

*Promising Practice*

**We Have Something to Say: Youth Participatory Action Research as a Promising Practice to Address Problems of Practice in Rural Schools**

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*The purpose of this article is to highlight a critical approach for practice, youth participatory action research, that can be used to invite rural youth to collaborate with school administrators, educators, and community leaders to identify and examine challenges, while building upon the strengths of a school and community to address challenges. Our youth participatory action research project was a collaboration between adult researchers and five students from a rural high school to examine and address postsecondary education access challenges. The adult and student researchers developed and implemented two evidence-based products: (a) a conference and (b) a resource corner in the school library. Student co-researchers demonstrated an increased commitment to the project, development of postsecondary education knowledge, and development as leaders during the project. Our project demonstrates evidence of youth participatory action research being an effective approach to address problems of practice in rural education.*

*“Most people have lived in this town since they were born. So they haven't gone out and actually seen areas that have more than what this small town has. So, most of the colleges are bigger than this community, and they're scared to go out and about without their parents or anybody that they know.”  
(Marie, High School Senior)*

Marie (a pseudonym) used the words above in response to her classmates discussing feelings of intimidation about pursuing postsecondary education as rural youth. As a high school senior from a small, rural town in Georgia, Marie, as well as her classmates, talked about the challenges related to paying for postsecondary education, receiving support to navigate a complicated postsecondary education enrollment process, and having fears of leaving home. In the U.S., one in five public school students attends a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019). Reflecting Marie's concerns, researchers have found rural students are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education and remain continuously enrolled in postsecondary education compared to non-rural peers (Byun et al., 2015; Byun et al., 2012; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018). While researchers

have extensively documented postsecondary education access inequities experienced by rural youth, students, such as Marie, are largely left out of conversations to address postsecondary education access inequities.

In Fall 2019, Marie and four additional high school students from her rural school and an education professor, a community and outreach specialist, and an education graduate student from University of Georgia came together to engage in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. The YPAR approach engages youth as co-investigators to examine and address social issues in their local community (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Powers & Allaman, 2012). In our case, we examined postsecondary education access for rural youth by collecting data, analyzing data, and developing and implementing evidence-based solutions to address the identified challenges in their community. The purpose of this article is to highlight how YPAR can be used to invite rural youth to collaborate with school administrators, educators, and community leaders to identify and examine challenges, while simultaneously building upon the strengths and assets of a school and community to address challenges.

While we focus on postsecondary education access, school and community leaders can use the approach to focus on other problems of practice.

In our article, we will begin with a brief overview of literature related to rural youth and postsecondary education access. We will then provide context for YPAR as an approach for practice and a description of our specific approach to YPAR to examine and address postsecondary education access challenges. We provide evidence from the five high school student collaborators on the effectiveness of the practice. We end the article with information about the significance of our approach for practice and educational equity for rural youth.

### **Rural Youth and Postsecondary Education Access: A Brief Overview of Literature**

There is an extensive body of research on rural students and postsecondary access (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015; Chambers, 2021; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Demi et al., 2010; Flowers, 2021; Gafford, 2021; Goldman, 2019; Griffin et al., 2011; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018; Kryst et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2017; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016; Petrin et al., 2014). Researchers have found that rural students have a lower rate of college enrollment and are more likely to delay their entry into postsecondary education compared to non-rural students (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018). However, researchers have also found that college enrollment disparities between rural and non-rural students are mostly related to socioeconomic background differences (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015).

For rural students, resources and networks needed to pursue postsecondary education are often related to parental education, socioeconomic status, and resources available in one's school and community (Ardoin, 2018; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Goldman, 2019; Nelson, 2016). Within rural areas, lower income and postsecondary education attainment rates of families compared to non-rural families coupled with impoverishment in some rural communities are challenges for rural students to be able to access postsecondary education information and resources (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018; Larrance, 2007). In addition, researchers have discussed how rural students have difficulties in choosing to stay close to family for postsecondary education or to leave their hometowns

to pursue postsecondary education and their careers (Ardoin, 2018; Goldman, 2019; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Sage & Sherman, 2014), and have expressed concerns about postsecondary education costs (Ardoin, 2018; Goldman, 2019; Means, 2019a; Means et al., 2016; Tieken, 2016).

