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# Youth Voices, Public Spaces, and Civic Engagement

Edited by  
**Stuart Greene, Kevin J. Burke, and  
Maria K. McKenna**

First published 2016  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Names: Greene, Stuart, editor.

Title: Youth voices, public spaces, and civic engagement / edited by Stuart Greene, Kevin J. Burke, and Maria K. McKenna.

Description: New York : Routledge, 2016. | Series: Routledge research in education ; 159

Identifiers: LCCN 2015039258 | ISBN 9781138951099 (hardback) | ISBN 9781315668376 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Urban youth—Education—United States. | Community education—United States. | Civics—Study and teaching—United States. | Education, Urban—Social aspects—United States.

Classification: LCC LC5141 .Y68 2016 | DDC 370.9173/2—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015039258>

ISBN: 978-1-138-95109-9 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-315-66837-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Printed and bound in the United States of America by Publishers Graphics, LLC on sustainably sourced paper.

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## 5 “We Want This to Be Owned by You”

### The Promise and Perils of Youth Participatory Action Research

*Lawrence Torry Winn and Maisha T. Winn*

As we ponder over the “loving critique” (Paris & Alim, 2014) of our experiences with YPAR, we do so with a “humanizing research” framework or a methodology that seeks to reposition the researcher-participant relationship as an act of reciprocity and mutual engagement (Paris & Winn, 2013). In a letter to communities, Tuck (2009) urges scholars to resist conducting “damage-centered” research in indigenous communities and other groups that have experienced marginalization and oppression, while Cruz and Sonn (2011) encourage researchers to “decolonize” their cultural perspectives that influence their investigations and interactions with historically oppressed communities of color. Similarly, Paris and Winn (2013) call for a “humanizing research” in which scholars become “worthy witnesses” in their sites by earning the respect and trust of participants and continuing to be reflective and critical of one’s methods and stances.

YPAR is one methodological lens that takes into account the importance of research and the need to work with community members to humanize and honor their stories, knowledge, skills, and contributions. Youth participate and engage in systematic research and advocate for social change through action (Cammarota & Fine, 2007; Morrell, 2006). Grounded in an epistemology of solidarity (youth working with their elders, university-trained researchers collaborating with local youth experts, and economically privileged researching with members of the poor and working class), YPAR has a history of seeking justice for others and “represent[ing] and humaniz[ing] communities under siege . . . connect[ing] ‘us’ and ‘them’ and cultivating research as a tool for social justice” (Fine, 2012, p. 434). YPAR provides opportunities for youth, as well as their “adult allies” (Green, 2013), to reflect on their lived experiences, identify barriers and opportunities, learn about resources to assist with their most pressing issues, and find solutions to overcome obstacles.

While there are numerous examples of studies illustrating the value of YPAR (Fine, 2012; Morrell, 2006; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012) and many important action-oriented works emerging from YPAR, there are also the challenges that come along with the work. After participating in two YPAR projects, we, like many social justice and

value-centered scholars, grapple with the complexities and tensions of conducting YPAR with youth who are exposed routinely to a standardized curriculum with few opportunities to think, write, engage, challenge, and discuss critically socially and culturally relevant issues that impact their daily lives.

In this chapter, we conceptualize what it means to be equity-oriented scholars (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2009) working with and for youth in a variety of settings. In the first YPAR project we discuss, African American youth in a public high school in the urban Southeast were invited to create a curriculum for a working group charged with engaging school policies on discipline and punishment and situating school policies in a statewide and national dialogue. This working group included two student representatives from each grade level (9th–12th), a member from the school security team, four classroom teachers (math, science, social studies, and English), the principal, and Maisha, who served as an instructional coach during the school's transition from a comprehensive high school to a small learning community. This collective of 9th through 12th grade students, the Change Agents, selected a team of adult allies to support their work. Their ultimate goal was to transform their school community from punitive to restorative. However, there were tensions in the process when it seemingly took too long to envision their work together without an adult leading, facilitating, or dictating the project.

In the second YPAR project, a community of African American boys, between the ages of 14 and 18, from working-class backgrounds, and coming of age in an affluent, White, progressive Midwestern college town, read, interpreted, and interrogated reports and data that impacted their lives and the lives of their families. This working group, the Alliance, met weekly in the evenings at their housing complex community space to discuss, debate, and learn more about topics that they considered important in their lives. For more than a year, Lawrence volunteered and led workshops with two other adult allies, Monica and Lance. After sharing local and national policy reports about racial disparities and inequities across the domains of education, workforce, criminal justice, and access to health care within the group, several of the teens became interested in learning more about the causes of inequities and finding solutions to implement in their communities. The youth decided that the upcoming topics and workshops would focus on racial disparities and inequities. Similar to the Change Agents, the Alliance identified elements of the school-to-prison pipeline as the main barriers to the aspirations of Black youth to succeed both in and out of school (Meiners & Winn, 2010; Winn, 2011).

