved by overt instruction. Instead, Discourses are acquired through socialization and apprenticeship into the social practices of a Discourse. This is done only through meaningful practice, and cannot be at odds with the participant’s current Discourse, or else it is impossible for him to achieve full fluency.
There are innumerable Discourses, for example a nurse, a skateboarder, a graduate student in cultural studies, a bank teller, a dog owner, or in the case of my study a student participating in a Youth Participatory Action Research Class- each of which possess common ways of talking, reading, listening; but also believing, feeling, and thinking that members of that social group or Discourse community would recognize as common or natural behavior. Consequentially, members of a Discourse community see others as either “insiders” or “outsiders.” Important to note is that you cannot fake a Discourse, as there is an embraced identity required for membership. You have to see yourself and your identity as part of that discourse.

Given all of this, there are multiple ways of “reading” the same text depending upon the perceived purposes of reading it, influenced by the communities that we are a part of and the rules that guide interactions within them. The activation of an identity, and its connections with cultural or social meanings that are situated in a context are not to be underestimated when inviting students into literacy activities inside of the classroom. Some students may not be familiar with the Discourses that are attached to these activities, and still others may choose not to enter into them because they are at odds with their identity. Or perhaps the learning environment does not allow room for meaningful practice that Gee says is necessary for mastery; that is, in the case of English classrooms for instance, students might not be allowed to play with and try on reading and writing identities in ways that feel authentic.

Finally, it is important to note that Gee also distinguishes between dominant (usually secondary) and non-dominant Discourses, with dominant ones linked to social roles of status and privilege that result in rewards and benefits for participants. Non-dominant Discourses don’t often include social goods or “payoffs”, even though membership may be valued by its participants. However, he argues that we must master Discourses of power through social
interaction or “apprenticeships” so as to participate in or criticize dominant Discourses that are part of a larger, social hierarchy of knowledge (1989/2001). Similar to Lisa Delpit’s work/position, this requires a positioning of the teacher to mediate experiences with text that are meaningful and take into account the various Discourses that students bring with them into exchanges with text, each other, and even space. For this study, exploring the discourses happening around literacy events within YPAR was useful in gauging the ways in which agency was either supported in the classroom - by the teacher, by the curricular materials used, or by students themselves. It was also interesting to see how students mastered the discourses of YPAR and the ways these complimented or rejected dominant discourses within the school as a whole.

The Ideological Context of Literacy

Another renowned New Literacy scholar is anthropologist Brian Street (2006), who vehemently opposed what he named as “autonomous models” of literacy, theories privileged by leading literacy scholars such as Goody (1963) who saw literacy as a set of autonomous skills that could be learned regardless of context. These were conceptualizations that Street says failed to take into account the significance of literacy practices in people’s everyday lives. He then offered an alternative that he named an “ideological” model, arguing that literacies are not only culturally-informed and socially-situated but also intricately tied to power structures and relations. He posited that literacy is attached to beliefs about knowledge, always embedded in socially-constructed epistemological principles. As such, the ways that reading and writing are taken up are rooted, he says, in multiple “conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (2003, p. 78). Far from neutral, the ideologies, values, social expectations, and power relations attached to literacies have a multitude of implications, especially when those privileged by institutions like school don’t match those practiced at home. To be clear, Brian Street and other NLS scholars
do not reject the role that cognition plays in the development of literacy; they understand that reading and writing *do* involve technical skill and cognitive muscle. However, they see what is deemed as proper literacy as immersed within structures of power and reflective of dominant discourses; literacy is never neutral. Street’s use of the term ideological is meant to signal this.

As such, the views of literacy and learning that adults inside of schools have matter, as they both shape and are shaped by power relations that are attached to a multitude of contexts, identities, and experiences—some that support notions of student agency and power and others that negate it. In the context of school, Street posits that the way that teachers or facilitators and their students interact influences the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, “especially the new learners and their positions in relations of power” (p. 78). Understanding what informs these interactions is important because it helps shape student’s language and literacy identity, and in turn their perception of agency or power inside of school. Unfortunately, while there is an overwhelming body of research that points to the credence of the work that New Literacies scholars draw from across academic disciplines, current educational policy tends not to reflect such, relying instead on positivistic epistemologies that close off opportunities for exploring more imaginative approaches to literacy instruction. These restrictions have placed tremendous burdens on young people who fail to master literacy skills attached to academic work inside of schools, either because they can’t or choose not to. In many cases, though a young person may be quite adept at navigating multiple literate landscapes, she may not find support inside of school to practice multiple literacies in ways that mirror her everyday encounters, denied the opportunity to expand sites for cultural and linguistic creativity. I hope that in my study, the acknowledgement of literacies as being rooted in social and ideological contexts helps shed light on ways to better support students who find themselves in
this position.

**Building on Students’ Home Literacies as Resources**

A rich body of sociocultural work has helped literacy scholars and teachers understand the importance of the background of students’ home life and respective cultures, both of which up until the 1980’s-1990’s were mostly uninvestigated. The concepts of “funds of knowledge” (Moll, 1992), “cognitive apprenticeships” (Lee, 1995), and “thirdspace” (Gutierrez, 2008) each reconfigured the tripartite of teachers, students, and community with relation to literacy, assembling bridges between discourse and discursive communities and literacy instruction. These concepts, and sociocultural theory in general, pushed for a new and transformative pedagogy that treated students’ rich cultural diversity as assets rather than hindrances.

In Moll’s anthropological ethnography, he employed teams of teachers as co-researchers using qualitative methods to study household knowledge, which they later drew upon to develop a participatory pedagogy. By a participatory pedagogy I mean that the teaching pedagogy that was adopted as a result of the research came from all stakeholders: the families who participated in the study, the initial research team, and the group of teachers who were trained in ethnographic methods in order to participate as researchers in the study. Together, they learned about the funds of knowledge that students drew from at home, and from here made strategic connections to both what and how something was taught in school. Students were encouraged to draw upon the cultural values and practices in their homes to unpack content and engage with their peers in traditional classroom settings, and this proved to be effective in increasing academic achievement.

In Lee’s (2007) introduction of what she calls a culturally-based cognitive apprenticeship, she helped her mostly African-American students make the cognitive connection between their
everyday discourse and her instruction, using cultural modeling to not just emphasize what skills writers need, but how one becomes a writer. Lee contends that the achievement gap is due in part to teacher’s limited understanding of students’ language, cognition, motivation, and social-emotional realities. If teachers are more aware of these, they can help scaffold material to account for this.

Finally in Gutierrez’s “third space” she offers an ecological model for thinking about literacy learning, where students are permitted to negotiate identity as mediated by what she names as a socio-critical literacy, or one that historicizes literacy that draws upon students socio-historical lives. In becoming literate, students are engaged in a pedagogy that focuses on how they and their communities both impact and are impacted by discourses rooted in political, social and cultural discourses at a particular time and place. Educational environments draw upon and purposefully extend students’ cultural repertoires of practice through mediating tools that intend to stretch their sociopolitical identities. They are permitted in this space to use literacy to re-imagine who they are and wish to be while understanding the history that informs these perceptions.

My ethnographic study situates itself within this transformative milieu, as Youth Participatory Action Research both as a method and a methodology taken up inside of school aims to draw upon students’ knowledge rooted in experiences in school, at home, and in their communities. I was in interested in the extent to which the teacher and students in the YPAR class structured engagements around norms found in students’ communities and home lives, and what this might mean for students’ identity development, particularly as it relates to agency. I now turn to an overview of Youth Participatory Action Research and the critical pedagogical and literate traditions that undergird it.
Youth Participatory Action Research

YPAR engages traditionally marginalized youth populations in researching issues that affect themselves and their communities. Each step requires a collective effort shared by adults and youth, and is generally comprised of these steps: identifying a relevant problem, researching it, creating a plan to address it, implementing the plan, evaluating its impact, and returning to the process again as new questions about the topic emerge organically from participants. McIntyre (2000), who is recognized as the first researcher to document YPAR in education, identifies three principles that guide most PAR projects including: 1. the collective investigation of a problem, 2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem, and 3) the desire to take individual action and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem. (p. 128). This cycle as enacted in educational spaces reflects a significant effort in educational research to position youth as knowledge producers who are well-equipped and qualified to inform decisions made about the educational contexts they navigate daily.

Theoretical Groundings of Participatory Action Research

YPAR has its roots in participatory action research (PAR) traditions and social movements that were happening across the globe concurrently in the mid-late 20th century. Scholars have argued, however, that the values and practices that inform the building blocks of PAR have been around long before those acknowledged in Western thought and research traditions (Smith, 1999). This is important to keep in mind because PAR processes, despite their commitment to nurturing diverse knowledge systems and prioritization of liberatory ends, can serve to further alienate or re-inscribe colonization through the privileging of a methodology that erases, silences, or else ignores the lived realities and ways of knowing of everyday people.
Kincheloe reminds practitioners of how important it is to be attuned to the veiled ways that this might happen,

the epistemological schema and ideological constructs of dominant power blocs subvert the democratic, anticolonial, and emancipatory dimensions of such critical theoretical/critical pedagogical research… I have watched activist groups, students and professors undertake PAR with noble intentions—only to fall victim to unexamined epistemological assumptions that reinscribed particular forms of white supremacy, class bias, gender oppression, and colonial relationships (2009, p. 108).

It in its radical epistemological challenge to positivist approaches to research, YPAR begs that researchers make intentional and steadfast commitments to critically examine the power structures and power relations that legitimate and privilege particular ways of knowing. As part of this commitment, it is crucial to acknowledge the important bodies of knowledge that indigenous communities across the globe have long possessed in working cooperatively to disrupt colonization; while it is resistances in 1970’s Latin America (Morrow & Torres, 1995) that are said to have shaped the beginnings of PAR as a strand of social science research, these efforts are not the first nor the only to have encompassed those values and ethics that characterize PAR.

I don’t plan to offer an exhaustive account of these movements and traditions, as each is attached to very specific historical, social, and economic contexts that influenced the ways that people theorized and produced knowledge around problems that they hoped to rectify. Instead, I first offer a brief overview of the British traditions of action research, which YPAR borrows its name from. Following this, I discuss PAR as a revolutionary pedagogical undertaking (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970) as situated within critical social movements that aimed to improve both the social and material conditions of communities and society writ large. The most influential of this work grew out of Latin American social movements and in particular the work taken up by educator Paulo Freire whose pedagogical approach I outline in brief. Finally, I
end by attending to YPAR’s methodological and epistemological orientation, and review
important trends and insights gleaned from literature that captures YPAR projects in schools. I
conclude with an identification of the gap that I seek to address, that is, research that looks at the
connection between literacy processes that happen within in-school YPAR projects and the
identity shifts that happen beyond them.

British traditions of (P)/AR

British Social Psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) was the first to use the term “action
research” in describing an iterative research process of planning, action, analysis, and then
further action. Lewin’s work across most of his career focused on organizational structures and
development, and was later adapted by British researchers interested in a theoretical approach
that would lend itself to exploring educational crises proliferating across working-class England.

In short, Lewin saw it as crucial that those people directly impacted by problems of
interrogation actively participate in the inquiries into said dilemmas. His insights led to greater
interest in social relationships and the psychological impact of prioritizing democratic decision-
making in the workplace. A Prussian psychologist and a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, he
embraced the belief “that people would be more motivated about their work if they were
involved in the decision-making about how the workplace was run” (McNiff & Whitehead,
2006, p.36). All this stated, his studies were criticized for focusing on productivity in the
workplace and being devoid of an explicit analysis of power and the ways that it shaped workers’
experiences with each other as well as modes of production.

One of these researchers was Clem Adelman, who later noted (1993, p. 7) that in Lewin’s
work, he was “particularly concerned to raise the self-esteem of minority groups, to help them
seek, quoting Lewin, ‘independence, equality, and co-operation’ (Lewin, 1946) through action research and other means. This intended outcome of PAR is important to note, as efficacy and agency weren’t always prioritized in later studies that applied Lewin’s model of action research. Even Lewin himself did not seem to always embrace a methodology that matched his stated purpose. I say all of this to draw attention to the inherent tension that has always existed in participatory action research since its inception; in contexts that tend to reward measurable outcomes over processes, the social, emotional and even spiritual benefits of participating in collective efforts toward social and material transformation are often lost.

Early iterations in the British tradition of action research that were inspired by Lewin’s model focused on organizational development and later teacher practice. However, while these projects were considered practical, critics felt that they weren’t critical enough (Carr & Kemmis, 1996; Brock-Utne, 1980). In a third wave of action research in the 60’s and 70’s, projects like the Ford Teacher Project directed by John Elliot and Clem Adelman (Elliott & Adelman, 1973) emerged that sought to rectify this in part by engaging teachers in identifying problems of classroom practice. Concepts like teacher reflection, evaluation techniques, and inquiry were highlighted in what literature captured as “Inquiry/ Discovery” or “I/D” methods of teaching: teachers were invited to participate in cycles of inquiry that researchers hoped would bolster their sense of agency as practitioners.

While powerful, engagement with these concepts were often mediated through a research team and teachers weren’t directly positioned at the helm of decisions that grew out of their identified concerns. John Elliot, for instance- a member of the Humanities Curriculum Project in the 70’s and 80’s was said to be “clear about the need to engage teachers in active participation
and discussion but less clear about whether decisions regarding further developments should be followed through by individuals or groups” (Adelman, 1993, p. 17).

These earlier projects directed at equipping teachers as researchers were an important contribution, for sure, but as Mirra and her colleagues (2016) note, “little is mentioned in the existing action research as to how (these) models improved the life experiences of youth beyond school” (p. 20). These methods, while valuable in the larger arc of action research, were devoid of any complex analysis of the socio-historical and sociopolitical realities of the young people that teachers were serving. Moreover, teachers themselves were not to offer any real suggestions as to how to rectify the problems of practice that emerged from their inquiry, making it difficult for them to serve in their full capacity as advocates for students.

*Latin American Resistance and the Educational Roots of PAR*

YPAR as a radical epistemological and pedagogical project (Fine, 2008), then, has its roots in a wide array of critical theories, but perhaps most notably in Latin American social movements and research traditions. An especially significant actor was Paulo Freire, who engaged marginalized groups of ordinary Brazilian peasants as activists and researchers, and was the first to link critical inquiry and knowledge production to emancipatory ends. In the 60’s and 70’s, Freire and other literacy educators would seek to identify what he called “generative themes”, or issues of critical importance to community members, to be used as a basis for literacy instruction. These collaborations helped adults learn to not only read, but also articulate their social realities and question the nature of their historical and social situations. Once these problems were in full view, the role of the educator was to facilitate dialogue between people so that the community could collectively decide on the most effective ways to dismantle
institutional and systemic oppression. Educators also used these instances of problem-posing as opportunities to teach literacy.

Revolutionaries, Freire argued, must respect the people and strive to achieve communion with them, uniting with them by their action, by their reflection upon that action and in turn-upon the world (Freire, 1998). Freire emphasized in his method the importance of dialogue between the human subject and the world, or what he would call a “dialogic interaction.” To speak, for Freire, was to name the world, and to name the world in order to transform it. His vision was radical in that it resisted traditional interactions that insisted one person act upon another to accomplish a goal. Instead, it trusted people’s ability to work together in ways that could open new spaces for justice and community building to take root.

This framework was committed to pedagogical configurations and commitments that could be structured in a manner to address everyday situations, and was a powerful adult educational model replicated in Australia, New Zealand, and South America (Baum et al., 2006). In general, PAR was an approach taken up by those enmeshed in colonization, as a project with emancipatory ends. That said, as other scholars have noted (Caraballo et al., 2017, Mirra et al., 2016), the participatory approach to solving community issues can be traced back to practices of indigenous communities residing in Africa, the Americas, and the South Pacific well before Western paradigms of thought were introduced.

PAR’s focus has been to serve as a disruptive catalyst for change, equipping communities to interrogate systems of oppression in order to transform them. As Michelle Fine highlights, PAR is a radical epistemological challenge that challenges those power relations that undergird legitimized ways of knowing, as it “assumes that those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structured,
consequences, and the facture points in unjust social arrangements” (2008, p. 215). That is, those who have the vantage point of having lived through and experienced oppression are best equipped to articulate that experience and ways of moving forward. As Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell note, “Participatory Action Research is valuable because it brings in populations that are often alienated within the traditional research paradigm, but it is also important because these populations often have the best vantage point and the greatest vested interest in the work itself” (2008, p. 108). In total, PAR and YPAR offer rich opportunities for participants to not only draw upon ideas, beliefs, skills, or funds of knowledge to build literacy, but also to create networks of power and new forms of literacy.

YPAR as a Critical Epistemological and Ideological Orientation

De-stabilizing concretized power hierarchies is also at the center of YPAR initiatives, or those carried by youth. For instance, some of the most common areas of YPAR investigations include issues related to police brutality, education, healthcare, and housing. YPAR is not only a method, (Fine, 2008), however. Important in these interrogations are explorations rooted in critical scholarship and ways of knowing, as students’ inquiries are committed to issues of power, race, class, and ultimately social change. For instance, Critical Race Theory is sometimes used as a theoretical framework when youth are exploring how race intersects with and folds into issues of class, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and the like (Torre, 2009; Akom, 2009; Terry, 2010); As a theory, CRT argues that there is “no scholarly perch outside of the social dynamics of racial power to merely observe and analyze. Scholarship—the formal production, identification, and organization of what will be called ‘knowledge’ is inevitably political” (Crenshaw et al., 1995). This acknowledgement of knowledge as inherently political
compliments YPAR’s commitment to disrupting traditional hierarchies of knowledge and questioning who has knowledge, who should produce it, and how it should be distributed.

Other critical traditions that have undergirded YPAR projects have included decolonial (Gill et al., 2012) and feminist studies (Cahill et al., 2010; Nygreen, 2009); like CRT they assist students in naming and questioning the multiple historical injustices that they engage with and hope to transform. In total, these framings challenge the ideology of social science as politically neutral, and encourage work that prioritizes emic perspectives that permit those most directly affected by problems to not only name and challenge what is under investigation, but to do so in ways that center their way of seeing and experiencing it (Irizarry, 2015).

Critical research traditions paired with the epistemological commitments that YPAR attests to open up revolutionary possibilities for not just research, but also youth resistance. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) termed “transformational resistance” as a concept that refers to “student behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice” (310). Instances where students have engaged in transformational resistance related to educational issues include influencing school decision-making (Yonezawa and Jones, 2009; Bertrand and Ford 2015) and even at the level of policy (Rogers and Morrell, 2010; Conner det al, 2013; Kirshner, 2015). However, as Bertrand has highlighted in her work, research is needed that uncovers YPAR’s relationship to educational change (2016, p. 17), especially in schools. This would provide more direction as to how adults might be able to more strategically support young people as they navigate the tensions that the sociopolitical context of schools would undoubtedly present.
**Affordances of YPAR**

YPAR projects are characterized by their collective and participatory nature (McIntyre, 2000; Fine, 2008) and efforts are often inter-generational. Most documented YPAR collaborations are supported by university partnerships, where university faculty are teamed up with youth to conduct research (see Kinloch, 2010; Romero et al., 2008, Tuck et. Al, 2008; Morrell, 2008). However, as a critical epistemological approach to working with young people, YPAR has gained traction with community organizations (Cahill, 2006), teachers (Morrell, 2008; Mirra et al., 2015) social workers (Johnston-Goodstar, 2013), and others who are interested in better equipping youth as knowledge producers and change agents in their local communities. As Fine notes, a powerful affordance of YPAR’s design is to “interrogate the conditions of oppression and surface leverage points for resistance and change” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). In this way it serves as a critical research methodology that challenges who is allowed to conduct research and toward what ends, making it an attractive model for those wishing to interested in attending to issues of power and social change.

According to Zaal and Terry (2013) engaging in the process of YPAR can transform not only the learning process for youth participants as they gain valuable critical and independent thinking skills through a process that places a greater responsibility upon them then traditional modes of instruction (46), but also their identities as experts and knowledge holders as they assume new roles in their learning. They gain confidence in taking on roles as authorities on selected topics and in turn, feel that that they can and should be heard by others. In this way, YPAR not only facilitates social action, but also fosters positive identity development.

Equally important as the transformative outcomes of YPAR is the development of students’ academic literacies skills (Kornbluh et al, 2015), which Morrell (2004) defines as
language and tools that students need to function in the academy. This is not automatic however, as it requires empowering curricula and pedagogies that are engaging, allow community knowledge to take center stage, draw upon strengths and interests of students, and are culturally responsive. It’s roots in a critical pedagogy point to the need for teaching stances that position young people to leverage their voices toward change. Such pedagogies do not erase the adult, however. Teachers must thing strategically about how to create opportunities for academic learning while engaging students’ sociopolitical identities. They must be skilled facilitators who are able to think creatively about instruction, while beholden to the demands of high stakes learning environments.

In committing to this aspect of the work, it is important to consider how to differentiate instruction for students with varying academic competencies. For instance, Wright and Mahiri (2012) note that a YPAR project they implemented at a local community center in California helped one struggling reader with his literacy and academic development, after initial apprehension and resistance on his end in the beginning stages of his participation. They attribute his growth to several factors including: providing a caring, supportive learning environment; fostering an assets-based approach to literacy (Moll et al., 1992) and providing an apprenticeship model (Lave, 1996) for learning to take place, where the project-based learning approach that YPAR is situated within connects literacy activities to real-world purposes (p.126). Each of these, they suggest, are worth taking into consideration for educators looking to adapt a YPAR model inside of schools. However, as Zaal and Terry also note (2013), some of the challenges in adopting YPAR inside of schools come from political administrative pressures, which might hinder students’ ability to study and take on issues. For instance, some investigations might draw more attention to the school, exposing it to potential value-based
judgments from the outside community. Or the context of learning and demands on learners, such as Common Core Standards and high stakes tests, might heavily influence the schools’ curriculum and course sequencing, which is often times filtered through the administration. This does not mean that YPAR cannot be implemented within school settings; it simply means that those wishing to do so should be able to anticipate challenges and be prepared to address them with various stakeholders.

Youth Participatory Action Research in Schools

Critical Youth Studies (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, ibid), Youth-led Participatory Action Research, or YPAR (Morrell, 2008; Ozer & Wright 2012), and Positive Youth Development (Larson 2006; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005) research narrates young people as having powerful assets that can be built upon to increase motivation and engagement to participate in academic content and community life. Some of these include a capacity for being motivated by challenge, a unique understanding of school setting and schooling as student participants, and experiential knowledge. However, literature that documents YPAR initiatives in particular, in which “young people study their own social contexts to understand how to improve conditions and bring about greater equity” (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008, p. 4) have paid minimal attention to the ways that adults working inside of schools have thought about and designed school-wide interventions or curriculum models that support such ends. In fact, it is only more recently that research has begun to expand into school settings (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Zaal & Terry, 2013; Irizarry, 2011; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011), as most Youth-led Participatory Action Research projects mentioned in the literature are rooted primarily in out-of-school or after-school contexts. Studies that have documented YPAR initiatives inside of traditional school settings have pointed to the structural challenges in doing
so such as balancing adult and youth power, access to limited resources, and preexisting socio-cultural assumptions from students and adults about classroom spaces (Garcia, 2012; Ozer & Douglas, 2013).

YPAR research points to its potential in creating opportunities for agentic youth participation, academic learning, and sociopolitical development (Ozer et al., 2013; Kornbluh et al., 2015; Morrell, 2008). However, studies that document its implementation in middle schools has been limited (Ozer et al., 2010; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2008), which this study seeks to address. As rendered by Ozer and her collegues (2010), middle school as a period of development is associated with reductions in academic motivation and achievement (Eccles et al., 2002; Simmons 1987) while an uptick of psychological problems tends to occur (Compas et al., 1997; Galaif, 2007). This makes YPAR an attractive intervention, as it taps directly into young people’s sense of autonomy and decision-making around issues that matter to them at a crucial point in their adolescent development. As a model, it also has the potential to create space for inquiry around those problems that surface as a part of coming into adolescence- mental health issues, for instance, or factors related directly to student motivation. All this said, there is a growing need to highlight the cultural models and discourses at work within the larger activity systems of in-school YPAR projects, particularly in middle school, in order to better understand how adult practices inside of school either support or resist dominant power relations and systemic inequalities, including but not limited to those embedded within the institution of schooling.

Some of the most complicated tensions to address around YPAR are those enmeshed within relational dynamics influenced by the broader expectations that the structure of school imposes: the values, beliefs, and expected modes of interaction inside of school tend to be at
odds with YPAR’s explicit commitment to disrupting and transforming hierarchies that produce inequitable and oppressive conditions in the communities that young people reside within, and are also extremely adult-centric. Nonetheless, while schools serving poor and working-class youth are often cited as spaces that reproduce class and race/ethnic inequities (Apple, 1982; Saranson, 1995), even noted by some as breeding civic alienation and social cynicism (Fine et al., 2004), this isn’t always the case, nor does it have to be. Adults inside of schools can work toward building academic skills while also cultivating agency-civic and otherwise, and YPAR might be a useful pedagogical tool toward these ends (see Morrell, 6 summers of YPAR; Filipiak & Miller, 2014; York & Kirshner, 2015).

As I mention prior, there are not many studies that capture Youth Participatory Action Research projects happening inside of school, during the normal school day. Moreover, most YPAR projects are implemented with young people who are of high school age. This is a unique study in that students are of middle school age, and the project was both initiated and supported by school administrators. At the time of the study and in its third year of implementation, the program evolved into the creation of a single class committed solely to the method and methodology of YPAR, with nearly 23 sections of the course taught by one teacher. The question is, what did this class mean for students enrolled in it? How did students use YPAR to address challenges both inside and outside of school? How was YPAR conceived of and carried out as a curricular tool? What happened when students addressed adult stakeholders and disrupted some of the power structures that existed across the school building?

In all, this study looked to provide a snapshot of not only how YPAR shaped students’ development of agency, but also what YPAR looked like inside of the unique context of a middle school. It sought to contextualize the way young people’s identities and literacy practices were
shaped by their participation in YPAR inside of school. Also important in the context of the YPAR class, the introduction of digital media tools democratized decision making while at the same time provided previously unavailable methods for youth to invent new ways of interrogating and transforming the social and material conditions of their communities. This study also hoped to highlight the literacy practices enacted in digital spaces, what characterized them, and how students came to understand their transformative potential.

Finally and just as importantly, it also explored how the adults supporting the YPAR project framed student learning environments and engagements, and the meaningful day-to-day interactions that students experienced. Mired with the same challenges that others like it face, including pressure to raise test scores and having a diverse student population that teachers were not always prepared to address the needs of, North Bronx Middle School administration got behind the YPAR work with gusto. As a result, faculty involved in the project had to change their pedagogical stances and practices in order to embrace the stance of empowerment and criticality that YPAR as a framework required. This was a messy process, one that was filled with challenges but also small victories and generative moments of learning, too. I now turn to a brief overview of critical pedagogy and critical literacy in order to situate this aspect of the study in a body of work that YPAR literature is oftentimes subsumed within.

**Critical Literacy/Pedagogy**

Freire and Macedo (1987) understood critical literacy as a means to transform inequitable social structures, seeing literacy as a tool to exercise “a critical reading of reality” (p. 36). They believed that literacy could be used as a mechanism to challenge the status quo, to open up new paths toward self-discovery and collective transformation. For critical literacy theorists and pedagogues, it has always been important to examine the ways that knowledge is constructed
through language, who is permitted to speak, ways that language is either sanctioned or silenced across settings, and the relationships that people have with both language and knowledge itself (Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1989/2001; Christensen, 2000). Critical literacy is a tool that permits people to unpack the hegemonic ideologies that undergird language, with hopes that greater critical consciousness will mobilize masses to resist oppressive structures that prevent the achievement of democracy and liberation for all.

Those critical literacy scholars grounded in Freirian pedagogy posit texts as contested spaces where issues of power and domination are located. To become literate then is to not just learn to read and write, but to learn how to do so within the context of becoming conscious of the political and economic contexts that texts and language are situated within (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Equally important are the opportunities to make sense of one’s own experience as it has been constructed through texts and language or to develop what Freire calls “conscientization” (1970; 1998) with the capacity to re-write the world as a driving force,

“Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world…we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or re-writing it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literary process” (Freire & Macedo, p. 35).

By learning to read and write, one learns who they are and can become. Freire’s conceptualization of critical literacy praxis, tied to a cycle of action and reflection toward emancipatory ends, has been an oft-referenced concept when discussing literacy as a meaning making process that can promote civic engagement (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morrell, 2008). Central processes in obtaining critical literacy are co-construction of knowledge,
investigation of “generative themes” attached to students’ real and immediate lives, and dialogue. This is important for students as it prepares them to not just develop different literate identities, but to become equipped to address issues in their lives, offering more clear pathways to successful academic futures. Both conscientization and praxis sit at the core of Youth Participatory Action Research; they offer guidelines for a critical pedagogy that challenges youth to direct their frustration about inequality toward purpose-driven change. Central to students’ ability to build meaning and critique inequities within their lives is their relationship with language and literacy, and those who hope to support YPAR within any setting must pay close attention to the ways in which they situate literacy in their approach. Inside of schools, this can oftentimes require a seismic shift in current capitalist school structures that have restrictive approaches to literacy and literacy instruction.

Critical language scholars across the field have carved out spaces to discuss the sociopolitical, cultural, and ideological issues that are attached to literacy instruction inside of schools. For instance, In Hull’s examination (2001) of the popular discourse around (ill)literacy in the workplace, she disrupts the common expectations that reading and writing skills emphasized in school actually prepare students with the requisite skills to enter into the workplace. She substantiates this with pointing to both the history of economic success during times when school-based literacy outcomes were at low levels, as well as more recent actions like high-tech companies out-sourcing job projects in search of a cheaper and perhaps more obedient workforce (p. 676). She questions the skills that are said to be valued in the workplace, as she notes that workers’ potential extends far beyond what most literacy tasks indicate. She notes the danger in creating dichotomies that separate those who pass these tasks from those who don’t—especially since in many cases, such divisions occur across racial, economic, and gendered
lines, and thereby re-inscribe deficit characterizations of some of the most vulnerable populations in society.

Goodman (2001), an advocate of “whole language” instruction, turned her attention to the sorts of knowledge about literacy that children gain from their environment, and the ways that discourses in school around literacy events support or negate this knowledge. Naming the “roots of literacy” (317) as relational, functional, and linguistic, she argues that each of these are tied to processes by which children become literate, but overlooked in programs that treat the development of literacy as linear. She notes, “Too often, (children) are placed in a rigid instructional setting that ignores and is incompatible with what they already know” (324). As a result, “it oversimplifies what children really do learn and focuses some insecure children on insignificant and often erroneous principles about language” (324).

In their work, both Goodman and Hull call attention to the value in non-dominant discourses and problematize dominant ones, but Delpit (1995/2001) complicates this dichotomy when she argues that exposure to dominant, or what Gee refers to as “secondary” discourses (1989/2001) can aid literacy acquisition. She advocates for the teaching of the dominant discourse so that all students can acquire the language of power, having the necessary language skills that can lead to economic and social capital. She offers instructional recommendations that include supporting students in using multiple discourses and voices, being aware of the conflicts between home and school discourses, and to acknowledge the “discourse stacking” (554) that society is engaged in. Engaging in these moves can help students to transform literate discourse and be aware of the oppressive language hierarchies in society, so that they can turn these “on (their) head and make available one or more voice for resisting and reshaping an oppressive system” (554).
Students’ perceptions of themselves and of the world writ large are heavily influenced by the ways in which languages and texts are thought of and treated. Critical language and literacy scholars offer an important perspective in illuminating the power relationships in society and texts, and ask important questions that are useful for teachers looking to create classrooms that question practices of privilege and injustice. For instance, leveraging multiple perspectives to explore texts with questions such as “whose voices are heard and whose are missing?” (Luke & Freebody, 1997) can create moments of empathy and understanding for all students, including those positioned as privileged. Also, taking a pedagogical stance that historicizes knowledge and problematizes current bodies of study aids students in calling into question the modes of perception that they use toward understanding experiences (Shor, 1987). Yet and still, if students are asked to engage in literacy more critically they may resist if the teachers working with them are not equipped to understand the systems of reference that students are using to navigate the world and in turn, the word. In the spirit of this concern, the final portion of my literature review offers a brief overview of approaches that taken into account students’ plurality, both as it relates to their cultural disposition as well as the tools they leverage to express their multiple voices. While critical literacy has the potential to promote dialogue around and reflection upon multiple and contradictory perspectives (Nieto, 2009; Harste et al., 2000), it is also true that many teachers are not equipped with tools to support the hybrid literacy identities and practices that students bring with them into the classroom. Especially in the context of supporting students in the project of designing and implementing YPAR projects, it is important that the adults who are supporting students in such a critical endeavor find mechanisms for uplifting and even centering the voices and perspectives of the youth whom they are serving. Otherwise, it becomes likely that adults will re-inscribe the same power structures that students are actively resisting.
Plural approaches to literacy

Across academic disciplines, various scholars have emphasized the importance of generating curricula and pedagogical stances that address the needs of students with diverse language, cultural practices, and literacies. (Gay 2010; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irizarry, 2007; Paris, 2012; Emdin, 2016). In her seminal study, Ladson-Billings credited the “excellence” of 8 teachers of African American students to what she names as a “culturally relevant pedagogy”, or “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement, but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (469). In particular, the orientations of teachers she studied are valuable in that they can be adapted across contexts and modalities, including those taking on projects like YPAR.

For instance, teachers’ “conceptions of knowledge” were not static or inflexible; they instead saw knowledge as shared, recycled, and constructed” (481). The orientation highlighted here is significant in that the teacher is de-centered as the expert and what replaces that center is the content to be explored, interrogated, and played with in a community of learners. Room is created for knowledge to be co-constructed, thus permitting students’ ways of seeing and engaging with the world to be honored and affirmed. The traditional hierarchy of teacher-as-expert is disrupted.

Ladson-Billings also notes that those teachers enacting a CRP valued knowledge as being action-oriented and dynamic. For successful teachers, she notes, “knowledge is about doing,” and meaningful learning that “sticks” is attached to activity that is adaptable and not always married to the handed-down curriculum. In fact, she notes that the teachers she studied insisted that assessments be multi-faceted, and that knowledge should be viewed critically. Teachers
possessed a healthy amount of skepticism as it related to content that was traditionally privileged in schools, but did not leave their criticism at the door. They found ways to provide multiple opportunities for students to come to understand a concept or to connect to it more personally. In this way, they possessed a sort of critical hope. Such an orientation complements the critical and imaginative disposition that YPAR requires of educators engaged with the model. Like those that Ladson-Billings heralds, teachers who support young people in the design and development of YPAR projects must consider the contexts that they are teaching in, the students whom they are working alongside, and the cultural resources and linguistic repertoires that students carry with them into the classroom. They must adjust their content and instruction to authentically account for the voices and perspectives and histories in the room, while also positioning themselves as brokers of students’ political and social identities; they must be up for the challenge of resisting epistemological assumptions that cast students in a deficit light.

One limitation of Ladson-Billings work is that it traditionally focused on African-American students and teachers; some scholars have gently pushed back on it for essentializing cultural groups (Irizarry 2007), and have since called for pedagogies that are more inclusive. A useful framing is Paris’s (2012) theory of a “culturally sustainable pedagogy.” Paris highlights CSP as having “an explicit goal of supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers (95). In his framing of the concept, he questions terms like “relevant” and “responsive”, skeptical of whether or not such adjectives capture exactly what educators are attempting to promote in a pluralistic society. He critiques, “They do not do enough to support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality necessary for success and access in our demographically changing U.S. and global schools and communities” (95). Toward this end, teachers might not only better understand how and why young people are exercising
and engaging with literacy across a variety of contexts, but also pay closer attention to the ways that such engagements are molded and shaped by social interactions— and the identities that emerge along the way. Irizarry notes, “identities are not solely created based on race or identity. Rather, identities are complex because of the experiences and relationships (students) create with others” (2007, p. 22). However, that is not to say that a focus on African-American students in articulating a culturally relevant pedagogy was not or is not useful. From an intersectional stance, focusing on those students deemed least successful in schools is likely to produce understandings that help teachers consider pedagogical principles for achieving success for all students (Ladson-Billings, 2014), not just African-American.

In moving forward, teachers must be equipped with pedagogies that sustain the identities and cultures that youth are enacting and practicing, and teaching practices that engage questions of equity and justice. Thus, one of the purposes of this study was to listen for the ways that young people described the relationships that evolve around their engagements with YPAR, and how these might speak to and hence stretch our understandings of what sociocultural approaches to literacy and a culturally relevant/sustainable pedagogies might offer students in classrooms today. This cannot be divorced from, however, the ubiquitous presence of digital media tools in students’ lives, as students are performing, thinking, learning, writing, and interacting with the world in dynamic ways. No longer can digital media be framed as a separate branch of the “literacy tree”; instead, it is a foundation that literacy and pedagogy writ large must be built upon. I turn to this final section to briefly highlight what has come to be called “new literacies,” in order to foreground not only some important ideas around the uptake of new technology tools and media as it relates to education, but also to point to the potential that such new tools might have in bolstering students’ civic engagements and identities.
New Tools

As mentioned earlier, “new literacies” also refers to the *kinds* of literacies that are being practiced as well as the social practices that are involved in exercising them. Here, ‘new’ refers to the nature or “stuff” of literacy, as digital technologies have introduced different forms of texts, which in turn require a different set of practices around textual production. There currently exists a growing body of research that suggests students are engaging with peer and social communities outside of school in increasingly participatory ways, producing sophisticated content in collaboration with others that is crafted and shared across both digital and physical communities. For instance, many youth are coding video games and generating their own blogs and websites, sampling each other’s music, and producing and distributing videos online and in person.

As the increased availability of media tools has allowed for production and dissemination of material to be in the hands of the general public, content is now shared across communities as opposed to being in the hands of a few elite individuals. In light of this, it is no surprise that young people are currently spending most of their waking hours consuming or producing media (Ito et al., 2009). And while I’m not saying that youth media production is a magic bullet for educational reform, I am saying that curriculums need to change in a technologically advancing society, where participatory cultures like the one Henry Jenkins (2004) describes below point to what might be nourished inside of classrooms if we decide to look more closely at spaces where youth production is flourishing. In 2004, Jenkins and his colleagues authored a white paper entitled Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century. Their paper describes a participatory culture as one:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created).

This explanation of participatory culture is important in that it points to the significance of fostering a purpose, supporting collaboration, and believing that the act of creating is a valuable process in and of itself - regardless of the product. Moreover and just as importantly, it acknowledges that digital media tools alone are not enough, and that production can and should involve both digital media tools and print. There is not a binary between these two mediums, nor should there be a trade-off of print for digital, as some have suggested. Focusing on this misses the point entirely. Instead, the characteristics above suggest that there are practices or skills embedded within participatory cultures that would be valuable to acknowledge and then foster inside of classrooms. Taking this into consideration, educators might take steps toward generating educational models that leverage collaboration and digital media production towards the end of creating equitable and affirming learning environments in the future. In terms of pedagogy, teachers must then not only understand and support multiple academic and cultural needs that students carry with them into classrooms, but also be aware of the broader social landscapes that they are operating as mediators within that are influencing students’ local experiences both in their neighborhoods and in their schools. Otherwise, we are bound to replicate the same broken systems that perpetuate and amplify inequity. It seems important then that young people have abundant opportunities to articulate and shape their ever-changing
circumstances and realities, and the YPAR classroom might exist as a powerful place that this might happen.

(Re) Imagining Futures

Currently, there exists a participation gap as it relates to unequal access to experiences and skills that will prepare youth for full participation in future worlds and contexts. For instance, some schools have ushered in one-to-one laptop programs with great fanfare, only to find mixed results. They focus on technology tools being in students’ hands, but then fail to commit to exploring the new ways of thinking and interacting that the tools might afford students- especially in schools labeled as “underachieving.” While in some other contexts, students are prepared and then asked to produce and distribute their own media. They are exposed to new kinds of participatory cultures that, while maybe not necessarily valued by most of our current educational institutions in the moment, will surely manifest themselves in valuable ways that will prove to be generative in the future. Thus the divide that has emerged is not one necessarily around access, but one of participation (Watkins, 2009; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Jenkins mentions in his work that when we talk about digital tools saturating educational landscapes, it is not the tools themselves or even access to them that we need to focus all of our attention on, but rather the “opportunities to participate and to develop the cultural competencies and social skills needed for full involvement”(4). To put simply, what we ask students to do or not do with these new tools is preparing them for their futures.

The focus should then be on access to new media literacies, or what Jenkins describes as “a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape” (4). These core media skills include: play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, trans-media navigation,
networking, and negotiation. As technology and an increasingly pluralistic society are changing the nature of work, students need experiences inside of classrooms that take into account what their world is demanding from them. Conversely, they also need to be being positioned to work in ways that they feel comfortable making demands of their world. According to Lankshear and Knobel (ibid), new literacies are “made of different “ethos stuff” from what we typically associate with conventional literacies” (29). That is, these literacies are more participatory, collaborative, and distributed, and less individuated and author-centric than conventional literacies. At the classroom level, this might mean that teachers need to design learning experiences that allow students to create more content and to do so in a more collaborative manner than what school has typically demanded of students. With all that said, there are important pedagogical considerations to take into account as it relates to instruction, including the cultural contexts that instruction is taking place within.

A definition of educational equity then must expand in order to account for not only the recent proliferation of media and technology tools, but also the multiple and varied historical, social, and cultural contexts of literac(ies) that students carry with them to school. Digital media allows students to collaborate and engage with each other and with their communities in new ways that expand beyond classroom walls. However, educators must work to guide students toward a more critical understanding of their role as consumers and producers of text. This is where a model like Youth Participatory Action Research might be helpful in re-imagining curriculums that both position students as producers and create spaces that encourage them to form mutual ties with one another as they explore issues that matter to their individual and collective well-being. In this way, digital media tools can be waged toward building spaces for youth to reflect, develop a critical consciousness, to hope, and to heal.
Emancipatory pedagogies (Haddix & Ruiz, 2012) that embrace the use of digital media tools can be powerful in transforming young people’s relationship with literacy, with themselves, and with the world. That said, what this looks like inside of schools has not been well-documented. Agency as rooted in a process of healing (Ginwright, 2011), which I hope to capture fragments of across this study, is a valuable trajectory for research insomuch as it highlights the remarkable ways that young people struggle collectively to resist toxic perceptions of their identities, their communities, who and what they love. Understanding what their day-to-day struggles are and the ways that they use literacy in all of its forms to heal, cope, resist, and reflect is an important undertaking. In the case of digital tools, youth can be encouraged to leverage their new media literacies as mechanisms to address larger inequities that they face.