While many rural students have constraints for postsecondary education access, researchers have also suggested several factors that may instead work to promote access for rural students (Byun et al., 2012; Demi et al., 2010; Kotok et al., 2016; Petrin et al., 2014). Engagement in college preparation curricula can promote postsecondary education access and increase educational aspirations among rural youth (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Irvin et al., 2016). Similarly, rural students benefit from financial aid and scholarship opportunities that make postsecondary education seem more financially possible (Means, 2019b), and from the resources available in their often tight-knit rural communities (Ardoin, 2018; Byun et al., 2012; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Kotok et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Petrin et al., 2014; Tieken, 2014), such as receiving encouragement and support during their pathways to postsecondary education from family members, school staff, peers, religious leaders, community members, and community-based organizations (Ardoin, 2018; Griffin et al., 2011; Means, 2019a; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018).

Researchers studying postsecondary education access for rural youth have cautioned educators and policymakers against placing blame on rural youth and their families for postsecondary education access inequities (Means, 2019a). Such a deficit-based perspective overlooks the systemic nature of education inequities and ignores the assets, resources, and networks possessed by youth and their families, especially minoritized youth and their families (Harper, 2012; Means, 2019a; Yosso, 2005). Instead, educators and policymakers should consider how economic and social conditions, such as employment opportunities, access to social services and healthcare, and access to educational opportunities, lead to postsecondary education access inequities for rural youth (Ardoin, 2018; Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Means, 2018; Sage & Sherman, 2014; Tieken, 2014, 2016; Williams & Grooms, 2016).

## **YPAR and Postsecondary Education Access: A Description of a Promising Practice**

In this section, we first provide an overview of YPAR as an approach. We then discuss how we applied the YPAR approach to our project to study and address postsecondary education access challenges for rural youth mentioned in the literature review.

### **YPAR: An Overview**

Participatory action research (PAR), including YPAR, focuses on building an alliance between researchers and potential benefactors of the research to engage in “a cyclical process of exploration, knowledge construction, and action at different moments throughout the research process” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1). PAR studies are guided by several core principles. First, alliances engaged in PAR recognize that “expertise and knowledge are widely distributed” and “assumes that those who have been most systemically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). Thus, researchers engaged in PAR collaborate *with* potential benefactors of the research to study and address injustices and inequities. Second, approaches to data collection and data analysis should aim to engage research alliances in studying, analyzing, disrupting, and transforming social contexts and conditions that reinforce inequities and injustices (e.g., the inequities in educational opportunities for rural youth; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Thus, PAR studies should avoid using deficit-based research approaches that place the blame for inequities on students and their families and do not engage issues of structure and power (e.g., spatial inequities, classism, racism; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Third, research alliances develop evidence-based solutions in response to the issues identified in the study with intention of social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2008; Powers & Allaman, 2012). PAR projects can “range from changing public policy, to making recommendations to government agencies, to making informal changes in the community that benefit people living there, to organizing a local event, to simply increasing awareness about an issue native to a particular locale” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 5).