In this chapter, we raise questions about how educators can use policy reports and data sets that count urban youth while potentially discounting their stories and lived experiences. We share our experiences with YPAR projects and a purposeful reflection of this work, hoping to build capacity for adult allies of youth.

## BECOMING AN ADULT ALLY: WHEN AND WHERE DO WE ENTER AS RESEARCHERS

Youth residing in systematically oppressed communities often resist outsiders entering into their spaces without proving their authenticity and genuine commitment to getting to know, understand, and believe in them (Fisher, 2007; Winn & Ubiles, 2011). Far too often, youth workers, initiatives, and funding come and go, leaving the youth and their community feeling abandoned and distrustful toward any future programs. Although participatory action research seeks social justice and encourages collaboration with stakeholders, it's still research, which has the potential to dehumanize, colonize, misrepresent, and harm. Introducing research to communities of color is a process that takes time, commitment, and trust.

We learned from our work with youth over the past decade that gaining their trust has proved to be essential to becoming adult allies. Once trust is earned from the researchers, youth are more willing to invite them into their space and their community. For example, in January of 2013, several mothers invited Lawrence to participate and lead a workshop about academic success and career options for their sons and other youth who belonged to the Alliance. During his first few visits, he observed and listened to the group. Through blank stares and side comments, some of the members initially pushed back against Lawrence being there and insisted to Monica, the lead adult ally, that he "get to know [them]," and "know what this is about" before he officially joined the group. At one session, Lawrence brought his three-year-old son to the group. Several of the participants were drawn to his son and started asking questions:

*CHAPPELLE:* What is his name?

*LAWRENCE:* Ask him. He will tell you.

*CHAPPELLE:* Yo, man, what's your name?

*LAWRENCE:* He is being shy. He has to get to know you first. His name is Kamal.

*PRYOR[LAUGHS]:* Is that an African name? Why did you name him that?

*LAWRENCE:* Because your name tells a lot about who you are.

*PRYOR [TO KAMAL]:* Man, you are my dude.

It was only after three months of observing that the youth started transitioning from whispering and laughing to offering handshakes and "hellos" to Lawrence. For several weeks they inquired about Kamal and wanted to know when he would return. There was an unexpected space that opened between Lawrence and the youth when he brought his son. It gave the youth and Lawrence a new way of seeing each other.

Several months later, Lawrence witnessed the difficulties that an adult who was interested in working with the group experienced when he visited session. The adult proposed that he lead several workshops on police and community

relationships. Upon hearing the words “police,” the youth became disengaged. The adult visitor left distraught because the session did not go as he had planned. After the session ended, the adult allies discussed the group’s actions:

**MONICA:** You know what this about? It’s not that the boys don’t like him, but they have been let down before in the past. When we first started group, an older brotha helped lead the group, but he disappeared after several sessions. They are only acting up to see how he reacts. They also don’t want to hear about the police.

**LAWRENCE:** I understand. They (the boys) did the same thing to me. Every now and then they still test me. This is their space that they created, and I respect that.

**MONICA:** Yes, they come faithfully and want to make sure that they don’t get disappointed by someone else. Too many people have said they will help but come and go. All they have are each other.

**LANCE:** It took me close to a year to build trust with the guys. Before, they did not care for me and had no reason to trust me. I had to prove to them that I cared about them. It has finally paid off. Every now and then they push back. But I keep coming.

Lawrence and the youth building a mutual trusting relationship is the third principle of what Winn and Ubiles (2011) calls “worthy witnessing.” The four principles include the following:

- (1) Admission: How do researchers enter, and who grants them admission?
- (2) Declaration: How do researchers introduce themselves (including political stances and worldviews that inform the work)?
- (3) Revelation: How can researchers and participants achieve “equilibrium” in their trust for each other?
- (4) Confidentiality: How can researchers make responsible decisions about what remains at the table versus what is written up and disseminated in scholarly writing?

In addition to “achieving equilibrium in their trust,” understanding the participants’ community is critical to establishing a relationship to conduct participatory action research.

Wallerstein and Duran (2008) define community as a socially constructed dimension of identity, created and re-created through social interactions (p. 47). Cruz and Sonn (2011) contend that researchers “decolonize” the way researchers perceive and interact with communities of color—especially the marginalized and oppressed. This requires that scholars refrain from applying researcher jargon, theoretical assumptions, and cultural biases to communities.

Instead, researchers should spend time learning about the strengths, attributes, history, experiences, challenges, and culture of the community because each community is unique. For example, Lawrence spent three years working with incarcerated youth in Newark, New Jersey, and three years teaching and mentoring college-bound high school students in Sacramento, California. Many of the youth from all three cities listened to similar music, watched and played basketball, and lived in under-resourced neighborhoods. Yet each group has experiences and histories that were uniquely situated.