In total, the conceptual model for my study frames literacy and socialization practices that mediate healing, critical literacy, and cultural representation as agentive, theorizing such practices as enactments of what I name as “agencies of dignity.” Agencies of dignity are those that affirm young people’s dignity and sense of self-worth, an essential priority for anyone looking to work alongside young people to create sustainable and transformative social change. Most recently, the lens of “transformative agency” has been used to describe young people’s investments in change-oriented action that disrupts normative hierarchies of power, forms of knowledge, imagining, or decision making (Bertrand et al, 2017; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Haapasaari et al, 2016). In conversation with such models, I see agencies of dignity as reflecting developmental inputs that might be tied to the liberatory activity that transformative agency assumes. That is, agencies of dignity as enacted by middle schools students could be considered as processes that, when nurtured, might foster the belief that one’s thoughts and actions are worth acting upon. Within the context of my study, the selection of healing, critical literacy and
cultural representation as guideposts for agency was informed by what I have seen across my 15 years of working in city schools as factors that affirm or else deny students’ sense of dignity. I see the attention to such iterations as worthwhile if we are to support the kinds of structural shifts needed in schools that will ultimately prepare young people to engage in new forms of agency that usher in sustainable, transformative change. I now turn to Chapter 3, which describes the methodology for this study and provides a broad overview of its design and implementation.
CHAPTER 3- METHODOLOGY

This critical ethnographic classroom study utilized qualitative research methodology to investigate how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shaped their development of agency. It highlighted youth as co-researchers in exploring the nature and development of agency across, within, and through multiple modalities, with literacy events being the primary unit of analysis. My discussion of sociocultural theory and critical theory in chapter two allowed for a shared language in accounting for both the myriad of mediators in literacy learning and practices and also for the ways that literacy is couched within power relations. The interaction of teachers, students, and content inside of schools cannot be divorced from the institutional contexts that classrooms are subsumed or the experiences, beliefs and values that individuals bring with them into the classroom. As such, the qualitative tools described in this chapter: field observation, document analysis, demographic surveys, focus group discussion, and semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) - reflect the plural voices informing this research.

For this chapter, I will explain how I approached data collection methods for each portion of my study along with the analytic lens engaged. I will first begin with an overview of the study. From here, I will present findings from an exploratory study that I conducted the year prior that informed the development of my research questions and then move into describing each portion of my study. For each, I will explicate its methodological value, provide a description of participants along with recruitment rationale, and explain the steps that I took in order to collect data. Thereafter, I will discuss my intentions in using Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how conceptions and formations of agency were enacted in and through discourses, activities, relationships, moments, and spaces attached to literacy events within YPAR. I will then provide
a brief explanation of my positionality as a researcher and conclude with a discussion of the limitations of my study.

**Study Overview**

For the first portion of my study, I engaged in ethnographic participant observation of thirteen general Youth Participatory Action Research classes meeting between the days of Wednesday through Friday, from February through June of 2016. The data that I collected from these observations were centered on my primary unit of study, which is the literacy event. Additionally, I conducted three sets of semi-structured interviews with 6 students enrolled in the general YPAR classes and three sets of interviews with the teacher of the course. I also collected course documents and planning materials stored on Google Drive following the receipt of permission from the teacher and students.

For this portion, I paid particular attention to those youth whom I had intended to participate in this study as co-researchers, a group of 18 eighth grade students who had been active with YPAR for over two years and were enrolled in a special section where students were tasked with creating a film that documented the impact of YPAR on the school. I initially requested student volunteers from this group who would be willing to keep journals that documented their experiences as participants within the YPAR class. However, despite some agreeing to engage in this method, most students stated that it was “too much work” to journal while also keeping up with their classwork. We collectively decided that we would not do journaling because it was too heavy of a lift. However, in the beginning stages of the process, I did inquire of them what kind of data they thought would be important in capturing the impact of YPAR on the school, which did, in part, influence the methodological and analytical framework I chose to adapt for this study. The ethnographic vignettes as found in chapter 5, for instance,
came about as a result of students stating that they thought that individual stories were especially powerful for capturing how YPAR lived at the school. Through individual and collective conversations with the YPAR filmmaking focus group, I came to understand how much they felt the power of stories was crucial in advocating for a program like YPAR. I discuss this in greater detail later on in my dissertation.

For the second portion of the study, I brought together this same group of participants for three focus group interview discussions, at the end of February, April, and June of 2015. The questions were in part informed by students the year prior, when I asked during one of my consulting sessions what kinds of focus group and semi-structured interview questions might pair well with my initial research questions. For our first focus group interview I began with a series of open-ended questions that mirrored some of those asked of the school leaders during my pilot study. For instance, I inquired what they thought about YPAR, and what they believed agency was. This allowed for a cross-comparative analysis between students and school leaders’ responses that offered insight into different perspectives held by stakeholders across the project. I now turn to an explanation of the pilot study that informed the development of my current research project.
Table 3.1

Alignment of Data Collection Methods to Research Questions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>SI</th>
<th>TI</th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>DA</th>
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<tr>
<td>How is YPAR leveraged to critically engage adult stakeholders in identified social issues, both inside and outside of school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How is literacy conceptualized and enacted inside of the YPAR classroom?</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does change happen in the YPAR classroom space, and how do students describe it?</td>
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Notes: (O) Observations; (SI) Student Interviews; (TI) Teacher Interview; (FG) Focus Group; (DA) Document Analysis; (J) Journals

Exploratory Study

The exploratory study sought to examine the ways that school leaders made sense of and developed YPAR as a framework, investigating how their personal experiences with literacy and schooling may have informed these understandings. Using a Life History approach (Dollard, 1935; Cole & Knowles, 2001), my inquiry aimed to highlight the understandings of literacy that the participants had and the social contexts in which they internalized these understandings; to make more explicit the ways in which these understandings may have influenced their own learning and theories of learning; and finally to draw attention to how each of these may have influenced the ways that they thought of Youth Participatory Action Research as a framework inside the large urban middle school where they worked. The two primary questions that I explored in this study were: (1) How do administrators and teacher leaders inside of a public, Title I, middle school make sense of Youth Participatory Action Research? (2) In what ways do
their experiences with and beliefs about literacy and schooling shape the way that they view and engage with a YPAR framework? This exploratory study happened at my dissertation site the year prior.

Life History Methodology

As a tradition, life histories date back to at least the 1920’s. During this time period, anthropologists used life history approaches to describe Native American cultures (Michaelson, 1925; Radin, 1926) and sociologists Thomas and Znaniecki (1920/1927) published their seminal life history work *The Polish Peasant* in Europe and America, a work that drew upon letters, brochures, newspaper articles and other personal documents to understand how Polish immigrants become “Americans”. It was important in moving sociology away from theory-heavy approaches to grounding ideas in empirical data, leading soon thereafter to the creation of the Chicago School of Sociology. (Bulmer, 1986). In 1949, Dollard’s *Criteria for the Life History* emerged, a work that codified Life History as a distinct approach and was a bold attempt to blend the principles of cultural study and psychoanalysis. Thereafter, scholars took up life history as a method across fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, education, women’s studies, law, and medicine, and methods for data collection have ranged from asking participants to write their own stories, to interviewing subjects beginning with their childhood and then moving chronologically to the present.

The distinctions between “life history” and “narrative” in qualitative research are oftentimes blurred, and fit into a larger category of terms such a autobiography, autobiographical narrative, oral narrative, stories, life stories, personal history, and the like. That being said, it is generally agreed that as a tradition, what distinguishes it from other qualitative methods that draw upon stories of participants’ lives is its inter-contextual approach; while it is a “story we tell
about our life” it is also located within a historical context (Goodson, 1992, p. 6). Thus, life history situates narratives within a broader context- personal, gendered, social, institutional, political, and the like and might draw from an individuals’ experiences to make broader contextual meaning” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 116). In the study of education more specifically, though not popular in the educational research community at the time, biographical methodologies surfaced. For instance, Goodson (1992) posited that the life and career experiences that teachers have both inside and away from school influence the ways in which they see teaching and the pedagogical moves they enact to support this vision. He believed that life history was a useful approach to better understand this interaction, in that it provided methodological support for “studies of teachers’ lives which seek to tell stories of action within a story of context” (1992, p. ix).

Population Site and Participants in Exploratory Study

The research site where I conducted my research was located at a public, general-admittance middle school located in the North Bronx, NY, hereafter I am naming North Bronx MS2. The building houses two schools, one an elementary and the other a middle school that I had worked with across the two years prior within a consultant capacity as a YPAR coach. The school is ethnically diverse: Of the 730 students enrolled, 28% were Asian, 24% were Black, 45% were Hispanic, and 2% were White. The majority of youth identifying as Asian were Bengali, and most of those identifying as Hispanic were from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Nearly 20% of the student population were English Language Learners, which is above the district average of 14%, and the majority of students (around 90%), qualified for free or reduced lunch at the time of my study. The composition was not unlike other public schools in

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2 The name of the school and all names of participants cited in this study are pseudonyms.
the Bronx in that it was ethnically diverse; however, it was unique in that the distribution across ethnicities was more balanced than its public school counterparts. This is due in large part to the consistent influx of Bengali students. Also important to note is that students’ performance on state exams exceeded district averages and in the case of math, exceeded the city average. Academic performance had increased across the tenure of the school’s principal Mr. Alexander, who served at the helm of the school for the last 9 years. Prior to his appointment, the school struggled academically and had high teacher attrition. Many of the staff members attributed the school’s growing success to Mr Alexander’s strong vision.

Mr. Alexander had a strong, visible presence in the school, and worked diligently to address issues around school culture. He believed that Youth Participatory Action Research would provide opportunities for students and staff to strengthen relationships between each other, and hoped that in witnessing students’ investigations of issues in the community, the adults in the building might view students who appeared disengaged through a more positive lens. He wanted to build-in initiatives that would highlight students’ strengths and interests, while also providing opportunities to build stronger connections with the outside community. He hoped that YPAR might serve this purpose.

The three participants included two administrators and one teacher-leader, all males ranging from ages 28-42. Two of the men were African-American, and one of the administrators were white. I used Criterion Sampling (Patton, 1990, p.176) to guide participant selection, with the criteria being: 1. Participants had to be taking on a leadership role within the YPAR project 2. I had to have a relationship with each participant that operated at least on a conversational level. The second criterion was in place because the nature of life history research is deeply personal. I knew that it might be difficult, if not evasive, to explore memories and feelings with
participants with whom I had no prior relationship. Therefore, I invited three participants with whom I had already worked closely across two years of the project.

Data Collection and Analysis in Exploratory Study

Luttrell (2009) posits that one of the central features of qualitative research is “defined by an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations as to how and why” (p.1). As such, this study explored the ways in which administrators and teachers made sense of their experiences in designing an in-school YPAR initiative, and the meanings they attached to their literacy and schooling experiences within this context. Further, as noted by Tamboukou et al (2013), unlike many qualitative frameworks, “narrative research offers to automatic starting or finishing points” (p.1), and “no overall rules about suitable materials or models of investigation”. This echoes Marshall & Rossman’s sentiment that qualitative research is not linear but iterative and complex (2011), and also complimented my attempts to better understand not only the lives of school leaders, but also their thinking from their perspective- “from the perspective of an insider looking around, and not from that of an outside looking in” (Muchmore, 2001). Toward this end, it is important to clarify that in employing a life history approach, my intent was to learn more about participants’ experiences with, beliefs about, and practices around literacy and schooling in the past alongside their understandings and conceptualizations of YPAR as a framework.

In all, I conducted nine one-on-one, 40-60 minute semi-structured interviews using Spradley’s interview protocol as guide (1979), transcribing them verbatim (See Appendix A for sample transcript). The interviews were used in conjunction with document analysis of YPAR brainstorming documents generated by participants as well as field observations and reflections that I kept in a researcher journal (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).
During the first interview we talked about experiences with YPAR, and then later with schooling and literacy. In looking over memos after the first interview that captured both points of curiosity and what I thought I was learning so far (Horvat, 2013), I returned for a second interview in order to follow up on issues that I needed clarification around from the first interview. A bulk of the discussion went into greater depth around more recent encounters with schooling and literacy, as in the life history tradition stories often emerge chronologically; all of my participants needed more time to finish the stories they began telling me in the first interview. Finally, after recognizing that agency and power were concepts that emerged across all three participants’ interviews in both rounds, we talked in the third and final interview about how they saw themselves and the roles they believed they should play in the larger school community.

I employed Luttrell’s three-step method for analysis of my data. During my first reading I looked for an overall point that participants seemed to be making. From here, I read the texts again, this time looking at all of the passages referring to school, literacy, and agency, attempting to find any points that they seemed to tie together. Finally, in the third reading I grouped stories according to the identified barriers to achieving agency, either in the own lives or generally speaking, as they were discussing their educational philosophies or their perceptions of YPAR. In doing so, I relied heavily upon the criteria that Cho and Trent suggest as major validity criteria for research: 1. triangulation, 2. accurate knowledge of daily life, and 3. member check as recursive (2006). However, in the case of member checks, I did not engage in them so much toward the aim of validity as it relates to providing a more accurate truth, but instead looked to engage my participants in the process of co-constructing the narrative of themselves that they wished to make public, taking into consideration what Cho and Trent name as a way of “taking its fundamental social initiative into consideration” (336). In triangulating data, using collected
observations, three semi-structured, 45-minute interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) collected from each of three participants, and YPAR brainstorming documents generated by 2 of the three participants, I hoped to notice what was identified as important by participants, what their educational values were about schooling and literacy, and the “accounting strategies” (Lutrell 2000) they used, as it relates to the ways in which they were framing and telling their stories. I hoped that this would allow room for more nuanced interpretations that would provide greater insight into how school leaders’ schooling and literacy experiences and the ways they recalled and made sense of them might inform the ways they conceptualized and implemented a participatory, critical inquiry project within a challenging educational context.

*Exploratory Study Findings and Impact on the Proposed Study*

My first research question set out to explore the ways that school leaders made sense of their experiences in designing Youth Participatory Action research. There are multiple reasons that schools decide to implement new programs; some of these include addressing perceived achievement gaps, improving literacy, strengthening school culture, and preparing students to enter into college. However, the ways that administrators and leaders within a school building help mediate teachers’ and students’ experiences with these programs are just as varying, influenced by a complex interplay of school and social contexts, ideological beliefs, and prior experiences. In this vein, I paid close attention to what participants noted as the purpose of YPAR, or what they thought or hoped it might foster. Overwhelmingly, YPAR was referenced as a scaffolding tool that participants hoped would lead to equitable learning experiences for all students, which I discuss below. Also, in discussing their experiences with and beliefs about literacy and schooling, each of them repeated across several occasions the importance of being able to exercise voice, citing instances in their own lives where they were either denied or
encouraged to do so, and the ways that this influenced their identity as students. Given that a central tenant within YPAR is agency, it seemed important to unpack how and in what contexts participants internalized voice as important.

YPAR as a Scaffold for Equity. Two purposes of YPAR were constant across each of the participants’ interviews, and the cultivation of each was noted at some point as being attached to more equitable experiences for students: a. to increase student engagement, b. to promote agency. Overwhelmingly, all participants viewed YPAR as a mechanism to leverage more engaging experiences for students in classrooms. One participant, the principal of the middle school, discussed this along the lines of YPAR’s potential to foster meaningful engagements with school curriculum, “It’s only sort of creating conditions for more meaningful work, meaningful work that is also developing them in a very genuine way as learners, and as thinkers, and as young adults, and as people who have agency in the world….I hate that “out-of-the-box” metaphor, but this idea that your learning is a consequence of your activity. You know, that you’re doing an activity that engenders meaningful learning.” He warned, however, that this meaning-making had to be student-led, which is perhaps why he saw YPAR as a framework for achieving this, “…I wanted to teach kids through experience…not through preaching at them, or telling them, or making them read something that was suddenly going to make this all meaningful, but to teach them that through experiences that you control what you experience and what you have access to,” He identified that engagement is predicated not solely on content, but on students’ ability to engage in experiences that allow them to exercise agency with each other and with information that is at hand. Here, he acknowledged the importance of the social activities through which knowledge and understanding was produced, advocating for opportunities where students were able to negotiate meaning on their own terms. This echoes
sentiments of scholars whose orientation toward literacy and communication prioritizes the social, cultural, and political contexts in which literacy and communicative acts are produced.

Another participant, the assistant principal, also spoke about engagement-, but specifically as it related to teachers and teaching as attached to a pilot run of YPAR the year previous. In his first interview he reflected on what he noted as the difference between engagement and compliance with YPAR, “It becomes an issue where students become compliant to the written instructions of the teacher. Who’s not so much focused on the engagement portion, not so much involved with the heart portion of the project…do the research, read the survey, do a presentation..the mechanics of what a school project that doesn’t engage students looks like, as opposed to the real heart and soul of doing something like this…. as opposed to like, some of the ones that were more sloppier, had more of the real like…the kids understood the purpose of what they were trying to do…” What engagement looks like, for this administrator, is “sloppy” but generative. In light of so many policies and practices in schools that promote compliance via best practices and hyper-standardization, this is important to take into consideration, especially given the substantial amount of research pointing to disengagement as the culprit in students’ academic failure.

Another salient concept was agency. All participants at some point across each of their three interviews referenced agency within the context of students having the necessary information and research skills to be able to understand the ways in which power and inequality informed conditions that affected their neighborhoods. As one participant noted, “the point is for them to activate that feeling inside of them so that they can be advocates for change. To have the agency to believe that whatever is affecting their community, that they have the power to change it.” But there were also other consequences they hoped the fostering of agency would evoke that
extended beyond critical participation, including investment in what one participant named as “an environment of intellectual challenge,” where students might shift the way they saw themselves as students because they genuinely cared about what they were being asked to participate in within school walls. This is significant because, as he saw it, “schools push students overwhelmingly into the same lot and condition as they came from.” He recognized student agency as a way to disrupt, albeit subversively, “the design” of schools, pushing back against the tendency to funnel students through visions imposed by adults, “Whatever our philosophical base is…we’re grossly misguided in those efforts, because you’re not developing in students the capacity to see for themselves. You’re essentially just making them see through your vision. What is powerful about anything like YPAR is that it’s teaching students that the most important thing is to have their own vision…their own understanding of their ability to impact the world around them.’ From a pedagogical standpoint then, agency was not just giving students something to do, but to nourish within them the sense that they could do something and the way to go about acting upon an idea or passion is left up to them. This philosophical orientation complemented the ethos of YPAR, as student-centered inquiry was privileged over teacher-driven instruction.

(Re)membering Voice. As mentioned earlier, it is worthwhile to consider what epistemological orientations that school leaders have alongside any particular program that they attempt to adopt. In the case of YPAR, agency is a central tenant that requires an epistemological stance that values youth as producers of knowledge who are capable of leveraging their knowledge toward ends that they identify as important. While it is true that you can’t change any one person’s experiences, it might be valuable to explore the worldview of school leaders who are actively taking up a project like YPAR. Along this trajectory of thinking,
I noticed that when participants discussed their schooling and literacy experiences during the life history interviews, all three touched on aspects of voice, which I loosely define as “the ability to have a role in decision making and choices impacting one’s life.” Each emphasizing the importance of creating room for student voice in school curriculums, participants had varying sets of experiences that shaped this belief. For instance, the two African-American men whom I interviewed shared encounters where exercising their voice was a matter of necessity to escape categorization or else succumb to the pressure of low expectations. In this case, voice was waged on an individual basis as an academic survival mechanism. In one instance, a participant was automatically placed in a remedial reading class at the community college level, because, as he puts it, the assumption was that “people who came up through the community college were not college ready.” This happened despite the fact that he received a perfect score on his placement test for English courses. The other participant’s experience was similar in that he attempted to leverage his voice to gain access to academic experiences that he felt mirrored his ability; however, there were multiple occasions where these attempts were met by resistant adults. To substantiate this, he spoke of an instance in middle school where he felt teachers were “plotting” against him after he got into a fight and then as a consequence moved him to what he identified as less rigorous classes. Frustrated, he verbalized his discontent, “I knew what was going on, and I would tell them that you are treating me differently, and that you know I’m able to do this work and I should be in a different class.” Soon thereafter the labeling began, “the teachers started to talk to my mom about me taking medication, and about me going into special education, all because of this one fight that I got into, and it actually got to the point where my mom threatened to sue the school…” In this case, there was no avenue for him to participate in decisions concerning his learning, and it was stifling. Later on in his high school career, he recalled falling
into a depression after resigning for a moment to teacher’s low expectations of him, placed again in less challenging courses along with the other black students in a mostly white school, and again resisting, “I would tell the teachers that, you know, “my mom’s tax dollars pay your salary (laughs), so they didn’t like that too much.” This speaks to the delicate and often times problematic power dynamics that exist between young people and adults inside of schools, one of the challenges that YPAR scholarship points to as a burden born most often by students.

On the other end of the spectrum, there were instances where participants expressed that exercising voice positively influenced the development of their identity, including how they saw themselves as intellectuals. In some cases this was mediated by an experience with a text that connected back to their life, generating an interest that they then wanted to talk about. Here, they developed identities as readers and thinkers as they were provided texts that they wanted to ask questions of and interrogate. In other cases, an academic identity was influenced through engagement in social interactions, where exercising voice meant challenging oneself, and feeling entitled to do so within a larger peer group setting. One of the participants cited a conversation in middle school where his peers in a math class were talking about a complex science phenomenon that he wasn’t familiar with, and a sense of urgency in asserting his voice into the conversation, “I knew exactly what it was, you guys are getting challenged because you’re smart, and I’m smart so I want that too. And it was, you know, I was a little put-out that I wasn’t invited into the group or asked to go do that, for sure, but I also just felt like, You’re not gonna’ stop me now that I know about it. I want to do that, too.” As we reflected together, he recalled his capacity to decide for himself what he wanted to learn, refusing to shy away from a budding interest despite little to no background knowledge of the concept at hand. In each of these references to voice, the awareness that participants even had something to say about whatever was at hand was
valuable, as they internalized that what they thought about and desired mattered. This surely influenced the ways that they saw a framework like YPAR, a model predicated on the belief that students do have something to say about what is happening around them and should be permitted the space and tools to explore their budding curiosities and concerns.

Impact of findings on the proposed study and research questions. School leaders’ written and oral narratives in the data collected during the exploratory study suggested a commitment to supporting students in developing both voice and agency; all three participants viewed Youth Participatory Action Research as a potential tool to leverage toward these ends. In numerous ways, administrators and school leaders act as buffers between the innovation of practice and the bureaucracy of schooling, and have the tremendous power of introducing and supporting teaching and learning models that support both teachers and students as agents of change, with YPAR being one such model. After exploring the belief systems possessed by the leaders of this project and observing that agency was a primary concept that emerged across the interviews, I then became curious about students’ experience of the curriculum and how their interactions with both the content and the adults mediating their experiences with it shaped their development of agency. All of the adult leaders who supported the implementation of YPAR into the fabric of NBMS hoped to see the project evoke agency inside of students, and each of them shared moments in their lives where they reflected on the ways that agency or the absence of it deeply influenced their experiences with school and/or literacy. Upon further reflection and wanting very much to honor the perspectives of the adult leaders who supported the YPAR program, I decided to frame my study around the concept of agency, hoping to understand the ways that students interpreted and engaged YPAR within a school ecology that actively sought to create an
affirming learning environment. I now turn to a more in-depth explanation of each of the data collection strategies I used for the rest of my study.

**Critical Ethnographic Classroom Study**

Before offering a more general overview of critical ethnography and the ways that it grounded the next phase of my study, a few terms need unpacking. First, the term “ethnography” refers to the qualitative study of the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings (Lecompte and Schensul, 2010), with a particular focus on the ways that individuals and groups construct and make meaning of their worlds. Ethnographers understand that cultures are locally specific and are rooted in meaning-making practices that are constantly shifting, always negotiated, and perpetually evolving. They pay close attention to these shifts, and attempt to offer as best as possible accurate reflections of participants’ views and perspectives along the way. This requires building ample trust so that ethnographers are provided access to participants’ authentic voices and opinions.

Second, the term “critical” is connected to two categories, “the value orientation of critical researchers”, and “the principles of critical epistemology” (Carspecken, 1996, p.5). As Soyini Madison explains, “critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain” (2005, p.5). Criticalists seek to do research that improves the social conditions of participants in particular settings; this speaks to their orientation. But as Carspecken notes, critical ethnography is based on critical epistemology, not on critical value orientation. Critical ethnographers employ methods that situate the topics or issues they are exploring in a more holistic social context, examining the ways in which wider social structures and cultural contexts influence participants and their
meaning-making. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) explicate pointed assumptions that inform the work of critical qualitative researchers,

That all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations which are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity; that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression which characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable; …that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression.”

These suppositions shape the ways in which a critical qualitative researcher both views and interprets data while situated within a context. Social and cultural life is perceived as happening within larger systems of power that must be explored. Critical theorists, then, view their role as unveiling and describing relationships of power to change inequities borne by them.

Critical ethnography is a rigorous qualitative method of study of social and cultural life that takes up methodological and theoretical frameworks that excavate these relationships of power. Also important is that it highlights participants as active agents within their communities; it attends to the local knowledge and understandings that participants possess in a commitment to moving toward “what could be” as opposed to settling on “what is” (Jocson, 2013). The researcher is in a delicate position, situated as an outsider who attempts to provide a snapshot of what participants’ behaviors and understandings mean to them to an outside audience. The two primary data collection strategies that critical ethnographers employ are participant observation and semi-structured interviewing (Lecompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 117) though they are not limited to these two methods alone.
Typically, ethnographers begin by playing close attention to what members of a group are doing and why through close observation of their actions and interactions, and at times by talking to them. The aim is to develop “thick description” (Geertz, 1994) that builds what Carspecken calls a “primary record” (1996, p. 44). They record every detail they can, including speech acts, arrangements of space, and body movements, usually in the form of a field note (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007, p.118). Many times, researchers jot down as much as they can into a convenient notebook and then as soon as they find a place to write, they produce longer notes that allow them to write more thorough narratives that capture ideas, reflections, and sometimes “hunches” that they may have. It is important for critical ethnographers to spend time at this stage in creating reflective field notes alongside more descriptive ones; reflexivity is a central component of critical ethnography and should not be overlooked. After this, ethnographers begin to create longer memos (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that begin to note trends, patterns in social interaction that are emerging. At this point, however, the work is not interactive; Carspecken goes as far as to call the data collected as “monological” in nature (1996, p. 42) because conversations and ideas are happening only inside the researcher’s head.

Next, ethnographers begin to analyze their primary record with greater scrutiny as they begin to make sense of what is in front of them. They move between previous literature on the research topic, the data on hand, and the theoretical framing which allows them multiple and necessary vantage points to develop a working organizational framework that might include topics such as interaction patterns and their meanings, power relations, roles, communication sequences, and other items that the researcher decides to focus upon and generate codes for. These codes can be “low-level” codes, which are concerned with more concrete, observable data such as rules and procedures around a particular classroom activity; or “high level” codes, which
refer to abstract ideas that explore thoughts and ideas about what is being observed, such as describing power relationships that influence literature choices. Carspecken labels this stage as “reconstructive” because it translates and articulates to a larger audience cultural themes and systems factors that aren’t immediately observable nor usually voiced directly by participants themselves; it “takes conditions of action constructed by people on non-discursive levels of awareness and reconstructs them linguistically” (42).

The coding process continues into the next phase of ethnographic data collection, which necessitates what Carspecken calls, “dialogical data generation” (p. 154). At this juncture, the researcher begins to interact with participants more intentionally and invites them to share their feelings, insights, and ideas about the topic of interest. This is a crucial phase in critical ethnography, as it is one that “democratizes” the research process by giving participants a voice in the exploration of the topic in a manner centers their sense-making (p.155). In introducing “interactive methods” (Pelto & Pelto, 1978; Lecompte & Preissle, 2003, p. 158) such as ethnographic interviews or group discussions, a level of comfort and trust must be established between the researcher and participants, and so it is oftentimes suggested that ethnographic researchers develop leading questions for those areas of interest that they are exploring, and then allow subsequent questions to arise organically from the responses provided (Spradley, p. 157). As this data is collected, the researcher continues the process of analysis through the crafting of memos and continuous coding. Quite likely, as the researcher interacts with participants at a much more personal and intentional level at this stage, perspectives will emerge that influence and perhaps change the routine activities that the researcher observes. For this reason, it is important to be sure that a thick record of observations is created and partially analyzed before the methods that this phase requires are introduced.
Critical ethnography is a methodological approach that is positioned well to examine young people’s development of agency inside of urban classrooms because it accounts for the wide range of mediators in human literacy learning and practice, including those embedded within relations of power. The acknowledgement of culture as an active rather than stagnant process of meaning-making affords the researcher the necessary flexibility to adapt as patterns of interactions that shape identities and roles within social and cultural communities change.

**Population Site and Participants**

The ethnographic data that I collected was generated from a YPAR class in which every 7th and 8th grader at North Bronx MS was enrolled. Mr. Keegan taught the course, and had taken a lead role in the implementation of YPAR across the school over the past few years. As such, I interviewed him as part of the first phase of this study. Keegan began his career as a New York City Teaching Fellow, and at the time of the study was in his third year of teaching. During the initial two years that I knew and worked closely with him he assisted classes as a special education push-in teacher, supporting students who had IEP’s during Social Studies and ELA classes. At that time, he also helped design and deliver YPAR lessons and assisted me in training teachers to implement the program, serving as the teacher-lead for the YPAR work. Impressed with Keegan’s leadership, the school’s principal asked him to teach YPAR full-time as its own year-long class, beginning in September of 2015. The class was in session across the duration of my study.

Keegan taught a total of 22 sections of the YPAR class, with each 7th and 8th grade student attending once per week, for a classroom period lasting 42 minutes. The class had fallen under the umbrella of “Health/PE”, so the issues that students were asked to investigate were
broadly tied to issues of health. Some of the social issues that they investigated included mental health, accessibility to community health resources, and environmental health, to name a few.

In addition, a cohort of twenty 7th grade students and a cohort of twenty 8th grade students met twice per week in what was named by Keegan as a “YPAR filmmaking” class. Students selected to participate in these classes met for a total of three times per week, once for the general YPAR course and twice for the filmmaking course. Students were selected to participate in the filmmaking course based upon essays that they wrote that articulated reasons they wished to participate, what they thought YPAR afforded them, and what they hoped to learn from the course.

Keegan shared with me that he wanted passionate students in the YPAR film class, but also wanted to make sure that the course was not filled with only the most ambitious and academically successful students, which he said typically happened when special or selective programming was offered. To account for this, he invited some students into the filmmaking class who did not submit an essay to participate, but whom he thought would demonstrate a commitment to the course nonetheless. Both of those he invited were African-American boys, a segment of the school’s population that Keegan felt personally committed to and believed the school writ large could be more effective in supporting. The major filmmaking project for the course was to develop a film that captured the impact of YPAR on the student body across the first two years of the program. This meta-narrative work was an important piece of the document analysis that I conducted as part of my research study, the bulk of which is explored in Chapter 6.

I conducted formal ethnographic observations and semi-structured student interviews within classes that met from Wednesday through Friday to gain a more general understanding of
how YPAR as a program was experienced by the general population of 7th and 8th grade students. For a more focused investigation, I invited those who were part of the cohort of 8th grade students in the filmmaking course to work alongside me as co-researchers, thus serving as a focal group to which I paid more meticulous attention to. I selected this group for three reasons: First, based upon my site visit schedule, I spent more time per week with students enrolled in this class than any of the others; 18 of the 20 eighth grade students enrolled in the YPAR Filmmaking class on Thursdays, for instance, also meet on Fridays for their general YPAR class. This provided me a more in-depth excavation of data than I would have if I were only permitted one period per week, as was the case with the rest of the groups. Second, watching students from this class engage in two different classroom contexts allowed me to explore whether or not classes that more prominently featured digital media tools shaped agency in meaningfully different ways. Third, the content focus of the course had the youth authoring, directing, and producing a film about how YPAR has impacted the school, and this produced a rich data set that allowed me more nuanced understandings of students’ sense-making around YPAR.

In the spirit of a more critical epistemology, I invited youth as participants in the research process alongside me with the intention to more authentically center their knowledge and meaning-making practices around YPAR. I believe that part of my commitment as a critical scholar is to change inequities borne by relationships of power; enacting meaningful co-researcher roles with youth that authentically build upon their experiences and understandings can serve as a powerful mechanism to address injustice (Irizarry, 2015). As part of my critical classroom ethnography, then, I attempted to forge what I hereafter refer to as a “humanizing youth co-researcher methodology”, or “HYCR”. Specifically by humanizing I am gesturing to approaches to research that build relationships of care, dignity, and “dialogic consciousness
raising for both researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2013, p. xvi). These relationships of care and dialogic consciousness center participants’ voices but also inspire participants and researcher alike to act upon the problems of interest in a research study. In the case of examining agency within a HYCR framework as part of this critical ethnographic classroom study, it was my hope that knowledge gained about agency and its development across YPAR might reflect how research for equity with young people can happen in the practices of human relationship, respect and love.

Data Collection

I conducted two, semi-structured interviews with Mr. Keegan, in the beginning and at the end of data collection (See Appendix B). In the first I solicited background information about how he approached planning for the class and his perceptions of YPAR as a program in the school currently; and in the second I asked him to reflect both on how YPAR lived in his classroom across the year and on the social action projects that students produce at the end of the course. I also requested him to share, at his discretion, planning and curricular documents that he kept uploaded to an electronic folder on Google Drive.

I attended 13 of the 22 sections of YPAR classes that he taught for three days per week from February through June of 2016, spending most of the first two months of classroom visits capturing a thick description of the research site (See Appendix C for observation protocol). During these initial classroom visits, I participated as an active observer, noting students’ engagement with texts, speech and body language, and actions. As a former consultant for YPAR work at this school and a former high school English teacher, I leveraged my insider status to assist students with group work, while also remaining mindful of my new outsider role as a visiting researcher within the classroom community. I kept field notes in my field notebook
about significant interactions that I later expounded upon in detailed field notes. I also kept
copies of all lesson plan and curricular plans from the course. This period also included the
collection of de-identified student work including journal prompts, media projects, youth
participatory action research (YPAR) portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research
protocols, and work stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that some opted to share with me. I
requested this data either at lunch, when I saw that students were being dismissed at school, or in
between classes so as not to place a burden on the teacher. Most student work was kept in
folders or online in individual Google Doc folders, making work accessible should students opt
to share.

I continued to collect data once a thick description of the site was established, but eased
into a more participatory role as I began conducting interviews with students. In February, I
randomly selected 6 students (see Table 5.1 in chapter 5 for more detailed information about
participants) to invite for participation in the first of three semi-structured interviews (Appendix
D-E). These interviews served to gather data about students’ general responses to the enacted
YPAR curriculum as I contemporaneously recorded their impressions and narratives about
themselves and their experiences in the class. This initial sampling of interviews sought
“maximum variation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as I attempted to better understand the variety
of behaviors, practices, and understandings that youth participating in YPAR reflect. In April, I
invited all students back to conduct another round of interviews, and sought information that was
helpful in developing the categories that I began to establish through observation, document
analysis, and the first interviews, making the sample I sought a “stratified purposeful” one (Miles
& Huberman, 1994). In addition, I looked to document how they were negotiating their identities
as YPAR participants as they were experiencing the enacted curriculum, and encouraged them to
discuss with me their impressions of agency and the connections, if at all, these impressions had to their experiences as participants in the YPAR classes. For a third and final interview in June, I followed up with the 5 participants to discuss their final YPAR projects and what specific moments they felt were significant. Each of these semi-structured interviews were exploratory in nature, lasted around 30-45 minutes each, and were largely conversational in fashion because I sought to collect data in a natural way. I conducted the interviews at the end of the day during advisory period, so as not to interrupt participants’ regular class time. During advisory time, students often finished up homework, listen to announcements from school leaders, play games or journal, or engage in check-ins with their teachers. I scheduled meetings with teachers ahead of time to make sure that the times that we settled on were not interfering with any of students’ academic commitments.

My data collection and coding of literacy events drew from students’ leveraging of YPAR with adult stakeholders, students’ literacy and socialization practices around YPAR, and specific moments of agency afforded in students’ exchanges within YPAR. I will discuss these analytic levels later on in this chapter in the data analysis section.

**Focus Groups**

*Overview*

During focus groups interviews, a facilitator brings people together to discuss a topic of interest or an area of concern. These meetings usually last around an hour, and the facilitator may guide the conversation along the way and encourage participants to share about topics that are meaningful to them. Bogdan & Biklen suggest that they are especially helpful when the topic to explore is too general and the purpose is to “either stimulate talk from multiple perspectives from the group participants so that the researcher can learn what the range of views
are, or to promote talk on a topic that informants might not be able to talk so thoughtfully about in individual interviews” (2007, p. 109). Many times, group participants urge each other to share, to clarify, or even to realize out loud what their ideas might be, revealing useful nuggets of information that help researchers gain insights that they might not otherwise have access to inside of individual interviews or through observation alone. Hearing what group members have to say can help highlight gaps in the researcher’s framework and also helps refine an understanding of social repertoires of practice that might become more apparent when members speak on processes and motivations that guide them as a group. In our focus group interviews, we were able to have a rich discussion about students’ experiences in YPAR across the span of three years. Having students together was helpful because students were able to recall events together and fill in details about information that might have been forgotten.

One major downside to focus groups can be participants’ hesitancy to share due to embarrassment or because their input might go against what is perceived to be the general consensus held by the group or the facilitator, what some researchers refer to as “group-think” (Janis, 1972). It can also be challenging to reign in certain group members who over-share or even keep the discussion on topic at times (Smithson, 2000). As part of our meetings, one of the students suggested that we establish the “step up, step back rule”, which urges those who are more comfortable sharing to share less, to listen, and to encourage peers who might be more reticent to contribute their thoughts. This protocol worked well for our sessions, and it was even more impressive that it was student-initiated.

Participants

Most focus groups consist of 7 to 10 individuals. While I invited all 8th grade students enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking course to participate in focus group interviews only 5
volunteered due to time restrictions. Students had important tasks to fulfill related to their role as rising high school students and the high school application process, and also having to prepare for standardized exams. Because of this, it was difficult to secure a time that wouldn’t be disruptive to the school day, or impede on their after-school commitments. Once I obtained the necessary permissions, I facilitated three, 42-minute focus group meetings with students, which happened over pizza with students during their lunch hour. Initially, we planned on hosting focus group interviews during discussion time that was built into the YPAR curriculum, as Mr. Keegan thought it would be a wonderful opportunity for students to process the data that they were gathering across the school; he felt that processing what was happening with such focused attention would result in richer and more critical films. However, as the semester progressed, it became increasingly challenging to weave an extra task into the scope of the curriculum, which I discuss in the limitations section.

Data Collection

As part of my Humanizing Youth Co-Researcher Methodology, I engaged youth from the YPAR filmmaking class as interpreters of data related to my study of the development of agency. For instance, when I began tracing emergent themes after the first interview, I asked some of them if they felt I was reflecting what they felt was important, and requested that they add their perspective if they felt I was missing something or misinterpreting anything. This is when students chimed in and suggest that I highlight students’ stories. As Jorge suggested, “you can come up with codes that make sense to you, but it might not make people feel what YPAR is. It’s not the real story of YPAR, because it’s different for everyone. For some people it is really good, but not for everyone. But it might be good in their future, you never know. But if you’re
writing your paper you have to make sure the teachers know the kid’s story. That will make them change and see what we can do.”

As part of students’ own data collection for the course, they were asked to gather data that would inform the choices that they made for their film. I used this to begin conversations with students about what they hoped to create and how they hoped to impact their audience. As I mentioned before, I had high hopes that students would journal as part of the process of composing pieces for the film, but students assured me that it was too much work to journal consistently. So instead, I just tried to check-in as frequently as possible through informal discussions about what they were doing, and also requested that they add questions to our protocols before we convened for our focus group interviews. Many of the questions grew out of conversations that I had had with some of these same students the year prior when I asked about what important concepts should be included under each of my guiding research questions.

In all, we met for three focus group interview discussions (Appendix F), between the months of January through June of 2016. Like those interviewed from the general YPAR classes, students in this group were given a demographic survey to complete (Appendix G) immediately following the interview and were reminded that they had the option of not answering any questions they didn’t wish to answer, for any reason.

For our first session together, I began with a series of open-ended questions that mirrored some of those asked of the school leaders during the first phase of the study. For instance, I inquired about their thoughts about YPAR, and the ways they thought about and defined agency. This allowed for a cross-comparative analysis between students and school leaders’ responses that I hoped would offer insight into different perspectives held by stakeholders across the project. In subsequent discussions, I revisited some of the questions posed in the semi-structured
interviews conducted with representatives spanning all of the YPAR classes, to engage students in dialogue about the themes emerging from data collected during observations, analysis of YPAR productions and student work, and interviews. Students’ responses to these questions helped me evaluate the consistency (Wolcott, 1994b) of students’ conceptualizations of agency as constructed and thought about in the YPAR classroom.

Table 3.2 Data Collection Methods for Each Group of Participants

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<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>210 Students Enrolled in General YPAR Classes</th>
<th>18 Students Enrolled in YPAR filmmaking class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Structured Interviews (3)</td>
<td>Feb, April, June 2016</td>
<td>6 randomly selected- Feb, April, June</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td>All 18 invited, 6 accepted- Feb, April, June 2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Analysis</td>
<td>YPAR Planning Documents, Student Work</td>
<td>Planning Documents, Lesson Plans</td>
<td>Films, Student Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Observation</td>
<td>3 Days per Week, from January through June of 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Surveys</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

My primary methodological tools for analyzing the data in this study were thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). I used thematic analysis to interrogate more broadly the social practices and norms of the YPAR classroom and for identifying specific categories for micro-analysis. Being that my primary unit of analysis was the literacy event, the starting point for identifying themes were the discursive and normative literacy practices inside of the YPAR classes. The initial levels of examination mentioned in the beginning of this chapter were informed both by nearly two years of observation and participation within the development
of a school-wide YPAR program and the theoretical grounding that this study is situated within, both of which offered somewhat of a springboard for my analytic levels. They were general enough in scope that I could develop a loosely cohesive schema for exploring and hopefully better understanding the development of agency across literacy events happening inside of YPAR, and thus informed the beginnings of categories for my thematic analysis.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

In moving to a more micro analytic scheme, however, and in order to account more specifically for the role of discourse in the development of agency I turned to critical discourse analysis, a method adopted from Fairclough (2010). CDA, he tells us, is “analysis of dialectical relations between discourses (which includes language but also expands to include other forms of semiosis, such as visual images or social cues) and other objects, elements, or moments, as well as analysis of the ‘internal relations’ of discourse” (p.4). This analytical approach allowed me the ability to move more fluidly between the iterations of data that I collected, providing openings to explore the ways in which interpretations and explanations happening inside of the social world of YPAR were in part governed and regulated by expectations held by those who held power. This included but wasn’t limited to, for instance, perceptions held by school leaders, activity and media coverage around the Presidential primary election, and objectives stated in Keegan’s lesson plans. In this way, CDA complimented the principles of critical epistemology that undergird this critical ethnographic work: issues and topics were analyzed through more holistic means that accounted for larger systems of power.