YPAR projects share the same core principles of PAR projects but with an explicit focus on youth development, employing research as a means to engage and empower young people as social justice advocates and change agents and to increase their consciousness about social inequities and injustices (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019; Morrell, 2008; Powers & Allaman, 2012; Pyne et al., 2013; Torre, 2009). YPAR begins with providing the space for youth to explore and address issues impacting their lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Powers & Allaman, 2012). In particular, research alliances have employed YPAR approaches to study, analyze, disrupt, and transform social conditions and contexts that reproduce inequities and injustices, centering the expertise and voices of youth (Ayala, 2009; Cahill et al., 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Pyne et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2015; Tuck et al., 2008). Engagement with youth in YPAR studies has led to evidence-based activities aimed at disrupting these inequities and injustices (Ayala, 2009; Cahill et al., 2008; Ginwright, 2008; Hudson et al., 2020; Pyne et al., 2013). For example, Pyne and colleagues’ research alliance with youth studied postsecondary education access inequities for low-income and working-class youth and/or youth who will be the first in their families to attend college. In disrupting inequities and injustices highlighted in the research, the research alliance of adult and youth researchers wrote a book and held an event for local stakeholders to increase awareness about postsecondary education access inequities (Pyne et al., 2013).

In addition, YPAR empowers young people as experts in their own right through “confront[ing] the commonly accepted truth that data and knowledge come solely from institutions of higher learning and adult experts and not from their own lived experiences” (Powers & Allaman, 2012, p. 5). Youth engaged in YPAR studies have described learning more about social conditions and contexts that lead to inequities and injustices and feeling empowered as change agents to disrupt and transform these social conditions and contexts (Hudson et al., 2020; Pyne et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2015). For example, Hudson and colleagues (2020) collaborated with youth on a study about postsecondary education access inequities for youth from poor and working-class families and Youth of Color. The youth co-researchers described finding solidarity with other youth and adults to address structural barriers in place that hinder postsecondary education access for

minoritized youth. Thus, adult researchers collaborating on YPAR projects must constantly grapple with their own privileges (e.g., age, race, social class, positional power), listen to the co-researchers, and consciously provide space for youth to question local, national, and global injustices, inequities, and authority figures who are positioned as the only holders of knowledge (McIntyre, 2008; Morrell, 2008).

### **YPAR Project as a Promising Practice in a Rural School Setting**

During the Summer of 2019, an education professor at the University of Georgia contacted the staff of Archway Partnership about collaborating on a YPAR project related to rural youth and postsecondary education access. The education professor recognized the recent scholarship, including his own scholarship, had highlighted postsecondary education access challenges for rural youth, but, in the scholarship, rural youth were rarely asked to collaborate on studying and addressing postsecondary education challenges in their local communities. Thus, the educator professor wanted to employ a YPAR approach for the project, and the staff of University of Georgia's Archway Partnership agreed to collaborate on the project. Archway Partnership connects communities with higher education resources to address community identified needs. As a unit of Public Service and Outreach at University of Georgia, Archway Partnership was created to enhance the institution's mission of teaching, research, and service while addressing critical self-identified community issues in geographically dispersed locations across Georgia. Founded on the principles of collaboration and knowledge-based decision making, Archway Partnership empowers communities to address long-standing (community and economic development) needs while facilitating connections between the public and private sectors and ultimately with the resources at the University of Georgia.

The staff of Archway Partnership contacted the high school principal of a Georgia rural school, Robinson High School (a pseudonym), which is approximately an hour away from the University, regarding a collaboration on a YPAR project focused on postsecondary education access for rural youth. Robinson High School has approximately 1,000 students. Approximately 40% of the students are Students of Color, and approximately half of the

students receive free or reduced lunch. The county in which the high school is located has been a partner community with Archway Partnership for over a decade. Approximately 23% of the adult population in the county has an associate's or bachelor's degree, which is approximately 28 percentage points lower than overall attainment rate in Georgia (Lumina Foundation, 2020).

The education professor and two staff members with Archway Partnership met with the high school principal to discuss the goal of developing, implementing, and assessing a project in collaboration with high school seniors related to supporting rural students on their pathways to postsecondary education. The high school principal agreed to have Robinson High School participate in the study. The high school principal was asked by the education professor to work with teachers to identify five seniors who had diverse postsecondary education plans to collaborate on the project. The selected seniors included three students who were planning to pursue a degree at a technical college upon graduation, one student who was planning to pursue a bachelor's degree upon graduation, and one student who was planning to enlist in the United States Armed Forces upon graduation and later attend postsecondary education.