Over a course of a year and a half of observing, sharing, and learning, Lawrence became familiar with the stories and aspirations of the members of the Alliance. He learned that many of their families recently relocated from big cities like Chicago, Detroit, and Milwaukee to this predominately White, affluent, and progressive college town because their parents believed (as advertised and celebrated in many magazines) that the new community had better schools, employment opportunities, and safe neighborhoods (Winn & Winn, 2015). Their recent migrant experience created a community context that was much different from the youth he worked with in Newark and Sacramento. It took Lawrence more time to learn the Alliance community and become a “worthy witness” than in other cities.

Maisha attempted to become a “worthy witness” with both students and staff at Du Bois High School. Initially her work focused on supporting the principal and leadership team; however, the leadership team could see that any progress they tried to make was being undermined by classroom and school climate. Maisha described this phenomenon as “small schools . . . big punishment” because the school-wide approach to discipline and safety remained the same in spite of the fact the school only had a quarter of its initial population. Du Bois was a small learning community that was once part of a large, comprehensive high school with most of its students being African American. However, in 2011 Maisha and a team of students and teachers engaged in a YPAR project seeking to change discipline policies that were hurting relationships between students and staff. While her role in Du Bois was to facilitate academic engagement and literacy across content areas, Maisha learned that the school community was lacking a basic understanding of how members defined “community” and what values could be agreed upon by students and staff alike. At the beginning of the group’s first meeting, Maisha wrote the prompt “What is community?” on the board. Students, teachers, and staff read out their definitions:

**JAY (STUDENT):** An area with people who have some type of characteristics: can be language, clothes, hairstyles, and sometimes around the same income.

**INDIA (STUDENT):** A community is a group of people coming together as one to accomplish a goal.

**ADAM (STUDENT):** Joining together as one where you can depend and rely on each other.

*SHANTI (STUDENT):* Community is a place where parents, authority, and children unite together as one.

*RYAN (STUDENT):* I think community is the society that you live in or are mostly around. It is also when you have family, friends, or close people that are helping you or guiding you in the right direction.

Common themes included “coming/joining together,” “as one,” “family,” “friends,” and “help.” When the session ended, Maisha charged the group with putting these definitions to work for the day by stating, “Community begins here so let’s look out for each other.” Later in the day, she saw Adam, a student participating in the Change Agents, and he went out of his way in a crowded hallway to speak. They both laughed and agreed it was a start.

Participatory action research engages community participants to identify problems, analyze the issue, and then advocate for social change. Scholars describe YPAR as youth-led research projects in which students exert power over key aspects of the research and action process (Cammarota & Fine, 2007; Morrell, 2006). Students select the topics, research methods, data analysis, and action steps with adults in a supportive role. YPAR projects “explicitly focus[e] on the integration of systematic research implemented by young people, with guidance from adult facilitators. Thus, students’ recommendations and actions for change are based in data as well as in their own life experiences” (Ozer & Wright, 2012, p. 268). YPAR is dependent on youth being invested and interested in the success of the project. The opportunity afforded to youth to decide on the issue and methodology to analyze and solve distinguishes YPAR from other methods.

We had several enduring questions throughout this work: How do we get the youth engaged and get them to lead the process? What are the roles of the adults and the roles of the youth? What happens if the youth stop participating? These are some of the issues that we both experienced conducting our projects. In the next section, we provide “pedagogical portraits” (Winn & Johnson, 2011) that we hope can serve as sites of engagement for youth researchers and their adult allies.

### GETTING YOUTH INTERESTED AND INVESTED IN ACTION RESEARCH

In the case of the Alliance, Lawrence introduced the concept of a YPAR project after the group spent time learning about each other, building trust, discussing politics, bonding over common values and aspirations, arguing about sports, and laughing at each other’s jokes. In the summer of 2014, Lawrence presented the findings of a local racial disparity report on education to Alliance members to disrupt the tradition of presenting this work

solely to those who are not directly impacted. According to the popular report, during the 2010–2011 academic year, only 50 percent of Black high school students in the region graduated on time; 21 percent of Black students were suspended from school compared to 2.3 percent of the region’s White students; and Black juveniles (ages 10–17) were arrested at a rate of six times that of White juveniles (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2013). Members of the Alliance and Lawrence discovered they shared the same concerns about the policing and schooling of Black youth. At the conclusion of his presentation, he asked the group if they have heard of the school-to-prison pipeline:

*LAWRENCE:* Has anyone heard of the school-to-prison pipeline?

*CHAPPELLE:* That’s something that is about jails in our schools.

*LAWRENCE:* I like that. Is there anything else?

*MALCOLM:* It’s about the system not caring about Black kids.

*LAWRENCE:* Jails in schools, the system.

*PRYOR:* I don’t know.

*LAWRENCE:* Well, it is important that you know about it because all the meetings I go to people are talking about the school-to-prison pipeline. And when they talk about it, they are talking about you. So you better know what folks are saying about you.

Their discussion about the school-to-prison pipeline prompted Lawrence to ask the youth if they were interested in learning more about racial inequities and disparities and if they would consider becoming part of the solution.