Fairclough advocates for the use of a three-dimensional framework for CDA that combines the analysis of “text, discourse practice and sociocultural practice” (p. 132). In the collection of life history, ethnographic, and focus group data, I built in methods that serviced
analytic levels that I hoped would allow for deep exploration into each of these dimensions. For instance, in the life history interviews, I traced the ways that school leaders’ perceptions of literacy and schooling shaped discourses within YPAR. This touches on the “discourse dimension”. Across observations of and interviews around students’ textual productions inside of class, I hoped to become more acquainted with the literacy and socialization practices that students identified as meaningful in developing agency, in sync with the dimension of sociocultural practice. And through focus group interviews, I aimed to gather data that helped me better understand specific moments where students felt that they experienced agency, either as individuals or as part of a larger collective. The care and time required to carry out CDA as an analytic method was serviced by ethnography as a methodological framework, which in turn provided a rich analysis for my study. The beginning analytic categories that I worked with compliment my research questions and CDA as an analytic method, and were as follows:

1. ways in which school leaders’ own perceptions of literacy and schooling shaped discourses within YPAR that either supported or resisted student agency
2. the literacy and socialization practices that young people took on as they become active in YPAR discourse communities, and how those framed identities and opportunities or restrictions for agency
3. specific moments of agency afforded in students’ exchanges within YPAR, or those moments where students were able to transform/reimagine/remake themselves and/or the conditions within their surrounding community.

**Role of the Researcher**

Luttrell (2009) advocates for a kind of “reflexive knowing” (3) whereby researchers center and question the pre-conceived categories of “the researched”. I recognize
that my ways of knowing and seeing and being influence and shape the ways that I am interpreting and producing knowledge, and so it is important that I make this visible not only to those reading my research, but also to myself as researcher. For instance, I know that my many years of experience as a teacher attempting to design YPAR projects inside of my own classroom color the ways that I see and make sense of the data. I hoped that my participatory approach to the research process, whereby I invited participants to help me identify salient themes and points of tension that they noticed in my etchings, would help me to see the data though multiple sets of eyes, as opposed to only my own. I also understand that in entering this study as a white female researcher, my racial and gender identity is not like that of my participants. However, most of my schooling experiences in grade school and all of my ten years of teaching middle and high school English were spent with youth of color, and so I believe this has afforded me the ability, over time, to connect with individuals outside of my race with greater ease. Finally, I acknowledge that while I have been at the site for over two years and have developed some powerful relationships with adults and young people at the school, I am still an outsider who is taking from a school community. To honor Luttrell’s (200) insistence on “giving back” as much as one “takes” from a community (4), I sought out and then assisted in writing a grant that would help the school secure technology equipment to build an online platform for the YPAR work, aiming to engage in genuine reciprocity and use what resources to assist them with an identified need. I also offered to help develop curriculum for the course and remain after-school in order to help tutor students preparing for standardized assessments attached to the high school admissions process.

My positionality as a researcher is surely connected to the site where I conducted my research because I served within a consulting capacity for two years to help equip staff to design
and implement YPAR within their classrooms, during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. I also co-authored a $20,000 grant with one of the teachers to assist the school in obtaining funds to purchase technology equipment and travel funds so that we could enhance the YPAR project during its second year of implementation. Across each of these investments, I worked closely with many of the 7th and 8th grade student participants who were enrolled in the YPAR classes that served as the primary sites for this ethnography, and I had worked with the cohort of 8th grade students whom I selected for the co-researcher portion both in the sixth and seventh grades, beginning in November of 2013. Across our relationship of the first two years I observed, took notes, and conducted interviews as part of my consulting duties and also had the opportunity to engage with students more informally during lunch hours, after-school in some cases, and on field trips to Albany and Washington D.C. where they shared their research with legislators. Through these engagements, I had generous and generative opportunities to establish a level of familiarity and trust with research participants, which assisted me in being able to gather rich and genuine data that traditionally characterizes rigorous ethnographic work.

Limitations

One of the glaring limitations of my study is that its findings are not generalizable. Looking at how Youth Participatory Action Research shapes the development of agency only speaks to the context of one school, with classes being taught only by one teacher. Moreover, the concept of agency within this study is an abstract one, and is limited to the manner in which I am defining it and then tracing it as a researcher. Nonetheless, I hope that the meticulous manner in which I described my processes of data collection will help establish a base for further research to explore that will offer even greater insight about the relationship between literacy, agency, and identity.
I also understand that frontloading the term “agency” might presuppose that the impact of the YPAR program results in students’ development of it. For this reason, I decided to change my methods to randomly select students from across all classrooms for the semi-structured interview portion of this study. Initially, I was going to collect data based upon analytic categories that grew out of the field observations conducted in the beginning of the study, and then select participants who demonstrated behaviors or practices that captured the characteristics of those categories. However, I changed my recruitment methods so that each student participating in the program had an equal chance of being interviewed by me. This allowed me to gain a better understanding of students’ general experience of the program and the activities happening within it, including those who may not have favorable or positive experiences with it.

Another limitation was time. Students were not able to complete their projects during the third year, both in the general YPAR classes or the filmmaking class. There were significant chunks of instructional time committed to testing, and also moments where Keegan had to miss class because of other commitments. This made it extremely challenging to complete larger projects, since the classes met so infrequently as it was. Losing a week or sometimes two in a row resulted in decreased momentum and Keegan often times had to repeat material so that students would remember where they left off.

A final limitation worth mentioning in my study is that it was not longitudinal. I wasn’t able to follow students when they entered into high school or across other contexts that they entered into, or make any conclusions about how agency translated into further opportunities later in their adolescent and young adult lives. Despite this, I think that this study has significant implications for literacy instruction, teacher education, and classroom practice particularly in the
areas of critical literacy, critical media literacy, and civic education and will be a strong contribution to educational research.
CHAPTER 4- CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY OF YPAR CLASS

I enter the school and sign in at 11:44 a.m. The same security guard from my last visit petitions me with a warm smile, “how you doin’ today, girl?” as I proceed to pull out my ID. “Naw, we don’t need it. We know you here. You my girl. Gon’ head.” I grin and return, “It feels good to be back.”

Making my way to the main office, I pass Halloween decorations in the hallway and a dressed-up “pumpkin man” in a corner with spider webs sprawled across his body; these distinct touches make NMHS stand in stark contrast to so many middle school buildings I have visited since arriving to New York. There is an effort to show that children reside here, that they are welcome.

I proceed to the school office and sign-in; there are documents translated in 4 languages sprawled about the counter: Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, and Bengali. As I exit and begin to make my way up the stairway to the 3rd floor for an interview with an administrator, another security guard whom I’m familiar with stops me, “hey, haven’t seen you in a while around here. What’s that you’re reading?” I hold up Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow. Oscar has me follow him to the security desk so he can write the title down. We both talk about why we’re interested in the book. “We’re reading it for class,” I tell him, “and I think that Alexander offers an important historical perspective on mass incarceration. It’s deep.” He nods. “Yeah, I read a lot about Native American issues. But I got to get into this, too.” When I ask him if he’s Native American he tells me he isn’t, but his sister is “part Indian.” For the next ten minutes we shoot the breeze, sharing resources like the names of indigenous Hip hop artists and the projects they’re working on and the titles of books we’re trying to get into. We exchange e-mails and pink post-it notes containing the names of some of our favorite artists, and I tell him when I come in the following week we’re gonna connect. “For sure,” he affirms as I make my way to the stairway.

It’s 12:05 and I’m five minutes late for the scheduled noon interview. I wait in Mr. Johnson’s office. He arrives at 12:10, breathing heavy and eyes furrowed. “You alright?,” I ask him. He tells me he’s got a million things to get done, so I assure him that I’ll wait for him for as long as he needs me to. When he takes off, my glance turns to the positive mantras plastered on posters around the room, “Develop our city’s most precious resource. Teach.” On another one, “Tackle inequalities. Teach math.”

As I turn to a notebook to jot down a field note, I’m offered school lunch pizza from the other administrator who shares an office with Mr. Johnson. Upon politely declining, a few more adults, mostly teachers, enter the room and begin to discuss how stressed out they are. This lasts a few minutes. Eventually, one of them turns to me and I inquire, “is something in the water? How are you all doing today?” A social studies teacher turns to me and tells me it’s Halloween, the first round of observations for teachers has commenced, and the school’s pre-quality review has taken place the week prior. When I ask how the school performed a teacher chimes in, “pretty good. I don’t think there is another school in the Bronx that performs as well as us. It’s taken a while, I mean I’ve been here a long time, but we’ve made progress. Most of the people care about the kids and they know it”
I look at the clock and it’s 12:50, and there’s no sign of Mr. Johnson. (10/30/14)

At the time I composed this memo, I had been working with North Bronx Middle School for a year to develop a school-wide YPAR program, which I outline the skeleton of in the pages that follow. North Bronx MS was, and still is- performing well academically in comparison with not only its peers in the Bronx, but also to schools across the city with similar demographics. But this has not been an easy accomplishment.

The building houses an elementary school, which means that space is limited and teachers aren’t able to enjoy the luxury of having their own classrooms. Instead, they share space with colleagues and it is often the case that teachers have to cart supplies and personal belongings from one classroom to another via rolling plastic carts. That said, requiring that teachers travel instead of students is an intentional decision that Mr. Alexander, the principal, has made to build a sense of community in each classroom. Every school routine and process, it seems, is undeniably touched by his vision.

The school is also one of the most racially and ethnically diverse in the city; peppered across the building are bilingual classes offered in Spanish and Bengali, and many students classified as English Language Learners are new to the country. This presents a challenge in that a fairly substantial chunk of students need extra language support in order to acquire grade-level content while having limited staff to address their needs. Even so, the school does quite well with the resources it does have, and teachers in the bilingual classrooms are passionate, loving, and generally sensitive to the needs of students.

Also worth nothing is that prior to the introduction of the YPAR program, access to technology was scant, with a single computer lab located on the first floor. In the library, a
limited amount of desktop computers were available for student use during lunch periods and I
was told that there were a few iPads floating around the building. I mention these challenges to
highlight that this school was far from a panacea; with limited access to technology, constricted
space, a high population of students who spoke limited English, and the vast majority of students
qualifying for free lunch, the school faced challenges not unlike city schools around the country.
Despite these challenges, adults in the building had thought quite intentionally about how to be
responsive to students, creating a space that felt like empathy and as sense of humanity lived
there. All in all, it was human capital paired with a strong vision that was paramount to the
school’s success.

When I met with Mr. Alexander in the Fall of 2013 to discuss what a YPAR program
might look like at his school, he expressed a need for a more innovative approach to benefit a
student body comprised of diverse students, and felt that there were some adults who needed to
equip themselves differently if they were to be effective in such an ecology. Current school
improvement measures, initiatives, and programs just weren’t enough to effect real and
substantive change toward improvement, as he saw it. As Mr. Alexander expressed to me in the
beginning, “I need these teachers to see students differently.” YPAR for him, then, wasn’t just a
program to amplify student voice or center students’ understandings, but a way to address
deficit-oriented teaching stances that he hoped might shift if teachers were to witness students in
the driving seat of their learning.

As to be expected, corraling teachers around an initiative like YPAR was not without
challenges. This was due to several factors, including the energy and effort in overcoming the
challenges just mentioned as well as those brought on by a project that de-centered adults as the
experts. Several studies have documented the tensions and challenges in introducing critical
youth programming like YPAR because it is so disruptive to traditional hierarchies of power (Kirshner, 2010; Kohfeldt et. al, 2011). To know that this school brought YPAR in precisely to disrupt this hierarchy, for me, presented a unique opportunity to understand what such a disruption meant for students and their sense of agency. I found it courageous that despite encountering several stumbling blocks across two years, Mr. Alexander and other adults in the building continued to advocate for the program.

At the time of my dissertation, the program was in its third year of implementation. I collected most of the data for my study during the second half of the school year, after the first half of the year-long class had already commenced. This was limiting in some ways because I was not able to document the beginning stages of the inquiry process. However, since my association with the program had been across three years, I have a substantial amount of curricular documents and student work from all stages of the YPAR process as it has taken place in the school since its introduction. I reference these in the chapter that follows in order to capture the full life of the YPAR work as a curricular project over time. After sharing a general scope of the curriculum and the daily structure of the class, I explore a few of the curricular experiences in greater depth, including those that students identified as significant in interviews.

From here, in the section “Civic Engagement and Action,” I highlight action and advocacy projects that students took up across the life of the YPAR program. Through the featuring of these experiences as well as student reflections dispersed throughout the previous sections, I provide an analysis of artifacts and interview transcripts of students in the YPAR classes in relation to my research question:

- How do students use leverage YPAR to critically engage adult stakeholders in identified social issues, both inside and outside of school?
Finally, I unpack the pedagogy and leadership philosophy that mediated young people’s experience with the YPAR, which I name hereafter as “A Pedagogy of Agency.” What I hope to highlight at this final juncture are the cultural and educational ideologies that undergirded the project, and the ways in which Keegan hoped to support young people as critical change agents.

3-Year YPAR Snapshot and Curriculum Roots

During the initial phases of introducing YPAR to North Bronx Middle School in the Winter of 2013, it was my intention to first expose teachers to the powerful potential of a program that centered young people and their knowledges. My beginning interactions as a consultant working with the English and Social Studies teachers featured inquiry sessions around what drove their teaching philosophies and how they hoped to center the knowledge and cultures of their students in the classroom. I also shared examples of other YPAR projects happening around the country in order to provide a glimpse into what this work looked like in practice, including samplings of my own work in Detroit as a high school English teacher. From here, I asked them to make connections between how they were building relationships and culture in their classrooms and the ways in which YPAR might service these ends. We identified key characteristics of the projects and anticipated pedagogical practices that be needed to implemented in order to support the project. These included taking students through discussion strategies that would encourage egalitarianism and modeling group inquiry processes.

I knew going in that the project would be a heavy lift, and that fertile ground had to be cultivated in order for the initiative to take root. I anticipated that one of the biggest obstacles to overcome would be the bottom-up approach that would be required to support an organic inquiry process led by students. I hoped that the cycles of inquiry that I took staff through would help to
develop a shared language around this process that we could use to guide both our thought processes in the development phase of the work as well as our reflections as a team later on while digging into critical moments happening in our classroom that would need more unpacking.

A second goal in this early phase was to familiarize teachers with phases of inquiry that YPAR followed. In general, we parsed out these steps and considered what guidelines and protocols needed to be in place in order to ensure students’ success during each step of the research process:

1. Identify a problem and research question
2. Design a Study
3. Collect and Analyze Data
4. Generate Claims and Provide Evidence
5. Create Products/Disseminate Products/Engage in Social Action

From here, we considered the best ways to engage students in each phase of the project, particularly with regards to students’ developmental learning needs as adolescents. Sixth grade teachers, for instance, introduced students to interviews as a research method and decided against having students create and distribute surveys. They felt that younger students should not be assigned to mine data in the surrounding community because their safety might be at risk. For 7th and 8th grade students who tended to travel in groups to the bodega, the local pizza shop, or the park before and after school, this restriction was removed so long as students remained in groups while convening with potential research participants.

As can be seen below, the implementation of the project changed significantly across the three years of its existence (See Table 4.1). By year three the adult responsibility for the project
As Keegan communicated in an exit interview, the first two years of the program felt “piecemeal”; challenges included conflicts with testing preparation and lengthy breaks.

Table 4.1 Evolution of YPAR program across three years of Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Adults Responsible for Implementation</th>
<th>Area of Focus and Action by Grade Level</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>English &amp; Social Studies Teachers, Grades 6-8</td>
<td>Grade 6: Media &amp; Self Image, student research report and advocacy campaign</td>
<td>English and Social Studies Teachers committed 1 day per week of instructional time to the YPAR project, from January through June. Some did not finish, and those who did committed much of the final weeks of the school year to completing the projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Junior Administration-Design of Project &amp; Teacher Support</td>
<td>Grade 7: Crime-PowerPoint with multimodal component</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keegan- helped develop curricular resources and informed the design of the program</td>
<td>Grade 8: Community Health Issues-research report and Power Point presentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danielle Filipiak, IUME- After-School PD once per week with staff- 10x; also pushed into classrooms for extra support</td>
<td>Note: Topics were largely driven by staff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>Social Studies Teachers, Grades 6-8</td>
<td>Topics chosen by students across all grade levels through a voting process included: Bullying, Mental Health, Access to Technology, Physical Ecology of School, Student Motivation, Environmental Issues</td>
<td>Students invested in projects across year, once per week in their Social Studies classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>Keegan- Initiated an afterschool program with selected students, supported teachers in implementation</td>
<td>Teachers gathered materials based on topics they were personally interested in, and then shared resources with colleagues</td>
<td>A select group of students also attended after-school sessions to work on their YPAR project with Keegan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. Murphy- Social Studies teacher who took a lead in developing curricular resources and sharing them with colleagues</td>
<td>Actions included: creating and distributing informative brochures in community, social media campaigns, reports to be shared with adult stake holders in the building &amp; trips to visit legislators in Albany, NY &amp;Washington D.C. to share research and recommendations.</td>
<td>For the first time, students had access to technology such as Ipads and Chromebooks, which allowed them more convenient access to resources and allowed them greater ease to collaborate within their groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danielle Filipiak, IUME- After School PD once per week with staff-10x; also pushed into classrooms for extra support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3</td>
<td>Keegan- Assigned to teach 22 sections of YPAR and 2 sections of a “YPAR filmmaking class”</td>
<td>Grades 7 and 8: Areas of Interest included: Education, Violence, Mental and Emotional Health, STD’s, Drugs, and Teen Pregnancy.</td>
<td>Every student in the 7th and 8th grades was enrolled in a YPAR class that met once per week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td></td>
<td>These aligned with some of the topics that were typically taken up in the Health class that students took in years prior. Now, the Health course was being revamped to infuse the YPAR process across the curriculum.</td>
<td>A select group of students were also enrolled in a YPAR filmmaking class that also met once per week, where students were tasked with creating a film that documented the impact of YPAR on the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students did not reach the point that they were able to design and carry out a research study &amp; action.</td>
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</table>

fell mostly on the shoulders of Keegan, who Mr. Alexander invited to design and teach a separate YPAR course so that students could have committed, uninterrupted time to the project across the year.
happening in the second semester, as well as the tremendous amount of time and sustained effort that it required to apprentice youth as researchers. Another challenge was general teacher buy-in; for many teachers who were asked to participate in the initial 2-year introduction, the project was seen as additional work that they did not have the capacity to take on. In addition, teachers learned that centering students’ inquiries and concerns required a level of intention and focus that some felt ill-prepared to navigate.

By the time that I began my study, Keegan was intimately familiar with these challenges and his practice reflected adjustments that accounted for some of them, which I discuss later in this chapter. However, unlike during years 1 and 2 of the program, students did not reach the point where they were able to design a research study around their chosen area of interest and follow up with a social action during year 3. The adjustment in shifting much of the content online, Keegan being the sole adult facilitator of the program, and limited time with students all contributed to this shortcoming.

In having sole responsibility for teaching 22 sections of the YPAR course and 2 sections of a YPAR filmmaking course, Keegan had to consider how best to use the digital media tools he had at his disposal to create new ways of learning, collaborating, inquiring, and acting that engaged all students. This meant that the YPAR process itself was stalled as he figured out how best to do this. But along the way, students became much more adept in using technology and in working in collaboration with one another, both online and in person. Their collective inquiries also unearthed voices previously overlooked in the development of school policy, embodying the ideals that the program initially sought to address.

So while students did not reach the portion of the project that allowed them to engage in any physical form of advocacy or action during the third year, the experience was transformative
in that it created space for them to practice their capacity as agents of social transformation. The pedagogy attached to this space was also felt by students, who expressed that YPAR was a different kind of experience because they felt trusted and respected to work together with their peers without the surveillance of a teacher. Many students also expressed how affirming it felt to be trusted to use technology responsibly. This stood in stark contrast with the restrictive encounters they tended to have with adults around laptop use, where teachers often limited students’ use of them in classrooms out of fear that students would go off-task or distract themselves by surfing the web or using the cameras. As one student stated, “maybe if they trusted us more like this we could do stuff that mattered more.”

**Critical Social Theory**

Many YPAR projects are guided by young people’s engagement with critical theories to aid their sense making around social issues and to historicize and contextualize their interpretations. Young people at North Bronx Middle School used critical theory to deconstruct issues like those mentioned in Table 4.1 and to understand how the unequal distribution of knowledge, power, and resources influence students’ and community members’ experiences of exploitation, domination, and inequality. The three most prominent theoretical concepts that students remained in conversation with were Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Yosso’s model of Community Cultural Wealth (2005), and Social Reproduction Theory (Bourdieu, 1997; MacLeod, 1987). These became important lenses for students to not only analyze their issues through, but also in humanizing those they identified as perpetrators of unjust actions. For instance, in thinking about bullying happening within the school in relation to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, students considered emotional and physical resources that some of their
peers might not have had access to and how this might be prompting negative behaviors inside of school.

On multiple occasions, Keegan assigned students to reflect on the connections they made between everyday experiences of the issues they were exploring or in some cases perpetuating-and the critical theories they were attempting to root their analyses in. These new lines of critical inquiry expanded their development of a personal identity that included a foundation for developing new forms of both academic and critical literacy. They were also able to connect to robust theories that humanized those in their school community, and encouraged them to think about how to read issues in a way that could lead to real and transformative action.

_Hip hop, Pop culture, and Media as Catalysts of Inquiry_

The curricular choice of infusing Hip hop and other popular culture artifacts was done so to engage youth in connecting more authentically to the concepts presented in the course. Keegan frequently leveraged these kinds of artifacts when introducing a new concept or theory, admitting to me that he wanted students to be able to connect more deeply with concepts that might otherwise appear to them at first glance as inaccessible. This allowed for rich discussion around themes that were relevant to students’ lives and also reflected the kind of critical pedagogy that Youth Participatory Action Research requires. As an example (see Figure 4.1), before introducing Pierre Bourdieu’s model of Cultural Reproduction, Keegan asked students to listen to and analyze Tupac’s song, “Changes”, a rap ballad that captures a meditation on the cyclical oppression of Blacks in America:

> I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself:  
> “Is life worth living?” Should I blast myself””  
> I’m tired of being poor and, even worse, I’m black.
My stomach hurts so I’m looking for a purse to snatch.

Copes give a damn about a negro

Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he’s a hero

“Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares?

One less hungry mouth on the welfare”

From here, he took students through an inquiry cycle that asked them to consider how social reproduction existed in their everyday lives and the connections that they could make to the topics they were pursuing.

**Figure 4.1 Social Reproduction PowerPoint**

Students discussed the physical ecology of schools and the messages youth receive at an early age about their worth as reflected in this ecology. They also talked about the quality of school
lunches and fast food ads in their community and the ways in which this shaped nutritional choices made by adults later on. Once these connections were made on a broader scale, students were then able to transition into a more focused inquiry on how the lens of social reproduction could help them frame the issue that they had chosen to pursue for their YPAR project.

In centering popular culture artifacts as catalysts for inquiry, Keegan was able to assemble a dialogical space that built upon students’ shared experiences and cultural capital to explore social issues in ways that developed their individual and collective critical consciousness. Students identified with these artifacts in part because they represented aspects of their own social worlds and identities. But equally significant was that the leveraging of artifacts within a critical context created new opportunities for students to think in richer and more nuanced ways about feelings surrounding marginalization and exclusion. Pop culture icons like Tupac or others whose experiences in feeling disconnected, abandoned, or alienated frequently paralleled those of students’. Yet these individuals also continued to assert a strong identification with and belonging to a neighborhood, locality, or cultural group in the face of regular experiences of racism, discrimination, or marginalization imposed on them by the broader world or society.

This was important because as a larger conversation within YPAR class, students were asked to not just consider the roots and consequences of the problems they were exploring, but also solutions. But part of recognizing the solution is to place oneself within it and to imagine one’s own sense of agency. Thus the interrogations of popular culture in the YPAR course were crucial in that they served as bridges to a range of positive aspirations and identities that were at times disruptive or transgressive, paving a way for students to explore what re-humanization in the face of suffering might require and look like, as modeled by pop culture figures. Future
advocacy work that students might be involved in later would require this internalized understanding for sure, making this takeaway all the more significant.

It was enlightening to bear witness to the fluid manner in which Keegan was able to construct a curriculum that was able to so directly impact discourse about socio-political issues, which in turn influenced the formation of students’ socio-political identities. Across several interviews later on, students spoke of how differently they began to read song lyrics, TV programming, and even commercials as a result of the interactions they had in the YPAR class.

**Daily Structure of General YPAR Class**

The structure of the YPAR class was contingent upon what stage of the YPAR process that students were exploring. In the beginning of each class, students would retrieve their Chromebooks and either assemble into groups to continue work that was in process or else wait for Keegan’s directives if he were introducing a new concept or activity. Students usually knew what was going on upon entering class because of directives posted on Google Classroom, which Keegan applauded as a resource because of the efficiency it afforded him. This was important because students only came together once per week for around 45 minutes, which meant that time had to be maximized.

Sometimes Keegan would open up class by checking in about the week’s events or the prior week’s homework. From here, if students weren’t working on a group project, they would engage in analysis of content that usually took two forms. If students were delving into a new concept, Keegan would take them through a PowerPoint presentation that would showcase important vocabulary and examples, along with guiding questions that would require them to make connections to texts related to their social issues. A common strategy he would use to activate students would be to first petition them about a personal experience, “has there ever
been a time that you were sad? What did you want other people around you to do?” This was a consistent pedagogical practice for him, asking students to engage in personal reflection first before delving into analysis of a concept. From here, students would “read” popular culture examples alongside traditional textual examples as a class, and proceed to discuss questions posed by Keegan. Through this particular cycle of interaction, Keegan was not just appealing to their emotional schemas to build interest and understanding, but also modeling ways to enter into a text and into dialogue with each other. There were several times that I witnessed students mirror these interactions with each other in smaller groups.

In the case that students had been drawing on the prior week’s homework or classwork, Keegan would have worksheets prepared for them to navigate through in small groups. Analysis was built collectively. Although the structure of these worksheets was often times quite standardized, the content that Keegan asked students to explore was either chosen by students or else what he hoped would be highly engaging content. For instance, students might be asked to identify and annotate articles related to their topic and be prepared to discuss them in class the following week. Upon entering, Keegan would hand them a worksheet he had constructed himself or else found on ReadWriteThink.org, a popular resource site sponsored by the National Council for the Teachers of English and the International Literacy Association. From here, students would discuss their readings according to the protocol, and then if there was time- share out with the class.

Keegan wanted to nurture student voice and dialogue as much as possible, and so in the infancy stages of the class, he created lessons that guided students through protocols he wanted them to use while in groups and co-constructed a set of norms with students around behavioral expectations. He made it clear to students that listening was prioritized as much as speaking, and
it was evident that students internalized this across the year. Students would usually quite patiently listen as their peers shared their ideas and synthesized connections across readings, and even take notes during share-outs.

As mentioned earlier, class was quite short and so students did not usually have enough time to share out with the larger group. To conclude the day’s lesson, Keegan would have students return their Chromebooks and introduce them to what they would be thinking about during the next meeting. He would also remind them that they could visit him during lunch or after school if they needed more time to complete work.

**Daily Structure of YPAR Filmmaking Class**

In the Filmmaking class, which Keegan taught two sections of, the daily structure was much more student-driven. In order to gain admittance to the class, students had to submit a letter outlining why they wanted to be in the course, as well as speak to the power that YPAR had in shaping their educational journey thus far. These students had participated in some iteration of YPAR across both of their first two years of middle school, and would now be tasked with composing a film that reflected what they felt the impact of YPAR was on the school writ large. As such, most everything that they did was related to the creation of the movie. Interesting enough, most students in the course had little to no experience working with video cameras, audio equipment, or editing software, so it was exciting to watch this class evolve across the course of the year as they learned about and applied new technical skillsets.

For this course, the primary activity took one of three forms: writing of some sort attached to the creation of the film, analysis of media in order to learn the genre of filmmaking, or assembling equipment and shooting footage. The limitations that a 45-minute class period imposed were more pronounced for these classes, as the bulk of learning time was activity-
centered. Students often had to assemble equipment, or else convene as a group to settle into an activity like storyboarding that might be a carryover from the prior week. It was often the case that students were cut short before the “aha” moment might happen as a group, making it challenging to make significant progress on a project. For instance, if Keegan were to introduce new vocabulary for filming shots and then have students analyze a short film to learn and apply their new vocabulary, this would take up the entire class period. Students then ran out of time to actually practice capturing these shots themselves, so their understanding was stunted. What might feasibly be accomplished in an hour-long period would take three or four class meetings instead. By the end of the year, students had a more sophisticated vocabulary as filmmakers and had captured all of the footage for the film, but hadn’t been able to edit all of the material in time to put together a working draft of the final film project.

For the film, students uploaded footage into WeVideo, a subscription service that allowed students to collaborate on their film projects while also permitting Keegan the ability to check on the status of students’ projects through his administrative account. For the creation of their storyboards, students used the free version of an online storyboard creator called Storyboard That after Keegan took them through some basic tutorials on the genre of storyboarding.

**Emergent Curriculum**

Although I have embedded some curricular examples in the preceding pages, I now turn to examples and descriptions of prominent activities that happened across the course of the year. A significant model for Keegan in creating class activities was the YELL handbook (Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning), developed by individuals and organizations partnered with the Gardner Center at Stanford University. Other resources he turned to were those developed by the Council of Youth Research at UCLA as well as materials that I had developed
as a secondary English teacher in Detroit and shared with him during the time that I worked with North Bronx MS as a YPAR consultant.

Keegan did not develop a full scope and sequence for the course ahead of time, but did sketch out the skills he anticipated needing to develop for the course, which he paired with five steps of YPAR that he would build his instruction around: identifying a problem, collection and observation of data, action, reflection, and demonstration. I organize the skills he outlined into three categories below, namely Digital Competencies, YPAR Specific Content, and Dispositions and Abstract Skills:

Table 4.2 Keegan’s Rough Sketch of YPAR Curricular Focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digital Competencies</th>
<th>YPAR Specific Content</th>
<th>Dispositions and Abstract Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google Drive</td>
<td>Finding the “root” of the problem</td>
<td>Critical thinking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Navigation</td>
<td>Identify bias</td>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents/sheets/presentation</td>
<td>Sourcing</td>
<td>Teamwork skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Classroom</td>
<td>Interviewing skills</td>
<td>Communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summarizing</td>
<td>Reading Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey skills</td>
<td>Visual Literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyzing data</td>
<td>Group Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creating questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyzing sources of information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annotating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those competencies outlined in the table are attached to the General YPAR course. Keegan did not create a similar document for the filmmaking classes. A significant portion of his time, although I don’t believe intentionally, was spent cultivating dispositions and abstract skills attached to the project and navigating through and using Google tools. Although Keegan shared with me in an interview that he wished that he had more time to work with students and see the projects through to the end, he was pleased with the exposure that students had to technology. He cited this as one of the most crucial functions of the class; in preparing “21st century learners,” he felt that students would be better prepared as citizens and workers of the future as a
result of their interactions in YPAR. I now turn to a brief description along with examples of a few activities that students generated over the course of the year. I include data from prior years as well in order to share a fuller scope of the YPAR work that students had participated in at some point in time during their time at NBMS.

*Problem Trees*

During the beginning of their inquiries, students identified an issue that they wanted to explore on a deeper level (See Figure 4.2). As part of this exploration, they completed “problem trees,” a tool used to help students identify what the root cause of an identified issue is. Students wrote the general issue that they were exploring in the “trunk” of the tree. Next, they asked each other why said problem existed and wrote this into the “roots.” They continued to ask why for each cause thereafter, until they felt that they could not dig any further. This was to be called a “root cause,” and upon documenting two or three, selected one to explore in greater depth.

*Figure 4.2 Problem Tree, Fall 2015*

From here, students convened with their group to identify what kinds of readings each group member would bring into the following class meeting for a discussion. Students’ research question would usually emerge organically from this discussion that was sometimes supported by Keegan, who would walk around the room and check in with groups as they shared out.
The problem tree activity helped serve as a bridge in identifying stronger research questions. Rather than ask, “why does violence happen in our community?” students might instead ask, “How does a student’s economic stability impact his/her stress level in school?"

Visual Vocabulary

A common activity that took place during the early phases of the YPAR project during year three was the visual vocabulary exercise. This was something Keegan infused into his instruction during the third year of the program in part because he wanted to be able to accommodate ELL students more directly. There were also other students whom he knew would be more motivated if they were invited to explore the themes and ethos of YPAR through images first. Remember that this class was an elective, a Health elective to be more specific. Therefore, it was important to keep in mind that if the class felt too traditional it would work against the expectations that students had of the course. Keegan seemed to know this and adjusted his content to allow for more dialogue around images and media than what students might be exposed to in other classes.

Figure 4.3 Visual Prompt, Empowerment
Generating images that represented students’ interpretations of concepts that activated self-concept, belonging, and agency were especially powerful. For instance, in the image above (Figure 4.3), students were being introduced to the concept of empowerment. After being introduced to its definition and several examples that included figures representative of the cultural and ethnic makeup of his classroom, students were asked to translate these definitions into their own words and provide a picture that expressed their understanding of the term.

This might feel like a simple activity that is easy to overlook and maybe not even worth mentioning. But as seasoned educators know, it is not just the assignment that matters, but the activity that surrounds it and the context in which it is introduced. Keegan was able to accomplish several feats with the use of this strategy: students gained a more thorough understanding of concepts undergirding YPAR, helping them to develop a shared language that could be leveraged in their conversations and projects later on. Also, as they explored what each term meant on a personal level and the representations attached to them as part of classroom discussion, students were able to raise collective consciousness around ideas that mattered to them, generating a sense of shared solidarity. Keegan generated a valuable formative assessment that helped him gauge both understanding of material and student motivation, and he took advantage of what visuals afforded him in terms of cultural representation. This last point I will expound upon further in a later chapter, but for now I want to highlight that Keegan often used visual examples that depicted the racial, cultural, and/or ethnic makeup of his students. So when they saw Keegan’s examples in explaining a given concept or term, they would be immersed in a barrage of images of people of color who were portrayed in a positive and loving light. This was so important to the students, who said they not only appreciated seeing images of people who
looked like them, but also learning about figures of importance whom they said that they did not often come across in their other classes.

**Inquiry-Driven Collaborations in Google Docs**

Keegan frequently curated collaborations between students in Google Docs. He would design an assignment for students to complete, and then ask students to respond to their peers with a specific focus in mind. For instance, in the beginning of the year in the filmmaking class, students brainstormed a list of themes that they thought would reflect the impact of YPAR on the school. (See Figure 4.4). Their intention was to build a film around these themes later on.

**Figure 4.4 Student-Generated YPAR Theme Brainstorm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Freedom of choice</th>
<th>Teachers trusted students</th>
<th>Empowerment/Voice heard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Given the opportunity to make your own choices can shape an individual from time-to-time.</td>
<td>Gradually, students learn to trust their teachers and vice-versa through YPAR.</td>
<td>Students feel that their voice is being heard and are empowered to make change possible efficiently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence: Students have the freedom of researching a topic of their choice which helps an individual develop. For instance, in the 8th grade, the students weren’t allowed to choose a topic, but from 7th grade and on we were able to identify a topic in interest.</td>
<td>Students can build trust through YPAR by developing vital relationships with one another. This creates a safe and positive interaction between teachers and students within a school community.</td>
<td>From experience in Albany, many of the students who made their presentations felt as if their voice was heard and that their hard work paid off. This empowered students to make effective changes that needed to be made.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Students and teachers continue to build the trust established by YPAR. YPAR helped students to develop more comfortable</td>
<td>Students must feel empowered in order to feel passionate about their work, which results in an effective project.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three themes that came out of students’ voting during class for what they thought were the most powerful affordances of YPAR at the school level were: freedom of choice,
teachers trusting students, and feelings of empowerment. These of course are not straightforward, and need to be unpacked. So, Keegan asked students to define each theme in their own words and the provide evidence to support this definition. He asked, “Where do you see examples of these themes in our school?” After completing the online chart, students commented on each other’s entries and this dialogue helped gel students together toward a common vision in putting together a plan for the film.

It also allowed them practice in identifying evidence and support for their perspective, which was a skill that they were asked to focus on in other classes to prepare for standardized assessments. This method of engaging students was rooted in an authentic task that serviced skillsets related to argumentation in a meaningful manner. It also helped students to refine understanding around abstract concepts that impacted their educational experience, calling upon their position and experience as young people.

*Pictures Capturing Issue*

As part of students’ data collection process during the second year of the program, Keegan required one to two people per group to serve as media specialists. These students created digital maps of where educational issues in the school manifested, and were also tasked with taking and captioning pictures that represented these issues. Keegan was strategic in who he invited to take on these roles. He admitted that there were some students who did not commit to the YPAR process as willingly as others; these were also students who struggled to complete course work and sometimes posed a behavioral challenge. He thought that these students would be the perfect candidates for a role that allowed them to work with their hands and also to more directly communicate with their peers. After they documented the issue as it lived in the school, these media specialists would report back to their groups and gauge what more needed to be
captured. This allowed an opportunity for students who were often times overlooked to carve out identities as experts. In turn, they were able to command more respect from their peers who looked to them for a unique and valuable vantage point.

Round Robin Data Immersion

During the third year of the program’s implementation, Keegan began to experiment with video lessons, where he would record himself presenting a lesson on either Google Docs or Google Slides. One lesson that seemed to pair well with this format was the introduction of data collection methods. Understanding the affordances of different data collection methods does not happen without real-world practice. And it would surely be challenging to take middle school students through multiple research methods in any efficient manner without assistance of some kind. Knowing this, Keegan decided to create an instructional video that introduced students to four research methods, with practice time and reflection time built in. Methods included: focus group interviews, one-one-one interviews, surveys, and Photovoice, and Keegan used excerpts from the YELL guide as models. This gave him the freedom to walk around and insert himself into groups who may have needed extra assistance or to troubleshoot issues with technology, which almost always came up during each class period. It also allowed students to review the content again at home, which he stated was crucial for IEP students and English Language Learners.
Storyboarding in Film Class

Storyboarding were a medium that some students selected to represent the findings and recommendations that they wished to express at the conclusion of their research. Students used an online platform called StoryboardThat to compose their narratives, and then shared their final products with stakeholders and their peers at the end of the year. The program was enjoyable for the youth to use, as they were able to generate storylines that came to life with avatars they constructed before scripting their story. They could even record voiceovers for dialogue happening between characters in the stories they etched, which made them feel more personal.

The storyboards were used primarily in the second year of the YPAR program after the school acquired technology tools through a grant, but some students in the filmmaking classes also tinkered with the platform the following year due to their level of familiarity with its interface and affordances. This presented the opportunity for a powerful apprenticing opportunity, as the “seasoned” filmmakers shared tips about writing scripts, generating a storyline, and using the technology to its full potential with those who hadn’t had any prior exposure to the program. Students seemed willing and ready to participate in groups that were
more participatory and student-led, in large part due to Keegan’s intentional focus during prior years on establishing group norms, roles, and expectations. For instance, during year 2 of the YPAR initiative, Keegan designated clearer roles for film projects students set out to compose; some would be script writers, one would direct, and others would be in charge of composing the frames, for instance. Students took to this configuration well, and were free to choose roles that they felt complimented their skillset. An interesting aspect of students’ engagements with media productions writ large was that the beginning phases of production often preceded or happened simultaneously alongside the data analysis phase. In this way, digital production served as a modality for students to process what it was they were thinking about and noticing. It was as much a cognitive processing tool as it was an outward-facing product demonstrating their knowledge and understanding.

**Civic Engagement and Action**

*Visits to Albany and Washington, D.C.*

During the second year of the YPAR program, seventh and eighth grade students visited state and national capitals to share their research with legislators. With the assistance of outside grant monies to pay for travel, seventh graders visited Albany, NY and eighth graders trekked to Washington, D.C. for day-long trips. All students attending these trips focused on educational issues; some topics of interest included the impact of technology access in schools on student motivation, the role that care plays in student and teacher relationships, the emotional, physical, and academic consequences of bullying on students, and the ways that the physical ecology of a school can impact a students’ learning experience. To refine these projects, students had to stay after school at least once per week to work with Keegan and other after-school personnel who
assisted them in the creation of PowerPoint presentations, informational brochures, and other visual aids that students leveraged in their advocacy work.

It is important to note that at this juncture in their YPAR journey, students were intimately aware of the manifestation of the larger issues they set out to explore on their school community. Since so many of their teachers relied heavily on reflection and the processing of issues collectively, students had taken considerable time to think through what it was that they wished to share with politicians. Having had adults authentically listen to them made them feel, as focus group interviews revealed, like they had something to say that mattered. Therefore, while in some cases the visits to Albany and Washington D.C. were largely symbolic, the students did not see their efforts as moot. They articulated their concerns in a manner that demonstrated thorough preparation and critical concern.

A poignant example of this occurred during the 7th grade Albany trip, when students arranged to meet with one of their local legislators to share their research on the important role that technology played in a students’ education. This day, however, his time spent in legislative session went over, and so he could not meet with students as planned. As an alternative, students were invited into the assembly chamber while Congress was in session, and at some point, the man whom they had hoped to speak with acknowledged them with a public welcome. This did not satisfy students’ desire for a more thorough discussion, however. Instead, when students spotted him leaving they decided to stop him, with laptop and brochures in hand. They were prepared to make their presentation on the spot!

This was without prompting from any adult. As they saw it, students had come this far to share their work and felt strongly about having more technology in the school. After introducing themselves and shaking the assemblyman’s hand, they asked for his ear for ten minutes and
proceeded to eagerly huddle around him as they began their presentation. It was a sight to watch; three students had bullet points they read from their brochure, while another clicked through the slide show with relevant data. At the end, they insisted he watch the brief video created in WeVideo, which was barely audible above the noise of the hall, yet strong enough to get their point across.