During the Fall of 2019, the education professor and a staff member from Archway Partnership met consistently with students for sixteen meetings during a 30-minute block available to students to participate in student clubs and organizations, receive academic support, and to work on academic assignments. During our first meeting, the education professor introduced students to YPAR and proposed a focus on postsecondary education access. Students were then asked to receive parent/guardian consent and sign student assent forms if they were interested in participating in the project. All five students received parent/guardian consent and agreed to participate in the project. The remaining meetings allowed us to (a) discuss challenges related to postsecondary education access for rural youth, (b) identify strengths related to postsecondary education access for students at their rural high school, and (c) build upon strengths and assets in the high school and community to address identified challenges.

## Identifying Challenges and Strengths Related to Postsecondary Education Access

To document the challenges and strengths in their lives related to postsecondary education access, we asked the five high school student research collaborators to engage in photovoice. Researchers using photovoice ask participants to take photographs to “record and catalyze change in their communities” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 371). Photovoice as a method allows participants to take photographs related to the social phenomenon under study (e.g., postsecondary education access) and use the photographs to strategize a plan to use collective and community strengths to address identified issues highlighted from the photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997). Each of the students received \$25 for participating in the photovoice project. Across two focus groups, students were asked to share three photographs. Students took photographs of family members, teachers, friends, and significant others to highlight how they were common sources of support as they navigated their time in high school and considered post-high school plans. For example, Gurnee (a pseudonym) showed a photograph of his father and Nicole (a pseudonym) showed a photograph of her and her mother to describe how these family members were their “biggest supporters.” In addition, Nicole took a photograph of her favorite teacher to describe how the teacher has supported her preparations for postsecondary education by helping with the college application process and serving as a reference. The students believed they had a strong network of support to pursue their aspirations post high school.

While students felt that they had support from the people in their photographs, they expressed feeling the pressures of “hav[ing] it all together” as high school students. Though they were not being explicitly taught how to apply to colleges and scholarships, they expressed that the adults, specifically teachers, in their lives expected them to understand the nuances of the application process because they were seniors. They also expressed that this expectation was unfair because there are multiple factors that can affect a student’s ability to have knowledge regarding scholarships and colleges or actually applying, such as having to take care of family, not knowing how they would afford postsecondary education due to the rising costs and limited financial capital, and not having structures in place to help them better understand the process for

applying to college or college lingo. Students also shared concerns around not knowing how to do “adult” things like budget and file taxes as they prepared to graduate from high school.

## Building Upon Strengths to Address Identified Challenges

Reflecting the use of the photovoice method (Bragz et al., 2011), the students were asked to discuss how their collective photographs could educate teachers, school administrators, community leaders, and policymakers on what could be done to create change. The student participants shared there was an opportunity to increase awareness around a variety of topics, including the degree opportunities at a two-year institution, scholarship and financial aid options, and financial management. Through multiple conversations, student participants decided on two projects to bring greater awareness to peers and their families: (a) a conference focused on planning for life after high school and (b) a resource corner in their school library focused on planning for life after high school. We received approval from the principal to proceed with the plans for both initiatives.

As a team, we recognized the importance of receiving input on conference topics and resources from students’ peers. Thus, we created a survey that included the following questions: What topics would you like to learn more about related to life after high school? What concerns do you have about life after high school? What do you think you would like to do after high school? We received 560 student responses on the survey, and the responses were categorized into the following topics: (a) career/college, including career exploration, pathways to postsecondary education, and military; (b) finances, including money management and budgeting; and (c) life skills, including paying bills and family relationships. We used the survey results to inform the development of a conference and a resource corner.