Without any pushback or hesitation, all 14 youth agreed to engage the project. In early September 2014, the youth discussed the inequities they were experiencing in their communities and schools. They drafted five possible research questions as seen in Table 5.1. In December of 2014, the group worked together to narrow their questions down to one. Seven participants wanted to research the policing of Black youth, and seven wanted to learn about why there were only a few Black teachers in the public schools. The question about policing created a dilemma because many of the participants had a tenuous relationship with the local police officers, especially after the murders of Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, and Michael Brown by police officers. They also demonstrated their disappointment of the police at an October 2013 presentation about police and community relationships. After back-and-forth dialogue between the police and members of the Alliance, eight youth walked out in unison as an act of protest because they believed the police continued to give scripted answers and were being dishonest. They expressed to the adult allies that meeting with the police was a waste of their time and would not lead to change. The police later suggested that the youth walking out was disrespectful and vowed not come back to the group again. Because of this incident, the adult allies pressed the youth

Table 5.1 Alliance Research Questions

Questions	Reasons
#1 Why do the police target Black youth?	The police stay on us! We are targets not only here but in Ferguson, Chicago, everywhere.
#2 Why aren't there any after-school programs in our community?	The club kicked us out.
#3 Why are they closing the only Walgreens in our community?	That is the only place around that our families can get groceries from. My mom gets her medication from there. The local grocery store is way too far.
#4 Why don't the schools teach us African American history?	We only get two days in February to talk about the same three people Dr. King, Rosa Parks, and Douglass. White people get the whole year. Why don't we have any Black teachers? We only have wWhite teachers here.
#5 Why are there so many Black kids in the criminal system?	We get into trouble, but there is a double standard when White kids get into trouble.

to ensure that examining the policing of Black youth was something that they wanted to pursue:

*LAWRENCE:* I thought you guys said that you don't like being around the police.

*PRYOR:* We don't!

*LAWRENCE:* Part of your research includes asking questions.

*MONICA:* So are you all OK with asking the police questions?

*CHAPPELLE:* Hell naw. I ain't snitching. They just want us to talk.

*LAWRENCE:* No, you get to come up with the questions.

*PRYOR:* So we get to ask them anything? Like, anything?

*LAWRENCE:* That's your call.

*CHAPPELLE:* I don't know, man, about this.

After going back-and-forth, seven of the members agreed to interview the police and others in the community about their experiences with the police, while the seven others chose to research Black teachers. Surprisingly, after stating his dislike for the police, Chappelle joined the team of researchers examining policing. Lawrence then invited the guys to think critically about the process:

*LAWRENCE:* This is your project. So why do you want to research the police and lack of Black teachers?

*MALCOLM:* We get to ask the police questions.

*THOMAS:* Break the cycle of youth living in poverty.

*PRYOR:* Find solutions to problems that have not been solved.

*MALCOLM:* Make it better for the next generation.

*LAWRENCE:* Is there anything else?

*THOMAS:* It's our chance to tell teachers and police how we feel and what we experience.

*MALCOLM:* Learn how to communicate and work together.

*LAWRENCE:* OK. You guys are on it. Again, this is your project, and Monica, Lance, and I are here to help you. You all come up with questions, interview (protocols), observe, meet with people, learn about the issues, and come up with solutions or recommendations. And y'all have to present at the end.

*PRYOR:* We got it. We got it.

*LAWRENCE:* I mean you have to stand up in front of people and talk about your project.

Youth participants in the Alliance's YPAR project accepted the responsibility to take the lead on their research. For example, after they narrowed down the questions to "Why do the police target Black youth?" and "Why are there only a few Black teachers in our public schools?" they, with the assistance of their adult allies, presented to the City Council Finance Committee to advocate for funding to help implement the project. The group unanimously chose Marcus as the speaker. They worked together to draft a script for Marcus and insisted that he practice. Marcus paraded his confidence, telling the group that he presents all the time: "This is nothing. I'm good." At the City Council Finance Committee meeting, Marcus spoke for five minutes about the benefits and importance of youth conducting research. Marcus's presentation surprised several members in the audience; one observer said, "He is really good. He is the next King, Jr." When he returned to his seat, Marcus was greeted by "good job(s)" and "Keep up the good work." Impressed with the project's purpose and the youth participation in the research, the committee awarded the Alliance a small grant to research, analyze, and publish a report about racial disparities and how to reduce social inequities. This grant gave the youth confidence about their work and confirmed the importance of YPAR and the impact that it could have on the larger community.