At the conclusion of the presentation, all parties exchanged contact information and agreed to follow-up with one another. The assemblyman told students that he believed that their advocacy for technology was important and just as significant was their use of the technology for civic ends. He made this connection because students laid out with such clarity the ways that technology met their needs as “21st century students.”

Students explained that they were only able to delve into the YPAR work so wholeheartedly because of their newfound access to technology. They described the struggle they had in completing their projects or even being motivated to complete their projects the prior year as sixth graders, simply because they couldn’t connect to the resources they felt they needed. “We were just stuck in our classrooms, just the teacher and us,” as one student expressed. Another added, “and that’s now how it works now. Information is everywhere and so are people. That’s why we need the laptops and stuff because it’s where everything comes together.” This was an issue that students felt was pertinent to their educational experience as well as their educational trajectories, “how are we going go to high school and college and not even have laptops in our school?” Students’ advocacy in this moment was ambitious, reflecting a confidence not just in the viability of their need, but also in their local congressperson’s ability to address that need. Students viewed their voice as important in holding elected representatives accountable in meeting the needs of the people they were serving, and saw it as their duty to communicate with
him despite the restrictions placed upon them in the encounter. Later, when I asked some of these students during a focus group interview what led them to approach their legislator despite the constraints, they told me that they didn’t think there would be any other way to have programs like YPAR at other schools or for students to get the technology the needed if nobody spoke up.

Later, this congressman reached out to students for follow-up meetings that ended up being re-scheduled or cancelled for conflicts on the end of both parties, but I heard that some of the new laptop carts that were purchased the following year grew out of students’ pleas during their trip to the capital. Whether this is true or not I am not sure, as it was students who informed me of this during interviews. What feels more important to me is that the visibility of more technology in the school was attributed, in students’ minds, to their efforts. Their comments and feedback speak to how compelled they felt to institute change and the importance of having opportunities to practice wearing identities as change agents. The term “21st century student,” although vague when students used the term a few times during our interviews, came into clearer focus as I thought about how they made sense of the context in which they used technology. 21st century student, perhaps, was using technology in ways that amplified students’ voice and concerns about issues that mattered to them. The tools mattered, yes- but not if they were being used in the same manner that other tools had been used to discount or silence their perspectives.

In-School Actions and Advocacy

Outside of those who went to Albany and D.C., most students during year 2 did not have the chance to go on field trips or even to interact with the outside community to share their recommendations. This was in large part due to funding, but also because it would have been a heavy lift to work alongside so many young people in seeing their projects through to
completion. As I touched on before, students in year three did not even reach the point where they were able to execute research projects, let alone participate in a defined action or advocacy initiative. That does not mean transformation did not happen, nor does it mean that the work should not have continued. A strong benefit of participating in programs like YPAR at the school level was students participating in the process of coming to discover that they had a voice, and internalizing that their voice could and should be heard. And even though many students did not always have the opportunity to present polished final pieces to some of their identified stakeholders outside of school walls, they did have encounters across the life of the project that allowed for different kinds of conversations with adults and peers inside the school who cared for them. This changed the ways in which they interpreted the school environment and the manner in which they viewed adults inside of it, as later chapters attest to.

When students did present their work inside of school, this came in many forms. During the first year of the program, sixth grade students researched the impact of beauty standards on teenagers and shared PowerPoints that contained local statistics as well as stories from some of the narratives they collected from friends, family members, and community members. Another time, seventh grade students created informational brochures about their issue and shared them with neighbors. In some cases, administration invited youth to share what they had learned in their projects and encouraged them to also discuss recommendations for remedying problems inside of the school. At the time of this study, several programs had been introduced at the school including a new peer mediation program, a peer mentoring program, an after-school coding club, and a UN Ambassadors club, all efforts that students or Keegan spoke of as having been a direct result of students’ YPAR advocacy efforts.
A Pedagogy of Agency

In closing out this chapter, I now turn to a brief analysis of the underpinnings of Keegan’s pedagogy in designing and implementing the YPAR course, paying specific attention to those concepts that tie back to the conceptual framing of this study. For my analysis I am drawing upon observation notes and field memos, as well as interviews that I conducted with him about his curriculum and lesson plan design process, his pedagogy, what he thought YPAR meant to the school, what he felt students took away from the course, and challenges that he faced in implementation (See Appendix B). In all, I wanted to understand what he desired to foreground in his pedagogy and what he was taking into account when he was planning for the course.

In Table 4.3 below, I present what I name as six iterations of agency. These iterations grew out of a list of frequently occurring concepts across interviews and observation data, which I then merged based upon themes that tied them together, with a specific focus on barriers or bridges to agency. Finally, I looked for patterns across all of the established themes and grouped data together by associations with the conceptions of agency informing this study: Agency as Critical Literacy, Agency as Cultural Representation, and Agency as Healing.

Rather than parse through each iteration in significant detail, I highlight key findings under each conception of agency in order to draw attention to the ways in which students’ experience in YPAR was mediated in part by the ideological underpinnings and sense making informing the development of the course. I reference examples of these iterations to support the analysis of each conception. I conclude by tying these findings back to Paris and Alim’s call (2014, p.91) for pedagogies that sustain both the traditional and evolving ways that languages and cultures are used by young people in their everyday lives. A Pedagogy of Agency as traced
in Keegan’s role as a YPAR classroom teacher helps us think about how to employ asset pedagogies that are fluid and account for the important ways that youth are repurposing, remixing, and reimagining cultural and linguistic tools to service academic, social and civic ends borne from their own needs, desires and imaginations.

Table 4.3 - Iterations of Agency across Keegan’s Pedagogical Philosophy and Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency as Critical Literacy</th>
<th>Agency as Cultural Representation</th>
<th>Agency as Healing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decentering Self</td>
<td>Reading the World as Something that can be changed</td>
<td>Counter-storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeing connections between self and world, Understanding you’re not alone, Empathy, Disrupting own ideological base, Stepping outside of yourself</td>
<td>Local sensitivities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading texts critically, Reading to understand socioeconomic and racial factors, Reading trauma in the world to process our own, Unpacking stereotypes that school imposes, Asking questions that assert desire for change</td>
<td>Meaningful Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resisting expectations based upon class, disrupting stereotypes based upon race, religion</td>
<td>Socio-emotional needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacies, Religion, Neighborhood Culture</td>
<td>Powerful connection with peers, Connective experiences, Service to others, Peer and adult mentoring, deconstructing relationships with teachers, trusting students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentional affirmation, Investing in self-efficacy, Confident encounters, disposition of hope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Critical Literacy: Shaping the World and De-centering Self

In the middle of the year, Keegan had students read a powerful story about a teenager their age who had been admitted to a facility for drug addiction and violent behavior. The article focused mostly on this young person’s struggles leading up to his admittance and later, his encounters with animal therapy for healing. The students were captivated by this teenager’s struggle, as well as the selected method of therapy. It wasn’t just the story that caught their interest, however. Keegan’s questions pulled them into explore what factors informed his experience, as well as how his condition and perspective may have changed if he had grown up in a different place or under different socioeconomic conditions. During one of our interviews Keegan reflected on why he selected this story to whet students’ interests in the research phase of their YPAR work:
I sought this article to one, broaden their horizons as we were looking into these issues, and then also to teach them to think critically about the topics they’re reading. One of the critical questions that I asked was, “If this kid’s parents can afford to send him to military school, what do you think his socioeconomic background is? The kids were…A lot of them were like, “Well in order for them to send him off to boarding school or something like that, they have to be wealthy.” And I was like, “Yeah. Probably. They probably have a little bit of money.” Then, the next step to the question was, “Well, what happens when you don’t have those resources? How does that impact that person’s ability to overcome this trauma, or overcome this addiction they had?” A lot of the kids put two and two together, and it was like “Well, if you don’t have the resources then you’re…you may be stuck in your situation for some time. And if there aren’t any public programs to facilitate helping you overcome these issues, that puts you behind as well.” That way, it helps students to connect…making that critical lens of, “what happens when you don’t have these resources, to overcome this trauma?” I thought that this was one of the powerful lessons we had.

This kind of engagement characterized Keegan’s practice. He modeled the kinds of critical reading strategies that he hoped students would be able to enact while they delved into their own topics. But for Keegan, critical literacy wasn’t just equipping students to better understand how power shaped a person’s experience of an issue. Unpacking the important ways that racial and economic factors intersected with and informed an issue like teen addiction was important, but so was hope. And believing that the world could be changed relied upon things like processing one’s own trauma, and asking questions that demanded that things be different. So alongside any critical reading that Keegan took up with students, he also built in opportunities for students to think about how to change whatever issue was presented- in a reading, at school, in the world. These opportunities were comprehensive in that Keegan took students through stories, questioning strategies, and group activities that provided strategies for thinking about and processing content at several levels: academic, social, and emotional.

Another interesting facet of his practice as it related to critical literacy was that he intentionally pushed students to think outside of their own experiences in connecting with critical issues. For instance, in the story referenced above, Keegan speaks of the fact that he chose this
story because he wanted to acknowledge some of the social and emotional turmoil that kids their age struggled with when they experienced trauma. This included the divorce of parents, as the main character in the story had endured. But he also featured a boy from a rich family because, as Keegan puts it, “it wasn’t about a kid from the inner city, or the typical narrative that’s portrayed about kids who get into drugs. It was about a kid who was from a wealthy family, and whose parents tried everything they could to help him.” Resisting pathological stereotypes that often times accompany references to addiction or addicts, Keegan created space for students to humanize those struggling with addiction in their families and communities.

Also important to Keegan was that students try to be more “objective” in their readings as they explored issues that mattered to them. This did not mean that he did not acknowledge nor account for the very real lived experiences of students who most likely chose the topics they did because of events happening in their own lives. But he wanted to arm them as researchers and citizens with the ability to better see all facets of an issue. As he stated, “I wanted to put them in a position of being researchers to collect data, and be driven by the data, not necessarily by the narrative that they think they should put out.” He stated how challenging this was but how necessary it had become in a world where most people’s guttural instinct was to act upon their biases. For teenagers specifically, he noted the sharp challenge in that 12 and 13 year-olds are at an age “where they only know themselves.” Decentering the self, whether through intentional disruptions to ideology or exposure to others’ stories, became a common thread in Keegan’s philosophy. Keegan felt comfortable in pushing students to think about how people they don’t identify with might view a particular experience or issue and wanted students’ research, questions, and interactions to reflect this understanding. He noted that this ability was difficult “not just for kids, but adults too.” He asked, “how and where do you learn to ask questions that
allow you to get inside what someone thinks? How do you help someone lead you there?”

Positioning students to think this way allowed for a foundation of radical empathy that informed
the ways that students viewed information and how they positioned themselves in relation to others.

* Cultural Representation: Resisting Master Narratives and Attuning to the Local

Keegan’s classes were filled with students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives,
which made for rich interactions that often times pushed all stakeholders to consider the nuances
of any given thread of inquiry. As mentioned prior, North Bronx Middle School was considered
one of the most diverse middle schools in the city. A significant Bengali population existed, and
more recently, a large portion of students had emigrated from Yemen. Another notable portion
of students emigrated from the Dominican Republic, and still others found their way to the
United States from across the African Diaspora. In all, a beautiful tapestry of students assembled
at North Bronx MS and YPAR felt like a generative approach to collectively explore
interpretations of both causes and solutions to those issues students deemed as most pressing.

Keegan’s practice not only accounted for this diversity, but also drew on it as a strength.
This was featured most prominently in his mixed group configurations that would place students
of varying backgrounds together to talk about or explore an issue. He would construct and
distribute scaffolds that would require students to highlight their own understanding of a topic,
and then acknowledge connections between their understanding and another students’ articulated
understanding within a small group. These configurations and the intentional scaffolding were
critical, because they drew out the multiple perspectives that existed within the classroom. What
violence meant to a student having to leave his home in war-torn Yemen, for instance, might be
different from a student who experienced bullying as a result of gender identification. Having
intimate knowledge of some of his students, Keegan knew to place students together who would have a range of vantage points on issues, and as a result, students excavated more complex portraits of ideas that they might have otherwise considered at a surface level.

What oftentimes emerged from these groups was a different story about the actors who students imagined as either perpetuators or interrogators of a given social issue. I’m not sure that Keegan planned for this exactly, but what group interactions revealed was that students began to tell different stories about what they bore witness to daily, or invest in what Solorzano and Yosso (2002) refer to as “counter-storytelling.” Solorzano and Yosso define counter-storytelling as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society), and add on that it is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). They highlight counter-storytelling as a research method that helps people to understand “the experiences of people of color along the educational pipeline (p. 36)” that might not otherwise be heard due to not only the marginalization of specific groups of people in research, but also the methods that academia utilizes to gather and communicate knowledge. Some have referred to this as the white gaze (Yancy, 2008; Morrison, 2007), or the inclination for all lives to be framed by whiteness.

In the case of North Bronx Students, counter-storytelling was engaged in as part of the research inquiry process, though this was a strategy that grew organically through dialogue as opposed to being intentionally stoked. While students shared, they had confidence enough to draw upon their own linguistic repertoires and lived experiences to express what they thought about issues impacting their lives. Using metaphors, leveraging sophisticated personal narratives, and even sometimes sharing pictures, students shared oft marginalized perspectives that captured the ways that racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism intersected with the issues
they sought to address. In so doing, they gave credence to one another’s voices and ways of knowing, sustaining important cultural experiences and perspectives. These in turn challenged the ways that every participant in the group viewed their own understanding of the issues they set out to explore.

These kinds of interactions didn’t “just happen”, however. In his own practice, Keegan attended to the local; the epistemological reflecting that students honed could be attributed in part to the creative activity of the YPAR classroom that encouraged students to employ multiple literacies, points of view, and cultural understandings to make sense of issues. This attuned students to the paradigms that informed how they even chose to represent concepts and seeped into the dialogues that occurred within groups.

*Healing From the Inside Out: Meaningful Connection & Leveraging the Socioemotional Core*

Keegan expressed an ethos of care that was palpable. This came through most prominently in his storytelling, his check-ins with students, and through his lessons that were structured with accessibility for all students in mind. With over 200 students enrolled in the YPAR classes, making a meaningful connection with every individual student was nearly impossible. Nonetheless, Keegan had a way of engaging students in the space of the classroom that let them know that they mattered, and that the YPAR class could be a place to gain a critical understanding of how structures of domination and oppression operated in their everyday lives.

Being connected to mechanisms and structures that permitted these kinds of explorations was important because it promoted self-determination and allowed students to see themselves differently as agents of change rather than hopeless victims entangled within insurmountable social conditions. This re-framing of self was crucial. But what ushered in this re-framing were the human interactions and affirmations happening in conjunction with students’ inquiry.
Honing power and leveraging a voice to achieve social justice can only happen with the development of trust, optimism, healthy relationships, and hope. This presents a challenge to educators like Keegan to consider the real interpersonal and intrapersonal healing that must be attended to if the aim is to support students’ capacity to transform community conditions.

To offer an honest disclaimer, I wouldn’t say that Keegan initially conceptualized the YPAR classroom as a space that would intentionally allow for healing. Although many of the students whom Keegan was working with lacked the proper social supports to work through internalized personal traumas tied to systemic social problems surrounding them, Keegan did not ever articulate to me or anyone else that he saw it as his responsibility to rectify this. Like many teachers, I think, he just saw the conditions that encroached upon students’ lives as being out of his sphere of control. What his practice did reveal was a deep sense of respect for his students and a commitment to cultivating meaningful relationships that were transformative. Because of this commitment, staples of a radical healing process were present that had a profound impact on students’ confidence and in some cases, bolstered their positive identity development. According to education scholar Shawn Ginwright, there are four areas that contribute to the radical healing process: caring relationships, community, consciousness, and culture (2010, p. 9). The first two concepts, caring relationships and community, were the most noticeable in the YPAR space in regards to the concept of healing.

Ginwright asserts that radical healing occurs in *community* where “the space to imagine and hope encourage young people to shed their fear and pain in order to move forward with love and optimism” (p. 10). I noticed Keegan’s alignment with this aspect of the radical healing process when I observed over time the ways that he honed his practice to facilitate powerful human interactions that assisted students in moving toward more hopeful dispositions. His
ongoing attention to students’ socio-emotional needs and his consistent effort to create meaningful connections allowed for this, and both were reflected as priorities across his interviews and in the everyday structure of the classroom. When I asked him about what benefits were attached to participation in YPAR, he reflects,

Students have more confidence, and not just more confidence but a skillset behind that confidence to seek out and research the topics that they are interested in. And I think that the benefit overall the students is that, to know that their voice matters, and what they think about issues…most of the time they’re not far off. They may not be able to articulate it, or they may not have the research or the empirical data to back it up, but a lot of times their perception of an issue is close to reality. I think that kids knowing that their intuition is not that far off, I think was important to know.

And Keegan made sure to consistently verbalize this trust in their intuition, often times while introducing a new idea or technique, “what does your intuition tell you about this? Trust it.”

This is only one of several affirmations that he infused into his instruction on a day-to-day basis; others included “I have confidence that you can do this,” or he would turn to students with questions, “what do you think we should do? I think you have something to say” and “what kinds of questions should we be asking? These intentional affirmations and deference to student knowledge were referenced several times in student interviews to support their observation that Keegan was a teacher who did in fact trust students. As one student expressed,

Mr. Smith is one of those teachers who you know gots your back. He always says stuff to make you feel like you got this, even if you think you can’t, you can try and eventually you’ll figure it out. I always feels like he always says stuff that makes you feel smart, like to ask us what we think and all that.

Keegan’s attention to propping up students’ knowledge and insisting that they act with confidence was not just delivered in word, however. He also communicated this through action. For instance, he would create group roles for students to intentionally serve as “encouragers” and leave students to decide who might best serve in such a role. Or in knowing that a given student
might have a competency not traditionally valued in the classroom, he would direct others to petition that student for his/her knowledge or perspective on an issue. In all, Keegan knew that he had to generate opportunities for students to practice self-efficacy and part of that was facilitating encounters that bolstered their confidence in themselves and each other. Paying attention to the socio-emotional dimensions of learning was paramount in fostering the disposition of hope needed for healing from past wounds but also in acting on behalf of the common good. The small moves of turning to students for answers or telling them to trust their intuition was powerful in so much at created important reminders to students that what and how they viewed the world was valid.

Another crucial focus for Keegan was providing pathways for meaningful connection. In a world of global interconnection and rapid change, being able to leverage meaningful connection both online and off is urgent. Research demonstrates that there is a growing gap between the generative use of digital media outside of the classroom and the often times disingenuous, disengaging media use inside of schools. As Ito and her colleagues note, this gap contributes to alienation from educational institutions, particularly amongst non-dominant youth (2013, p. 4). Prioritizing meaningful connection in his classroom then is a healing practice that speaks to issues of equity quite directly. Keegan’s centering of connective experiences, using technology to engage with community, and facilitating powerful peer collaborations provided valuable resources for building loving and supportive communities and collective capacities for learning.

A staple commitment in his educational philosophy that strengthened meaningful connection was service to others. Keegan did not just want students to think about how to be of
service to community outside of the school. He wanted them to practice humility and service with each other. As Keegan tells it,

I wanted them to actively invest in service. I would see that what would ultimately happen is that they were of service to each other. If one group was done with their survey questions, now, they could go help this other group with their survey questions and ask them what they thought about it… I didn’t actually have to do a lot after the first couple of weeks, really because they were able to… they were self-sustaining in each group helping each other which was really good because I was doing that all by myself before.

Through participatory interactions that de-centered Keegan as the sole transmitter of knowledge, students learned that they could rely upon each other as resources. The above reflection might seem insignificant as an individual example, but the cumulative effect of students’ serving one another and connecting through meaningful experiences transferred into the larger school culture. Students began to see that they could and should take part in shaping the educational environment that they navigated daily. They began advocating, for instance, for programming and interventions that would allow them to develop outlets for healing alongside caring adults. These included a peer mentoring group and a peer mediation group, which an administrator and a school counselor helped coordinate and is still operating at the school to this day. They also advocated for anti-bullying campaigns and programming, and for more outlets to communicate with teachers in order to strengthen relationships and build trust. Not all of these efforts flourished, nor were they fully embraced by all adult stakeholders in the building, but the act of investing in efforts to dismantle barriers to their success helped them build healthy identities that restored hope and imagination in what could be.

The advocacy that grew out of the meaningful connections they made in YPAR class reminds me of the pathways that Ginwright mentions are essential when centering caring relationships for the purpose of radical healing. He notes, “caring relationships… connect people
in profound ways to meaningful acts of resistance…caring relationships do not simply imply individual acts of kindness, rather (they) prepare black youth to know themselves as part of a long history of struggle and triumph” (p.10). Through the rituals and activities in YPAR class, students learned how to confront the issues that mattered to them. They came to learn who they were and how much they mattered in the struggle to influence the quality of education they received at the local level.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I shared a summary of the pedagogical and curricular foundations upon which the YPAR program at North Bronx Middle School was built. I also shared the disposition and pedagogy that Keegan employed that complimented the YPAR class and the development of the program. It is important to mention that just as YPAR was a new project for the school to undertake, so too was it new to Keegan. In fact, Keegan wasn’t just new to YPAR; he was also new to teaching. During the first year that North Bronx MS adopted YPAR, Keegan was part of the New York Teaching Fellows, an alternative teacher education program that recruited recent college graduates and career changers to teach in New York City. At the time of this study, he was finishing up his third year as a teacher and his first as the sole instructor of YPAR at his school. I think it is safe to say that Keegan’s experiences in developing the YPAR program across these three years left an enduring imprint on his teaching philosophy and practices. He learned how to teach in the context of designing and implementing a program that centered young people, and the iterations of agency that I traced across his pedagogical philosophy and practice reflect this.

Over time, Keegan developed humanizing approaches to teaching that emphasized the building of care, dignity and respect (Paris & Winn, 2014) through meaningful encounters with
content, people, and resources. Moreover, he demonstrated sensitivity to the socio-emotional needs of students through the intentional weaving of affirmations, statements promoting self-efficacy, and consistently cultivating opportunities for hope. Keegan also structured the class so that students had ample opportunities to leverage literacy as a tool to become conscious of their own experiences in the world and the ways in which relations of power influenced these experiences. This pushed students to read the world as something they could shape, echoing Shor’s sentiment, “to be for critical literacy is to take a moral stand on the kind of democratic education we want” (1999, p. 25).

In addition to the iterations of critical literacy and healing found in Keegan’s practice were those of cultural representation. His valuing of counter-stories and attention to the local are both themes that compliment Paris and Alim’s call for culturally sustaining pedagogies that foster linguistic and cultural flexibility (2014, p. 95). A project like YPAR feels considerably less important if an adult facilitator’s pedagogy does not attend to the evolving cultural and linguistic practices at the local level. The forms of both that a young person brings with herself into the classroom is intimately tied to her experiences with community, with loved ones, and with a personal identity. Moreover, being able to leverage these tools in ways that resist traditional narratives to promote humane renderings of oneself and one’s community in the context of social justice can have powerful impact on young people’s beliefs and modes of interacting.

The following chapter provides an analysis of interview transcriptions, classroom observation data, and classroom documents in relation to the literacy and socialization practices that students took part in as part of the YPAR class. These are aligned with the three iterations of agency conceptualized in this study: Agency as Healing, Agency as Cultural Representation,
and Agency as Critical Literacy. In addition, since part of this study was to better understand middle school students’ experience with YPAR over time, Chapter 5 also details encounters that highlight students’ reflections on participating and their perceptions of YPAR’s impact on their perspectives and actions inside and outside of school.
CHAPTER 5- SIGNIFICANCE OF YPAR ON STUDENT AGENCY

It’s a warm Spring day at North Bronx MS, and I enter the building excited to view the progress that students have made on their projects since my last visit to the school three weeks prior. Students are in good spirits when I enter, having returned from Spring Break on Monday full of the usual energy that a prolonged vacation from school brings. Sweaty bodies transitioning from PE and horse-playing in the hallway, rambunctious laughter, circles of friends trying to sneak in a minute or two of chatter before heading to class. I direct smiles toward teachers, security guards and students as I begin to circle the building to check-in with staff who are implementing the YPAR project during its inaugural year. This is my usual routine: I chat with a few of the English teachers who have been tasked with implementing YPAR into their curriculum and assess where they are at in the project, how they are feeling, and what needs they have in terms of support. This usually comes in the form of a 2-5 minute conversation and I then usually proceed to search for Keegan, who is always in a different place because he is circulating around the building to assist teachers with their YPAR projects or else offering support for IEP students in the Social Studies classes. After two quick visits with teachers, I observe that I am not greeted by the usual warmth I am accustomed to. There is a bit of hesitation in the air, tension expressed through an avoidance of discussing YPAR, “how was your break?” or else a brief head nod for the sake of acknowledgement upon entering the classroom. Leaving these encounters a bit apprehensive, I make my way to the third floor to track down Keegan.

He is rolling a cart into a classroom and gestures politely, “I think we’ve got to talk about something that happened. We’re not going to do YPAR today; I should have called you. You should find Mr. Johnson. They want to talk to you.” I’m nervous at this point, but know that I cannot interrupt the lesson that Keegan is getting ready to lead. He senses my uncertainty, “It’s
about the surveys. Some of the kids started targeting those they knew were suicidal, and collected data from them for their projects. The surveys weren’t properly vetted by teachers, and so we had a lot on our hands, with reaching out to parents and all that.”

After several conversations with teachers as well as administration, I gain a clearer sense of what transpired. A group of seventh grade students had decided that they wanted to explore issues related to mental health for their YPAR projects, and settled on teen suicide. This was a committed group of young people, fervent about their topic and caring deeply about the well-being of their peers. In this particular event, students had sought out those whom they had heard were suicidal or had known to be “cutters” to answer survey questions that asked them directly about feelings of suicide. This group of student-researchers wanted to better understand the issue at its core, but also wanted to advocate for their friends once equipped with this knowledge. However, after constructing their survey they failed to get approval from their teacher before distributing it. Within days, the cumulative data collected found its way to administration who then had to contact parents, school social workers, and the like in order to follow up on each individual case and be sure to provide the supports that students needed.

At this juncture in the YPAR process, where students were in between the phases of collecting data and analyzing it, teachers had been scrambling to complete the project. I had only come in as a consultant in January, and two school breaks along with testing meant that they had a limited amount of time to infuse anything extra into their instruction. Reception to the idea of YPAR was also varied, with some teachers believing it was a great idea but not feeling like they had enough time to see it through to its end; a few who committed whole-heartedly because they had faith in its potential and significance, and the remaining two who resisted anything above and beyond what they felt the traditional curriculum required. Restricted time and varied
reception, along with the fact that teachers were new to the YPAR process, resulted in the progress of YPAR being stymied this first year. The process was only further frustrated by the presentation of this challenge, where students surfaced a real and urgent need that would require tremendous effort in addressing. When we finished in June, I felt torn. On the one had, I felt embarrassed in not having prepared teachers and administrators better for these challenges, which YPAR almost always presented because students pursue real and urgent issues that they face in their everyday lives. On the other hand, I thought it a powerful gesture for young people to express such critical empathy in pursuing information that they hoped would be helpful for their friends who were struggling with mental health issues. It is these tensions like these that make YPAR so challenging to implement in schools, but also so compelling.

And Nevertheless, He Persisted

I wasn’t sure what would happen with the YPAR project at the end of this first year. There were groups of students who had produced impressive presentations that highlighted oral histories, stunning photojournalism projects that captured their issue, and the beginnings of some significant data that even seasoned researchers would be interested in excavating. But the challenges were great. The risks and challenges that YPAR presented took time away from traditional academic tasks and also required extra support and resources; once students began identifying issues that they cared about, their learning started to extend well beyond the classroom. This unearthed authentic issues that students were encountering in their lives. Once these become public, adults could not turn away- even if they felt stretched thin already. The school performed well as compared to its peers, but worked hard to do so. It did so much with so very little.
These challenges and more made it a difficult program to adapt in an in-school setting; YPAR exposes all cracks and fissures in a school’s foundation and pushes adult stakeholders to feel vulnerable and compromised at times. And for schools like North Bronx MS that serve some of our nation’s most vulnerable children, an extra stressor is the discourse of hyper-standardization and accountability measures that impose demands on schools that reduce learning to what can be measured on a test and teaching to a set of “best practices” divorced from context or the sociocultural and socio-material reality of students’ lives. As a result, what gets stripped away is perhaps what students need most: investments in processes of hope, optimism, and vision that affirm their humanity, brilliance and ingenuity as young people.

Positioned at the helm of the school, Mr. Alexander seemed to understand the inherent risk and challenges in taking YPAR on. In fact, he seemed prepared for it. Much to my surprise, when I shared out my end-of-year summary of the program, he mentioned nothing of the survey incident again. Despite all of the challenges and hurdles that YPAR shored up, he persisted. And even though the ups and downs continued into the following year, he codified it in the curriculum as a class that every seventh and eighth grader would take in the program’s third iteration, assigning Keegan as the sole instructor.

As captured in my pilot study, Mr. Alexander held onto a steadfast belief that sparking students’ curiosity and supporting their sense of agency was crucial. He believed in YPAR’s potential to serve as a bridge to meaningful experiences with learning, and was willing to adapt to the challenges he anticipated it presenting. This chapter, like the one before it, features the understandings that young people had of a program aiming to cultivate and nourish agentive identities, and the literacy practices that accompanied it. Analysis of data was in relation to the following research questions:
• How is literacy conceptualized and enacted inside of the YPAR classroom?
• How does change happen in the YPAR classroom space, and how do students describe it?

Ethnographic Vignettes Capturing Themes

In the pages that follow, I attempt to encapsulate the agentive value of YPAR at the human level through an analysis of the interview transcripts, observation data, and classroom documents collected from students. I also draw attention to the literacy practices that students engaged in as part of their agency construction as it corresponds with the three areas outlined in my conceptual framework: agency as healing, agency as cultural representation, and agency as critical literacy.

For each area, I weave analysis of classroom documents and observation data of literacy events into ethnographic vignettes that illuminate the stories of three students whose interviews spoke most directly to the areas outlined in my conceptual framework, and also whose reflections on YPAR echoed many of the sentiments expressed by other participants who were interviewed as part of the larger ethnography (see Table 5.1 below for brief descriptions of 6 interview participants). In presenting the data in this way, I hope to provide more humanizing portraits of young people that center their narratives, counter-narratives, perceptions of and claims about YPAR and agency. A discussion follows each series of vignettes that extends a highlighted theme emerging from an analysis of the interview data, to provide a more well-rounded snapshot of how that theme lived in other stories encountered in the study. I conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of students’ perception of the value and implementation of YPAR.
Table 5.1 Participant descriptions for 6 semi-structured Interviews, taken from demographic survey and interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alina, 8th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Columbian. Born here, moved from Harlem to the Bronx in sixth grade after parents’ divorce. Explored relationships between students and teachers because of horrible experiences as new student at the school. Wanted to understand motivation for teachers’ behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ihuoma, 8th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ghanaian. Born here, moved back to Ghana until the age of 5, when her parents brought her back here. Explored alcoholism and drug use because of what she witnessed with friends and family and wanted to be equipped to inform them of consequences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea, 7th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identifies as Chinese, father is Puerto Rican. Researched alcoholism and drug use because of what she was witnessing in her neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim, 8th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Family from China, mom raised in Dutch community and he was born in Puerto Rico. Lived in Puerto Rico, then Amsterdam, then moved to the Bronx at 9. Explored issues of mental health/suicide because of own experiences with abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro, 8th grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mexican. Lived in Bronx entire life. Explored drug use because he said he found it interesting and noticed that it prevented lots of students from fully participating in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahman, 7th Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>Traveled back and forth between war-torn Yemen and the U.S. Explored issue of violence due to witnessing of impact of war on his country and now violence he sees exercised by his peers at school who are also from Yemen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Agency as Healing

Eighth grader Vaughn sits at a table with his peers, navigating between four browser windows open on his computer. He clicks on one of them and begins annotating an article about mental health issues in LGBTQ communities. He then migrates to another and reads in silence before transferring his attention to what looks like a journal. It is leather-bound and he is protective over its contents, turning his chair slightly so that his diagonal positioning makes it difficult for anyone at his table to read his jottings. Within minutes, however, he gets the attention of his group members when he spits out statistics on the suicide rate of LGBTQ youth. “Can you believe it? I mean, how can kids be so depressed so young?”

His neighbor Alexis chimes in, “Yeah, I’m reading about how arts could be in school more, you know, it can be a place for us to vent and let our feelings out. I think that this connects with what you are reading, Vaughn, because maybe if kids and teenagers could create and have somewhere that adults don’t judge us so much we could feel better about ourselves. You know, we know a lot more than adults think we do.” A third group member, Ahmed, nods his head, “Uh-huh, we must ask about that in our research: like, if people feel like they have enough art or like stuff like that.” Alexis agrees, “I’m realizing this is all connected. Mental health has to do with a lot of different things.”
This is a literacy event that is common in the YPAR class: groups of young people arranged by research interest, collaboratively annotating articles and then sharing out with a scaffold of some sort that requires them to make connections. These include connections to their own experiences, connections to each other’s experiences, connections to each other’s texts, and connections to examples that they see in the world. At first glance, this might not seem like a significant episode. However, in looking more closely at the engagement around this event where a group of young people is exploring mental health issues, important information is gleaned.

Figure 5.1. Vaughn’s computer screen during a group research inquiry

Vaughn, in a later interview, subtly reveals to me that he identifies as queer, and oftentimes feels ostracized by his peers because of this identification. An interaction like this, he reports later on, “let me feel like I wasn’t alone and people could actually learn about me by more than just talking to me, but also in what we are reading together, too.” And Alexis, who cares about having art infused into school curriculums, proclaims that her peers’ emotions and attitudes have a lot to do with whether art and creative outlets are in school.” As I sat in on the group conversation she asks me, “how come I can practice art outside of school and feel good,
but almost never in?” Or Ahmed, a fairly recent immigrant to the Bronx from Yemen, who says that he does not think kids in his school or neighborhood are happy: “I do not see happiness and I want to know why, so I can fix it.” In notebooks, on computer screens, through dialogue- this group of young people is unifying around what Connected Learning scholars name as a “shared purpose” (Ito et al., 2013), where "learning is part of purposeful activity and inquiry, (and) embedded in meaningful social relationships and practices" (p. 74). In this case, their collective inquiries will eventually culminate in action. Through rigorous research, they are growing in their trust for one another, the teacher and the classroom space. They are also permitted to leverage a plethora of literacy practices as they explore each other’s perspectives, while wholly invested in better understanding an authentic challenge that faces their local community.

*Group Inquiry as Healing in a Multiethnic Youth Space*

Within this interaction, there are multiple forms of individual and collective healing. On one level, students are coming together to explore something that they feel personally connected to. Each of these young people wants to make sense of something that brings them pause, concern, or as I highlight in the next section, pain and trauma. Inside of schools depleted of resources, students often do not have the time nor the space to articulate needs attached to their emotional, mental, or even physical health. A space to come together and share in an exploration that allows for dialogue helps to address this gap while also growing empathy, understanding, and sometimes a necessary shared vocabulary for mutual concerns.

On another level, students are affirmed in the ways that they prefer to communicate their ideas. They are encouraged to use multiple modalities for expression, and are engaged in activity that allows them to draw upon multiple linguistic and cultural repertoires (Gumperz, 1964;
Zentella, 2005; Rymes, 2010) to demonstrate understanding and competence. Django Paris speaks specifically to the need for classrooms to embrace textual practices enacted by multiethnic young people like those in this exchange, in what he calls *multiethnic youth space*,

I have come to conceptualize multiethnic youth space as a social and cultural space centered on youth communication within and between ethnicities- a space of contact where youth challenge and reinforce notions of difference and division through language choices and attitude (Paris, 2008, p. 430).

Paris’s concept of multiethnic youth space pays specific attention to the interchange happening between ethnically and linguistically diverse youth as the focus of study, asserting the educational value that exists in understanding the counter scriptural economy of youth space and the practices that emerge from it which he calls “identity texts” (2010, p. 280). As youth wear or display or deliver these identity texts, they are revealing memberships to identity groups, resisting dominant school texts, and sharing new and hybrid practices that represent who they are, where they come from, and where they hope to be. These practices do not stand alone, however. They can be leveraged to make more powerful connections to traditional academic texts (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002), to articulate theories of change, or to foster academic literacies.

Alexis, Vaughn, and Ahmed, I would argue, are investing in multiethnic youth spaces in their inquiry work referenced above, working through tensions that arise in misunderstandings and misinterpretations along the way. Across their expressions, they are making themselves known and conversing as each feels comfortable. This act of asserting their voices and listening to each other is healing, I would argue, as they are loosed from the regulated, evaluative measures that tend to delegitimize their ways of communicating, both in print and oral forms, in
school. This is so important because it allows them to harness power that is their own, for purposes understood by them to be important. As their group continues the conversation until the bell rings, Alexis references sketches she’s etched in her notebook to discuss how art has helped her heal; Vaughn connects anime plots to what he calls the “journeys” of the characters he is reading about in his research article, and Ahmed listens and takes notes on the computer. It is in so many ways a powerful communion in so much as it at provides everyone involved with the opportunity to play with words and ideas that are theirs.

Referencing Lisa Delpit’s work, Paris offers that acknowledging the culture of power (Delpit, 1995) while also acknowledging the counterculture of power that marginalized youth participate in will mean finding ways to join the work of youth texts and dominant school texts to show the value of each for communicating meaning to and exercising power with audiences (2010, p. 288). YPAR might be one generative avenue to pursue in creating the third spaces that would allow practice for both at once; however, I do want to trouble this notion of value as perhaps measured by disruptions to or else mastery of registers of power, with the emphasis on swaying an audience.

Power is also harnessed in hearing oneself and coming to find value in one’s own voice. Part of feeling like you matter comes from affirmations expressed by others, for sure; but just as significant is the ability to express in viable terms to yourself your own self-worth and value. In terms of healing, the trauma imposed by injustice and oppression on people’s lives requires in some cases a radical re-framing of self. Keeping this in mind, it is important that teachers who plan to engage the identity texts of young people in the classroom toward the ends of power, healing, or transformation provide opportunities for students to unpack not just the impact that traumatic or problematic events have on the community writ large, but also on the ways that one
processes these events internally. I now turn more focused attention to Vaughn, whose utterances across three semi-structured interviews reveal the urgency in this priority.

Snapshot 1: Vaughn

It is a warm March day that I sit with 14-year old Vaughn, who I am excited to get to know better as I have been observing him and his peers in class for several weeks. What stands out most to me heading into this interview are his pointed remarks to peers that push them to think outside the box. He most often speaks in metaphors or what if’s that tend to agitate his group members, but occasionally there are breakthroughs that spark rigorous discussion and debate.

When I swing by Vaughn’s homeroom class to pick him up, he initiates small talk by telling me that he remembers me from prior years as the “YPAR lady” and tells me that he is excited to talk to me about his thoughts, “like a psychiatrist or something,” he explains. We find an empty classroom and he places his journal, several gel pens, and two books down on the oblong table where I also lay my Mac Book. I ask him about the Rainbow Rowell book I notice he’s reading, Carry On, and he tells me he’s delved into everything this author has penned, including having just finished Fangirl. “I love fan fiction, too---” he tells me, and then proceeds to point to the various books in the room that he has read, “I’ve read almost all of them, I think.”

Vaughn is wearing jeans and a long black t-shirt, and slumps in his chair, tattered sneakers crossed across one another and hands in lap. He brushes his dark black hair from his eyes and stares at me intently. Although we have said hi in passing and chatted in class a few times, this is the first time we have had a face-to-face encounter, just him and I. We begin the interview as many ethnographic interviews do, with a bit of an awkward dance around
interaction that feels anything but natural. My beginning question to Vaughn asked him to articulate how he would describe himself to someone who has never met him. He tells me that he is unique, and refers to himself as multicultural, being able to speak three languages: English, Chinese, and Spanish. When I inquire about his uniqueness, he thrusts the conversation in an abrupt direction I hadn’t anticipated:

Vaughn: I'm your introvert that's trying to be extroverted.
Danielle: What do you mean by that?
Vaughn: At my core I am trying my best to be cooperative, social, and everything just so I can blend in with the school environment, and the introvert part is just because I have some issues with my mentality.
Danielle: What do you mean by that?
Vaughn: I have trust issues, apparently, and I'm somewhat emotionally unstable.
Danielle: Do you feel like that comes from you identifying that as the case, or somebody else?
Vaughn: I define myself like that, because I'm not really a very trusting person.
Danielle: You're not a trusting person?
Vaughn: I'm not really a trusting person as in, like ... (he trails off and looks away)

The pages of transcripts that follow outline an imaginative journey of sorts that Vaughn takes me on; he tells me his mother was raised in a Dutch community although she was Chinese, that his parents both met in China but that his mother had given birth to him on Puerto Rican soil before returning to Europe where his family lived in Holland, the Netherlands, and Amsterdam; and then travelled to Paris, Florence, and Switzerland on a photography tour with his uncles before moving to New York:

Danielle: So, how did you land in New York? What brought you here?
Vaughn: It was from a very somewhat traumatic events. We were inside the apartment building. Our neighbor, we were close friends until his wife was supposedly found dead. He thought she died in some freak accident at ... his son was going to see her at a hospital, but no, it was just that his oldest son is visiting her at a train station, picking her up. It was haywire.

Danielle: You're saying ... Where was this?

Vaughn: Holland. Amsterdam.

Danielle: You're in Amsterdam, and a situation arose where your neighbor's partner was murdered or... died?

Vaughn: Supposedly.

Danielle: Suddenly?

Vaughn: I believe he has schizophrenia.

Vaughn tells me that this event was what prompted his mother to move him to New York at the age of 9. While I am not sure how much truth this tale contains, I do know that there is some. I have learned from his cousin, who is also Chinese and I interviewed for this study, that both of them were in fact born in Puerto Rico to Chinese parents before coming to the United States.