**Conference.** As a team, we worked closely to design and implement a conference. The conference took place during an evening in December. We used the data from the survey to identify six sessions for the conference: (a) types of colleges and universities, (b) career and postsecondary education opportunities through the U.S. Armed Forces, (c) standardized testing for college admission; (d) transition into adulthood (finances, taxes), (e) career exploration, and (f) financial aid and scholarships. Recognizing

the rich resources at the school and in the community, the team identified educators at the high school and local community members (e.g., local college representatives, employees affiliated with the local bank) to facilitate the sessions. In addition to the conference, the high school students offered feedback on a previously-developed post-high school planning guidebook for rural students based on the education professor's research on postsecondary education access for rural students. The students' feedback was used to revise the guidebook, and each conference attendee received a copy of the guidebook. In addition, a digital version of the guidebook was developed, and the digital guidebook will be made available to all Archway Partnership partner communities. We also contacted colleges and universities across Georgia to send college paraphernalia and institutional brochures to share with students and families at the conference's resource table.

We advertised the conference on social media outlets for the high school, emails to community members, and through word-of-mouth. We also provided a sponsored dinner to promote attendance. The high school students recruited volunteers to help with serving on the set-up committee and welcome committee on the day of the conference, and a high school student led the welcome for the conference. There were approximately 40 students and family members in attendance at the conference. After each session, conference participants had the opportunity to rate the helpfulness of each session on a scale between 1 and 5 (1 being the least helpful and 5 being the most helpful) and offer open-ended feedback. All sessions averaged a rating of 4.8 or higher. While the students were not pleased with the turnout for the conference, they were affirmed by the high rating for each session.

**Resource Corner.** The high school students and the education professor met with the school's media specialist/librarian to discuss the idea of having a resource corner in the school's library. The media specialist/librarian agreed to create a space in the school library for a "life after high school" resource corner. A high school student was assigned to create a banner for the resource corner. The high school student made drawings of the banner, and the education graduate student on the team developed a digital version of the banner. The banner was approved by the high school principal and media specialist/librarian, and they agreed to have the

banner printed for the start of the 2020-2021 academic year. In addition, based on the responses from the survey from 560 students, the education graduate student on the team identified and researched resources that could be included in the resource corner. The resources fell into the following topical areas: (a) college admission, (b) standardized testing, (c) U.S. Armed Forces, and (d) career exploration. The media specialist/librarian ordered most of the resources, and they will become available to the students during the 2020-2021 academic year.

### **Evidence of Youth Participatory Action Research Projects as a Promising Practice**

While we believe the conference and the resource corner had and will have a meaningful impact on students at the high school, we are particularly interested in evidence of how using a youth participatory action research approach for a range of topics has the potential to lead to positive change for students who engage as co-researchers to examine and address challenges in their schools and communities. During the course of the project, the education professor held three focus group interviews with student participants to gain a better understanding of how participating in a youth participatory action research project impacted them as students and leaders. Students received \$25 for each focus group. The first focus group occurred shortly after the decision to host a conference and develop a resource corner and focused on each student's decision to participate in the project, the learning that was occurring for them thus far in the project, challenges related to the project, and rewarding aspects of the project. The second and third focus groups occurred at the end of the project. The second focus group had a specific focus on their experiences implementing the conference and developing the resource corner; questions focused on challenges and rewarding aspects of the implementation process and learning that occurred during the implementation phase. The third focus group had a focus on their overall experiences with the project; questions focused on the development of skills and assets, overall learning that occurred during the project, overall challenges during the project, and takeaways they wanted people to know about rural students as they pursue their pathways to postsecondary education. The major themes from the focus group include: (a) commitment to the project,

(b) development of postsecondary education knowledge, and (c) development as a leader.

### **Commitment to the Project and to Others**

When asked about their motives for working on this project, the students had varying motives for participating in the YPAR project. One student was incentivized by the monetary reward for participating in focus groups, while other students were generally excited to work on this project because it was a new and different approach (“It was something different”, “I’ve never done anything like this before”). One student chose to participate in the project because it would help them learn more about postsecondary education.