Youth participants having an authentic role consists of speaking to the public about the issues, leading workshops, coming up with research topics and questions, writing reports, interviewing, analyzing data, and observing meetings. Maisha also discovered that when youth take the lead in naming the YPAR project and articulating its purpose, they become invested in the process. At Du Bois High School, the YPAR team and Maisha met to discuss school culture. Maisha volunteered to coordinate the group because she had more time than the staff; however, the principal, Ms. Toure, was active and engaged, offering support by way of time, space, and presence. Ms. Toure selected students who

experienced harsh discipline policies as well as students who seemed to be slipping “under the radar” of the staff. Maisha shared the idea with the staff, and teachers volunteered. Maisha personally asked the school safety team, and one member volunteered who was an alumni of the school and familiar with the community. Unnamed at the time, the group agreed on the mission to address school climate issues and build community. Meetings were held in the principal’s conference room, where students were seldom invited unless they were in trouble. One by one, students trickled in and smiled. When Jay, an 11th grader, walked in the room and looked around to find a place to sit, Maisha pointed to one of the chairs at the head of the table. Jay responded, “Oh for real,” surprised and delighted that he could actually sit there. Shanti sat next to Maisha, while Monty, a well-spoken and outgoing freshman, sat next to Shanti. TiTi and Lex, the senior representatives, sat in chairs lining the walls. Ms. Toure summoned them to the table, “Please sit at the table. We want this to be owned by you—this is why we ask you to be at the table. This is yours.” The students and the adult allies had a hard time coming up with a name for the group. After weeks of meeting, Jay made a suggestion:

JAY: I think she (referring to Ms. Toure) said our name—“Change Agents.” That should be our name. That made me feel important when she called us that!

Several weeks later, Maisha observed that participants arrived on time and felt comfortable coming into the conference room. However, it was obvious that Jay was missing. Maisha learned later he was involved in an off-campus altercation that would result potentially in him transferring to another school. One student, Adam, noticed Jay was not there to claim the seat at the head of the table:

ADAM: Can I sit at the head of the table?

MAISHA: This is your table, so sit where you like.

ADAM: I have a friend who wants to join the group.

MAISHA: That sounds great. . . . [W]hy don’t you mention it to the group.

Maisha began where Jay left off and offered the question: *What or who is a “change agent”?* In an interesting turn of events, the adults in the group were eager to respond to this question when they had been more passive in the last session:

MRS. SHIELDS

(ENGLISH TEACHER): A change agent can work covertly/overtly.

ADAM: It depends on the influence you have someone’s life because sometimes you don’t know if you are being a change agent or not because you don’t know if a person is watching you.

MS. TOURE

(PRINCIPAL): People who change others must work on one’s self first. If you want to change, you have to work on yourself.

MAISHA: So one of the questions I have for us and for myself is whether or not one has to be deliberate to be a change agent. Before we had this discussion, I really thought the course of action had to be mapped out, but I am really influenced by Adam and others around the table that it can also just happen.

MS. FOWLES

(SOCIAL STUDIES

TEACHER): I believe when you are deliberate, the rest will follow.

MS. SHIELDS

(ENGLISH

TEACHER): The common word in all of our responses is action.

MS. TOURE

(PRINCIPAL): There has to be a principle that drives us. We have to have something at the core. It is not us who determines we are change agents; it’s others. We have to change ourselves.

SHANTI: I wanted to change myself, and my job had an opportunity to go to the King Center for this program. When my boss asked, none of my peers raised their hands, but I did not let that stop me. That was my first change.

MS. FOWLES

(SOCIAL STUDIES

TEACHER): I think the King Center has a “Wall of Tolerance,” and it would be great for us to go visit. I am going to get some more information about that, so we can go.

MS. TOURE

(PRINCIPAL): I think we have to be leaders, and part of that is managing impulsivity. Being a leader is different, so we have to learn how to manage ourselves.

The teacher’s and students’ definitions of “change agent” were much different from Maisha’s definition. She defined a change agent as “a catalyst for organizing, mobilizing, and acting on a principle or set of principles that stand for something.” However, many of the participants’ definitions were based on their lived experiences.

It was becoming clear that both the youth and the adult allies were becoming invested in the project. For example, youth participants took the lead in naming their group and defining their purpose. In the following weeks, students asked that they facilitate class activities. One such student, Shanti, was eager to share with the class her nonviolence training:

SHANTI: I participated in the Martin Luther King Nonviolence certification. I want to share this with you, even though I don’t

think anyone here is violent. I am certified to teach this. We had this activity where we interviewed someone and then we had to talk like we were them, like walking in their shoes.

The next week Shanti led the group with an icebreaker and community-building activity that she learned at the King Center. Everyone was encouraged to find a partner who they hadn't spoken with for any great length of time and interview him or her. The focal question was this: "If money were not an issue, where would you travel and why?" The groups exchanged their answers with each other, sparking an interesting conversation. Shanti shared her feedback and guided the discussion.

Shanti's out-of-school experience provided an authentic opportunity for youth participants to lead and to take ownership of the YPAR process. On the one hand, when youth are invested in the process, they become ambassadors recruiting other students to participate. On the other hand, some participants will fail to show up, others will become disengaged, and a few will encounter conflict. For example, shortly after leading a session on non-violence, Shanti was involved in an on-campus conflict on her way to a Change Agents meeting. Ms. Toure called parents, guardians, and students who caused and experienced harm and invited Maisha to be part of the dialogue. Because of Shanti's involvement in the Change Agents, Ms. Toure was able to begin her inquiry about the incident from the perspective that she saw Shanti's potential as a change agent and peacemaker.