The rest of the story- the mysterious murder of a neighbor, the photography tour with his uncles- I am not so sure of. But it is not so much the truth I am interested in as much as it is the meaning that is attached to what Vaughn is expressing. To be transparent, I am surprised and a bit unsettled halfway through our first encounter, not sure what to make of what he is telling me or of my own readings of his narratives. In my head, I’m scrambling a bit. Is he pulling my chain? Is he trying to process something? Is his immediate reference to schizophrenia a confession he’s holding onto but hinting at? I try to resist inaccurate portraits that fetishize or else don’t paint a full picture of him. This is challenging, because he does not render an event in any particular order. He speaks in metaphor and rather than referencing himself in a story, he directs attention
to those outside of him to offer an example of a point he is attempting to make. But over time, there are pieces that surface across the remainder of this interview and the next two that begin to reveal glimpses of what he is attempting to put forward, which I glean from those comments put forth about the YPAR work and what brought Vaughn to his area of interest: mental health and specifically, suicide.

*Storying Trauma as a Healing Practice*

There were pieces of information that Vaughn would insert into an interview, almost without any connection to what we would be talking about, and this would happen often. Here is an example of when he begins to compare his experiences navigating the United States education system to those he had in Europe, following up a statement he made about being a “matriarchal” figure in a capitalist, “patriarchal” society:

* Vaughn: It's just very different. It's a very level playing field over there, and right here it's just like you have to aspire or just climb this ladder of utter shame, or like the easy path. It's complex, and very, very hidden.

* Danielle: What do you mean? You're saying the ladder here leads to shame ... Tell me more about that, that the way to climb is hidden? What do you mean? What's hidden?

* Vaughn: It's something like a complex math ... path system-

* Danielle: Here in the United States?

* Vaughn: Yes, because I don't know what happens to immigrants. I don't see what's going on in the government. It's just hidden, unbelievably hidden. I see some more suffering here, apparently.

* Danielle: Hmm.. that's an interesting observation.

* Vaughn: Partially a little bit more suffering.

* Danielle: What do you mean? What kind of suffering?

* Vaughn: The idea of disowning a child, because I've been to a homeless shelter because my mom had accidents. My dad was in Puerto Rico, so yeah. I saw a homeless shelter
with kids. I was surprised to see that there were 13-year-olds, 14, teens, adolescent youth who considered to be LGBTQ.

At this point I realize that Vaughn is making himself vulnerable. He begins to make sophisticated connections between the state of schools in the U.S., meritocracy, gender expectations, and mental health- and then eases in a shard of a personal story. I stay quiet and let him take the conversation where he’d like to, without pushing or prodding. At this juncture, he shifts into a discussion of psychiatry, which he insists that YPAR is a form of. Before any more information is offered, the bell rings and Vaughn dismisses himself for class. This ended the first interview.

During our second interview, he references YPAR as a psychiatric intervention several times, until we get about 40 minutes in and he finally discloses what he means by this title, “YPAR (was) like a psychiatrist, he says, “because it helped you diagnose and treat a problem.” We discuss what this cycle of diagnosis and treatment is, and Vaughn makes vague reference to the group in his class studying STD’s, whom he judges as needing the knowledge that they are pursuing, “they probably chose their topic because they wanted to talk about sex. Because they are having a lot of it. But what they probably didn’t know is that they really need to know about STD’s but also think about why they are having sex so much. YPAR might put pressure on them to think about that.”

This is the seed of thought that opens Vaughn up to disclosing how YPAR is functioning, in his words, as a psychiatrist of sorts for the issue he is exploring with his group: mental health issues and for him more specifically, teen suicide. Halfway through our second interview, Vaughn discloses that he was mentally abused when he was younger, and hinted that he had also endured some physical abuse as well as a child. In a stream of conscious-type thought he tells me that this lead him to lash out on himself two years prior, not being able to take the emotional
weight of what he had been carrying around for so long. He said that talking to professionals about his feelings was helpful, but that it was difficult to re-establish trusting relationships with everyone, including his peers.

YPAR, he said, was a way for him to try and understand what mental health was, recognizing in himself for the first time the residual trauma of enduring abuse, “It was just sitting there.” He explained to me that he didn’t want to focus on the problem of abuse, but to make sense of what mental health was so that he could pursue it. “YPAR let me tell a story in my own way, without anyone even knowing, like a secret path where I could be a wallflower.” His inquiry into what mental health was allowed him to create a language around health, to be able to name for himself a new pathway in his thinking. This felt important, seeing the process he invested in as worthwhile in pursuing for his own personal healing.

Discussion

Vaughn’s specific experience of trauma, though a bit jarring, was not unique. Across the observations and interviews, this practice of storying trauma showed its face often. Ihuoma had watched her grandmother pass away a few years ago from smoking and therefore decided to research the impact of tobacco on the body. She feared that others in her family would continue to smoke and face the same risks if they refused to quit their dangerous habit. She expressed that her research project helped her to get a picture in her mind of what the solution could be and even if she couldn’t sway family members, “I could make a lot of sense out of what the drugs did to the body.” In this way, it permitted her to imagine more dignified portraits of family members who struggled with addiction.

And Tracey, who danced most days after school and didn’t arrive home until later on in the evenings, was petrified walking the streets by herself,
I chose to research alcohol and drugs. That is because sometimes after dancing and stuff like that, I come home around 9 and I sometimes see people drunk and stuff. It’s kind of dangerous because there is few polices knocking around and I try to walk where there is street lights. It’s especially dangerous for girls because something could happen. I get very scared.

Interesting to note, Tracey was no stranger to navigating the unknown, and had a significant amount of independence for someone her age. Our second interview in, she revealed that she was a K-pop (Korean pop) star, and even agreed to share some of her group’s videos on the condition that I would use a pseudonym for this research and would not share an inkling of what I told her with adults at North Bronx MS until she had left for high school. On her phone, she shared her group’s top 3 songs, each of which had garnered millions of Youtube hits. To keep her identity a secret, she told me that she was often transported to shows in a van with tinted windows, to locations not disclosed to her or other group members. She also lived in a house in Brooklyn on the weekends in order to remain close to a practice location where her band-mates would shoot their music videos. She explained to me that her safety could be at risk if anyone discovered the identity of her or any of the other group members. Learning of this risk and her story in general led me to wonder if her fears in walking home at night were due to the possibility of being followed rather than the conditions on her block, to which she responded,

No, see this is a different kind of being scared. I got really scared of the men who were moving everywhere at night and you don’t know why they are even out like that. They say things to you and I am so young. They are fathers too. Yeah. I felt scared. I also feel sad for them. I wanted to know why it was so strong to do drugs, you know what I mean? The drugs and alcohol is so strong. I learned in YPAR they only want to drink alcohol or
do drugs because they want to forget something or something is bothering them.

Something can actually change that. They can try dating someone or talk to someone about their problems. So now it make me less scared because I could see how they get there. I think that they don’t want to hurt me but somebody hurt them so that is why they there.

Tracey, like Vaughn and Ihuoma, each witnessed or endured some kind of trauma that YPAR helped them to make sense of and process, at least in part: abuse, the death of a family member, constant fear in navigating the streets. Agency in their cases was not measured by being able to do something that impacted an issue directly. Instead, it manifested itself in the altered narrative that these young people constructed around the issue that they explored, and the ways that they chose to see themselves or loved ones in relation to it. This is important because the issue that each one selected reflected something that was going on in their lives that impacted them beyond surface level and required healing. Storying their trauma provided an avenue for this healing. It also ushered in new opportunities for them to share their knowledge through multiple modalities that allowed them power over the research process through their capturing of issues via photographs, journal entries, research summaries, songs, storyboarding, and other literacy engagements that prioritized self and collective transformation.

Taken together, group inquiry in a multiethnic youth space and the practice of storying trauma allowed students to activate their culturally situated knowledges in ways that allowed them to offer responses to issues embedded within larger forces like economic and social injustice, systemic racism, and political oppression that can negatively impact one’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. The YPAR space and the practices within it also affirmed students’ sense of purpose, promoting the practicing of literacies and assertion of identities that would be
necessary for survival in environments hostile to brown and black people, contexts characterized by surveillance, regulation, disparagement, silencing, and hyper-policing. This is important because it speaks to the need for educational experiences that equip historically marginalized youth with tools for not only social transformation, but also processes and practices to cope with the pain and distress that accompanies racial and economic injustice. These are important for healing to take root.

Agency as Cultural Representation

Keegan: So today we are going to talk about telling stories with pictures. We are going to do a turn-and-talk about why pictures are good for storytelling. Let’s do that for one minute.

Many of the young people in this ELL classroom, all of whom are in the process of learning English, misinterpret Keegan’s request as tasking them to create a picture with stories. A group of boys in the back immediately recognizes this confusion and translates the directives into Arabic. 30 seconds later, a boy wearing a club soccer jersey named Akeem turns toward Keegan and raises his hand, “you can understand better because there are pictures. Pictures help you see a story easy.” Keegan nods and then looks in the direction of four girls who are grouped up in the middle of the room, directly in front of him, “Ammerah, I want you to practice; I know your English is very good. What do you have to say about this?” Ammerah stares back, in silent protest. A long pause ensues as Keegan continues on, seemingly unfazed, “OK, so I will explain. If you think about it, you read stories through pictures all of the time through things like Instagram. How many of you have Instagram?” A single male student raises his hand. Keegan proceeds, “what about Snapchat?” A single girl raises her hand. The rest appear confused and scan the room for direction. Akeem interjects again, “It’s where you put pictures of your life on the phone and you share it on the computer with people you trust.” Keegan takes out his phone and shows them pictures from a recent visit to the UN building that he posted on Instagram, “See,” he says, these are like “the story of my life.” He has everyone’s full attention. “We are going to learn how to put together a story with pictures from our life, too. But first, we have to finish our story and learn how to do that.”

From here, Keegan instructs students to go to Google classroom and find a story that they had begun reading together the week prior. It is the one mentioned in chapter 4 about the boy whose parents shipped him off to a military boarding school for his violent behavior and drug use. Students take about five minutes to log into their Chromebooks and find where they left off from last time. At this point in the story, the main character is learning about how horses become startled, before beginning his regimen of “animal therapy” that will include feeding and taking care of horses. Keegan opens up by asking questions that require students to think about the horses’ predicament in potentially feeling scared of humans and the boy’s experience in fearing the possibility of getting trapped, “I want you to think about what it is like for both of them, and the fears that they have of one another.” After this, the students proceed into Round
Robin reading, where Keegan again selects Ammerah to read, who he says will select another female to read, and so on. He points to Ammerah to begin, and just like the request for her participation before — she responds with silence, furrowed brows and slightly parsed lips. Keegan shifts his glance away from her direction and poses a question to the class:

Keegan: Let me ask you something, class. Are you ever afraid of what people will think of you?

Akeem: Like when you wonder if people think you’re crazy, or look crazy!

Keegan: What else?

Students: Also, if they think you are shy or scared. They might think you’re stupid.

Keegan: If I went to Yemen, and let’s say if I was practicing my Arabic, maybe I would think about whether or not people were judging me. I’d be afraid to talk. Do you ever feel that way? (Ammerah looks up)

Ammerah: Yes, because I’m not sure how to speak. And my accent doesn’t sound good. When I talk I mutter sometimes. And I get lost.

Keegan: Hey, my Arabic doesn’t sound good! Give me something to say, go ahead….

The students give Keegan multiple words to practice, each of which are challenging for him to pronounce. He gives his best effort, though, and students are smiling. They chime in, “good. That sound good.”

Keegan: But I sound like a New Yorker…

Student: The color of our language is all different. We are all human. We have to respect that we are all human.

Keegan: Yes! So if I struggle with it… well, I will try to learn Arabic if you work at learning English. Deal?

The students swap smiles and some shake their head in a kind of exaggerated disbelief, playfully. Keegan then proceeds again to call on Ammerah, “do you want to try again? I know you can do it.” She pauses as her friends nudge her and encourage her in Arabic to go ahead and read. She proceeds to speed through the passage, at a very low level, and then stops at the end of the paragraph. Keegan walks over to her proudly, “Give me a fist bump!” She looks at him a bit bewildered until her friend coaches her in Arabic, “punch your fist against his, like this.” She taps Keegan’s balled fist, and then motions for Ammerah to do the same. The class laughs and claps at the exchange before returning back to the story with a renewed sense of energy and willingness to continue the activity and work through the discomfort of reading aloud.
This was Keegan’s transitional lesson to the digital storytelling project that he planned on assigning in the coming week, which would stand in the place of a traditional YPAR project for this group of English Language Learners. As seen above, a wide language barrier existed between Keegan, who only spoke English, and his class of 15 Yemeni students who all spoke fluent Arabic, but very limited English. There are multiple moments in this transaction where Keegan seems to have limited understanding as it relates to the cultural knowledge or norms of students in the room. His offered “fist bump” to Ammerah, who shared with me later that she had not been aware of any American greeting beyond a handshake or perhaps a hug if it were to be shared between loved ones. His expectation that most students would have access to or knowledge of platforms like Instagram or Snapchat, without a second thought about the ways in which social media might increase risk for Yemeni immigrants and their families who students told me the government kept a watchful eye on. His turn-and-talk protocol that proliferated across American classrooms, but would not be a familiar classroom routine for newly immigrated students.

Despite these shortcomings, there are also echoes of humor, delight, trust, and joy sprinkled across this space that are ushered in by a spirit of collaboration, empathy, and ultimately- trust. Idris’s chiming in and translating where needed. Keegan’s willingness to put himself in the role of learner as students taught him Arabic phrases. Ammerah’s awkward fumbling with the fist bump and the giggles that followed.

These echoes could be detected in most of the activity that I observed in this classroom, regardless of the task at hand. And in relation to cultural representation, which this section seeks to draw attention to as an agentive iteration, their presence was crucial in creating the conditions necessary for students to feel comfortable sharing personal experiences and deeply intimate
interpretations of concepts like racism and violence through digital stories. As one student noted in an interview, “I felt welcome in this class where I could be Muslim, and Yemeni, and just myself and it was ok to make mistakes.” The digital stories that students rendered about their perceptions of the United States and Yemen, which I highlight below, would never have been so fully committed to had the class not been rooted in such a strong ethic of care and respect.

**Snapshot 2: Idris**

Before I drew names for interviews, Idris and his brother Akeem asked me nearly every day if they had been selected. On the day I told Idris that I had drawn his name, he secured a bag of Takis from one of his classmates and gave it to me as a gift, “thank you for picking me.” I am not sure what Idris anticipated would happen during our exchanges, but it was endearing, to say the least, to have such an enthusiastic participant. Idris was all of 5’3, and a ball full of energy. Him and his brother were both known to horseplay in the hallway and sometimes get in a bit of trouble for distracting classmates, but over the last few months Idris had really invested in the YPAR class, specifically in helping out his classmates with translating and in using the Chromebooks. This was an identity he seemed to take great pride in, especially as he became more adept with technology.

In our beginning exchanges, what Idris seemed most enthusiastic sharing about was his culture: traditions like fasting, his favorite dishes during celebrations, the meanings and significance of the five prayers that he participated in. He made sure, however, that he could speak freely about his culture without consequence, “Wait, so my culture is Yemen. I am Muslim religion, so we pray five times a day and but…can I tell them, or should I only say I am a soccer player?” He peered at my computer when we began our exchange, a bit suspicious. I explained to him what was on the permissions form again, that I would be using a pseudonym
instead of his real name, that I would destroy all of the transcripts once the study was over. I also let him know that he didn’t have to share anything he didn’t want to and that I could also just take notes if that made him feel more secure. He smiled, “ok. I can talk about myself now and a big part of it is that I am from Yemen. But you won’t tell the Columbia people my real name, right? When I talk?” I assured him I wouldn’t.

After continuing to speak of his favorite prepared meals, the way his mother would put lemon in his soup if he had a runny nose, and various narratives attached to the Prophet Mohammed, he transitioned into discussions about his travels between the U.S. and Yemen over the past 6 years. At the age of 8, he had moved to Manhattan with half of his family and enrolled in the second grade, where he tells me he remained for two years due to his limited command of English. At 10, his grandmother got very sick and so he moved back to Yemen while his family took care of her before passing away. In 2013, his entire immediate family- mother, father, his twin brother and an older brother- moved back to NYC once again and settled in The Bronx, where Idris had been living ever since. He spoke with a tone of regret about the insurmountable barriers that war presented for his family, pushing them to leave Yemen permanently in order to obtain safety and economic security. It is no coincidence, then, that Idris’s primary interest for the digital storytelling project was violence. I now turn to highlight the process that Idris and his classmates went through to compose their stories, the content of their stories, and the ways in which their compositions served as counterhegemonic tools that allowed them to assert humanizing portraits of themselves in a safe and caring environment.

**Digital Storytelling and Double-Consciousness**

Digital Stories are usually brief personal narratives that use images, words, and sound to tell a story using new media technology. Those composing them are able to repurpose texts,
images and music to assert new identities (Vasudevan et al., 2010), claim authorial agency (Hull and Katz, 2006), and in the case of this population of ELL students, support literacy acquisition (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Skinner & Hagood, 2008). Keegan drew on some understanding of digital storytelling to create an abbreviated digital storytelling assignment where students would use pictures and captions on Google Slides to tell a story. He did not have them infuse sound, but did ask that they speak their story aloud as part of their presentation so that they could practice their English. The goals that Keegan expressed for the assignment were three-fold: 1) He wanted students to become more adept with technology, 2) He wanted them to practice using their English, and 3) He wanted them to have the experience that students had in the other YPAR classes in being able to engage in inquiry around something that they cared about.

Keegan took students through a series of tasks that supported them in developing a skillset to create miniature digital stories that captured their interpretations of the positive and negative aspects of living in Yemen and living in America. (See Figure 5.2, below) First, he asked students to use Google Slides to create pictorial representations of major events in the story about the boy who had attended military school. This would allow students to become familiar with the technology needed to construct the story, as well as provide an opportunity for students to practice their presentation skills. Next, Keegan explained that students would be creating stories of their own, and had discussions with them about what elements needed to be present for the message to be understood, including a title, a theme, and captioned images that would provide information about what they were presenting. He explained how they could use Google Translate to caption photographs and then modeled its affordances through his provision of instructions for the final project. Finally, students created abbreviated digital stories about their perceptions of living in Yemen vs. living in the United States, as Keegan circulated the
room to assist where needed. The inquiry question that Keegan posed to students was, “what is good about living in the U.S. and what is bad? What is good about living in Yemen and what is bad?” Keegan phrased the question in this way so that it would be accessible to students and would easily translate into something they would understand if they input it into Google Translate.

Figure 5.2 Visual prompts in Google Slides for Yemeni cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prompt: Represent what you took away from the story with pictures</th>
<th>Practice: Use Google Translate to help you caption the pictures chosen for your story</th>
<th>Produce: Represent the positive and negative aspects of living in the U.S. vs. living in Yemen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Prompt Image]</td>
<td>![Practice Image]</td>
<td>![Produce Image]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all, students chose to tell their stories differently. Some students who had a more limited range with English interpreted the task at its most basic level, choosing pictures that answered each individual prompt and then providing captions. Idris chose to structure his story in this way (see Figure 5.3), although in this snippet from his interview it is clear that there was a deeper meaning he was attempting to capture than the pictures and captions alone might indicate:

Danielle: Tell me about how you think this through (the story)? How do you decide what you want to put in the story?

Idris: Like I said, again, I know how to use the technology so it gets more easier for me. So, when I ... When the word, photos of Yemen, it just comes right to my mind. I think of the land and the cities and everything so I just take pictures of it. If I hear the word “Yemen
photos”, everything comes right out of my mind. It comes right out of my mind. So I just put it in the Google ...land and cities and beautiful Yemen.

Danielle: It sounds like an amazing place, Idris.

Idris: I told about what's good, I already told you, but the bad ... The bad for this year is about the wars and everything.

Danielle: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Idris: Yeah. That's one. And then the two is some places, stealing and everything. Guns, the guns are everywhere it's just not safe. That's what I wanted to put in my story.

Danielle: And so that's what you type in?

Idris: No. I don't type nothing I only just tell what the pictures are just two words ... This pictures you choose that. The picture just tells you everything.

Danielle: Yeah, I see what you mean.

Idris: This land is beautiful and soccer is fun... I took like two pictures of, one, the war and the second one of guns. You can see both. But I can see the beautiful lands more. That’s what I want them to see so it has color. It tells you everything, the whole story. Yemen is beautiful and people will remember that. Not war. So that’s how I did it. What I choose.

**Figure 5.3 Idris’s Digital Story about Yemen**

Idris insists again and again in the minutes that follow that his country is beautiful. This is what he wants to leave his viewers with, especially Keegan, “I wanted him to see the real Yemen.” Like Idris, other students also wished for their viewers to see an alternative side to a theme or issue that they wanted to capture. As can be seen here, war and violence were common themes that students depicted in their digital stories. Unlike Idris however, Halim extends his story with
a series of pictures and more detailed captions that span across several sides, offering a historical standpoint as well as a personal one:

Figure 5.4 Halim’s Digital Story about Yemen

In this narrative, Halim was able to offer a more nuanced portrait of war, which included reference to the ways that young people were positioned in having to protect themselves and family members- especially the young men. As a young person who did in fact carry a gun in Yemen for safety, he expressed later to me that he did feel “a little bad”, as “kids should not have
guns.” However, he was grateful to explore alongside his peers the context of war that, in his eyes, necessitated this practice. It was war that was the problem, not him or his peers. Being part of a classroom community allowed him to process his identity in relation to the turmoil in Yemen and to re-assert a more humanizing image of himself as a young person who carried a gun, “I can be good and the guns can be bad because the war is bad.”

There are also remnants of what Dubois names as a “double-consciousness” across this narrative and others in the class, where students produced images that reflected an awareness of how others viewed them on one hand, and how they wished to be viewed on the other. Halim did not want to be viewed as violent, nor did he want to feel like he was somebody who was violent. Just like Idris who wished to leave his viewers with the feeling that Yemen was beautiful, Halim wished for his viewers to not only see the story of war differently, but also children like himself who were caught in the crosshairs of it.

Despite having only navigated the country for a short while, students created stories that portrayed an understanding of the power of mostly white stereotypes on Muslim life. Consider this slide taken from Alia’s story (Figure 5.5), which is captioned, “The thing I felt when traveling back and forth from America is that in airports Muslim people get deeply checked for example the girls who wear long clothing and hijabs to cover themselves Americans might think they are hiding something.” Inside of the hijab worn by the caricature is an inscription written in cursive, “Judge me by what’s in my head, not what’s on my head!” The other young women who Alia worked with in a group shared that it was one of their favorite pictures because it was, according to them, “the truth.” As Alia explained during her presentation, “this is how we feel and this is how you should treat us. We are smart and have a lot in our heads.” Her Digital Story, like some of her peers, portrays the reconciliation of identities that the digital portraits provide
space for. On one hand, Alia’s narration captures her perception of the way she is read by Non-Muslim, mostly white adults, as well as the impact this has on her. But on the other, she directs her audience to a portrait on how she wishes to be read instead, as an intelligent and beautiful young woman.

*Figure 5.5 Alia’s Digital Story, capturing her experience of Islamophobia*

*Digital Storytelling as a Counterhegemonic Practice*

In the activity of constructing digital stories, students invested in literacy practices that helped them obtain academic literacies and increased mastery of the English language. This aligns with a body of work that speaks to the ways in which multiliteracies, including digital literacies, can be leveraged by English Language Learners as tools for language development (Skerrett, 2013; Yi, 2008). But in addition to an increased understanding of academic conventions and literacies was an opportunity to broker new identities that brought the social and political realities of students into literacy engagements. Students were able to share meaningful encounters they had with concepts like war, Islamophobia, deficit views prevailing amongst teachers, and drug economies. They were also able to document and share moments and sources of pride in their country, their cultures, and their individual identities.
These engagements grew out of a dialogical ethic (Freire, 1970) that Keegan exercised in the classroom that respected and created space for students’ questions and concerns. This ethic motivated students to engage deeply in the tasks that he assigned and ultimately set the stage for digital storytelling to function as a counterhegemonic practice. In their narrations, they felt safe to disrupt common misconceptions about their identities and practices, and assert humanizing portraits of themselves and their culture.

Hegemony as defined by Peter McLaren (2015) “refers to the maintenance of domination not by sheer exercise of force but by primarily consensual practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system and the family” (p. 140). McLaren states later that “the dominant class secures hegemony-the consent of the dominated-by supplying the symbols, representations, and practices of social life in such a way that the basis of social authority and the unequal relations of power and privilege remain hidden”. In this particular historical moment, students’ enactments of identity were crucial because they provided alternative representations to those that dominated popular discourse. In lieu of the recent election and the vitriolic rhetoric surrounding it, Muslim peoples have been narrated as dangerous, anti-American, and as it relates to their status as immigrants- a drain on the economy. There is no doubt that students’ sense of self determination and agency were mediated, and in many cases mitigated, by these constraints.

But as seen above, the tools and resources in this space of digital authoring can be drawn upon as semiotic means that can assist students in performing agentive selves who can assert authority over narratives that they tell to others and just as importantly- themselves. Schools have long played a significant role in being an important component of the social fabric of civil society that instills the dominant worldview, traditionally engrafting dominant-class capitalist
values and norms through the curriculum and teaching practices it prioritizes. However, small and radical acts like those that Keegan supported in his classroom can be powerful vehicles for young people to rethink relations of power and privilege and to practice asserting an alternative worldview that is so desperately needed for a more just and equitable future. Discussion

Toward the middle of our third interview, when I asked Idris to share an artifact with me that captured his experience in the YPAR course, he pointed me to a drawing that a student had etched upon a school desk (See Figure 5.6). It was not a piece that he had taken any part in composing, nor was it created by any of his classmates. However, it managed to catch his attention as well as the attention of his peers because of its artistic value and because it resonated with them. Idris referred to it as “the three Yemeni girls who are one.” I found it interesting that of all of the experiences he had in the YPAR course, he referred to something generated outside of it as significant. When I asked him why he found it special and how it represented his experience in the YPAR course he stated simply, “YPAR class was like the picture. Where you can be like one, yourself. Two, Muslim. And three, different. That’s it.”

*Figure 5.6- Desk Etchings, Hybrid Identities*
In looking closely at the picture, Idris’s analysis seems spot on. There are three portraits of the same girl. From left to right, there is one wearing a Hijab, another in plain wear, and a third with what appears to be a bolder hair cut and outfit. It is a telling observation for him to offer. He read the YPAR class as a place where he could be more fully himself without having to decide what parts of his identity to withhold or restrain, including as a Muslim boy. And he could also be someone else; he could try on a new identity without judgment in a learning environment that welcomed change, experimentation, and risk-taking.

For Idris, this “different” identity could have been attached to his new skill set with technology. It was something he mentioned with great pride in each of our interviews. He enjoyed assisting his peers in learning how to use Google Classroom. He liked that he got to use computers every time he came to class. He appreciated that he could use pictures to tell stories that he did not talk much about elsewhere, especially those attached to his culture. And he was proud of the fact that he stopped “getting into trouble.” But maybe the new identity he pointed to wasn’t just attached to his newfound interest in technology or getting into trouble less often; maybe it had something to with the way he was positioned to represent himself inside of school.

Identities are relational categories that are embedded in and inextricably linked to larger social forces at play, or discourses, in a given setting (Foucault, 1979; Fairclough, 2010/1995). They delineate what is seen as normal, correct, or appropriate for particular groups of people, at particular points in time, in particular places- and no doubt influence how students makes sense of themselves and also how teachers and other students come to see them. As an immigrant, as a Muslim, as an English Language Learner, as an adolescent boy who was active, Idris wore multiple identities that could have myriad meanings attached to them depending upon the setting he was in. Inside of school, prevalent institutional representations of these identity categories
might be attached to deficit framings, or maybe views that limited the ways that Idris could be seen or even represent himself. It could be possible that Idris expressing that in YPAR class you could be “different” meant that he felt free to resist these representations and this could have in turn influenced his behavior in the classroom and the ways in which he interacted with both people and content.

This reading would be consistent with what surfaced in interviews and collected student work from students across the months of my ethnographic study. Students referenced YPAR class as “different” on several occasions because they felt that it was a place that they felt free to express aspects of their culture and to explore what interested them. Many young people also referenced ways that YPAR supported their identities and practices as youth, including the encouragement from Keegan to use digital media tools for communication, the allowance of readings that they might typically read more casually on their cell phones as opposed to in a structured setting like school, and pursuing research topics that they wanted to explore rather than being forced to follow lines of inquiry deemed as important by adults.

All this being said, youth identities are never static. The umbrella term of youth identity supposes a way of seeing and communicating that is not adult, a subculture if you will in the larger society. But what that translates to looks very different to different groups of young people, and different individual youth. YPAR was overwhelmingly read as a youth-centered project that many participants seemed to appreciate. Every student whom I interviewed referenced it as a project that appeared to them as one that had good intentions. But not all youth felt supported, and this connection to culture was not always present.

For instance, for those sections of YPAR comprised of students who had immigrated from Spanish-speaking countries, investment was often times low. However, these sections were
large in size and Keegan did not take as much time as he did with the Yemeni youth in making strategic connections to culture or to the stories of their lives. The language barrier was also a challenge that only further exacerbated this disconnect.

It was also true that many of the African American boys, whom Keegan said he really wanted to reach, tended to be more hands-off with the project. Keegan attempted to rectify this by inviting some of them into the YPAR filmmaking class, which I dive into in greater detail in Chapter 6, to work on developing a web page for the school. He also tried to take more time in connecting with this demographic through check-ins in the hallway, though he said it was difficult at times because he wore so many hats that required tremendous responsibility. For future iterations of the program, it would be worthwhile to consider how literacy learning, pedagogical practices, and student/teacher relationships might be more sensitive to the individual experiences and subject positions of Black males. The efforts that Keegan made to connect with Black Boys were important, but the affirming of their literate identities coupled with intentional relationship building and an anticipatory curriculum would have positioned him as a better sponsor of Black male literacies.

In all, cultural representation as an iteration of agency seemed to be most pronounced in a) those courses that were smaller, where Keegan was able to develop more intimate relationships with students b) when he was able to make intentional, direct connections to students’ language and cultural practices, and c) with students whom he had worked closely with before; for instance, in the YPAR filmmaking courses. These conditions alone were not enough, however. Students’ enactment of culturally specific forms of agency also depended upon the provision of space to negotiate their own sense of power as embedded within their racial and ethnic identities. Using digital storytelling as a counterhegemonic practice and as an expression
of their ways of knowing, including double consciousness, are two examples of the affordances of these negotiations. As students drew upon multiple voices, grammars and mediums to express how they made sense of issues, their history and culture were affirmed as legitimate texts that were worth exploring. Just as important, the ways that they chose to see, to represent, and to make sense of these histories and cultures were validated. This is important when we consider how much our norms of literacy and writing and marred in white cultural traditions. Finding one’s voice and locating one’s story cannot happen without the acknowledgement and practicing of multiple ways of understanding the world.

**Agency as Critical Literacy**

*It is a bustling afternoon in the beginning of May. I arrive to Keegan’s 7th grade general Ed YPAR class about 15 minutes into the second hour of the school day, and make my way to a table beside a group of youngsters engaged in rigorous discussion. Keegan has assigned the class to view an instructional video on Google Classroom that he has created to guide students through the Round Robin research methods workshop that is the primary activity for the day. In this workshop, groups of students are assigned to practice and then reflect on four different research methods: journaling, focus group interviews, Photovoice, and surveys. They are cued by directives presented in the instructional video, which provides students with a brief explanation of each research method and then instructions related to the activity attached to it. This frees up Keegan up to walk around the classroom and gauge which students might need extra help, and to troubleshoot any issues with technology that might arise.*

*At the point of my arrival, students have reached the point where they are finishing up their discussion of the pros and cons of journaling as a research method, and transitioning into their exploration of focus group interviews. Laptops are open and most groups are focused on watching the video so that they can begin cycling into the next round. However, the group across from me has lost sight of what they are supposed to do next and get carried away in an intense discussion following the share-out of journal prompts, which require students to describe their feelings concerning school:*

*Tina:* School is useless. I want to be a chef, and I can just share my work and my recipes on Youtube. That’s what I want to do. You can ask my mom. She’s always talkin ’bout, clean up this mess in this kitchen cuz I’m always cooking.

*Mitul:* Well, I like school. I feel respected, I like my friends and I like seeing them, and yeah. I like learning, too. So I don’t agree.
Tina: Well, what do you really learn, Mitul? I mean, this curriculum just prepares you to be a scientist or mathematician, nothing else. That’s it. What do you really think you’re learning? Nothing. Nothing unless that’s what you’re tryna’ be.

Aaliyah: (Interjects) Tina, it’s his opinion. You have to respect it. That is how he feels and school works for him. But, I do see where you are coming from. I do think some adults look at us down. They look down not just in height, but in the way they see us. Not all of them, just some. I think that education is just the way the government keeps us in check. But still.

Tina: Yeah, like they have video cameras everywhere in schools too because they just want to keep track of the kids they think are going to go out and be criminals.

The conversation diverges quickly into an exchange about race and criminalization and a very brief reference to the school-to-prison pipeline before Keegan walks over, “do you realize what focus groups are? Come on, guys. We have moved onto the next topic: Focus groups. Let’s make sure we are on task. Let’s focus on the focus groups.” Students chuckle, pause for a minute until he walks away, and the conversation continues on,

Mitul: I’m not used to feeling uncomfortable like this, and its uncomfortable sitting with a group because I’m not used to talking to you guys.

Aaliyah: But that’s diversity! I think it’s good that we have diversity. What do you think? (Aaliyah turns to me)

I try my best not to resist imposing on the conversation too much because I want them to come to their own conclusion, but I share something to the tune of believing that diversity is important and that sometimes it is good to see things through another person’s eyes. All that said, I tell them to go on ahead and not to worry about me or my thoughts, suggesting that they might want to transition into the next research method. Of course like all obedient middle schoolers, they ignore my trivial suggestion:

Aaliyah: Anyway, I guess you could say this environment is a little shady, but it’s also good because people can be a little weird and don’t have to give up their culture or religion. You can just be who you are without feeling like you have to try and be someone else. (She turns to me again) This is kind of like the book club that me and Tina are a part of, (turns to Tina) “you know like that book with the Korean girl who has to fit into a group that is mostly White and has to give up everything, who she is and thinks. She can’t even be Korean!” But that’s not how it is here. Not all the way, is how I see it.

Tina: Yup. That’s just like what is going on with Trump. Trump doesn’t want diversity, and when he says things that are horrible, everyone is supposed to laugh. That is what’s dangerous. It becomes normal to hate people.

Aaliyah: We’ll be shipping off Mexicans, killing Muslims, it’s going to be dangerous to be diverse.

Tina: Yeah, like the Black Lives Matter movement. I feel like that movement has finally allowed people to see Black people in a different light, as not dangerous. We’re not
dangerous. And here comes Trump, who paints a different picture of this movement. Like people are wrong for sharing how they feel! People believe him and really just laugh everything off. But this is serious. People have to learn how to read this man. Read between the lines. Infer. That’s the word, right? I mean, damn. You don’t even gotta infer. It’s just straight up in your face. All up in there!

Aaliyah: Yeah, usually my mom and I disagree about issues. Like with people like her, everything is like black and white..

Tina: Well, more like blurry..

Aaliyah: Yes, blurry for you maybe. But this time, not so blurry. Trump is the one thing we agree on. His perspective is such a problem. I taught her how to break down what he says and look past the TV and she gets it now.

By many measures, this group is far off task. Left field, even. Tina, Aaliyah, and Mitul, none of whom talk much outside of school, are huddled together in this curious moment that surfaces varied feelings about school. They talk well past the amount of time allotted for discussion of their journal responses, but it is a rich and productive deviation. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that this is the stuff that middle school YPAR is made of. Their exchange is messy and critical. It’s communal and complicated. And students are willing to wrestle with an idea while disclosing a bit of their thought processes along the way, which makes it a bit vulnerable of an interaction, too. Consider Mitul’s announcement of discomfort in having to go back and forth with people that he not only disagrees with, but also doesn’t talk to much outside of class. Then we hear Alliyah’s response, “But that’s diversity!”

On top of that, this isn’t just any idea they are contemplating. They are talking about their relationship with school, a subject that most students are never asked to process in any kind of critical manner in their 13 years of K-12 education, let alone within the confines of a regular school day. As if that weren’t enough, their conversation moves outward to commentary on the ideological stance of Donald Trump, whom some students see as emblematic of the same
intolerance and hatred that fuels the racism driving problems that have a direct impact on their lives. Problems like the school to prison pipeline and disengaging schools.

Why pay attention to this? This exchange is worth drawing attention to, I think, because it reflects the level of sophistication that pre-teens and teenagers have in reading and interpreting the school environment that surrounds them. In middle schools, one would not be hard pressed to find teachers who avoid critical discussions like those that these youth are having for fear that students are too young to handle them. As can be seen, this is not the case. During this stage in adolescence, students are confronting an assortment of ideological truths and untruths. They are defining themselves by and through their readings of these ideologies and the social structures and expectations that they impose. And they are processing all of this in part through their engagements with texts and through language. To not acknowledge these transactions and to instead defer to sanitizing their interactions would mean a missed opportunity to engage in important sense-making and identity constructing. And YPAR might be one approach that allows for the kind of critical framing that these conversations and interactions necessitate.

Reading School

To provide a bit of a context around the conversation highlighted above, I share both Mitul and Tina’s responses to the journal prompt below. Prompts listed at the top of the sheet include:

- Do you like being at school? Why or why not?
- How are you treated by adults? Youth?
- Do you have input into what happens at school?
- Does this school offer you what you need?
- If this school could be a better place for you, what would need to change?
I transcribe both Tina and Mitul’s entries so that they are easier to read, but the difference between them is stark. Tina makes it clear that school is not a place that supports her or her dreams. This comes across in the dialogue she’s having in her group but also in a pretty straightforward fashion in her journal response. She offers a vivid account of a prior encounter she had with a 7/11 cashier to make her point even clearer: *even the depressed 7/11 lady who’s hair I found in my nachos can’t convince me that school is worth it.*

*Figure 5.7 Journal Prompt responding to inquiry about relationship with school*

**Tina’s Entry:**

I don’t like being at school. Just the word school reminds me of the one time and only time I went to 7/11 when this fat, depressed, old lady who worked there and I ask for nachos. She bend down and said, “stay in school.” I moved backed said “ok” paid and left and in the nachos was a long piece of hair. Hated it ever since. In school adults treat me like I don’t matter and the students think I’m crazy. I have no say on what happens in school. At all. The school has no value to my dream at all. There is a limited amount of jobs you can have with what they teach you. I would change the measures of student learning and the curriculum of this school if I can.

**Mitul’s Entry:**

I do like being at school because it’s a place for me to get educated and a place for me to be with my friends. I am treated very nicely by the adults. If I pay attention and not talk then I treated nicely. I am treated very respectfully by the youth. If I respect them then they respect me and they we all should be treat like that. Yes I do have input into what happens at school. I know when project or other important things are due. This school does offer what I need because it teaches me a lot of things I do not know. I would need to change the fact that there should be more gym periods in our school.
But what’s perhaps most telling is the last sentence of her entry, which hints at an awareness that even I was taken aback by, “I would change the measures of student learning and the curriculum of this school.” Her criticism of school is clear, yes. But so is her recommendation of what to change.

This is what I want to hone in on. Having just turned 13, Tina is aware of both the hidden curriculum and the detrimental effect of increased accountability measures on students’ motivation. “Measures of student learning” is very specific language attached to the corporatization and hyper-standardization of schools, and Tina is no stranger to the term. It is so familiar that it pours out of her in a five-minute response to a journal prompt, with ease. Tina reads the identity that this language imposes on her, however, and refuses it. She instead prefers to continue “pursuing art, a free mind, and a peaceful one,” she tells me, rather than feel bad about the dreams she has or the way she chooses to pursue them. Unfortunately, the pursuance of personal freedom coupled with a downright refusal to adopt an academic identity inside of school makes her vulnerable. This shouldn’t be so, and yet it is the story of so many young people in city schools. Countless young people who are brilliant, engaged and acutely aware of abounding possibilities while at the same time tethered to restrictive and confining academic expectations.

There is no doubt that Tina is by many measures well equipped to leverage her vantage point to provide alternative possibilities for what might happen in school, or even in the world writ large. Here is a picture of Tina’s desk, which I snapped later on in the lesson, when her group was trying out Photovoice as a method. This is what her desk looks like most days—sketches strewn about. Markers of varying colors planted next to her notebook. Sometimes I see
her working on a story or a comic that’s in process, other times maybe a poem (Figure 5.8). Tina loves to write, to draw, and to create; she enacts a rich literate identity. And nearly every time I see her, she has a glorious smile plastered across her face. Coupled with this smile is a fierce disposition that she is aware sets her apart, “School is too uniform. I’m outside the box. Too outside the box, I explode it! ” In many ways, Tina possesses the skills, the ingenuity, and the boldness that characterize the change-makers whom our society lauds as trailblazers and innovators. Yet, she does not identify with the identity of being a good student or the dominant discourses that “good student” demands mastery of. Still, here she is. Markers on desk. Voicing her dissenting opinion without apology. Having a productive dialogue with peers about each person’s unique experience with school.

*Figure 5.8- Tina at Work, Multiliteracies*

As sure as she is that school is not for her, Tina is only 13. She still has a substantial amount of time left in her experience with school, and therefore her ideas about who she is and the future she sees for herself are not yet concretized. This is why these kinds of push-backs that are happening in her YPAR class are significant. It is important that she has opportunities like
this to practice the kind of identity that leads toward self-actualization and the liberation she seeks. There are a number of skills that she can practice in order to sharpen this identity, all of which are evident in the exchange above.

First, she is invested in critical civic dialogue with her peers about issues that matter to them as a collective. The entire group is learning how to come together and sustain dialogue through their respective differences, and substantiate claims with solid reasoning, evidence, and personal experiences. They even share out examples of when they have transported their understanding about issues into their homes, speaking with loved ones about “reading” Trump, for instance. These are miniature examples of civic action that are shared out and in so doing, normalizing an ethos of critical engagement with the world. Second, she is practicing a critical vocabulary that has been developed in many places, but in part in the YPAR course. She is able to name the forces that rob her of the ability to assert her full identity in school (ie: the “curriculum” and “measures of student learning”), and even connect these to mechanisms in the larger society that function in a similar manner (the silencing of Black Lives Matter; the school-to-prison pipeline). She is able to “name the world,” which is a necessary precondition according to Paulo Freire, “in order to transform it.” Third, Tina is engaged in a caring interaction with her peers, who both challenge and support her as she asserts her opinions. This bolsters a sense of self-love and self-respect, both of which are important in establishing a voice.