By the end of the project, students discussed how commitment to the project became about caring about their peers and wanting their peers to have the support they needed to pursue their aspirations. The students reflected on how they, alongside their peers, could support each other to pursue their aspirations and encourage each other when they were afraid to pursue aspirations that may require them to leave their hometown (“To get through high school, you got to help each other out”, “Don’t be intimidated just because you’re from a small town”).

### **Development of Postsecondary Education Knowledge**

The students expressed that working on this project gave them an opportunity to support their high school while simultaneously teaching them about postsecondary education. For example, one participant discussed learning how to apply to college and how to approach applying for scholarships during the course of the project by having conversations with team members, and another participant shared that the project pushed them to start planning for their own post-high school plans in the fall of their senior year. In addition, during the conference, the students discussed learning about different types of colleges and universities, scholarships, standardized testing, and the multiple pathways to pursue postsecondary education, including earning a certificate or associate’s degree from a technical college. The students also discussed developing confidence in making decisions about their post-high school plans.

The students were also exposed to new information which challenged their preconceived thoughts and others’ preconceived thoughts about

planning for life after high school. For example, the students discussed how people often perceive college as being out of reach for students from a small town because of the potential intimidation of leaving your hometown for postsecondary education, or the belief that some postsecondary education institutions, such as University of Georgia, were only for “rich kids.” The students also expressed being pleasantly surprised by working with a college professor because they perceived college professors as being inaccessible and impatient.

### **Leadership Development**

When prompted to reflect on the challenges that they faced during the course of the project, students discussed the difficulty of having people consistently at meetings because of conflicts with field trips, student clubs, and organizational meetings. Students discussed how there were many ideas during the planning process of the conference, and they had difficulty in implementing the conference while incorporating everyone’s ideas. Finally, students were disappointed with only having approximately 40 students and family members present at the conference.

While there were challenges, students seemed to learn and grow as leaders as a result of the project. The students felt as though they took initiative to address a school-wide challenge, some for the first time, and were able to contribute ideas. One student also noted that having to be organized during this project helped with procrastinating less. In addition, one student discussed how the project enhanced their communication skills and ability to communicate ideas. They also shared that they felt more confident interacting with others, including peers and school staff, to accomplish a goal. For example, one student participant shared the following: “Like before, I probably would never talk to a staff administrator about anything to do with college. I’ve talked to teachers about it, but I feel like this has helped me.” Students also commented on how working with their peers on the project made them more comfortable to collaborate with others.

### **Discussion of Implications for Practice and Policy**

The use of YPAR is promising for practice, policy, and student learning and development. During the course of the project, we identified school and community challenges and strengths related to

postsecondary education access for rural youth through the photovoice discussion, multiple discussions as a group, and the school-wide survey. For example, reflecting the literature, we learned that rural students' ability to access postsecondary education was related to having resources and support to navigate the admissions process and being able to pay for postsecondary education (Ardoin, 2018; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Goldman, 2019; Griffin et al., 2011; Means, 2019a; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018; Nelson, 2016). In addition, the students in this project also shared they had the encouragement and support from family and teachers to pursue postsecondary education (Griffin et al., 2011; Means, 2019a; Means et al., 2016; Morton et al., 2018). Building upon the strengths in the community and school levels, we focused on two evidence-based products that could enhance postsecondary education access: (a) a conference and (b) a resource corner.

While our project focused on postsecondary education access, the use of YPAR could be significantly beneficial for addressing other problems of practice. Instead of relying on the expertise of school and community leaders to investigate and address challenges facing rural youth, these leaders could consider how to engage rural youth in how to develop and implement programs and services that are responsive to their needs. School and community leaders may not be able to always fully implement a YPAR project like described in this paper due to the time commitment (e.g., we had a total of 16 meetings in one academic semester) and limited resources (e.g., our project required us to seek people willing to donate their time and funds to implement the conference and we used funds from the university to support the project). While school and community leaders may not be able to implement YPAR projects as described in the paper, they should consider ways in which they are getting the perspectives and feedback from students on programs that are intended to enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of the students themselves. For example, school and community leaders could seek the input of students on programs, services, and policies at the school (e.g., student handbook, a program designed to address school bullying, counseling support and resources) or even how to handle school and community challenges (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic). Rural school and community leaders could consider setting up a youth advisory board that could help with investigating and addressing school-

and community-level challenges or assessing students' needs and perspectives.