### RECOUNTING AND HUMANIZING YOUTH'S LIVED EXPERIENCES

With increased interest in racial disparities, police brutalities, incarceration rates, and educational inequities, the lives of youth of color sit at the front and center of news stories, scholarly articles, and table conversations. Some scholars and journalists use infographics and quantitative data to illustrate the vast differences between Whites and Black or Brown people. However, these data fail to illustrate the full picture and provide an explanation for the historical causes of racial disparities and inequities. These data neglect to address the effects of racism and socioeconomic oppression. Furthermore, a select group of individuals often have access to policy briefs and reports. When we began our YPAR projects, we wanted to introduce the Change Agents and the Alliance to reports such as Children's Defense Fund's (CDF) *The State of Black Children and Families: Black Perspectives on What Black Children Face and What the Future Holds* (2011) and the *Race to Equity Report* (2013), which statistically projected their educational, career, and life trajectories. Our goal was to familiarize the youth with issues that policy makers identify as the most important and to engage the youth to think about how their experiences relate to the data.

In the Change Agents' third meeting, Maisha passed out CDF policy reports to the group. After feeling self-conscious that students still seemed to be looking for her to lead, she asked students what they thought CDF did:

**SHANTI:** They raise money to help children. They help defend children—like poor children.

**MAISHA:** All of these are solid contributions. The Children's Defense Fund is committed to advocating for children, especially children from vulnerable populations. Let's look at the cover page for their report on the state of Black children. What stands out on this title page?

**JAY:** It says Black perspectives on what Black children face and what the future holds.

**MAISHA:** Why is that important to you?

**JAY:** 'Cause it's better that Black people were asked because they are closer to the situation and probably care more.

**MAISHA:** OK, what else?

**LEANNA:** They used qualitative and quantitative research.

**MAISHA:** Is everyone familiar with qualitative and quantitative research?

[A few nods]

**MAISHA:** Tell me about it.

**ADAM:** Quantitative research involves numbers and statistics, and qualitative is more—I don't know—quality I guess.

**MAISHA:** OK, so quantitative research may include statistical analysis. Say you collect survey data from everyone in the school and then analyze the data, right? But if you interview every student and then transcribe the interviews and code them for emergent themes, then you would be doing qualitative research. Both are equally important, which is why they used mixed methods. Is there anything else?

**MS. ALANA**

(**MATH TEACHER**): I really like the children's art (the CDF logo). It personalizes the report.

**MAISHA:** Everyone has a copy of the actual report as well as the PowerPoint presentation that was used to introduce the report. Why don't we work with partners or in small groups and discuss some of the findings, and then we will get back together.

Small groups provided a way for Maisha to decentralize her role and also make sure there was more dialogue. One of the school security staff members contributed for the first time in the small groups. The small groups listed the most serious problems that their communities faced.

The top issues varied from violence and guns to respect between men and women, to drugs.

**CHRISTIANA:** I think the disrespect and mistreatment of women and girls are the most serious problem because boys think it's OK to dis women, and it can give women low self-esteem.

**RYAN:** I think violence is the most serious problem because it can lead to prison.

**MR. FRANK**

**(SCHOOL SECURITY):** I agree because that's the biggest issue in schools and on the streets. It's all one big chain. It's hard to say what's the most serious because everything leads to another thing.

**LEANNA:** We saw that too. Like drugs and prison are related, and I think unemployment is important, but that comes much later. I think adults and youth see these things differently because this is what adults say are the most serious problems in the community. Adults see the outcome, but we see the process. We are at the ground level, so things like teen pregnancy and violence are our main concerns because that's our every day.

**MS. TOURE:** You know I was amazed to see "poorly performing schools" so low on the list of "serious problems" in the Black community. Black people did not see the schools as having an impact on Black children. When I look at this, I see the value of a Black man is high; our kings are being captured. Black people or we're saying we want to work; we are not blaming schools. This is so in line with our town hall meetings. You often have a conservative view that Blacks have choices, and it's up to them to do better.

**MAISHA:** I agree. I thought education would be at the top of all these lists, and that could be because I'm an educator and, perhaps, education centered. I believe that mis-education is at the core of so many of Black peoples' issues. . . . I know we are running out of time. I'm wondering if you would like to look at the CDF "Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline" report next week?