In total, this exchange does not directly impact the school curriculum or the way she is measured in school, which are the original points of contention for her. But she is tooling herself with the skills to act upon these forces and if not for anything else, the belief that she can act upon these forces. Her sense of agency is rooted in a transformation that is happening through small acts at the personal level that evoke a different perspective and equip her to navigate
discourses of power. This points to the need for school interventions to move past measuring themselves by scores on a test or follow-through on a project and instead focus more on processes that support the development of critical civic dialogue, critical vocabulary, and caring relationships, each of which support the a positive self-identity and sense of place in the world.

I now move to discuss my interactions with Jenni, an eighth grader who like Tina, had somewhat of a tumultuous relationship with school. Further along in her schooling experience, however, she took a different turn that I think speaks volumes in terms of the benefits in seeing YPAR through and working through the challenges it presents. Like Tina, she had endured experiences with teachers and inside school that were disheartening and at times discouraging. However, as an eighth grader Jenni revealed that it was during this last year of the program that she began to shift her perspective on school and the challenges that it presented, which I highlight below.

Snapshot 3: Jenni

For our interviews, I asked Jenni to meet me in the library, and upon her arrival we migrated to a pair of love seats that were tucked away in the back corner- set apart from nearly everything except the school copy machine. Normally I would not have asked an eighth grader to meet me for an interview in such a place, for fear of invoking discomfort at the level of our proximity. However, Jenni was a young woman whom I had gotten to know pretty well in the past two years, so I figured she wouldn’t mind sharing a cushion with me. She had an easygoing way about her, and was someone I had turned to from time to time to ask about her perspective on what was happening in YPAR class or even school in general. I sought her opinion not just because of the ease in talking with her, but also because she was someone who became more active and vocal in the YPAR projects as time progressed. What stood out the most to me
entering into the interviews was her level of confidence and sense of self-awareness, both of which I saw hints of at the end of her 7th grade year when she shared her research on student/teacher relationships with legislators in Albany. This year, however, these characteristics were even more pronounced, as she began to emerge as a stand-out student who was also considered a leader amongst her peers.

Like many of the participants whom I interviewed, Jenni referred to herself as both “unique” and “different” when I asked that she describe herself in the beginning of our first interview. She explains with a sense of self-assuredness that is quite mature:

I think weird is a compliment because you’re not like everybody else. You do things differently than what others might do so that’s why I would consider myself weird…You might see me one day dressing up like very girly, very feminine and other times maybe more like a boy. I separate myself, those days I’m really just walking like a lady dressed with my sweats and my hair would be messy because I really don’t care about if I do my hair or not. Other people are like, “I have to do this and that. I have to do my hair, I have to do my makeup, I have to come to school looking amazing.” That’s not me. That’s not something I do. I don’t focus on what people are thinking about me. I focus on the way I think about myself. I don’t dress to impress people; I dress to impress myself. See the best part of dressing to impress yourself is you don’t have to, so I do whatever I want to be honest.

Jenni shrugs her shoulders and stares me directly in the eyes, in a matter-of-fact kind of way. I wonder if she has always had this level of surety and under what conditions it developed. After talking with her a few times in the coming months I learn that her faith in herself developed despite some pretty challenging obstacles that she faced both at home and at school. Jenni was a
first-generation Colombian, her parents moving to the Bronx right before she was born to ensure she would obtain American citizenship. At the age of three, her family moved to public housing in Harlem and remained there until Jenni was in the sixth grade. In the middle of her sixth grade year and at the finalization of her parent’s divorce, her mother moved Jenni and her brother back to the Bronx where she had been living ever since. Finances were tight across her childhood, which created stress for her parents. All of the accumulated challenges resulted in a bit of stress for Jenni, but she chalked it up to just being “the facts of life.”

What Jenni spoke of with great disdain, however, was the transition she had to make to North Bronx as a new sixth grade student, where her encounters with a few teachers brought her to what she calls an “all-time low point” in her life. Here is a snippet of a conversation that we had about an encounter with her sixth grade science teacher, which served as a catalyst in bringing her to research student and teacher relationships in the seventh grade:

Danielle: So for your seventh grade topic you told me you chose it because it was something you experienced. Can you talk more about that?

Jenni: Well, it happened when I first came to this school in sixth grade with my Science right?

Danielle: Mmm hmm, go ahead.

Jenni: I don't know, I always kept a grudge against it because it impacted me a lot.

Danielle: What happened, though?

Jenni: It was because the way she treated me. She treated me really horribly. The way that she would make fun of me and she would embarrass me in front of the whole class.

Danielle: I’m sorry to hear that you had to experience that, sounds pretty tough.

Jenni: She would be sarcastic about certain things. She would be like, "Oh yeah." I wouldn’t raise my hand and she was like, "Oh, don't be silly, raise your hand. There's no such thing as a dumb question." But then be like "Oh, that is pretty dumb. That is really dumb." She would say it out loud. She just wouldn't care. She never liked me. I felt like I didn't want to learn anymore. I didn't want to learn Science and I struggled a lot. My grades went down. I still…sometimes I dream of her but they're nightmares. It's silly but it's true.
I was so impacted because I shut down totally just because of her negativity. It bothered me because of nothing! Okay, she had favorite students and those students weren’t affected at all but she had groups and stuff, and they saw stuff the way she saw stuff. I don't know, that impacted me a lot and I really didn't want to learn at all and I hated her. I know that's a big word. But I did.

Jenni goes on to explain that this is what brought her as a seventh grader to want to research how the relationship between teachers and students impacted student motivation. Her first-hand encounters in feeling humiliated and overlooked created such a toxic cocktail of emotions that she was brought to having nightmares several nights in both the sixth and seventh grades. For Jenni, the point of stress was not the curriculum or the accountability measures like those that Tina loathed, but the relationships or lack thereof between teachers and students. This is what she wanted to get to the root of not just for her own peace of mind, but also to pass on the knowledge to other adults who she had hoped would listen.

From a teaching standpoint, this scenario might feel pretty intimidating. Listening to a student use the word “hate” in reference to a colleague or even oneself can feel compromising. And even more daunting is a team of young people with similar experiences being provided a platform to give voice to their harrowing encounters. This is why so many schools avoid conversations like the one that Jenni wanted to have. It is inevitable that when youth begin to dissect issues that have a direct bearing on their lives, thorny moments will occur. Causes of problems are traced to their roots and perpetrators are identified. This is why perhaps even good schools that have the best of intentions are reticent to adopt programs like YPAR that tend to unearth so many competing emotions and perspectives. It gets real.

Exposing wounds is not a moot effort, however, if it the interrogations that students lead with the assistance of caring adults are done in a critical manner in a way that respects the dignity of all stakeholders. At North Bronx MS, a surprising takeaway was that many students,
including Jenni, developed new ways of seeing and empathizing that allowed them to humanize those whom they initially saw as harmful. This wasn’t always the case, but it was commonplace enough to be notable. To be honest, this was one of the biggest surprises in my study: that a great number of students whom I had interactions with began to adopt an empathetic perspective in regards to people who had perpetuated cycles of violence and trauma in their lives. Jenni and several of her peers spoke of harassments from peers and other adults that would probably warrant retaliation in nearly any context outside of school. But critical literacy practices equipped students to see those who harmed them differently, and positioned them to address issues with a renewed perspective.

*Reading Adults through a lens of Empathy*

For Jenni, who spoke of having harsh feelings toward several adults in the building during the sixth grade, the iterative process of reading school and reading adult relationships happening inside of it implanted a sense of empathy for the teacher who had rendered so much damage on her sense of self-worth in her first year at North Bronx MS. She explains,

Jenni: As I researched (student-teacher relationships) I found information on it. I saw that it's not only ... A lot of kids that it happens, a lot of students and teachers, we're all human beings so we all see things different. We go through stuff. Maybe a student is having a hard time at home and the only way to make it better maybe is being disrespectful. The same thing with an adult. Adults have bad days too. That's how I got it. It doesn't help either that the schools are the way they are. Just like us the teachers have to deal with a lot of stuff but they still should know better-

Jenni learned from some of her group mates in her 7*th* grade YPAR project about the tremendous pressures that were placed on teachers in the current political climate. This helped her to reframe the way that she saw the actions of her 6*th* grade science teacher. She also spoke later of the process that she learned to help her “dig,” as she puts it, “to the root of the problem,”
a process that she said she now applied to every issue that she encountered. When I ask her what
going to the root meant to her she explained:

Jenni: Let’s just say you are reading right? And there’s a word you have never seen before. Let’s say you didn’t know a word right, you would research, "Hey what is this?” I had, let’s just say a person was drinking, I don’t know…. a beer, I really don’t know any beers but you research that beer and you find out when was it made, who made it, who discovered it and who is harmed from it. Then you connect that to where it's coming from, where do they sell it, who makes money. You figure out, "They sell so and so, this store." Then you are like, "That’s where you find it." Then you keep asking yourself you go back to the article. Let’s just say this girl, I don’t know, she lives in Harlem like I did, you’ve researched the background of Harlem, where and what is Harlem? Where is it located? What type of people live around there? Is it a bad place, is it a good place? Is there a
great education there? Like so and so.

Danielle: The research process for you is just constantly asking why?

Jenni: Yes exactly. Until you reach through.

Jenni expressed to me that this was how she now approached research tasks, and most problems
that presented themselves both inside and outside of school. As seen above, Jenni gives
examples of how she interrogated multiple aspects of a topic until settling on what exactly she
wishes to explore. But notice the critical questions dispersed across her inquiry, “who discovered
it (beer) and who is harmed from it?,” and “where do they sell it, and who makes money?”

These critical questions that Jenni modeled in her response to my interview question were like
those that she had been encouraged to practice in her YPAR projects. Later on in seventh grade,
this development of a critical disposition gave her new tools to understand the social reality of
her school and the people in it, including her teachers. And in the eighth grade, this critical
identity was instrumental in bolstering her self-confidence enough to be able to face her fears
and insecurities head-on. She shared with me an account of running into the teacher whom she
had harbored so many ill feelings for in public only a few weeks back, and the interaction she
initiated that demonstrated her self-identified growth:
Jenni: It's funny, I saw her recently.

Danielle: Oh, she's not here anymore?

Jenni: Yeah. I saw her and I was, at first I was scared and I didn't want to say anything so I was like, wow. She really impacted me. I talked to her and I was like, "Hi." It felt really good to let that go because I guess she probably was whispering to other kids, "She's so scared to talk to me anyways. Oh, Jenni." She always said it in a negative way. I took that memory in and I was like, "You know what, I'm going to go say hi to her. I don't care. I'll ask her how she's doing because I know I'm doing perfectly fine." My grades, my Science grades went from a 55 actually to a 90 and if it wasn't because of her, that wouldn't have pushed me to where I am.

The YPAR made me from being in this ball of fear, ball of being so afraid to let it out where now you ask me stuff and I will be able to tell you information. I'm not scared anymore. I will talk to you now. That's why she's impacted me a lot.

Danielle: So this is what you walked away with? Wow.

Jenni: Yeah.

Danielle: Why do you think that is?

Jenni: Because based on my results and my information personally I figured out that it doesn't matter what the teacher says. Just do you.

Danielle: You said earlier that you walked away from the study with self-confidence. You figured out it doesn't matter what the teacher says; just do you. I'm curious if there was something that happened during the YPAR process brought you to that conclusion? Do you think you would have come to that conclusion anyways in due time?

Jenni: I think maybe I could have because as I got older, I don't hold a grudge anymore against what happened to me. I felt like I will eventually figure out I can't get stuck on the past, on what happened to me and let my learning be affected by it because I wasn't doing great in sixth grade. I wasn't going to let that affect me. In the project, when I was doing it with my groups, my other two teammates, they also went through it but we got to research it….

I like to see other people's point of views and as I researched, teachers also have it hard. I mean I don't know what I ever did to her. Personally I don't know what I ever did to her. I guess people are all different types of people. I used to hate her. I hated her. I really would care less what happened to her but you know what, I used to think she was a bad person but as I got older and researched I realized that nobody's really bad. Not everyone's bad. We all start off as good and our decisions and the things we do, it changes us I guess.

Jenni processes aloud her struggle in determining how she would internalize her interactions with the teacher. As she spoke to me she twirled her pencil in the sleeve of her Adidas warm-up
like she was in deep thought, eraser rubbed into shreds against the thick cuff of her jacket. How would she decide to remember the gross assumptions that her 6th grade Science teacher burdened her with? And what would she make of this unexpected encounter later on?

Discussion

Over two years later and on the brink of entering high school, Jenni arrived at a place where she could see past some of the trauma that school had imposed. And not just that, she was sophisticated in being able to identify a larger cycle that placed sixth grade science teacher in the same boat as many others who have become bitter and in turn, hurtful toward others. This in no way dismisses the actions of the teacher she speaks of, or the standardization and stringent accountability measures that Tina was so critical of. Worth attending to were the ways that Jenni used the practices honed in YPAR to parse out her identify from the one that her teacher imposed during such a crucial time period in her adolescent development. Her development of a critical empathy arose from an understanding of the deep and lasting ways pain and suffering could impact a person’s life. To go one step further, this understanding arose from meaningful interactions with her peers who were exploring different angles of the same issue, through her practicing of enacting critical literacies to name and then trace problems to their root, and from being provided with opportunities to share her insights with caring adults, including authentic power brokers who had an established voice to impact the issue she set out to explore. Taken together, these allowed her to untangle herself from the web of shame, bitterness, and dejection that accompanied the humiliating encounters she had in the sixth grade. Once this happened, she was able to re-assert herself with confidence and assurance.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I outlined some of the literacy events that were most prominent in the YPAR course, as well as students’ perceptions of these events and the YPAR class writ large. Group inquiries in a multiethnic youth space and storying trauma opened up new opportunities for healing. This healing was brought about through the honoring and sustaining of students’ multiple literacies and the acknowledgement of their traumas. As it relates to cultural representation, digital storytelling served as a counterhegemonic practice whereby students could articulate narratives of themselves and their lives in a humanizing and honorable manner. There were also moments where students engaged in a reconciliation of their cultural identities through an expression of double consciousness. Finally, students’ engagement with critical literacy practices inside of YPAR equipped them with the tools to read school and read adults inside of school differently. In some cases, these critical readings translated into a sense of empathy that aided in their processing of dehumanizing encounters with school, such as in Jenni’s case. For others, this sense of empathy may not have been present at least on a conscious level, but students were equipped with the vocabulary and confidence to take part in critical conversations about their experiences.

In the next chapter, I now turn attention to a unique group of students who participated in the YPAR program. These eighth grade students, in addition to having been quite active in each iteration of YPAR across their three years of attending the school, were also enrolled in what was named a “YPAR filmmaking course”, where Keegan assigned them to create a film about YPAR and its impact on the school. Their vantage point is a valuable one insomuch as they offer a rich phenomenological perspective of YPAR within a middle school context, as well as a close-up look at ways in which middle school youth adopt digital media tools for civic ends in a school
context. I highlight their understandings and experiences in Chapter 6, some of the key facets of the program they hoped to highlight in their film, and the ways that they used digital media tools to engage their peers and other caring adults in both their YPAR filmmaking class and in some cases, digital spaces. Overall, I argue that in the process of developing what I name here and elsewhere as digital social imagination (Filipiak, 2016), they equipped themselves to engage as critical civic agents prepared to shape more equitable futures.
CHAPTER 6- DIGITAL SOCIAL IMAGINATION IN FILMMAKING CLASS

In understanding literacy as a social practice, I have intended to illuminate the sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions that shaped students’ experiences with literacy inside of school, with a specific focus on its capacity to serve as an agentic catalyst of sorts. For much of this dissertation, I have focused on the ways in which students’ sense of agency has been mediated by their relationships with each other, their experiences with school and with teachers, and their prior encounters with literacy and with YPAR more generally. For this chapter, I would like to extend my analysis by accounting for the specific ways that digital media tools were also a part of this mediation process, as the introduction of technology into classrooms during the second year of the YPAR program drastically shifted the kinds of writing and activities that students participated in. Moreover, several students across this study cited its implementation as a significant factor in their motivation for participation in YPAR, as their prior experiences in school had offered them minimal interaction with technology tools.

The significance of digital tools was most pronounced with those students who attended North Bronx MS as 6th grade students, before technology was introduced into the building by way of a grant that Keegan and I crafted to secure equipment such as Chrome books, video cameras, lighting equipment and audio recorders during the second year of the YPAR program. At the onset of the third year, a subset of eighth graders signed up for two sections of a class that Keegan created to engage those who had been most active and emerged as leaders in the program, dubbed “YPAR Filmmaking.” To become admitted to the course, students had to write an essay that outlined the reasons they wanted to be in the class as well as the impact that they thought YPAR had on the school. From here, Keegan selected students for admittance. The multimodal literacy practices that students engaged in as part of this course, as I hope to
highlight across the remainder of this chapter, helped me to gain a more nuanced understanding of how digital contexts reconfigure critical literacy practices. Students’ use of digital media tools opened up spaces of possibility and reimagining of self and community, paving new pathways toward fundamental social transformation. In total, I account for this reimagining as a kind of digital social imagination, which I highlight below.

After providing a brief overview of the scope of the course and making the case for digital social imagination, I highlight five “agentive practices” that emerged as students read and designed multimodal texts in the context of the YPAR filmmaking course. These practices enabled opportunities for students to enact new forms of agency central to realizing or “imagining” more equitable social futures. They include: documenting, designing, deconstructing, disrupting, and dreaming. I highlight what characterized these practices and the uses they were leveraged toward, and conclude with a discussion of students’ reflections on their participation in the course and within the YPAR program more broadly across its three years of implementation. This helps to provide a valuable phenomenological viewpoint that might allow educators to understand how extended interactions with YPAR in school might promote meaningful learning and positive identity development over time. Data analyzed for this final portion included three focus group interviews conducted in the beginning, middle, and end of the study with a group of 8th grade students enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking course.

Context of Course

Keegan’s initiation of the filmmaking initiative was one that grew out of his wanting to designate more responsibility for the YPAR program to students in the school. The year prior, clusters of seventh graders championed efforts such as anti-bullying campaigns, advocacy for greater access to technology, and increased student voice in school initiatives. Students also
heralded the school’s infusion of technology into more classes, with many having expressed that outside of their interactions with mobile devices, it was the first time that they had used technology in a significant manner. At the end of their second year of the YPAR program, momentum increased and it was clear that there were young people who were ready and equipped to take a more central role during year three.

An important detail to note is that Keegan had an extensive background in business prior to becoming a teacher. The adoption of a YPAR filmmaking class was indicative of his sensitivity to the need for developing student leaders in the program for sure; but, he also saw the creation of a course like this as a way to “market” what was happening in the school to the broader community. He had hoped that with more publicity and attention, the school could secure more programming and grants in the future. As I mention later on in my conclusion, some of his desires did come to fruition. The program gained more visibility and in turn, drew more attention to the school for programming and grant opportunities. However, what was lost in this decision was the potential to support students as stronger mentors and facilitators in the program or else generate space for them to use the technology tools toward civic ends that reflected their expanded interest in social issues. Instead, students had a concrete path already carved out for them before even stepping foot in the classroom. The decision to follow this trajectory as opposed to one that was shaped more intentionally by students meant that the course became directed at an entirely new audience comprised of different stakeholders. Yet and still, students took up the responsibility of documenting the impact of the program with sincerity and a sense of determination - and I was afforded a rare view of what components of the program they deemed most important. At the same time, there were practices that emerged that grew out
of the cultivation of what I highlight below as digital social imagination, a concept that centers humanization and the interpersonal dimensions of learning while pursuing civic ends.

**The Case for Digital Social Imagination**

There is no doubt that in order for young people to be prepared for their academic, social and civic futures, they must have be immersed within rich learning environments that reflect the digitally rich environments that surround them. However, with increasingly multilingual, multi-gendered, multiracial populations of young people who are using technology and tools that are rapidly changing, we need more comprehensive pedagogies that acknowledge the nature of the new digital terrain and the tensions that arise within it, most especially those attached to issues of equity and access. Middle school students are an especially important group to pay closer attention to, as this period of development is when most students gain full access to smart phones and begin to establish and maintain online identities, immerse themselves in the project of building and sustaining peer groups, and bring together the knowledge and technology skill sets they have gained throughout childhood to larger digital projects that might be introduced in school or perhaps in after-school spaces. It is a time when students’ burgeoning digital identities are perhaps most malleable, as they begin to consider who they are and who they wish to become, while having a vast array of tools to mediate this process.

Consider the frequency of use and the ideological landscapes that students traverse each time they connect. Nearly 92% of 13-17-year-olds report that they go online daily and 24% report going online “almost constantly” (Lenhart et al., 2015). Although their uses are focused mostly on entertainment (Rideout, 2015), young people are bombarded with images that reflect social, racial, gendered, and economic inequalities, a hyper-polarized political climate with “truthy lies” abounding, and advertising aligned with their browsing histories and interactions.
As their use of the internet has surpassed conventional TV watching (Farhi, 2009), there is virtually no way to avoid the corporate-controlled media industry and the far reach that it has in young people’s lives.

Indeed, literacy theorists comprising the New London Group were accurate in their call two decades ago to reimagine and restructure literacy curriculums and instruction to account for the proliferation of tools that had expanded the ways and which young people were communicating (1996). However, as Kellner and Share have discussed extensively, simply accounting for these new multimodal and hybrid text forms is not enough. Students need access to pedagogies that equip them to critically consume and produce media in ways that position them to acknowledge the relations of power and hegemonic forces that shape their experiences and interactions online. This is at the heart of what Kellner and Share named as “critical media literacy” a decade ago (2007). They argued,

Critical media literacy thus constitutes a critique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multiperspectivital critical inquiry, of popular culture and the culture industries, that addresses issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media.

In the years since, the increasing ubiquity of digital literacies has influenced how critical literacy and a critical media education are theorized. In recent years, scholars have paid increased attention to moving beyond talk of critical digital production and consumption, and ventured into a discussion of supporting young people as distributors (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009) and even as inventors (Mirra et al., Forthcoming). These positions align with the ways that students are using and might use technology both now and in the future. As Mirra and her colleagues state, we
cannot see young people as “simply masterful and critical consumers, producers, and distributors of digital literacies, but as inventors with competencies and dispositions needed to dream up digital forms of expression that we cannot yet imagine.” Such positions point toward an epistemological stance that views young people as agentive actors capable of shaping and participating in a world that centers their interests, passions, and concerns. It also accounts for the practices that students are using across spaces- at home, afterschool, with their peers, and online- and considers the audiences attached to each as equally valuable. What they don’t do, however, is provide a roadmap for navigating the murky waters of uncertainty that teachers will surely face when challenged to adopt a pedagogy that supports young people in this new role.

For sure, there is no handbook that points to how we might rethink critical pedagogical approaches that specifically support students as inventors in the digital age. As Luke (2012) has rightfully asserted, even though “Freirian models provide a pedagogical approach and a political stance, an orientation towards “voice” and ideology, they lack specificity on how teachers and students can engage with the complex structures of texts, both traditional and multimodal.”

Moreover, as students’ lived struggles and challenges are rapidly evolving, so too are the tools used to describe, analyze and ultimately speak back to those challenges. If we are to support students in leveraging the communicative possibilities of new media toward upending inequitable power structures and creating more just futures, teachers will need to develop more responsive pedagogical frameworks and be open to innovating alongside students as they embrace new forms of participation.

*Moving from Social Imagination to Digital Social Imagination: Pursuing Care, Collaboration, and Love in Digital Spaces*

To answer this call for more responsive pedagogical frameworks, I posit that a pedagogy in service of what I name as *digital social imagination* helps provide some direction. In 1995,
Maxine Greene described “social imagination” as the capacity to “invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, on the streets where we live, (and) in our schools” (p.5). Equipping youth to devise new solutions to problems that surround them, she emphasized, requires new kinds of encounters that awaken students’ critical consciousness. For civic provocations to activate students’ awareness though, a commitment to dialogue couched within an ethos of care is crucial. She explains,

The challenge is to make the ground palpable and visible to our students, to make possible the interplay of multiple plurality of consciousness— and their recalcitrances and their resistances, along with their affirmations, their “songs of love.” And, yes, it is to work for responsiveness to principles of equity, principles of equality, and principles of freedom, which must be named within contexts of caring and concerns. The principles and the contexts have to be chosen by living human beings against their own life-worlds and in the light of their lives with others, by persons able to call, to say, to sing, and— using their imaginations, tapping their courage—to transform (p. 197-198).

Greene’s commitments assume a cornerstone of deep and radical collaboration; across her work, she describes alliances that foster social imagination as “aesthetic experiences” that provide fertile ground for critical questioning and self-exploration in communion with others. These are the pillars of critical engagement that she cites as necessary for interrogating one’s existence and purpose in the world (1977, p. 120). Greene also proposed that encounters with art provided robust opportunities for aesthetic encounters to capture young people; in their viewings and creation of artistic renderings, they could pursue new pathways of imagination toward empathy and heightened self-consciousness. Artistic productions could be a place to critically and
consciously interrogate the meanings that drove people’s understandings and in turn, awaken them to their freedom.

In the digital age, I would argue that the potential of social imagination does not have to be limited to encounters with art alone; new media tools and the productions that come out of them afford young people new opportunities to dialogue about what it means to be human, to reflect on their realities, and to become aware of the multiple perspectives that shape others’ experiences and perspectives. *Digital Social Imagination* (Filipiak, 2016, p. 6) is a concept that I see as extending Greene’s work; it is young people leveraging digital media tools toward ends that allow them to imagine in community how the world might be if it authentically valued everyone’s humanity. As digital social imagination is expressed, it centers the human being and the joint construction of care, concern, and love that emerges as transformation is pursued. Digital tools used in this context allow students to imagine a better world while ensuring the visibility of all people’s humanity- both important aims for teachers who wish to use digital media tools in the classroom toward liberatory ends.

*Digital Social Imagination as a Humanizing Endeavor*

Teachers who decide to support the use of digital media tools in favor of social imagination can equip youth with experiences that allow for radical re-envisioning and new ways of seeing their roles in shaping the future. As part of this venture, however, educational stakeholders must be committed to transformed human relations. This is what sits at the heart of digital social imagination. As Paulo Freire proclaimed, “to transform the world is to humanize it” (1985, p. 70). In the particular context of a hyper-polarized political climate seeped in power relations that have tended to relegate experiences of black and brown peoples to the margins (Salazar, 2013), prioritizing the interpersonal is crucial for the liberation of all peoples. In order
to practice building across difference and disrupting political invisibility in the digital age, young people need opportunities to not only explore the creative and communicative affordances of digital media, but also the interpersonal. Digital media tools allow for new ways of being and seeing, and like the arts-can offer new opportunities for making sense of the world. The emphasis of digital social imagination is not only reimagining how we might read and re-write the world, but also allowing the encounters we have while doing so to shape the way we do and imagine who we are as human beings- awake and feeling the world together.

I see the cultivation of digital social imagination in schools as a precursor to, or in some cases a catalyst for, the stance of digital invention that Mirra and others point to as a promising pathway toward more equitable and participatory civic futures. A future cannot be imagined without considering how to better demonstrate value for the lives of all people who live on this planet, and negotiating in community what this might mean and look like. Invention cannot be disconnected from the care and concern necessary for imagination that directs us toward a better future. In the face of new challenges that digital technologies will hopefully help us better solve, there are those issues that may be amplified if divorced from an ethic of care. This is why it is important to consider (digital) social imagination as being in service to digital invention, where youth are offered opportunities to use digital media tools in ways that inspire hope, empathy, and action while simultaneously creating new spaces of interrogation and innovation.

When it comes to understanding what digital social imagination might look like in action, I think that the YPAR filmmaking class offers a generative context in which to excavate. More specifically, the digital media practices taken up inside of it provide a glimpse into the ways that youth understand their role in creating new civic, academic and social opportunities for their peers in the future. Although the activity in the course was not centered on specific civic or
political purposes, students had substantial experience using digital media tools to explore and distribute their concerns around identified social issues in the year prior. Understanding how they practiced literacy provides important entry points for teachers looking to understand how to support youth expertise within a context that upholds the bedrock of collective care that undergirds digital social imagination. For the following section, I focus on the digital literacy practices that occurred within the filmmaking course, including what characterized the practices and what students leveraged them toward. In total, the literacies enacted in the course were central in informing students’ identity construction and representation as filmmakers located in a critical context, and offer valuable insight as to ways that youth constructed stories about imagined futures and their perceived role in shaping those futures.

**Digital Literacy Practices in the YPAR Filmmaking Course**

*Document*

Students entered into the course with the expectation that they would be documenting the impact of the program on the school. Interestingly enough, the story they wished to share moved beyond what the program was comprised of, or the projects that cohorts of their peers had initiated in the two years prior. Instead, students wanted to share how the program made them feel, and more specifically the shifts that happened in the relationships between adults and students. In the beginning of the course, one of the students, Michael, jumped up to the board when Keegan was absent and constructed a sophisticated scaffold to encourage his classmates to determine what was essential to document in the film (see Figure 6.1).
He first encouraged them to share their thoughts and feelings about YPAR, moved on to a period of reflection on their experience, and finished by asking, “what can we do now?” This followed a cycle of inquiry that mirrored Freirean praxis. Michael had a sophisticated understanding of this cycle and its impact, and ultimately its potential reach if he could find a way to transfer what it generated into a film.

From here, students generated themes that they wished to capture. Upon returning the next day, Keegan worked alongside students to continue exploring themes and then moved them into a process of coding their responses and generating categories for them. These would be what drove the themes for their movie (see Image 6.2). The categories included freedom of choice, empowering students, and teachers trusting students. Translated simply: freedom, power, and trust.

Documentation as a practice first happened on physical surfaces, and later moved to the generation of online storyboards and the beginnings of a film that never materialized. However, what was significant about students’ transference of knowledge and understanding from a physical space to a digital one is that students’ identities as researchers were invoked in their new
role as budding filmmakers. They drew on their resources as youth researchers to consider how best to reflect YPAR’s reach. For instance, when students were making initial choices about what they should capture on film, they decided to compose interview questions and bring in their peers and adults in the building to film them sharing their responses about the impact of the YPAR program. They also surveyed other students in the building in order to make sure that they were asking questions that reflected the student body’s curiosities and concerns. It was evident by the end of the course that the practices that they honed as researchers had transferred into their new role as youth filmmakers.

*Figure 6.2 Students’ documentation on whiteboard of major themes in YPAR*

In addition to being dominated by a research discourse, students’ documentation practices could be characterized as participatory. While considering topics and conversations of interest for the film, students were careful in being as inclusive as possible, stating on several occasions that they viewed themselves as “messengers” of YPAR. As one student so eloquently stated, “I just want everyone to feel like they have a say in what this movie is about. Not just us.” Documenting the impact was about listening to the voices of peers and weaving it into their
story, but also about integrating the voices of teachers whom they viewed as caring for them during their years as middle-schoolers. “I just want people to know how it was after we’re gone, what can happen when everyone listens to each other,” as one young filmmaker asserted. Students believed that their film could serve as a living artifact of the transformation that was possible when teachers and students joined together to solve issues in the school, and they wanted to make sure that everyone had a say in how this potential would be represented in the film.

This was perhaps the most surprising aspect of the documentation practices used by the students. I expected that they would want to document all of the changes that had happened in the school as a result of their participation: the anti-bullying programs and the newly painted bathrooms, the school trips and the results of their investigations. This was not the case. Students wanted to leave behind proof of the emotional residue left by YPAR. They left the school having an intuitive understanding of the power of leveraging their voices for change, and this was what they had hoped to transmit through their film. It was this emotional stamp that so many students I came in contact with had hoped to draw attention to; they believed that they could impact the moods and behaviors of those who came into contact with their production after they had gone. Like Soshana shared with me at the end of the course, “I think that if there were students who weren’t acting like they should they might see that if they do the YPAR project they could feel important. Almost we could maybe help them see that it is just a new way of listening but feeling good about the listening from everyone, even if things don’t change right away or at all maybe.”

Design
In order to conceptualize and create the film, students assembled themselves into teams and designated responsibilities according to roles. The groups included a research team, a writing team, and a tech team. Those serving on the research team made decisions about what information was needed to craft a narrative of YPAR; they also generated questions to ask interviewees and then followed up by conducting on-camera interviews with students and staff. The writing team was in charge of creating scripts and storyboards for the film and assigning acting roles. Students serving on the tech team were in charge of lighting, filming, and editing. Sometimes students would navigate multiple roles, usually at the request of classmates who identified a gap in their knowledge and needed someone to help solve a problem. For the most part, however, students remained with their cohort.

Each member played an important role in assembling a vision for capturing the story of YPAR and communicating it to a larger audience. Sometimes, the details would get cloudy and students were not always in sync with another when it came to messaging for the film. Still others would become so focused on the individual tasks they were responsible for that they would forget about the other moving pieces that required consistent check-ins and discussion. Since activities were distinguished from one another and the division of labor for the film was equally distributed amongst students, all actors involved had to communicate with one another as to how best meet a particular goal. This required a commitment to distributed leadership as students had to work together in order to accomplish tasks. Because of this distributed model, students’ ability to communicate with one another became important.

Students learned what their roles required of them as they planned for the film; since Keegan had no experience as a filmmaker and limited experience working with digital media tools in such a substantial way, much of what students created grew out of the co-constructed
knowledge that happened in groups. There were several points where Keegan would ask students to perform a task and follow his request up with, “I’m not sure who’s has a knack for this, so I’m assigning this because I’m looking for who can be a point person.” For instance, during one moment in the course, students on the tech team were directed to work on an opening scene for the YPAR movie. A pair of students assembled to create the background music, determining what music they wanted to sample and even mentioning the possibility of mixing their own beats for a track. Another cluster focused on the visual aesthetic of the opening scene, tinkering with fonts, color, and images. A final pod broke off and decided they wanted to film a new shot directly from their computer. Once students received instructions and assembled, experimentation would follow. For those creating background music, one student would record sounds in the classroom and then edit them on the computer, whereas another student went straight to the computer to search databases for beats. Meanwhile, the visual aesthetic group immediately retrieved images and followed up with questions like, “I want to add a transition and I don’t know how,” or “I need to make the opening screen shorter but it’s not letting me do it.” There was no raising of hands when students felt challenged or encountered a hurdle. Students would express their problem out loud and trusted that someone would assist them. If nobody came to the student’s aid, Keegan would wander over to assist. When students reached a point where they didn’t know how a particular feature worked, they would talk it out with each other before Keegan would walk over and attempt to help. As students participated in the YPAR filmmaking community, they became increasingly resourceful and exercised a stance of vulnerability that allowed them to draw upon the collective knowledge in the room. This de-centered Keegan as expert and reinforced students’ expertise, which was necessary in creating space for ownership over the work.
As designers, students could have benefited from having more exposure to the affordances of the digital media tools they were working with. Participating in more workshops that acquainted them with film as a genre would also have been helpful. Stated simply, having more practice as filmmakers would have substantially contributed to their ability to conceptualize and compose a film. However, like most teachers Keegan did not have the experience, knowledge base, or even the time to commit to preparing himself to support them in such a capacity. This does not mean that students did not benefit, however. The practice of working in a space where a distributed leadership model reigned helped students hone important communication skills that will no doubt serve them well in future collaborations. Moreover, learning how to quickly assess what a task required of them and then pursuing the knowledge and practice necessary to meet the requirements of that task in a supportive community helped them to reflect on and revise their ideas. They were able to construct knowledge using new tools for thinking and reconstruct their practices to align with goals shared by classmates. Seen in this light, the act of designing itself opened up new pathways for understanding and interacting; being open to personal and collective reflection and critique helped to solidify an inquiry stance that helped students work through difference and engage productively with classmates. Even though their products were messy and incomplete, their role as designers led them to experiment with new practices that might serve as frames of reference in future learning encounters. This feels significant given the rapid rate at which new digital media forms are being introduced into the world.

*Deconstruct*

A consistent practice that students committed was a critical examination of how ideas, media pieces, or understandings were put together and came to be. This was a practice imported
from their experiences in prior YPAR projects during the sixth and seventh grades, but also reinforced by some of the activity that happened online in Google Classroom and through direct instruction in the physical class space. One new skill that students were introduced to was deconstructing film, and more specifically short documentaries. In the beginning of students’ introduction to film analysis, Keegan would ask students to pay close attention to the camera work, the story’s progression, and the methods that documentary narrators used to both collect and reflect information. From here, he invited students to consider the methods that filmmakers employed to get information across, to create an aesthetic, or to tell a story. Some of these included, “How does the narrator make connections to the main point of the story?” or “What kind of camera angles are being used and for what purpose? What kinds of emotions do these angles create in the viewer?” Such questions helped students to develop a vocabulary that allowed them to unpack the artistry in crafting a message. Later, students used their newfound vocabulary to analyze clips that they had shot themselves, which was helpful on a practical level.

Students’ understanding of artistic choices made by filmmakers launched them into new conversations that moved beyond practical applications. They also began to take on discussions about the underlying social issues that informed the conflicts that characters endured in the films that Keegan featured. A common theme in their interrogations was a questioning of the filmmaker’s effectiveness in portraying an issue, even if it wasn’t the focus of the film itself. For instance (see Figure 6.3 below), when asked to reflect on what she didn’t enjoy about Matty Brown, a self-titled film short chronicling an artist’s journey in pursuing his dream of becoming a renowned filmmaker, one student Veronica critiqued, “I would’ve hoped for more elaboration on how he dealt with the circumstances of being homeless.” Even though she found the film evocative and its images poignant, she expressed that it glossed over the larger forces at work
that contributed to the character’s plight. It also didn’t capture how he interacted with these forces and eventually overcame them. She explained in a follow-up conversation,

I know it’s a short film about how he became a filmmaker and all the hard stuff he went through, but….he just doesn’t explain the bigger picture of being homeless. Maybe how he really got there and what wasn’t in place that resulted in him getting there. People need to understand that more now, even in short films. We can see that the imagery and shots that he chose to feature created a picture in our minds of what he went through, but we needed more. What wasn’t said was too big.

Veronica rightfully calls out the absence of an actor, the wrongful centering of the main character’s homelessness as opposed to the person or people who made decisions that placed him in such a vulnerable position.

Figure 6.3- Student work found on Google Drive: reflection sheet after film analysis session with classmates and teacher

Feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I enjoyed:</th>
<th>What I didn’t enjoy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I enjoyed how there was a strong, significant purpose to this story and I liked how this document was based on how an individual was shaped from childhood to adulthood.</td>
<td>• I would’ve hoped for more elaboration on how he dealt with the circumstances of being homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I liked how the pacing of this documentary was well-balanced since it wasn’t too long nor was it too short. Also, the voice fit the storyline very well and grabbed my attention as an audience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I found it interesting how the story created imagery and communicated symbolism from his childhood which affected his life as an adult.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When she stated “People need to know that more now,” I can only imagine what she meant by such a statement. At the time of the study, students had been speaking often about the prospect of having Donald Trump as a president, the harmful stories being perpetuated in the media about immigrants and people of color. They had also been in conversation about the power of media to, as one student stated so powerfully, “change the way that people see everyone, including themselves.” I would imagine that Veronica was aware of the threat that the rampant Islamaphobia and White Nationalist propaganda scattered across media outlets posed to her peers and even to herself, hence the critique. But when we look at her commentary, we also see hope: in directing the filmmaker to “do more,” or to capture “the bigger picture,” she expresses a disposition of possibility. She reframes the role of the filmmaker as a cultural worker, having access to an important set of tools that might facilitate true transformation.

These kinds of sophisticated analyses saturated the interactions that I witnessed in the filmmaking class. Students’ deconstructions of media pieces were consistently in conversation with the socio-critical perspectives that they had began to develop as youth researchers. Across the range of new practices that they had gained as budding filmmakers was an orientation toward consciously interrogating how a story was presented- who was speaking and who wasn’t…what aspect of an issue was highlighted and what was overlooked. With their newfound vocabulary, they were able to express with precision how such illuminations and erasures were expressed through visual mediums, leveraging critical digital literacy practices to disrupt classroom routines around analyzing film in generative ways. Moreover, it allowed them the opportunity to perform their subjectivities as critical researchers in new spaces, adapting stances that may serve them well in their future engagements as civic actors in the digital age.

*Disrupt*
Discontent was a sentiment that made itself visible in some students’ conversations and interactions, and they did not shy away from voicing their afflictions to both real and imagined audiences. Keeping in mind that students in the filmmaking course were active participants in YPAR for two years prior, this unique cohort had substantial experience airing their grievances with a variety of stakeholders. They had traveled to Washington DC to speak with legislators in 7th grade; some had spoken with the principal and made recommendations for change, and some even approached peers about issues they hoped to rectify. In this third year of the program, some students’ work took a turn toward more active disruption in digital spaces. Equipped with experiences in advocating for change while also having acquired new knowledge in using digital media tools toward civic ends, there were pockets of young people who spoke in interviews of directing their attention more recently to online advocacy efforts. They began asserting themselves as digital disruptors- using social media to shatter stereotypes, to share content that they though would be informative and accessible to their peers, or to create communities committed to the issues they cared about. In one interview a student expressed, “there are stories that people are telling that aren’t good for the issues we are trying to change. So we have to our part to give them another story. They can’t believe the truth that’s really a lie that hurts people.”

Paul’s comment reflects an acute understanding of how social issues impacting students’ educational experiences don’t just live in school, but also manifest themselves in digital spaces.

One of the most compelling and long-standing examples of digital disruption that I encountered was the work of Nadeen and her friends, a group of Yemeni young women interested in disrupting stereotypes about Muslim youth. After investigating bullying in their school as 6th graders, they decided to create an Instagram account to not only combat stereotypes of Muslim youth, but also support those who had been bullied. This became the social action
project that they took on to fulfill the “action” portion of YPAR, evolving over time to an advocacy campaign happening largely online with no adult intervention.

To provide a bit of a context, Nadeen and her peers had never used social media prior, and of the group of three, only Nadeen had a cell phone. Nadeen had also been in America the longest; Ania had arrived only the year prior, and Sophia had immigrated only months before.

For the purposes of this section, I focus solely on Nadeen because she was the only one who went on to independently carry the project through to the eighth grade and also the only one who enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking class. In the sixth grade, Nadeen and her peers began investigating bullying as a concept. As Nadeen tells it, neither herself nor her peers were prepared for the barrage of negative encounters they would have with their peers as new immigrants in America. Nadeen tearfully recalled in an interview how students made fun of her “accent”, her clothing, her scent, and what she ate, “there was nothing they couldn’t say. Everything about me was bad.” A shift in perception came, however, when she began to learn about bullying as a concept in her humanities class as part of the YPAR program, “I felt like I knew what was happening to me now. And I stopped hating the bullies.” Having the vocabulary to name what she had been experiencing left an impression on Nadeen that was so strong that she decided to pursue bullying as a research interest.