However, school and community leaders must be careful not to always seek the perspectives and feedback from students who have been labeled as the student leaders or "academically-strong" students, especially since this labeling is often embedded in racism and classism, leaving out the perspectives and feedback from Students of Color and students from poor and working-class backgrounds. In addition, school and community leaders must be prepared to listen to the perspectives of youth even when the perspectives do not align with their own (McIntyre, 2008). For example, during the course of this project, the education professor had concerns about promoting the U.S. Armed Forces during the conference and through the resource corner given how he believed Students of Color, students from poor and working-class backgrounds, and rural students are often the target audience for being recruited to enlist in the military. The dialogue from the five student co-researchers and the survey results indicated that the students wanted to learn more about career and postsecondary education options through the U.S. Armed Forces. Thus, the education professor was compelled to listen and learn from the student co-researchers about their interests in the U.S. Armed Forces, while working alongside students to consider how to promote and position other postsecondary plans as viable options for rural youth.

The concern from the education professor leads to a larger point about how a single YPAR study may not overturn the social and economic conditions that compel rural youth to make decisions about their lives and the lives of their family members (e.g., decision to enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces to cover future postsecondary education costs or to have access to financial capital to support their family). However, YPAR studies can increase critical consciousness of youth to understand how social and economic conditions lead to inequities. In addition, the commitment by educators and local, state, and national policymakers to consistently center the voices and experiences of rural youth can have sustained and real implications for addressing social and economic conditions that impact the lives of rural youth and their families.

The use of YPAR to engage rural youth should also be considered by local, state, and national policymakers. Recognizing the haste and unpredictable nature of the policymaking process, it may not always be feasible to implement a full



YPAR project with youth. However, policymakers have an opportunity to better engage with rural youth to listen and learn from their experiences, leading to policy that better reflects the diverse needs and interests of rural youth. For example, how could local, state, and national policymakers learn from rural youth about their concerns and interests related to postsecondary education and develop policies that build upon the strengths and assets of rural communities across the United States and enhance robust support for rural youth to pursue and complete postsecondary education?

The five student co-researchers described how engagement in a YPAR project enhanced their sense of responsibility to others, postsecondary education knowledge, and leadership development. Thus, we position YPAR as a promising practice that can enhance student learning and development. Rural educators have the opportunity to investigate how to implement YPAR projects as a way for students to develop multiple skills, such as investigative and research skills, through an innovative, student-centered approach. Furthermore, we position that YPAR does engage and empower youth to develop and employ their agency in addressing pressing issues and challenges (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019; Powers & Allaman, 2012; Pyne et al., 2013; Torre, 2009), which could be beneficial for

the improvement of both rural schools and communities.

### Conclusion

The five student co-researchers from a rural high school in Georgia had something to say about the postsecondary education access challenges facing rural youth and strategies and approaches to address such inequities. The adult collaborators on this project would like to believe we listened and supported the students' ideas, but, most importantly, the adult collaborators learned the value of providing space for rural youth to investigate, question, trouble, and respond to educational challenges and barriers. The students were provided the space to also consider and dream of a wide range of possibilities to enhance postsecondary education access at their rural high school. While the conference and the resource corner are important steps, we also recognize that educators, policymakers, and researchers have a lot more to learn from and with rural youth to develop systemic changes that are needed to address pervasive spatial inequities experienced by rural schools and communities. We hope the lessons learned from this project will be recognized by educators, community leaders, and policymakers as a critical, transformational response to the need to be inclusive of the voices of rural youth.

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