**RYAN:** Wait, are they saying that they already know which babies go to prison?

**ADAM:** Prison growth is built on third and fourth grade reading performance.

**RYAN:** What?

**SEVERAL STUDENTS:** Yes, let's read that.

This session seemed to galvanize the group. Ms. Toure's urging for change to begin within individuals resonated for everyone at the table—especially for Ryan. He, like Shanti, wanted to lead future sessions. Ryan also wanted to know what books and articles Maisha could access for them. Through a small grant, she purchased class sets of Noguera's *The Trouble With Black Boys, Sugar and Spice and No Longer Nice; Interview* (Student Press Initiative) and *Letters From Young Activists*. Ryan really liked the *Young Activists* book and would like for the Change Agents to use this book as a blueprint for the upcoming school year. Ryan also wanted summer reading assignments. It was in this moment that as the adult initiator—a term borrowed from poet and activist Gwendolyn Brooks (Fisher, 2009)—that Maisha realized that some youth may want and need more time to cultivate their ideas independently of the YPAR group. What Maisha needed and wanted was more time with youth participants, especially those seeking out more outside reading. Maisha and Ryan talked about spending time this summer reading the newspapers such as the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* and *New York Times* and listening to the National Public Radio (NPR) and Democracy Now. Ryan shared that he would work for his father this summer doing remodeling; his father has taught him how to lay tile:

**RYAN:** My dad said you may not learn anything in school, but you will always be able to make some money when you can fix things. My dad and I did not used to talk that much, but now I see why. He works really hard. He turns red in the summer on top on the roof working. We talk more, and I understand him.

**MAISHA:** Have you heard of Booker T. Washington?

**RYAN:** Yes.

**MAISHA:** Have you heard of W. E. B. Du Bois?

**RYAN:** No, I have not.

They continued their conversation by discussing the value of physical labor, growing vegetables and livestock, and being self-sufficient by being able to build using the famous Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois debates. After spending some time examining these arguments, Ryan asserted, "You need both." These transactions reminded Maisha of the documented "downtime" in her ethnography of a theater program for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls, *Girl Time*. "Downtime," or opportunities for teaching artists and student artists to have conversations over meals, during rides to field trips, or while working side by side, became essential for building relationships and pathways to learning (Winn, 2011).

Much like the Change Agents, members of the Alliance read policy reports and the *Race to Equity Report* in particular. The report reveals that only 50 percent of Black high school students in the region graduated

on time (2001–11); 21 percent of Black students were suspended from school compared to 2.3 percent of the region’s White students; and Black juveniles (ages 10–17) were arrested at a rate of six times that of White juveniles (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2013). Many of the youth indicated that they knew about the numbers because they see it every day. When the group discussed the reasons for the disparities and inequities, Malcolm suggested slavery, and many of his friends laughed at him. Other youth suggested that system doesn’t work for Blacks, and White people don’t care about them. When the youth read and interrogated terms such as “high school graduate rate,” “3rd grade reading proficiency,” and “suspensions,” they connected the challenges of Black students with the school’s inability to relate and care for them:

*LAWRENCE:* Why do you think only 50 percent of Black high school students in the region graduated on time?

*CHAPPELLE:* Black students know that schools don’t care about them. So some show up or don’t show up.

*PRYOR:* School is not interesting. They don’t teach us nothing.

In previous conversation, Pryor was more forthcoming about his school experience and race. He believed that “White teachers don’t care” about him and other Black students and “don’t teach anything engaging or interesting” (Winn & Winn, 2015). He also stated that White teachers wanted Black students to “act like them.” When Lawrence inquired if he had any Black teachers, Pryor responded that he did not have one Black teacher as a student and did not recall having any Black janitors at any of his schools.

In 2014 the school district reported that only 2 percent of the teaching force was Black.

Some of the youth expressed that the White teachers don’t how who to connect and often teach “boring and bogus stuff.” During one class session, we discussed why there were less than 80 African American teachers out 3,000 total. Their reasons included the following:

- They (White people) don’t care about us.
- The system doesn’t work for you if it was not built for you.
- Keep things for themselves (White people).
- We don’t matter.

The students then brainstormed why it is important to have Black teachers (Winn & Winn, 2015):

- To engage us.
- Black teachers can relate to us.
- It’s not all about academics but life skills.
- We can learn about our history and ourselves.

The youth had strong opinions about their experiences with White teachers and Black teachers. Their overall reaction to the report is that White people don’t care about Black people. Pryor spoke candidly about the report:

*PRYOR:* We know the numbers, but there is nothing we can do about it. Every year it’s the same thing—people tell us that we are going to jail.

*LAWRENCE:* Should we just give up?

*PRYOR:* It is what it is. We’ve been talking about stuff like this for years. Nothing has changed.