In the seventh grade, Nadeen and her group of friends decided that they wanted to survey her classmates to find out who had been bullied, the kinds of bullying that they experienced, and how it made them feel. Alongside their investigation, they were introduced to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, a psychological pyramid that prioritizes human needs and motivations. Understanding Maslow’s work cultivated empathy and informed the intervention that Nadeen and her peers decided to implement. As she tells it, “the bullies are hurting inside, too.
Sometimes people hurt others because they are hurting inside. It’s their basic needs not getting met. We have to do something about that.” Upon learning that a majority of students in the school had experienced bullying at some point in their educational career, she decided to create a platform online that reflected a deeper understanding of the problem, and offer her personal support to those who had been bullied. It was at this moment that Nadeen’s Instagram account was born (See Figure 6.4). Very quickly, her following grew to nearly six thousand followers, the majority of them being outside of her immediate school community. Sometimes at lunch periods she would find me to share interactions she was having with young people who had reached out to her online about being bullied, and the advice she gave them. She also spoke of the ways that she drew upon interactions she had with her followers as inspirations for new posts. It was all very exciting for her, positioning herself as a critical friend to those whom she felt needed a listening ear.

_Figure 6.4: Screenshots taken from Nadeen’s Instagram accounts._

| Instagram page 1- 2014-2015 | Instagram page 2, 2015-present |
Moreover, as she became more comfortable in facilitating the community, she began to reach out for support in her journey as a researcher and anti-bullying advocate. In the image above, her initial profile description contains the request, “doing a project about bullying which will be present on June 15, 2015. Please pray for me. Need your support plz.” Unfortunately, right before her group’s journey to Albany, NY to share their research, her account was hacked and she lost all of her posts and followers. She was devastated.

Within the month, however, she created a new account and as can be seen above, also amassed somewhat of a following. Unlike the first account, Nadeen asserted herself with a new sense of authority that her old page didn’t command. Notice the profile introduction where she provides directives, “Smile. Be Happy. Love yourself! Stand against bullying! Share your story with me if you ever get bullied.” In her new account, she expressed a clear mission that reflected the experiences she had both in person and online, with a specific focus on humanizing herself and her Muslim peers, “the solution is more than telling people who we aren’t. We have to do something that show people the pain. That’s what everyone will understand.” Only 13, Nadeen had a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how to disrupt problematic narratives online that shaped, at least in part, the ways she navigated school as a young Muslim girl. She sought to evoke empathy in all viewers of her page, and to promote dialogue. An example of this in action can be seen in the example below, where she designs and posts a picturequote (See Figure 6.5), a medium that allows users to generate text on top of a chosen image. Below the quote is a long caption that highlights seeing things, as Nadeen explains, from multiple angles. An excerpt reads,
Everything situations are a shape. It has angles and if you look through the situation from different angles it won’t be the same. You will have different prospective (perspectives). . .the question that comes to mind is “why one person is bullying others?” Is it because they’re joules (jealous) of others? So if they’re (jealous) of others happiness, it’s mean they don’t have the happiness. Maybe it’s because of theirs family….maybe they don’t know the meaning of love and they can do whatever they want…. 

Nadeen goes on to respond to her followers’ comment, including one from user @nickphillips_13, who shares that his god sister committed suicide. This is an interaction that is common for Nadeen, and follows a pattern that she has grown to use often-posting a captioned picturequote that draws comments from users, and then generating a dialogue around stories that come up or else inviting those who have experienced turmoil, bullying, or even greater trauma into a more intimate conversation about their experience.

*Figure 6.5- Screenshots from Nadeen’s Instagram account*
Nadeen’s practice of disrupting stereotypes related to the issue of bullying featured a key characteristic of many of the engagements I saw happening in the YPAR filmmaking class: empathy. Although the Instagram account was created and managed out of school, in many ways it was an extension of what she was learning in her YPAR class over three years, extending her learning to new spaces and providing an opportunity for her to create new forms of expression that extended beyond the boundaries of school. Empathy as a feature of disruption was prevalent in the exchanges that happened as students analyzed film, humanized actors in issues, and worked with each other in groups.

_Dream_

One of the most powerful practices that came through in student’s digital productions was the practice of dreaming. Dreaming happened in the form of constructing new visions for the future; for instance, in students generating mission and vision statements for what they hoped to change through their media productions. But students also used digital media tools to capture the essence of YPAR, an abstraction that students consistently cited as something that “words just couldn’t capture.” Digital media tools, in several instances, were able to communicate what words simply couldn’t.

The writing team, who was responsible for mining their peers’ ideas and then transferring them into storyboards and movie scripts, demonstrated this proclivity the most. Having centered their entire script around a boy entering a sort of YPAR “dream”, they offered me a unique glimpse into how dreaming afforded them the most flexibility for communicating their intended message. Consider the following conversation, which I came across on a day the team was convening to discuss what edits needed to be made on their storyboards before filming. At the juncture highlighted below, Paul is explaining his thinking behind the frames that he composed, which capture the journey of a boy who is transported through a dream to a new school.
experience that exposes him to the affordances of YPAR (See Figure 6.6). In one frame there is what the students call a “zombie baby,” which Paul and his friend Elijah discuss extensively,

**Paul:** “Ok, yeah, in the first scene there is an old lady teacher. Andrew (the main character featured in their film) falls asleep, and then he has a dream, and jumps into this time-warp, and you have him jump into a school.”

**Elijah:** Wait, but explain zombie baby again. It’s just, ahh ….it’s just there.

**Paul:** oh, that’s the YPAR zombie baby. It knows where Andrew is supposed to be and what the purpose of his journey is before he even knows it. But it isn’t there because of end times or anything. It just knows that, I don’t know …that… YPAR is supernatural when you discover what it is. Remember that’s what we talked about? It can transport you but in a good way. I wanted to show that somehow. But I don’t know how we would get the YPAR baby in the script, with the acting. It’s in a different space than reality.

**Elijah:** Yes, it’s weird because the baby makes sense on the computer, but in real life it’s hard to see how we could make the image work. I see where you’re going, where we’re going I mean, but it just feels like we can do more with it on the computer than we can with ourselves alone. Maybe we can make something to put in the movie, where it could be something like an image over the movie that moves? We’ve got to learn how to do that now. It’s got to be there though because….I don’t know how to say it….what am I trying to say?

**Paul:** because it is important? We want to show what YPAR means when you figure out what it can be.

**Elijah:** Yes, something like that. Maybe even more.

The way that the writing team decided to capture the story of YPAR is interesting, in that they wanted to tell a story that moved past the literal. They decided to prioritize the main character’s journey toward consciousness, one that could best be portrayed in a dream. *(See Figure 6.7)*

Listening to Paul explain what the YPAR zombie baby meant to the larger group, I am left feeling like it is a suitable image to use in capturing the spirit of YPAR. The baby served as a stand-in for a kind of knowing that the main actor, Andrew, has yet to understand. A way of seeing the world and more specifically, school. Just as importantly, it also sat as a subtle
remind

Figure 6.6 Introductory frame and “Zombie baby frame”, with captions

Dialogue bubbles read as follows:

“As a group of friends stand outside the building, they discuss the flaws of the school as well as future steps they can take to improve”

“School is boring and dirty. It feels like the school doesn’t even care about me.”

“I know. Well what can we do anyways.”

Dialogue bubble reads as follows:

“Andrew’s curiosity increases across another room. On the board, it says, “How do students feel about choosing their own topic?”

Figure 6.7 Introductory frames for YPAR film storyboard
To extend the analysis even further, there was also a pointing to technology as a means for transformation. In the context of Paul and his group members’ storyboard, the main character only came upon a new world by way of an iPad that “transported” him through a kind of wormhole. A caption reads, “As the student sleeps, he has a dream that starts off with him jumping into an iPad. This symbolizes that he is escaping reality in order to enter into a techno-world to develop new perspective.”

An important detail to mention here is that Paul worked with a group of his peers the year prior on research related to student motivation and access to technology in schools. It is no coincidence that he chose to focus on technology as a bridge to new understandings for the main character in the story. In fact, it is most likely that Paul’s positive experiences with technology and with his advocacy efforts around technology were being drawn upon in significant ways, and that this is another instance of him championing the kinds of engagement that thinks are possible when students have access to digital media tools.

In each example of dreaming that I witnessed, what stood out as most significant was that students’ leveraging of digital media tools, in this case the use of an app to create a storyboard, allowed them ample opportunity to express complicated ideas that might not otherwise have been given attention in the physical space of school. Their dreaming was characterized by a stance of vulnerability, which school oftentimes stamped out with its demands of accountability and imposition of standardization. In digital spaces, students weren’t fettered to a prescriptive set of guidelines. As such, students didn’t shy away from asserting ideas that they were still working through. They could express ideas in more abstract terms, through the creation of a “YPAR baby” or the colors chosen for a background, via music they mixed for a soundtrack or through arrangement decisions. They could make what felt intangible mean something. It was this above
all else- the ability to communicate a new idea that could be genuinely felt by an audience that seemed to drive student’s interactions the most.

**Impact/Reflections**

As mentioned prior, I recruited 5 students to participate in 3 semi-structured interviews (See Appendix F), in order to gauge what they identified as significant in their experiences as youth researchers and in the YPAR program writ large over the course of its three years. Students volunteered their participation, and all 5 interviewees were 8th grade females: Nadeen (whose Instagram account is highlighted in the preceding “disrupt” section in this chapter) Sunita, Veena, Nashwa, and Zeinab. All five participants in the focus group interviews also travelled to Albany the year before, to share their research and recommendations with legislators, although they weren’t all in the same research groups. Some of the most prominent themes in their interviews are discussed herafter.

*Increased Attention to the News*

Like their peers, participants cited an increased awareness of what was happening in the news cycle, referencing the insights they gained as researchers as the reason that they became so interested in the stories portrayed on local news stations. As Nashwa mentioned, “I think YPAR gets us more involved in the news, because we look at what is going on and seeing how it might be related to a topic in YPAR or one of the root causes in one of our issues.” YPAR became a lens for reading what was happening in the world, a way of dissecting problems and thinking about how they might begin in places like school. Prior to YPAR, students overwhelmingly mentioned social issues as something that they didn’t pay much mind to, as impossible situations outside of themselves and their influence. What made the difference, they said, were the ways that they were asked to think about and empathize with people as part of their inquiry process.
For instance, as a follow-up to what Nashwa’s comment, Veena elaborated, “When we watch the news it’s like Nashwa said; we were just watching it before without thinking. But with YPAR you have to research it. You are forced to think about other people who might be facing that issue or other places that have a certain situation that’s going on around us as well.” Digging deep into an issue, for students, wasn’t just about tracing causes to their root, but also about tracing narratives of people and the places they came from- this helped to generate images in students’ minds of how situations played out and how people were impacted. Students cautioned me, however, that images took time to set in and change their perspective. They expressed the importance of consistent exposure to the critical thinking and critical empathy processes that YPAR demanded, stating that it took several cycles before they really felt connected to the issues that they were both exploring in school and witnessing on the news. As Zeinab recalled, “there are so many other repeating messages that we have to forget in our minds. That dull us. It takes time to connect.”

*YPAR as a Method to Address Teacher Practice*

The possibility of transformed teacher practice was one reason that administration felt drawn to supporting a YPAR initiative at North Bronx Middle School. Their hope was that teachers would be able to see students in a different light, to recognize their capabilities as change agents who had real concerns about the world and their communities. Students also picked up on this potential, as reflected in their conversations with me and with each other. At one point during our second interview, I prompted focus group participants to reflect on how they thought their teachers perceived the YPAR program. Some students thought the YPAR program shifted how teachers saw and interacted with students, as evidenced by the amount of time they spent arranging field trips, talking with students about projects, or even in the ways
that teachers spoke and interacted with students more generally. YPAR functioned as a vehicle for teacher care, in some instances, and students perceived teachers’ investment in the program as evidence of their commitment to students’ socio-emotional needs and interests.

Adopting YPAR was not enough to receive students’ stamp of approval, though. In fact, students were critical of teachers who they saw as doing the project without understanding its underlying purpose. One of the most pronounced examples that continued to resurface in conversation was in reference to technology adaption in classrooms where teachers began to use Google Classroom or other digital tools, without changing their practice. Sunita’s comment crystallizes this point well, “I think that the teachers who tried to adopt the technology with more rigor showed that they were willing to learn too, and we appreciate that. But, I think that the other teachers should know about what YPAR is doing, because they’re getting technology but they doesn’t know how they’re doing the technology. I think they should know what YPAR did in changing the school.” Students were aware of the ways that YPAR could and should transform practice, but also how the use of technology could reflect a more emancipatory pedagogy. Sunita went on to say, “We can use the internet and the computers and all that in ways that we want to. Teachers don’t have to be in the middle all the time.” The de-centering of the teacher as expert was an affordance of YPAR and of technology that students hoped to replicate across the school. They found this potential to be so powerful that they even recommended to me that all teachers be invited to view their YPAR film as part of their in-service training, “Before taking the work and our film to the outside people, I think we should get it out in the school, so the teachers know about it. They are aware. We can present it in the auditorium and then all the teachers will watch it.”
Final Thoughts

At first glance, students’ use of technology might be mistaken as not serious enough for school, or worse yet-a distraction. Another popular stance in schools is to use a carrot-and-stick approach with technology, dangling digital media tools in front of students to persuade them to buy-in to what is considered meatier academic content. As seen above, there is a lost opportunity in refusing to take seriously the new ways that students are engaging with the world. Students can and should be provided with chances to tinker and imagine with digital media tools toward not just new academic knowledge that will service them in a globalized, digital economy, but also as human beings with the potential to preserve our planet and the lives of the people on it.

The late Grace Boggs, a Detroit luminary and activist once asked the question, “What time is it on the clock of the world?” In asking this question, Boggs was inviting her listeners to consider historically (and cumulatively) the human responses we have had over time to structural conditions (1974). In order to create radical change, she argued that we have to consider how best to develop as human beings at this particular moment in time, to take a longer view of history while at the same time understanding that the nature of revolution is always changing. In this current political moment, where we are in the midst of massive displacement on a global scale, income inequality is greater than it’s ever been, and our hyper-polarized political landscape is being fueled by a president who is as mercurial as we have ever seen, we exist on a threshold of change. In Boggs’s later years, she posited that it would be young people who could engage in the kinds of visionary organizing we would need in order to transform societies, who would be best equipped to rethink the kind of revolution that would be needed to effectively respond to the injustices of the world.
Digital Social Imagination, as a concept, is one that I think serves Boggs’s vision in that it demands the provision of space for young people to practice prioritizing political and social responsibility over meritocracy and materialism. Moreover, it acknowledges that the development of young people’s creative and imaginative capacities is necessary if the expectation is for them to create alternatives; how do we expect young people to dream up more humanizing institutions or new conceptions of revolution if they are denied the ability to create together? Finally, it accounts for the ways that digital media tools mediate how students see themselves and each other as people. Enacting new visions of what it means to be a human being cannot be divorced from the reality that we are drawing from new resources in constructing identities. As young people practice the kinds of people they hope to become it will be essential for them to consider how digital media tools might facilitate transformation—both individually and collectively.

To be clear, at the center of digital social imagination is not the use of technology, as the leading adjective might suggest. The word digital preceding social imagination is a response to Boggs’s question, in so much as the revolution of values and priorities needed for transformation will be represented by cultural images and symbols created with many tools, digital included. But who will create them? And where will they take us? Paying close attention to the ways that young people are leveraging new tools in civic projects like YPAR, I think, help provide some direction in building the radical revolution of values that Boggs calls for.

The agentive practices highlighted in this chapter: documenting, designing, deconstructing, disrupting, and dreaming, are a powerful testament to what is possible when young people are entrusted with digital media tools to act powerfully in their world. Accordingly, we need to create spaces that allow them to expand their imaginations and continue
to offer us their visions for a new future. It is their understandings that will ultimately transform our relationships with ourselves, with ourselves, and each other- projecting humanizing portraits that might restore our beloved communities and our belief in each other.
CHAPTER 7- SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this concluding chapter, I return to the purpose and significance of my study, beginning with an overview of my dissertation as couched within an explanation of its purpose and significance. From here, I return to my research questions and respond to them based upon the general conclusions I shared in my findings chapters. Finally, I offer a set of recommendations in moving forward, concluding with a set of “marching orders” for researchers, teachers, and students wishing to extend YPAR work that supports agentive identities in school.

Overview of Dissertation

There is a growing body of scholarship that documents that cultivating youth agency-young people’s ability to analyze and respond to problems impeding their social and academic advancement (Akom, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2008, p. 2) can aid students in not only improving academic skills, but also participate in civic engagement and at times revolutionary change. Given the aforementioned projected growth of children of color in classrooms, the continuance of education remaining stratified across race and class, and rising economic inequality, there can be no more urgent time to consider how in-class instruction that promotes youth agency might help mitigate issues of academic and economic inequality. As a critical pedagogical approach that centers young people’s perspectives and literacies, YPAR makes several provisions for agency that are useful in exploring within the context of school, which this dissertation aimed to highlight.

Moreover, as this study captures, projects like YPAR can be amplified with the use of digital media tools. Technology use in service of civic agency can be leveraged in ways that democratize decision-making while at the same time provide previously unavailable methods for
youth to invent new ways of interrogating and transforming the social and material conditions of their communities. This is important because young people have so little opportunity in schools to leverage the affordances of digital media toward civic and social transformation. When digital tools are introduced, it is often within the context of guiding students toward similar outcomes dictated by the teacher, rather than allowing for multiple pathways of exploration initiated by students. It has been a long time coming that schools rethink what classrooms look like, how they should engage students, and the kinds of futures they see themselves preparing students for. The introduction of digital media tools into nearly every facet of our lives only strengthens this case, and YPAR offers a generous starting point for those considering how to take up such tools toward more critical and emancipatory ends.

It is frequently mentioned that schools need to create new paradigms for learning, but it is less often documented how to operationalize concepts like agency, hope, empathy, innovation, or creativity—some of the most frequently mentioned buzz words in education today. One major hindrance in pursuing these ends is the sociopolitical context of schools and the discourses attached to success that mediate young people’s experience of school and for the purposes of this study, of literacy. YPAR, as a methodological and epistemological undertaking in schools, actively disrupts the power hierarchies that prevent concepts like those mentioned from taking root, and resists deficit discourses so prevalent in education today. This makes it a model that has tremendous potential in offering schools an example of how to include generative entry points for critical civic and social engagement. Moreover, as this study documents, YPAR has the capacity to create space for agency, hope, empathy, innovation, and creativity in authentic ways attached to students lived experiences and articulated concerns.
For this dissertation, I sought to document the literacy and socialization practices happening in YPAR and the ways that young people drew on them in developing agentive identities. As a researcher, I wanted to understand how a program that intentionally positioned students as change agents while simultaneously bolstering their multiliteracies mediated students’ experiences with school and with literacy writ large. The guideposts of agency that guided this study: agency as critical literacy, agency as cultural representation, and agency as healing, aimed to capture ways that young people engaged with literacy that are traditionally not accounted for on standardized assessments or privileged in traditional schooling contexts. Approaching agency in this way afforded me an additive lens that I hoped would be helpful to the field in reimagining what literacy pedagogies to embrace in service of more hopeful and imaginative futures.

Finally, I took an ecological stance in order to unearth the perspectives of multiple stakeholders in the YPAR class. Being that this study was framed by sociocultural and critical theories of literacy and learning, I thought it important to capture the multiple factors mediating students’ experiences within the YPAR class. While it was students’ agentive literacy and socialization practices that I wished to foreground in this study, the discourses present in such a space generated both affordances and constraints that had a direct bearing on students’ experiences, participation, and perspectives within the class. And given that one of the most prominent constraints for the adoption of YPAR in school settings is lack of support from adults or administrators in the building, I thought it important to generate a research design that incorporated the ways that they thought about and contributed meaningfully to the development of the YPAR program. I now turn to a discussion of findings attached to my research questions,
which are expanded upon within the context of the agentive ecological framing that I highlight in Chapter 1, as expressed in Figure 1.1.

**Summary of the Findings**

*How do students leverage YPAR to critically engage adult stakeholders in identified social issues, both inside and outside of school?*

Given its disruptive nature as well as barriers to implementation such as time constraints, standardized testing mandates, and adult-centric power hierarchies, YPAR has most frequently been implemented in out-of-school contexts. The fact that administration invited YPAR into NBMS made it a unique site to better understand, particularly as it relates to the relationships forged between educators, school administrators, and youth in pursuit of civic change. The welcoming of the program into the building shaped the ways that students not only engaged with adults around their identified issues and concerns, but also how they came to understand the impact of their advocacy efforts. One major finding consistent across the study was that many students perceived changes happening at the school level as being attributed to their advocacy efforts within the YPAR program, as highlighted in Chapter 4. This, of course, was not always true. The administration and other adult stakeholders in the school were consistently making updates to the campus, implementing programs, and rethinking curriculum in order to improve the school. However, those changes that were most visible or felt by the students: updates to technology and to the bathrooms, more caring relationships with teachers and programming changes, for instance, were read by students as being championed by them. They came to understand that what they had to say was important, and felt affirmed by many of the adults who supported their ideas and concerns during the research process.
Several students who participated across the three years of the program described a process of coming to discover that they had a voice, and internalizing that their voice could and should be heard. This was practiced first within the context of engagements with adults at the local level, and often times transferred to interactions that they had outside of the school. When students engaged with adults outside of the building around issues such as school bullying and access to technology, they exuded a sense of confidence that reflected a belief that their voices mattered. For instance, during a visit to the state capital, students bombarded an assemblyman as he proceeded to exit from a legislative session. Without any hesitation and with no direction from Keegan or myself, they stopped him in the middle of the hallway and insisted that he listen to their presentation on school bullying. Bold and unapologetic, they walked up to him, shook his hand, handed him a pamphlet capturing their research issue with data and recommendations, and opened up a laptop to share a visual presentation. These are the kinds of engagements that marked some of the most inspiring moments of the program, where students took it upon themselves to initiate interactions with stakeholders whom they knew had the power to change issues that they were invested in.

To be fair, not every student’s experience with adults was so generative or marked by the same sense of confidence. There were students who did not participate so actively, even expressing that YPAR was not solving the issues that they hoped would be addressed within the school. Ihuoma, who was one of the students I interviewed for the study, shared that YPAR did “nothing” for her and that it was “just another class”. She hadn’t travelled on any of the field trips outside of school in years prior, nor had she seen a project through to its conclusion in any year that she attended NBHS. In fact, she was often times spending time in detention for verbally berating or else bullying other students in the school, and expressed frustration that she
could not connect more intimately with Mr. Keegan because he had “way too many students.” Her experience speaks to one of the limitations in the program in that there was only one teacher responsible for the bulk of its implementation. There was a bulwark of students who cited the development of trust and camaraderie as reasons they invested so whole-heartedly in the process, which seemed a necessary pre-cursor for nourishing student voice. For those who did not make a more substantial connection with their peers in the YPAR class or with Keegan, YPAR was often times not seen as an avenue to implement change. This speaks to the importance of developing a strong sense of community before delving into such a substantial project that requires a significant amount of trust between adult and students. In Chapter 4, I highlighted the “pedagogy of agency” that Keegan employed, which contained remnants of an ethos of care and affirmation that were so necessary to achieve student buy-in for building a strong classroom community.

Finally, a significant finding in the data was that students viewed digital media tools as having substantial potential in communicating their concerns to adults. Digital media tools afforded them new ways of communicating a message that they hoped would live on long after they had left. As captured in chapter 6 more specifically, students enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking class generally felt that the productions they were composing could be used to remind teachers at BHMS of how powerful YPAR could be and what it had meant to students, with hopes that the spirit of the program could live on for years to come. They also spoke of the portability of digital media productions, being able to construct a message through a medium that could be quickly viewed and deliberated upon without students even being physically present. Students also appreciated that they could draft their productions and share them in final form after several tries, rather than having a stand-up oral presentation that required them to deliver
information fully and succinctly on the first try. This was important to them because they could refine what they wanted to share first.

How is literacy conceptualized and enacted inside of the YPAR classroom?

As mentioned prior, I attempted to capture the agentive value of YPAR as it was reflected in the literacy and socialization practices taken up in both the general YPAR courses and the YPAR filmmaking class. For the general YPAR course, I highlight those practices that correspond with the three outlined areas in my conceptual framework: agency as healing, agency as cultural representation, and agency as critical literacy (See Table 7.1). For the filmmaking course taken by students who had participated in the YPAR program for three years, I offer a recap of the digital literacy practices that they engaged in, highlighting the ways in which this supported the development of a digital social imagination, a concept elaborated on in chapter 6 (See Table 7.2).

General YPAR classes

In the general YPAR courses, students participated in important engagements with literacy that equipped them with processes and practices to cope with the pain and distress of consequences arising from racial and economic injustice writ large, both in-school and out. As captured in Vaughn’s vignette and other data sources referenced in Chapter 5, group inquiry in a multiethnic youth space and the practice of storying trauma provided avenues for students to leverage their culturally situated knowledges to speak about and process issues attached to systemic racism, social injustice, and political oppression. In so doing, they were able to constructively dissect emotions and experiences that negatively impacted their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Moreover, students were able to construct alternative narratives around
issues that they explored, seeing and positioning themselves and loved ones differently within traumatic events.

As it relates to cultural representation, students were able to reflect multiple ways of seeing the world, finding their voice and locating their story through practices like digital storytelling in the YPAR classes. An outgrowth of these practices as captured in the narratives in Chapter 5 was that digital storytelling could be leveraged as a counterhegemonic practice and as an expression of double-consciousness. Through their interactions in the YPAR class, students were able to broker new identities that invited their social and political realities into literacy engagements, where they were able to offer their perspective on issues like Islamophobia and violence. In this way, the YPAR classes permitted for new spaces of self-authoring where students were able to assert humanizing portraits of themselves and their communities. In addition, those who identified as English Language Learners were invested in literacy practices that helped them obtain academic literacies and increased mastery of the English language. By and large, students were permitted space to draw upon multiple voices, grammars, and mediums to articulate the ways in which they were making sense of issues. In so doing, their history and culture were affirmed as legitimate texts worth exploring in community.

Critical literacy, as it was practiced within the middle school YPAR classroom, provided invaluable opportunities for students to read the school environment and the world around them. Some examples were leveraging critical social theories to make sense of issues they were interrogating at the school level, deconstructing messages in film and advertisements, and considering whose voices and perspectives were either privileged or erased in readings that were assigned as part of regular classroom activity.
Activities that encouraged students to critically frame their experiences and understandings of school, in particular, allowed them to process dehumanizing encounters with curriculum, with teachers, and with their peers. Journal entries, facilitated whole-glass dialogue, and small group discussions that encouraged students to intimately confer about issues they witnessed in school or how they felt about themselves as students were important interactions in that they acknowledged students’ feelings and experiences rather than discounting them or deeming them too disruptive or disrespectful. These kinds of engagements were especially generative for students like Tina, who had a tumultuous relationship with school and had no other avenues for redressing. Students also imported critical literacy practices to process their relationships with adults in school. In some cases, critical literacy practices provided an avenue for students to name relationships they witnessed between teachers and students as problematic. But in some cases, like in Jenni’s, critical literacy practices were leveraged in ways that evoked a sense of empathy for adults who had not engaged positively with students. Students were able to see beyond individual interactions they had with adults and considered the larger sociopolitical context of school that may have been hindering for everyone, including teachers. This isn’t to say that adults’ toxic behavior was justifiable. Rather, students considered the larger environment that all actors, adults and students included, were forced to navigate. For some, understanding this “bigger picture” helped them to understand their negative encounters as predictable and in some cases, surmountable.
### Table 7.1 Agentive Literacy Practices in General YPAR Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Practices</th>
<th>Activities to support</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency as Healing</strong></td>
<td>Group Healing in a Multiethnic Youth Space</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Storying Trauma</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Agency as Cultural Representation</strong></td>
<td>Digital Storytelling as Double Consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Digital Storytelling as Counterhegemonic Practice</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Agency as Critical Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Reading School</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading Adults through a Lens of Empathy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentional affirmations by teacher, Group Inquiry, Encouragement of “identity texts” that are inclusive of hybrid literacy practices, critical listening, student choice for YPAR projects, Photojournalism, Whole-class dialogue around issues navigated by protagonists in stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visual prompts with captions, critical readings of stories, grouping configurations around students’ racial and ethnic diversity, expression of understanding through multiple literacies, connections between manifestation of issues in America vs. home country or country of origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Journaling about School Experiences, Prompts from Keegan that encouraged taking multiple perspectives, critical civic dialogue, Problem Trees, explorations of critical social theories like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Social Reproduction Theory, Yosso’s theory of Cultural Capital; collaboration with adults on projects</td>
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**YPAR Filmmaking Class**

In the context of the YPAR filmmaking class, as referenced in Chapter 7, young people who participated in YPAR across the three years of its lifespan engaged in a set of digital literacy practices that offered valuable insight into how young people constructed stories about imagined futures and their perceived role in shaping those futures. These practices included: documenting, designing, deconstructing, disrupting, and dreaming. Overall, I posit that the phenomenological perspective that this group of students offers might help educators understand how extended interactions with YPAR in school might provide meaningful learning and positive learning development over time, more specifically within the realm of critical civic engagement in digital contexts. Although students in this cohort never completed the film that they intended to write, produce and release, the practices that they engaged in were extremely useful in bolstering what I named in Chapter 6 as “digital social imagination”, a concept I articulate as young people leveraging digital media tools toward ends that allow them to imagine in community how the
world might be if it authentically valued everyone’s humanity (Filipiak, 2016). I argue that focusing on digital social imagination in classrooms creates necessary space for students to imagining a better world while ensuring the visibility of all people’s humanity. This is an important undertaking if we are to take seriously the ways that youth might leverage digital media tools toward new civic, academic, and social opportunities in the future.

*Table 7.1 Agentive Digital Literacy Practices in YPAR Filmmaking Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literacy Practice</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Document</strong></td>
<td>Desire to capture legacy of relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
<td>Distributed Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deconstruct</strong></td>
<td>Issue-Centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disrupt</strong></td>
<td>Empathetic Stance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design</strong></td>
<td>Vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perspective Taking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*How does change happen in the YPAR classroom space, and how do students describe it?*

For those who participated in the YPAR program over time, two themes emerged. Students overwhelmingly cited an increased attention to what was happening in the news cycle, as well as a more concentrated attention on YPAR as a method to address teacher practice. As it relates to critical engagements with the news cycle, students discussed the ways in which critical questioning, in particular, ordered the ways in which they viewed the presentation of ideas in the media, both online and on TV. Most students took news in through their phones, and mentioned that their participation in YPAR led them to question where news came from, whose stories were being highlighted or marginalized, and the ways that issues were being portrayed. This is a significant finding in that around half of adults get the news through their phones (Pew Research
Center, 2017), yet as a demographic, young people fail to effectively evaluate the credibility of information that they are encountering online (Wineburg et al., 2016). It is a worthwhile venture to consider how to prepare young people to navigate media landscapes littered by truthy lies, the threat of “fake news”, and the like, and YPAR might be an effective intervention toward this goal. As stated by students, one mechanism that drew them closer to what was happening in the news was the intentional cultivation of empathy in the engagements they were having in class. Many students referenced engagements with text and with issues that centered empathy and perspective taking as reasons that they thought twice about media portrayals they encountered daily.

As it relates to addressing teacher practice, students perceived YPAR as a vehicle for teacher care, where teachers could demonstrate more visibly to students that they cared for them and had a stake in the issues that students identified in the school. Moreover, students read teachers’ positive engagements with YPAR as evidence that they were committed to students’ socio-emotional needs and interests, a focus that was often lacking in the school according to students. Students’ reading of YPAR as having the potential to transform relationships between teachers and students aligned with the leadership’s intention in introducing the program to the school. One final point is that students sometimes read evidence of teachers’ care through their approach to adopting technology. Students cited the tremendous potential in using technology to center student perspectives and interests, but spoke critically about those teachers who weren’t able to infuse such an understanding in their classes. They were intimately aware of the ways in which technology was used by some teachers for the purposes of efficiency and accountability, and hoped that they shift teacher practice by sharing their work in the YPAR class.
Implications

In moving forward, English teachers and literacy researchers will have an important role in asking probing questions that help us all to better understand how to support student voice and agency toward more equitable civic, social and academic futures. In the current educational landscape, concepts like grit and growth mindset (See Table 7.3) are perpetuated as the most desirable dispositions that students can possess. They have been adopted in schools with great fanfare, with little to no attention to the power structures in education that either hither or support students in their acquiring of skills necessary for full participation in society. Focusing on concepts that prioritize students’ role in the driver seat rather than interrogating what makes the terrain easier or more challenging to navigate seems faulty to me. Of course, given the focus on continuous standardized testing and restrictive assessments, there will be students who consistently compete against labels of failure within educational settings, if the road is never altered and the measures remain the same. We don’t just need better drivers. We need smoother terrain. To extend the metaphor to account for plurality and more inclusive epistemological stances, we might even say that we need another way of transportation altogether.

Table 7.3 Grit/Growth Mindset vs. Agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grit/Growth Mindset</th>
<th>Agency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students expected to work within systems that already exist</td>
<td>• Students develop competencies to create the world anew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positions students as individual actors expected to act on own behalf</td>
<td>• Students work collaboratively and draw on each others’ strengths in pursuit of larger collective goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Views students’ abilities as divorced from larger systemic and systematic inequalities</td>
<td>• Accounts for external challenges like racism and oppression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study very intentionally disrupts the meritocratic notions of success that are so prevalent in schools and more specifically, in literacy achievement. For the future, we need multiple forms of assessment and evaluation that account for the plural ways that young people not only practice and engage with literacy, but also come to understand themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers. Moreover, we must work diligently to more intimately understand the ways in which multiple agentive actors come to influence the discourses that ultimately help mediate young people’s experience with literacy and with school writ large. This is why I intentionally sought to highlight the pedagogies and school leadership philosophies that ultimately shaped the adoption of YPAR in school.

As a contribution to the field, this study contributed to a growing body of literature that captures YPAR projects in school settings (Ozer et al., 2010; Romero et al., 2008; Garcia, 2012; King, 2013; Irizarry, 2015) foregrounding in particular the literacy and socialization practices adopted as part of the larger program. What makes it a unique contribution is its focus on agency as reflected in the literacy practices attached to healing, critical literacy, and cultural representation. Each of these instantiations have been oft referenced in the field of English Education as important factors influencing students’ engagement with school and with literacy, but as far as I am aware, this is the first to trace all three as they live inside of an in-school YPAR program. Future research might extend this line of inquiry to other youth development programs, in order to understand those literacy practices and engagements that support students’ sense of agency as they pursue civic ends. Mixed methods approaches might also bolster this study, in order to capture a broader snapshot of how the guideposts of agency that define this study are interpreted and enacted by students in school.
Marching Orders

I will never forget the first time I heard my current doctoral advisor, Dr. Ernest Morrell, give a talk about his work at NCTE, ending with what he named as “marching orders” for researchers, teachers, community members, and students looking to change their school communities through projects like YPAR. At the time, I was a classroom teacher who was looking to better adapt YPAR in my Detroit classroom, and Dr. Morrell had been the person whose work I had looked to the most for an example. His modeling of marching orders resonated with me as it compelled everyone in the room to engage; you simply could not leave the session without feeling like you had to go back to your respective context and act. To honor his ritual and to carve out specific routes for various stakeholders based upon the research findings captured in this study, I would like to conclude with a few sets of marching orders that I hope will be helpful for those thinking more intentionally about the capacity for programs like YPAR in schools to support agentive learning ecologies that center critical literacy, cultural sustenance, and healing as viable and humanizing ends.

Marching Orders for Researchers and Teacher Educators

- Consider how to prepare teachers to shape learning environments that democratize decision-making and more intentionally center youth voice. Many of the tensions that young people experience in school have to do with power hierarchies that silence their perspectives and discount the experiences and literacies that they bring with them into the classroom. Excavating positionalities and engaging in multiliteracies activities are two ways to prepare teachers to be more open to these priorities.

- Engage young people not as objects of study, but as full participants in the research process. This includes petitioning them as informants of the research design process.
Young people are living the issues that they are studying, and can provide valuable insight into not only how these issues manifest themselves in their lives, but also viable solutions in bringing about change.

Marching Orders for Students

- Be prepared to take risks in your thinking during class. Sometimes figuring out the question that you want to ask is more challenging than pursuing the answer. Following through on designing and implementing a research study requires a commitment to the inquiry process and a willingness to be vulnerable with your peers. Position yourself to be open to failure and embrace challenges as they arise.

- Have fun! Don’t be afraid to explore ideas using alternative modes not traditionally valued in school. Write bars, draw, create stuff, repurpose assignments to your liking and understanding, and share. As a young person, you have a fresh perspective that the world deserves to engage with. How are you going to change the world if your way of seeing it, engaging with it, and shaping it falls by the wayside? Practice creating and interrogating the world around you like someone who has a stake in its future….because you do!

- Hold space for your peers. Sometimes sharing ideas or experiences is challenging in a group setting. Be an active listener and ask questions that help your peers refine their thinking. Draw upon what you have learned about critical social theories and issues that you have been exploring to frame questions that you ask.

Marching Orders for Teachers

- Engage students in reading and discussion practices that engender critical hope. Ask questions of young people that position them to understand the ways in which racial and socioeconomic factors intersect with social issues that they are engaging with or reading
about. Just as important, however, prompt them to consider what can be done to change those issues and how to heal from the consequences wrought by them. Young people need teachers who can take active stances that support the belief that they can shape the world.

- Urge students to invest in a sense of radical empathy, asking them to consider the ways in which people living under different circumstances from them might view and/or process issues. This can be done by storytelling, or even through lines of questioning that require students to consider a character’s feelings or experiences in stories as they navigate challenging issues.

- On a similar note, challenge students to read information with a critical eye that de-centers their ideological position. Guide students through activities that help them become aware of what frames their perceptions of issues, and actively challenge those perceptions that promote dehumanization of any person or group of people.

- Curate group configurations around student diversity so that students are encouraged to share marginalized perspectives in ways that sustain their cultural experiences and perspectives. Embolden them to draw on multiple literacies, diverse points of view, and cultural understandings to make sense of issues so that their ways of knowing and understanding are affirmed.

- Make intentional efforts to publically affirm students’ voices and perspectives, and be diligent about deferring to students’ knowledge and frames of reference. Young people need to hear, see, and feel that they matter, and their engagements with adults often times becomes the measuring stick for this mattering.
- Share your work. Pedagogies that support student agency and critical civic engagement must be documented and shared with the larger academic research community and with policymakers writ large. You have a valuable vantage point that needs to be shared, and are best equipped and most knowledgeable about what happens in your classroom.

Attend conferences and share your work; write for academic journals, blog, and convene with other educators who are looking to invest in the kinds of work that you are pursuing.
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APPENDIX A- Exploratory Study Sample Life History Interview

Participant Entry Marked with Single Initial; Researcher identified as DF

DF: Testing, 1, 2, 3. So, this is our third interview. It's November 27th, I think?

H: 6th.

DF: 26th, thank you. This is our final interview for now and we've talked a lot about your prior experiences with schooling and literacy and a little bit about how you ended here as principal, but the purpose of today's interview is to really think about presently, how you see the role of literacy in young people's lives and specifically here at NBMS and to think about how you think positive experiences with literacy and schooling can be shaped and what you see ... How you see your role in that process as an administrator. I know I'm throwing a lot out there, but I'm trying to gauge, now that we've discussed all of this, where you stand as it relates to your role and mediating these powerful experiences that you've began to touch on with your own philosophy in earlier interviews.

H: That's an interesting question or topic because I do think that, while you, as an educator in general and in certain- different roles, whether it be teacher or school leader of some kind or whatever it is, you bring all these beliefs and experiences and expectations, and whatever else you bring. You bring them all to the table and you ... I'm distracted by the bell and yelling and the ...

DF: So am I.

H: Kind of thing, but there's nothing I can do to quiet that down.

You bring to the table, all these things. How much you allow them to influence the work is another story. Or at least how con ... I guess another way to put it would be how intentionally it influences your work and how much form a conscious philosophy about that is just another matter entirely and I think that there is a spectrum of that and where you are on that spectrum has a variety of consequences.

First of all, I think that there can be attitudes and philosophies about literacy that can be very harmful. Sometimes people are cognizant of them and sometimes they're not and sometimes they're deliberate attitudes and sometimes they're not. People generally, I don't think, are intentionally harmful, although I think a lot of times people aren't at all reflective as to whether or not their attitudes and beliefs actually result in harmful practice and harmful outcomes and are willing to be reflective and so on.

For example, I do think a lot of educators bring really negative attitudes about class and race into the field and they don't recognize that those attitudes are negative and they don't recognize the impact that those attitudes have on the outcomes and the lives of kids. Sometimes they're just not at all in touch with
those attitudes. Sometimes people bring in attitudes that can be very positive or even that they think can be very positive, but it can also be a delicate matter as to how deliberately you let that shape what you're trying to do. That's where, see, I think that work like YPAR [inaudible 00:04:17] is good because there's a definite philosophy and attitude that aligns with what I believe in, that is that we should be teaching kids and giving kids and young people the opportunity to have agency and to be empowered, and I think that transcends a lot of politics. It transcends a lot of ideologies. It is almost a sort of pragmatic philosophy. It is almost a humanist philosophy, as opposed to a dogmatic ideology. It's consistent with a number of ideologies and I like it in that sense. What, I think, can be harmful is when you have ideologies or attitudes that cause you to ... It's really hard for me to concentrate. It's hard for me to sustain my train of thought. (construction noise in the background constantly)

The reason I'm contrasting this to those ideologies is because, one: I see so much of this happen and it's so frustrating because you want to address directly like, "What is your idea about literacy? What is your idea about education?" I feel like we're using literacy sort of synonymously with a number of ... We're not narrowly defining literacy here. You wonder sometimes, what is your attitude and how is it driving you and what belief system is informing your decisions and the way that you're interacting with kids and the policies that you're making and the sort of subtle nuanced, day-to-day, moment-to-moment decisions that you are making. When it's one where there are these, you know sort of negative attitudes about class and race and gender and sometimes it's even ... A lot of times, people think they have positive attitudes about those things or they sort of cloak their negative attitudes with this sense of sort of ... If I were to try to make up a name for it, it would be like "justified entitlement" or something that like, "Well, we can all be ..." like when I say entitlement, I don't mean entitlement like economic entitlements. I mean entitlement like power entitlements. That's really what I'm talking about and the idea that there are these sort of class entitlements and that there's this idea in America that really we all have those entitlements, when we don't and they're not synonymous with empowerment or that we could all be empowered, but we don't all have these entitlements and I think it's interesting when people who have these class power entitlements get so defensive or critical of the idea of political and economic entitlements. Because, in truth, there is no doubt that what's really going on there is that they are protecting territory, like there are only but so many entitlements to go around. If I'm in an entitled class, we can't be going and evening the playing field in any way, when in reality, there is a finite economy of entitlement. Entitlement only happens because some people have and other peoples don't and it is a point blank fallacy to sort of engage in this idea that everybody can access entitlement.

I think that's the whole like ... so when you look at this whole Cosby thing, right? What people are respond ... What a lot of more progressive thinkers are responding to about Cosby is it's sort of like now it's finally our opportunity to say Cosby may have been mistreating these women, but people are using it as this opportunity to attack the underlying fallacy of what Cosby was about, which was
this whole ... He sort of projected this idea that entitlement was available to
everybody as opposed to empowerment and that was really sort of his subversive
message that I think a lot of progressive thinkers really recoiled at, and it's funny
that now that this is all happening, that's really the dot, the thing that people are
jumping all over is that Cosby's message has always been this subversive,
undermining message that like, "Well look at me. I have power, money, and
entitlement and so what's wrong with everybody else?" If you sort of take away
the race from there, he essentially, and I read an article about this yesterday, he
essentially was just one of the first people in the country to take that narrative into
his race, which I think people appreciated who wanted to see that narrative be
accessible to them, but people that understood that's not a good narrative, period,
always were uncomfortable with what he represented. That's a really roundabout
ting, but I'm bringing it back to the question and the point, which is you see a lot
of educators do exactly what Cosby did and I don't mean raping people. What I
mean is you see a lot of educators taking this idea of a non-empathic expectation.
That is not the same thing as high expectations. That is not the same thing as
believing in the potential of everybody. That's really a subversive way to absolve
yourself of responsibility which is the worst thing to do when you're an educator,
but also to shift responsibility to the individual without actually providing a
scaffold to the individual. To essentially just say, "It's really up to everyone else
do for themselves." Instead of, at minimum, teach people to do for themselves
and this is ... Bringing that back to my overarching point about YPAR [inaudible
00:11:46] is that it transcends that ideological dissonance between the
progressive/conservative idea of empowerment/entitlement because it is about the
individual having agency over their environment, but it's also about providing
structure so that they're able to do that and that is what I feel like that's who I am
in the work.

I am not here to preach at kids about Ferguson or Cosby or the role of race or the
role of class or the role of gender. I'm here to teach kids to think about those
things and everything else that's around them because they are the issues of the
day and to think of them with an educated mind and an empowered mind and a
belief that you as an individual do have power over what's going on around you,
but that you have to understand how to access that power and how to find balance
against entitlement of those who have power and those who have entitlement and
to understand that you can be a causal factor in your environment.

I see people doing things in schools that I don't think are necessarily productive
because we shouldn't have to spoon feed (13:35) to children and to youngsters
what their beliefs about these things should be. If we really believe in what we
believe ... I don't care what your ideology is, if you believe we are the product of
evolution and that morality is synonymous with logic and humanism or if you
believe all the way on the other side that we were created in a day and that the
world is only but a handful of thousand years old and that everything is under a
grand design. Whichever one you believe in, however that influences what you
believe about the world around you, whatever ideology you have if you really
think it's the truth, what are you afraid of letting kids think for themselves and find out for themselves what's right and wrong?

I'll take, Ferguson is a great example, right? Ferguson is not black and white, see what I did there? But, it really isn't black and white. There are a lot of narratives in Ferguson and they speak to a lot of nuanced issues. You have people with very black and white attitudes when things like this happen. It is because there is something that is very important to them that they have a vestment in or a strong reaction or belief about and there are .... It's funny because there are nuanced ideas and responses that get out there and they get ... Sometimes you see really good thinking get shouted down by people who are theoretically in the same camp. I'm really talking about on both sides of this.

The reason that kind of thinking and that sort of polarization of response doesn't lead to any kind of true progress. What leads to true progress is people being able to understand the complexity and the multi-layered nuances of situations like that and what's productive and not productive and what to listen to and what to filter out and what role the media really is in isn't and what the role of community leaders is and isn't and ... and when we want kids to be able to go into this world and do something about it, we have to give them an opportunity not just to see what other people have done and not just to see what we've done and not to just fill into our box, no matter how much we believe in our box like, "This is the box you have to think, you have to see this truth." Well, if it's really the truth and you teach them to be truth seekers, they will find it. If you teach them to be thinkers and it's what's truly logical. If you think teach to be even believers, if it's a belief that's ... I mean I do very much believe that it needs to be grounded in logic and evidence. I believe in that. Yet, I mean I'm really sort of go off the script here for a minute, but ...So one of the things that I think is dangerous about really narrow dogma is that there's this ... And I don't even mean religiously here, I just mean sort of dogmatic thinking ... Is that there is this very narrow definition of what is true and yet there is this, almost charade of intellectual integrity and this idea that it can be bolstered by a logic and a rationalism and if you really believe that rational thought is important, then you have to give people room to draw their own conclusions. (18:35)

That's what I feel like my role is as my role in literacy with young people is to give them the tools to be able to draw their own conclusions and when I talk in a graduation or an honor assembly or an assembly and I'm talking to kids, what I talk to them about is things that I feel are undeniable truths. Thing like, "You know what? The world is full of obstacles, but the more empowered and educated you are, the greater your chances of overcoming those obstacles." The world is full of inequality, but you really can do something about it. Things that ... I'm not telling them what they should go out and do. I'm telling them that they can go out and do something. I feel that a lot educators come into the field and they lose track of that or they have a twisted idea about that or they never really believed that in the first place. Or, they believe that they can do something more direct about that than is probably healthy. When you can actually provide an
intellectually fertile environment for children to figure that stuff out properly themselves. Now you've got a learning community that can really make a difference. That's [inaudible 00:20:20].

DF: I think it's interesting and I wonder how much I should ... Because a lot of it is you telling stories, right? And me listening and thinking about how you're telling that story just as much as the content, right? And something ... So I don't know if I'm supposed to, like if this is outside the boundaries of the tradition of life histories, right? If I'm interfering too much, but something I noticed is that when you're discussing how you see literacy and schooling, there's a relationship between you and the students and what you think should happen, but you also have this unique vantage point in that you're an administrator. So, I think to myself you have this philosophy and belief about young people and you speak of the engagements that you've had with young people but oftentimes when you reference teachers, sometimes it's like they're out there. They're spoken of almost outside of your own ... I don't want to ... I guess I'm thinking, I'm asking myself if this is your philosophy and belief about young people, what is your role here at NBMS in getting them there on a day to day, outside of just instruction?

H: I understand and there's a lot of things. The school is organized around that belief system. The pedagogy that I try to teach and support teachers and promote the kind of teachers I try to hire are the ones that believe in empowerment and ones that know how to create empowerment and when I got into a classroom and I see that a teacher doesn't know how to create empowerment, I try to teach them how to. It doesn't mean I'm trying to teach them how to teach kids to march. It means that I'm trying to teach them how to teach kids to think, to ask questions, to answer questions, to read and analyze text, to question each other, to engage in meaningful discussion and to write coherently about what they think, to unpack critical text and to analyze the quality of the evidence that is being used and whether or not the claim that's being made is valid or de-constructive, to make connections between history and current events and what the actual outcomes and consequences of history were and the nuanced stories and perspectives that actually existed instead of that single story and when they engage in science and math, that they're problem solvers, that they're thinkers, that they think empirically, that they think creatively, that they make connections, that they bring a capacity to read and to comprehend to that work so that they are not simply absorbing information and facts and phenomena, but they are synthesizing them with their experience in the world and what they want to do and that they are becoming, essentially, empowered thinkers and empowered participants in the world. And so my role is to lead a school where that's what the school looks like and that's how the school is characterized and that's a really hard thing to do in a public school with a bunch of people who essentially have these more or less bureaucratic positions.

As much as we are professionals, and I include myself in saying this, as much as we are professionals, we have a bureaucratic job with a pension and tenure and a union and protections and a contract and expectations and accountability
structures and framework that no matter how much we try to be creative, it is defined by certain parameters and philosophies that are in the bedrock. I take all of that and I still think of myself as a school leader. When I speak to all these things, I know I said this before, I really believe that I can create a school like that. That's where it starts. I feel empowered to say I can do that in this school. I can hire the right kind of people, train them, teach them, learn together, read the right things, try the right things in the classroom. We can create that kind of school.

It's critically important that I have ... The reason I talk about teachers so much ... I understand the point you were making, but it's not that I'm talking about them as if their work is separate from my belief system. That is my work, to think about teachers and what they're thinking, the same way you're asking me these questions. This is the subtext of my work always. What are you thinking? What are your belief systems? What do you believe in about how kids learn when you teach a class like that and you bring the materials and resources and planning and curriculum to the table in the way you did and you use assessment in the way did? What does that say about what you believe about kids? When you create [inaudible 00:25:39] environment in this way, when you engage your professional learning or don't in this way, when you engage in collaboration with your colleagues or don't in this way, what is your belief system?

I don't care whether you do or don't believe in God. Whether you're conservative or no, whether you believe in the ... What your political ideologies are about race and class and entitlements and those kinds of things. I really don't. What I care about is do you understand the moral imperative that it is to be a teacher, you're fucking teacher. You know what I'm saying? I don't care what you believe in you're a teacher and you better believe in that and believing in being a teacher means believing in kids' capacity to think and to do the right thing and to be a good person. Because if you don't believe that, you're in the wrong fucking profession and get out. If you do believe it, then maybe you've forgotten it. Maybe you don't understand how to get from point A to believe B, how to get from the belief system to the practice that actually goes along with that belief system and I'm going to teach you how to believe in kids and get kids to believe in themselves and to believe in the power of literacy and the importance of literacy and that literacy means empowerment.

Literacy means agency in the world around you. That's my goal. When I'm talking about all these things, I'm almost implicitly like ... Yeah, that's because that's what I do. I ... This is my ship. This is how we're going to do it on this ship. I'm not ... It's not about whether we're going to respond to something in the news the same way and it's not about whether we're going to have the same belief about some sort of dogma or political point or do you think that the climate change is cyclical or man-made. It's about do you understand that this is something that kids need to learn to think about and make decisions about. I really believe that it's pretty dang obvious the things that I'm talking about, what's right and wrong. But, I believe in those beliefs enough to know that if I'm teaching people to be critical thinking,
they're going to come to the right conclusions and I don't have to just give them one side. It's like here, let's read the article that says the other side of this and let's take a look at the quality of evidence that's being used and the quality of reasoning that's being used and then let's look at an article over here that says this side of it and let's look at the quality of evidence to the quality of reasoning. I'm going to let you guys just talk about the quality of evidence and the quality of reasoning and then sit back and just bask in glow of the power of the truth and the power of the human mind to discern the truth for itself. That's what a school should be doing.

DF: So, I hear you saying that how that happens on your end is through hiring practices.

H: Mmhmm (affirmative).

DF: Through attempting to set up something like [inaudible 00:29:08]so curriculum decisions, program decisions. And what I also here, because I haven't heard and I haven't walked around the building with you is that you have thorough conversations with teachers.

H: I supervise practice. There's an element of this that I do talk about with teach and there's an element of this that I don't talk about with teachers. Even in that, yes I do. I set the ground work, but I also don't think it's my role to walk around and preach this. I think that it is about the practice. It is about the implications of what you're doing. You could believe this all you want. If you don't know how to do it, what does that matter? In the end, what I do is I supervise practice and I model these beliefs and we talk about these beliefs and they are embedded in the professional learning and collaboration that goes on. If they're not it gets challenged. It's .... I am not a prophet for this stuff. I'm a practitioner and being a practitioner means teaching other people to be practitioners. Really where it really happens is when I understand whether or not you are going to be a practitioner in this work or not. Because, if you are going to be a practitioner in this work, I am going to invest in helping you to be the best practitioner you can be. If you are not going to be a practitioner in this work, I'm going to invest in helping you to understand that this is not going to work.

I really believe there I a parallel to competence. What a teacher does is shepherd young minds. You cannot be a good teacher and not believe in the power of the mind of a youngster. If you don't, that equals not being a good teacher and your practice will show that. I have yet to see a great teacher that doesn't believe in the power of children to think for themselves. That is ultimately my belief system about education, the power of people to think for themselves. That's what it's about.

Sometimes it is not natural, what we want to do, what our impulses are ... Are not always in alignment with that and that's where having the ability to be reflective is really important to look at yourself and your practice and say what I'm doing does
not reinforce what I believe in, it does not help move us towards what I believe in. It's more a reaction of [inaudible 00:32:00] and I need to filter that out and I try to ... That's sometimes where the conversations come in is you're talking to somebody, you say, "Let's just get to the bottom of what you're thinking is about what you're doing here because I'm not sure that you really believe in what you're doing here." You get that person to say, "You're right, I don't. I need to be more reflective and whatever it is." But, if you can't get somebody to that point, to be reflective and purposeful about their practice, that is a competency issue. It's like you're not going to be able to do the right thing, the right kind of practice, if you're not going to be able to fundamentally embrace that practice is about the capacity of young people to think for themselves and then engage in that work.

Those conversations generally don't tend to be productive. They don't tend to serve much purpose, because I don't know that I can really change that. That's one I'm not sure that is my role. I'm going to make you see and do this, I don't know that I can. What I can do, is I can help you along, but you've got to believe that. I think that's what my role is, to supervise in practice, but to supervise what I believe practice is about, which is very simply at its rue, supporting the capacity of young people to think critically, independently, logically, coherently.

DF: I guess I'm ... I was asking you because I think that people believe that it's kind of magic, right? You hear about these schools. It's known that NBMS has turned around in the past 8 years or something. It's known that there are these dots on the map in terms of urban schools that do better than others. People oftentimes think, "Oh this is magic." I think in coming to this work, and I know ...

H: [crosstalk 00:34:12] which is sort of like magic. But, it's not. It's intentional.

DF: I know that, and I'm speaking kind of off the record too. I know that it's not magic. When you're in a particular environment that there things that are happen and that strategical and intentionally there are people who are making decisions along similar lines. But, it's also important, I think, in the field. Not to necessarily say there are best practices that everybody can adopt, but to understand what you as an administrator, who's over this whole thing, you know what strategically you're doing. So, I'm poking at that a little bit to try and get at some of that and thinking about that, because I think it's useful to know OK you have these beliefs, but how does that manifest itself in the day-to-day or how has that evolved over time? I think people would be interested in that. I'm letting you go, but I'm just letting you know, because I know I kind of ...

H: I understand.

DF: I poked you a little, but it's because I think ...

H: It's fine.

DF: If you have more thoughts about that and you happen to be at home ... You're like ah I might go over this a bit.
H: Usually this stuff doesn't really surface unless we're talking about [crosstalk 00:35:29]. No problem.

DF: I'm just saying if some ...
APPENDIX B- First Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Protocol

Good Morning/Afternoon,

Brief self-introduction…

Thanks again for your interest in my study and for agreeing to be interviewed. Your responses will contribute to my research on how students develop agency in youth participatory action research class. This interview is part of research I am conducting for my dissertation (to earn my doctoral degree). The interview will last about 40 minutes. As I mentioned in the letter inviting you to participate in the study and requesting your approval, I will treat your interviews as strictly confidential. I will not share what you tell me with your teachers or anyone else, unless you gave me permission to do so. For example, I will not use your name in any written report. Instead, I will use pseudonyms or codes to replace your name and the names of any persons you should mention.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may say that you’d rather not answer a question if you don’t want to. You may also choose not to participate in the study at any time.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview in order to have a more complete record of our conversation. Would that be acceptable to you?

______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)

If at any time you are uncomfortable with what’s being recorded, you can reach over and press the stop button, or just let me know.

This form states what I just told you about confidentiality. Would you please read and sign this form, and let me know if you have any questions?

*Give interviewee time to read and sign forms, which he has already signed. One copy to researcher and one to interviewee.*

Before we get started, is there anything more I can tell you about the purpose of this research or this interview process?

During this interview, I am going to ask you about how you approach planning for the class and your perceptions of YPAR as a program in the school currently; and in the second your reflections at the ends of the course on how YPAR lived in your classroom and on the social action projects that students took on at the end of the school year. So let’s begin.
Beginning Guiding Questions for Interviews:

- Tell me a little bit about your planning process. How do you go about selecting materials for each class?
- How do you differentiate for students across interests and achievement levels?
- How has the adoption of YPAR changed over time? Is there a difference between what it looked like in previous years and what it looks like now that it is sanctioned as a course?
- Do you think that there is evidence in the building that YPAR lives in it? What might an outsider notice that you believe is an outgrowth of the adoption of the program?
- What kinds of social action projects did students design that you felt captured the attention of their targeted audience well? How do you think they achieved this?
- What benefits do you think students have experienced as a result of participating in the classes? What students do you think did not benefit and why?
- What would you change for next year if you were to teach the course again?

Note: Again, these are beginning questions. The two interviews will be heavily informed by data that is collected along the way and I will ask the teacher to offer ideas for questions that he would like to explore and reflect upon as a practitioner.
APPENDIX C - Classroom Observation Protocol

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<tr>
<th>Observation Notes</th>
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APPENDIX D- First Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Good Morning/Afternoon,

Brief self-introduction…

Thanks again for your interest in my study and for agreeing to be interviewed. Your responses will contribute to my research on how students develop agency in youth participatory action research class. This interview is part of research I am conducting for my dissertation (to earn my doctoral degree). The interview will last about 40 minutes. As I mentioned in the letter inviting you to participate in the study and requesting your parent/guardians’ approval, I will treat your interviews as strictly confidential. I will not share what you tell me with your teachers or anyone else, unless you gave me permission to do so. For example, I will not use your name in any written report. Do you know what a pseudonym is? (Explain.) I will use pseudonyms or codes to replace your name and the names of any persons you should mention.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may say that you’d rather not answer a question if you don’t want to. You may also choose not to participate in the study at any time.

With your permission, I would like to record this interview in order to have a more complete record of our conversation. Would that be acceptable to you?

______ yes   ______ no  (please initial next to your response)

If at any time you are uncomfortable with what’s being recorded, you can reach over and press the stop button, or just let me know.

This form states what I just told you about confidentiality. Would you please read and sign this form, and let me know if you have any questions?

Give interviewee time to read and sign forms, which would have already been signed by his/her parents. One copy to researcher and one to interviewee.

Before we get started, is there anything more I can tell you about the purpose of this research or this interview process?

For your YPAR class, your teacher has been taking time out to talk with you about your research projects and why you think they are important. During this interview, I am going to ask you similar questions and give you an opportunity to reflect on your answers. I would like for us to talk a bit more about you and your background, as well as your thoughts about being a student at CHMS and your experiences in YPAR class.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Related Research Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) How would you describe yourself to someone who has never met you? How do you think your friends might describe you?</td>
<td>Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>2) Tell me a little about your family background, your neighborhood, what you consider to be your culture, etc.</td>
<td>Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) Talk to me about the YPAR class a little bit. What kinds of things have you been learning?</td>
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<td>4) What do you find interesting in the YPAR class? Is this different from what your friends find interesting?</td>
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<tr>
<td>5) What kinds of reading have you been doing in YPAR? How do you find the information that you need in order to do the research?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6) Is there a time where you felt like you did something in your YPAR group that affected the way your YPAR project would go?</td>
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<td>7) Has YPAR made you think differently about anything? Either this year or during sixth or seventh grade?</td>
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<td>8) So your teacher has probably mentioned to you that YPAR stands for “Youth Participatory Action Research,” and I’m curious about what you think the “Action” part means?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9) Can you explain how YPAR brings students and adults together?</td>
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<td>10) How do you think the adults in the building view YPAR?</td>
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<td>11) What kind of student would you describe yourself as in the YPAR class? What about in your other classes?</td>
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<td>12) Is there anything else you would like to share?</td>
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### Guiding Principles for Second Semi-Structured Student Interview

During our first interview, we talked about your impressions of YPAR. Today, I would like to more about the projects you are creating in YPAR class. I would also like to know you see yourself in YPAR class amongst your teacher and your peers. I also want to talk about your responses during the first interview and review some of your work in the YPAR class with you.

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<th>Guiding Analytic Level</th>
<th>Related Research Question</th>
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<td><strong>Adult influence on discourse communities in YPAR</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Reflect on what YPAR work students have shared with adults, if at all. Ask about what moves adults made that they found helpful or encouraging, and also frustrating or hindering.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Reflect on who students are thinking about as it relates to audience for their work. Ask them who they imagine sharing their projects with and whether or not this influences the decisions that they are making along the way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Go over assignments that students have completed in their YPAR class thus far together. Discuss how they chose their topic, and whether or not they care about it. What do they think about how the teacher structures the activities and lessons? Do they feel committed to the project or do they feel forced to do it because it’s a required class?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy and Socialization Practices</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Talk about the activities they are currently engaged in or have recently completed. Discuss their participation and engagement with those activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Using my observation notes as a starting point, ask about specific events and the activity and or feelings happening around those events, such as</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their participation or lack thereof related to a particular assignment or text, how they chose to go about approaching a task, what they felt particularly motivated or discouraged by, and/or the factors that influenced their decisions inside of class.

- Review students’ YPAR projects, both from the past (where applicable) and those currently underway. Discuss their thoughts about some of their favorite and/or least favorite parts of it. Ask students about their thoughts about readings and the development of their research project as it progresses. Discuss how decisions get made within the group, how they prioritize goals, what shapes their reading choices, and if they feel they have power within their current group configurations.

**Moments of Change**

- Discuss students’ feelings about their participation in YPAR class both during this academic year and previously. Encourage them to talk more about specific moments they reference in greater detail.
- Ask students to share what they might describe YPAR as to a stranger: its purpose as well as the process.
- Discuss moments documented in observation notes where change was documented, and ask students to explain their thinking about the events.

For the third and final interview, I will discuss with participants their final YPAR projects and also follow up on events that I documented during classroom observations, using the three analytic levels as a guide: Adult influence on discourse communities in YPAR, Literacy and Socialization Practices, and Moments of Change.
APPENDIX F- Student Focus Group Protocol

Good Morning/Afternoon,

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this discussion. Like the interviews that some of you have participated in, your responses will contribute to my research on how students develop agency in youth participatory action research class. This discussion will last about 40 minutes. As I mentioned in the letter inviting you to participate in the study and requesting your parent/guardians’ approval, and as I told you before your interview, I will treat your comments as strictly confidential. I will not share what is discussed here with your teachers or anyone else, unless you gave me permission to do so. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may say that you’d rather not answer a question if you don’t want to.

With your permission, I would like to record this discussion in order to have a comprehensive record of our conversation. Would that be acceptable to each of you?

______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)
______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)
______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)
______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)
______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)
______ yes  ______ no  (please initial next to your response)

If at any time you are uncomfortable with what’s being recorded, just let me know.

We are getting together today to talk as a group about some of the topics that have come up in your YPAR class and what it’s like to be a student here at CHMS. I am going to ask you questions about your journal prompt responses, your experiences in YPAR class, and about the projects and films that you have been making as part of your research. This is meant to be an open discussion, so feel free to chime in if after someone else is done talking if you feel like you have something to add. Add the end, we will jot a list down of possible ideas we would like to discuss next time and maybe some journal prompts we would like to write to and think about before then.

Before we get started, is there anything more I can tell you about our discussion today?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Focus Group Questions</th>
<th>Related Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- How would you describe your experience in school so far? Does anything stand out to you?</td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What do you think the purpose of YPAR is? How would you describe it to your friends or family?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tell me about the films you are making in your YPAR class. How did you decide who you wanted to interview?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What made you choose the topic that you are researching?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What is your vision for your research project? What would you like to see happen?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Who would you like discuss your research with? Have you started to contact them? Have you contacted them already?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What are you reading about in your YPAR classes? What led you to select these readings?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What journal prompt would you like to discuss with the group today? What about your response made it feel important to share?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How would you describe yourself as a student in the YPAR class?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Describe anything that stands out to you about YPAR.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Do you feel that anything has changed as a result of your participation in YPAR?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initial focus group interview questions will be generated by me as the researcher, as referenced below. Future interviews, however, will be heavily informed by questions generated by participants at the end of each session as well as artifacts that they collect along the way and wish to discuss.
APPENDIX G - Student Demographic Survey

Directions: Please complete the survey below. If you would like to ask me to clarify any of the questions, please raise your hand.

Name ________________________________

Age ______________

Grade ______________

Gender ______________

Race ______________

Ethnicity ____________

What country were you born in?

How often is English spoken in your home?

Are you eligible for free or reduced lunch?
APPENDIX H-Letter of Invitation to Teacher

Dear XXXXXX,

As you know, I’m working on my dissertation in the English Education department at Teachers College, Columbia University. I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

What: My research study seeks to examine how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shapes their literacy practices and identity, particularly as it relates to agency or students’ actions upon the world around them. My study involves a close analysis of the YPAR curriculum and how students respond to it, including examining their work for the class and going over it with them to discuss their experiences. Some of this work might include journal prompts, media projects, YPAR portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research protocols, and work stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that they can opt to share with me.

Who: You and your 7th/8th grade YPAR classes at NBMS Middle School, including the YPAR filmmaking class

When: Wednesday through Friday from February through June of 2016

How:

- Informal conversations with you about your teaching and the YPAR curriculum, when time permits.
- Two audio-recorded interviews: in the first a little background about how you approach planning for the class and your perceptions of YPAR as a program in the school currently; and in the second your reflections at the ends of the course on how YPAR lived in your classroom and on the social action projects that students took on at the end of the school year.
- Observations of your classes, three days per week for four months.
- Analysis of your curriculum and lesson planning documents
- Analysis of student work including journal entries, student media projects, brainstorming documents, advertisements, policy recommendations, census data, or survey results.

As part of the nature of academic research, the contents of my interviews and observations will be transcribed and recorded for research purposes and may be used in academic papers, publications, and presentations at conferences. Please note, however, that your name and personal information and anyone that you happen to mention would never be disclosed; all transcriptions, comments, and observations would appear in reports under a pseudonym. Thank you very much for your consideration—I hope you will volunteer to participate in this study. If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me by telephone or email, as indicated below.

Sincerely,

Danielle Filipiak
Doctoral Student, Dept. of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
Ph: 646.362.4274; Email: drf2127@tc.columbia.edu
APPENDIX I- Letter of Invitation to Students, General YPAR Classes

You’re Invited to Participate in a Study on YPAR!

Dear ______________________________, Date: ______________

As most of you know, I have been working at your school since you were in sixth grade. I have helped out in your classes, led workshops, worked with your teachers, traveled with some of you to Albany and D.C., and interacted with many of you in and out of class. I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I will be conducting at your school as part of my doctoral dissertation research at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Remember our discussions last year and with your teachers about why you thought Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) was important? Well, my study this year is interested in your answers to that question and your thoughts about what is happening in your YPAR class with XXXXX. As part of this study, I may look over many of your YPAR assignments and journals in this and previous years, interview your teacher, observe in the classroom, and interview you and some of your classmates about your own experiences in YPAR. In these interviews, I will ask you about topics such as how you might describe yourself as a student in the YPAR class and why you have chosen to research certain issues in your community. Please note, however, that your name and personal information and anyone that you happen to mention would never be revealed to anyone in or outside of school; all transcripts of interviews, comments, and observations would appear in written reports under a different name—a pseudonym.

Please let me know if you would like to be interviewed and/or have some of your work collected as part of this study. Some of this work might include journal prompts, media projects, YPAR portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research protocols, and work stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that you can opt to share with me if you’d like.

Please note that you will not be pulled out of classes for these three interviews. Each of these interviews will last 40 minutes, and we would meet at the school during lunch periods, study periods, after school, or other times that do not interfere with your academic schedule.

Thank you very much for your consideration—I hope you will volunteer to participate in this study. If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me by telephone or email, as indicated below.

Sincerely,

Danielle Filipiak
Doctoral Student, Dept. of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
Ph: 646.362.4274; Email: drf2127@tc.columbia.edu
APPENDIX J- Letter of Invitation to Students, YPAR Filmmaking Class

You’re Invited to Participate in a Study on YPAR!

Dear ______________________________, Date: __________

As most of you know, I have been working at your school since you were in sixth grade. I have helped out in your classes, led workshops, worked with your teachers, traveled with some of you to Albany and D.C., and interacted with many of you in and out of class. I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I will be conducting at your school as part of my doctoral dissertation research at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Remember our discussions last year and with your teachers about why you thought Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) was important? Well, my study this year is interested in your answers to that question and your thoughts about what is happening in your YPAR class with XXXXX. As part of this study, I may look over many of your YPAR assignments and journals in this and previous years, interview your teacher, observe in the classroom, and interview your classmates about your own experiences in YPAR. In these interviews, I will ask you about topics such as how you might describe yourself as a student in the YPAR filmmaking class, the kinds of reading you are doing, and why you have chosen to document certain themes in the school as it relates to YPAR through film. Please note, however, that your name and personal information and anyone that you happen to mention would never be revealed to anyone in or outside of school; all transcripts of interviews, comments, and observations would appear in written reports under a different name— a pseudonym.

Please let me know if you would like to be interviewed and have some of your work collected as part of this study. Some of this work might journal prompts, media projects, YPAR portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research protocols, and classwork stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that you can opt to share with me if you’d like to.

Please note that you will not be pulled out of classes for these three focus group discussions. Each of these interviews will last 40 minutes, and we would meet at the school during lunch periods, study periods, after school, or other times that do not interfere with the academic schedule.

Thank you very much for your consideration—I hope you will volunteer to participate in this study. If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me by telephone or email, as indicated below.

Sincerely,

Danielle Filipiak
Doctoral Student, Dept. of English Education
Teachers College, Columbia University
Ph: 646.362.4274; Email: drf2127@tc.columbia.edu
APPENDIX K - Letter of Invitation to Parents

Date: ______________

Dear Parent,

As some of you know, I have been working with the staff and administration at your school as a curriculum consultant for some time to implement the YPAR work, and I have met some of you at school events. I am writing to invite your son/daughter to participate in a study that I will be conducting at NBMS Middle School as part of my doctoral dissertation research at Teachers College, Columbia University.

My research study seeks to examine how middle school youth’s participation in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) class shapes their literacy practices and identity, particularly as it relates to agency or students’ actions upon the world around them. My study involves a close analysis of the YPAR curriculum and how students respond to it, including examining their work for the class and going over it with them to discuss their experiences.

In conducting this study, I may examine student work, interview the teacher, observe in the classroom, and interview some of the students in the class to ask them about their academic experiences and thoughts about YPAR. I will ask them about topics such as how they might describe themselves as students in the YPAR class and why they have chosen to research certain issues in their community.

As part of the nature of academic research, the contents of my interviews and observations will be transcribed and recorded for research purposes and may be used in academic papers, scholarly publications, and presentations at conferences. Please note, however, that your child’s name and personal information and anyone that s/he were to mention would never be disclosed; all transcriptions, comments, and observations would appear in reports under a pseudonym.

Please let me know if you would grant permission for your child to be interviewed and participate in this study. Please note that s/he would not be pulled out of classes for these interviews (about 40 minutes each), meeting with me on school premises during lunch periods, study periods, after school, or other times that do not interfere with the academic schedule.

Thank you very much for your consideration and anticipated support of this research. If you have any questions or would like more information, please feel free to contact me by telephone or email, as indicated below.

Sincerely,

Danielle Filipiak  
Doctoral Student  
Dept. of English Education  
Teachers College, Columbia University  
Ph: 646.362.4274; Email: lc2382@columbia.edu
APPENDIX L- Parent & Student Letter of Informed Consent & Student’s Rights

Teachers College, Columbia University

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

Protocol Title: Tracing Agency in a Middle School, Youth Participatory Action Research Class
Principal Investigator: Danielle Filippiak, Teachers College 646 362 4274

INTRODUCTION
Your child is being invited to participate in a research study approved by the principal called “Tracing Agency in a Middle School Youth Participatory Action Research Class.” Your child may qualify to take part in this research study because he/she is enrolled in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class at school. As part of this research study, I will be observing and taking notes during classes, examining classroom artifacts and materials, and conducting individual and group interviews (audiorecorded and transcribed) across the months of February through June of 2016. Approximately two hundred and thirty students will be invited to participate in this study, including a smaller group of students who will be selected for interviews. For those interviewed, it will take 2 hours of their time to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to explore how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shapes students’ literacy practices and identity, particularly as it relates to agency or students’ actions upon the world around them.

WHAT WILL MY CHILD BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE THAT MY CHILD CAN TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? If you decide to allow your child to participate, he/she may be invited to share work with me. Some of this work might include journal prompts, media projects, YPAR portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research protocols, and work stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that they can opt to provide me access to. They may also be randomly selected to be interviewed by Danielle Filippiak three times. During the interviews students will be asked to discuss their experiences in the YPAR class, the projects they have developed along the way, and about the ways that they define themselves as students participating in the YPAR class. These interviews will be audio-recorded. After the audio-recordings are written down they will be deleted. If your child does not wish to be audio-recorded, they will still be able to participate. Each interview will take approximately forty-five minutes, and each student will be given a pseudonym in order to keep their identity confidential.

Students enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking class may also be asked to participate in a focus group run by me where they will journal about and discuss their experiences and work produced in class in three focus group interviews, with each interview lasting approximately forty minutes. These will also be recorded. Everyone will be asked not to
discuss what is being spoken about outside of the group but it is impossible to guarantee complete confidentiality.

Students will never be taken out of class to be interviewed. Rather, the individual and focus group interviews will be scheduled in consultation with the student during lunch time, study periods, or after school. All other class observations and data collection will take place as part of the regular school schedule. Every student who agrees to an interview will also be given a demographic survey to complete that will yield general information that will be kept completely confidential.

**WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
This research has a similar amount of risk students might encounter during usual classroom activities. However, some students might experience some discomfort as they reflect on topics discussed in class or work that they have produced. Students will be reminded that they can skip any question or choose not to answer without penalty. The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep students’ information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing their identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of students’ names and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
There is no direct benefit to students for participating in this study. Because it is in part a reflective process similar to that of journaling in class and during homeroom periods, students may benefit from conversations with the researcher and discussions with their peers about how YPAR shapes agency, or students’ ability to act upon the world around them.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**
There will be no reimbursement or payment for your participation.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**
The study is over when students have completed the interview/focus group. However, students can leave the study at any time even if they haven’t finished. Students will be reminded at the beginning of each interview that they may choose not to answer any question or ask to stop the recording at any time.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**
The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.
**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?** The results of the study will be used for my dissertation and shared with the school. Written reports and data excerpts may be used for educational and academic research purposes at academic conferences and published in journals or articles. Your child’s name or any identifying information about them will not be published.

**CONSENT FOR COLLECTION OF STUDENT WORK**
The collection of student work is part of this research study. Some of this work might include journal prompts, media projects, YPAR portfolios, brainstorming documents, group research protocols, and work stored in a YPAR Google Doc folder that they can opt to share with me. If you decide that you don’t wish for their work to be collected, they will still qualify for the pool from which I will randomly select students to participate in the interview portion of this study if you would still like them to participate.

_____ I give my consent to allow my child’s work to be collected ______________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent to allow my child’s work to be collected ______________________________

Signature

**CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWING AND AUDIO RECORDING OF INTERVIEW**
Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded during the interview. If you decide that you don’t wish for them to be recorded, they will still be able to participate in this study.

_____ I give my consent for my child to be interviewed ______________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent for my child to be interviewed ______________________________

Signature

 _____ I give my consent for my child to be audio-recorded ______________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent for my child to be audio-recorded ______________________________

Signature

**WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY**

_____ I consent to allow my child’s written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College ______________________________

Signature

_____ I do not consent to allow my child’s written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College ______________________________

Signature
WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Danielle Filipiak at 646-362-4274 or at drf2127@tc.columbia.edu. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Ernest Morrell, at em2822@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

• I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
• I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future grades.
• The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
• If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
• Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
• I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to allow my child to participate in this study

Child’s Name ____________________________

Print Parent or Guardian’s Name: ____________________________

Guardian’s Signature/consent: ____________________________ Date: ____/____/____
APPENDIX M- Assent Form for Students, Individual Interviews
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

Assent Form for Minors
Protocol Title: Tracing Agency in a Youth Participatory Action Research Class
Principal Investigator Danielle Filipiak, Teachers College  Ph. #: 646-362-4274

This study will explore how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shapes their identify, literacy practices and development of agency, or students’ actions upon the world around them.

I _________________________________ (child’s name) agree to be in this study, titled “Tracing Agency in a Youth Participatory Action Research Class”.

What I am being asked to do has been explained to me by Danielle Filipiak. I understand what I am being asked to do and I know that if I have any questions, I can ask Danielle Filipiak at any time. I know that I can quit this study whenever I want to and it is perfectly OK to do so. It won’t be a problem for anyone if I decide to quit.

Name: ____________________________________________
Signature: ____________________________________________
Witness: ____________________________________________ Date: ________________

I agree to have my work collected ______ Yes ______ No
If selected, I agree to be interviewed for three semi-structured Interviews ______ Yes ______ No
I agree to have my interview audio-recorded ______ Yes ______ No

Investigator’s Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to __________________________________ in age-appropriate language. He/she has the opportunity to discuss it with me and knows that they can stop participating at any time. I have answered all of their questions and this minor child has provided the affirmative agreement (assent) to participate in this research study.

Investigator’s Signature ________________________________________

Date ________________
APPENDIX N- Assent Form for Students, Focus Group Discussions
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

Assent Form for Minors
Protocol Title: Tracing Agency in a Youth Participatory Action Research Class
Principal Investigator Danielle Filippiak, Teachers College Ph. #: 646-362-4274

This study will explore how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shapes their identity, literacy practices and development of agency, or students’ actions upon the world around them.

I_______________________(child’s name) agree to be in this study, titled “Tracing Agency in a Youth Participatory Action Research Class”.

What I am being asked to do has been explained to me by Danielle Filippiak. I understand what I am being asked to do and I know that if I have any questions, I can ask Danielle Filippiak at any time. I know that I can quit this study whenever I want to and it is perfectly OK to do so. It won’t be a problem for anyone if I decide to quit.

Name: __________________________________________________
Signature: _______________________________________________ Date: ______________
Witness: _________________________________________________ Date: ______________

I agree to have my work collected ______ Yes ______ No
If selected, I agree to be interviewed for three focus group discussions ______ Yes ______ No
I agree to have my interview audio-recorded ______ Yes ______ No

Investigator’s Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to ______________________ in age-appropriate language. He/she has the opportunity to discuss it with me and knows that they can stop participating at any time. I have answered all of their questions and this minor child has provided the affirmative agreement (assent) to participate in this research study.

Investigator’s Signature ______________________________________
Date ________________
APPENDIX O- Teacher Letter of Informed Consent and Participant’s Rights

Teachers College, Columbia University

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Tracing Agency in a Middle School, Youth Participatory Action Research Class
Principal Investigator: Danielle Filipiak, Teachers College 646 362 4274

INTRODUCTION
You are being invited to participate in a research study called “Tracing Agency in a Middle School Youth Participatory Action Research Class.” My research study seeks to examine how middle school youth’s participation in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) class shapes their identity, particularly as it relates to agency. My study involves a close analysis of the YPAR curriculum and how students respond to it, including examining their work for the class and going over it with them to discuss their experiences.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to explore how middle school youth’s participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) class shapes their development and conceptions of agency.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? You will be asked to participate in two, 40-minute long audio-recorded interviews, allow me to analyze curriculum and planning materials, and allow me to observe your class three times per week for a period of about 16 weeks. My interviews with you are meant to provide a more complete sense of what a YPAR curriculum entails. In the beginning of the data collection process, I will ask you questions about how you approach planning for the class and your perceptions of YPAR as a program in the school currently; and at the end of the course will ask you to reflect on how YPAR lived in your classroom and on the social action projects that students took on at the end of the school year.

As part of this research study, I will be observing and taking notes during classes, collecting curriculum materials, student work and documents, and conducting interviews. I will also randomly select 6 students enrolled in your general YPAR classes to participate in individual interviews for a maximum of three times. In addition, all 18 students currently enrolled in the YPAR filmmaking class may also be asked to participate in a focus group where they will journal about and discuss their experiences and work produced in class across three focus group discussions, with each interview lasting approximately forty minutes. The interviews and focus group discussions will take place outside of class hours. Recordings and research notes will be kept in locked files at my home at all times, and labeled according to individual pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The research will be conducted by Danielle Filipiak at the school site during regular school hours.
**WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
The possible risks associated with this study are minimal, similar to the amount of risk teachers usually encounter during usual work at the school. You may experience some discomfort as you reflect on challenges in implementing YPAR in the school, in discussing the political or social implications of students engaging civically, or in discussing the work of students that did not meet your expectations.

**WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**
There are no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, there may be some benefits to your participation in the study. Reflecting on materials, student work including action projects, and agency as a concept may be generative as a pedagogical practice. You might find that this opportunity to reflect on the course and on students' participation in it will incite new ideas that may enhance your instructional approach or curriculum planning. It may also help you gain a more thorough understanding of students' classroom interactions.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?**
There will be no reimbursement or payment for your participation.

**WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS?**
Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. You will also be reminded at the beginning of each interview that you may choose not to answer any question or ask to stop the recording at any time.

**PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY**
The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. Regulations require that research data be kept for at least three years.

**HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?**
The results of the study will be used for my dissertation and shared with the school. Written reports and data excerpts may be used for educational and academic research purposes at academic conferences and published in journals or articles. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published.

**CONSENT FOR CLASSROOM OBSERVATION**

**I give my consent for my class to be observed ______________________________**

Signature

**I do not consent for my class to be observed ______________________________**

Signature

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CONSENT FOR INTERVIEWING AND AUDIO RECORDING OF INTERVIEW

Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish for them to be recorded, they will still be able to participate in this study.

____ I give my consent to be interviewed ____________________________

___ I do not consent to be interviewed ____________________________

___ I give my consent to be audio recorded ____________________________

___ I do not consent to be audio recorded ____________________________

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

__ I consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College ____________________________

___ I do not consent to allow written, video and/or audio taped materials viewed outside of Teachers College Columbia University ____________________________

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Danielle Filipiak at 646-362-4274 or at drf2127@tc.columbia.edu. You can also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Ernest Morrell, at em2822@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 1002. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.
PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the researcher. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future grades.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his or her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

*My signature means that I agree to participate in this study*

Participant’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: _____/_____/_____

Name: _______________________________
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