Pryor made a valid point about inequities and social change. As Pryor indicated, “we live the numbers.” Black youth are aware of the history of slavery, segregation, racism, failing schools, incarceration, high unemployment, and teen pregnancy. When they read and interrogate policy reports and data sets that “count” them, they also experience being “discounted.” If there is no time to analyze and reflect, data potentially can cause more harm to youth. Pryor and the other youth want to be accurately represented in data and want data to do more than count them as numbers but count them as promises. To be “counted,” youth must have forums in which their voices cannot only be heard but “exalted” if not amplified (Fisher, 2007). However, there has to be a step after this; those of us with privilege and access to forums where youth voices can, indeed, be amplified must open doors, set tables, pull up chairs, and use or positionality to support youth in creating the levers of change they want to see in their communities and schools.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS (FOR NOW)

When we started our projects, we imagined exchanging stories of how these two YPAR projects created large-scale change in their schools and communities that would be visible to others. We knew the research process would not be neat and tidy and welcomed tensions to optimize learning experiences. However, we came to value that this notion of change and transformation, much like the words of Ms. Toure, had to begin with the individual to get to the important work of the collective. We realized that self-reflection and individual transformation had to serve as the initial phases of the work as opposed to systemic changes in school policies. To address and change school climate meant that community members needed to explore their own dispositions toward the Du Bois learning community. For example, the Change Agents inspired an exercise for the Du Bois staff in which Ms. Toure asked teachers to describe their philosophy of discipline for one to two students. Maisha also conducted an exercise with teachers in which they defined “discipline” and did a community reading of Wayne

Yang's (2009) "Discipline or Punish? Some Suggestions for School Policy and Teacher Practice."

We also learned that for youth in these particular settings that their educational trajectories primarily consisted of teacher-focused and teacher-driven transactions. In the case of Du Bois, there was a policy change to transform a large, comprehensive high school into a small learning community that focused in inquiry-driven curriculum. This work was slow and tedious. To engage in YPAR projects, we had to design an infrastructure in which the youth we worked with understood that their questions, ideas, and solutions mattered. This was new for youth in the Alliance, who experienced "urban pedagogies" for most of their K-12 careers or an education that was focused more on the policing and management of their bodies and voices than promoting intellectual growth and development (Duncan, 2000). While Duncan found urban pedagogies to be consistent in schools that largely served Black and Latino students from working-class and working-poor backgrounds, Lawrence's work with the Alliance demonstrated that even in schools in affluent White communities, Black youth have similar experiences (Winn & Winn, 2015).

YPAR presents opportunities to represent accurately the lived experiences of youth from multiethnic and multilingual backgrounds in humanizing and collaborative ways that reject using deficit lenses and monolithic stories of young people. Collaborative efforts to identify problems, find solutions, and implement action are what makes YPAR especially compelling. Using this methodology allows us to move beyond stating the problems and providing more evidence about the inequalities we already understand are pervasive in communities and schools. However, we also experienced tensions in the process, including when and where to enter as well as exit. We struggled with how involved we should be in the process and felt conflicted when youth participants looked to us to guide them, set the agenda, ask the next question, and provide a new challenge. Although we understood YPAR as a process of becoming engaged civic actors for young people, we did not expect to be so central to the projects for so long as we hoped that the work would, indeed, be "owned" by youth. Tensions, of course, present learning opportunities for youth and adult initiators. In our efforts to decolonize research methods and practices, we lost sight of the fact that some youth might benefit from purposeful scaffolding such as "guided participation" in YPAR to get to the phase where youth take ownership of the process and, when relevant, the product(s). This is where we challenge ourselves to think about the ways in which we can support youth with their process and product goals in YPAR.

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## 6 Writing Our Lives

### The Power of Youth Literacies and Community Engagement

Marcelle M. Haddix and Alvina  
Mardhani-Bayne

“In school you kinda contradict yourself and you kinda like, you know, cover up some stuff, like you kind of hide yourself in school but when you’re outside of school, it’s like you open yourself up. You unfold everything.” Brenda, one of the youth writers from the *Writing Our Lives* program, shared how she experienced writing that took place in school versus the kinds of writing practices she engaged with outside of school. (All student names are pseudonyms). Brenda was participating in a *Writing Our Lives* after-school creative writing workshop that took place in the library at her high school. The program was on a drop-in basis for youth writers looking for an outlet to compose creatively in various modes and to share their writing in a youth-inspired, youth-led collective. *Writing Our Lives*, a year-round program providing after-school and summer workshops and annual youth writing conferences, grew from the urging of young people like Eric, a budding screenwriter, who said, “For me, writing is like breathing. I need it to survive.” Eric became involved with *Writing Our Lives* when he received an invitation from Marcelle, first author, who attended the staging of one of his plays at a high school showcase. Eric participated in a summer program that encouraged his interest in screenwriting and supported his application to college programs. Eric and Brenda represent two examples of the youth writers who sought opportunities and spaces that encouraged their writing ambitions and that offered the necessary resources for them to hone their crafts. In that way, *Writing Our Lives* emerged from a call by youth writers who clearly understood that the demands on writing curriculum and pedagogy in school did not readily connect to the kinds of writing that fostered creativity and authenticity as they developed writer identities.

*What can I do to help change what is going on in my community, in my local schools, and in the lives of young people?* This question was at the forefront of Marcelle’s desire to support and help develop community spaces for literacy practices of youth writers like Brenda and Eric. After moving into a new community and attending local meetings where families and other community members lamented the educational experiences of their children, she decided that, as a parent of a school-age child too, she needed to find ways to leverage her skills and expertise as a literacy scholar