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Youth-led participatory action research in school counseling as a vehicle for antiracist SEL

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ABSTRACT

As youth in the United States continue to become diverse, it is important for the practices educators adopt to be inclusive and antiracist. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a pedagogy that aligns with the social emotional learning competencies and the tenets of antiracist education. We propose that school counselors are best positioned to support efforts to implement YPAR in schools. The following article provides 2 case examples of the use of YPAR: one in a school counseling small group and the other in a classroom co-facilitated with a teacher.

This conceptual article argues that Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which has been thoroughly integrated across educational fields, can be strategically integrated by school counselors (SC) toward social-emotional learning (SEL) and antiracist praxis. Support exists for simultaneously pulling from educational and counseling theories to advance the work of the SC. I. P. Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021) describe that SCs operate as educator-counselors at the intersections of these fields who understand how to deploy preventative and developmental counseling interventions. Their professional roles are simultaneously focused on wellness and social justice, through educational tasks like *small-group counseling, classroom instruction, appraisal and advising, consultation, collaboration, and referrals*. As a result, we posit YPAR is a practical application for SCs to integrate in their interdisciplinary professional roles. YPAR is a youth-led groupwork practice that simultaneously supports social-emotional development, academic development, and combats racist practices/policies in schools. This article describes how SCs can integrate YPAR across comprehensive school counseling programing, to support SEL and actualize the tenets of antiracist education. We illuminate 2 case descriptions on the use of YPAR to address SEL and antiracist education.

The role of the school counselor in school ecosystems

Historically, SCs have promoted students' holistic development in 3 domains: academic, social-emotional, and career. While that remains true, SCs deliver comprehensive school counseling programs through a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework that

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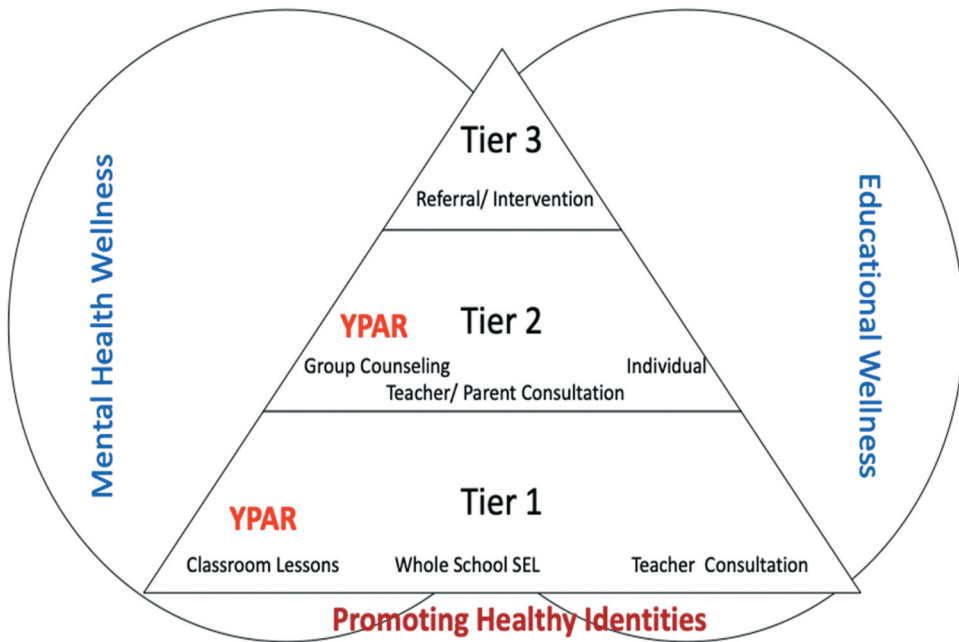
Figure 1. School counselors' role within schools and SEL.

attends to whole school goals. Within the MTSS framework, SCs focus on preventative support for children. (Goodman-Scott et al., 2019). Through a data-informed process, students may progress to multiple interventions (e.g., small group counseling, individual counseling, referrals) as needed in each of the other 2 tiers. However, SCs' roles in MTSS are not exclusively direct services with students (see Figure 1).

Critical to SC's work is consultation or collaboration with other stakeholders, specifically with teachers. Their training in both the intersection of the educational system and mental health for children and adolescents affords them a perspective different from the training of other educators. This perspective allows SCs to engage educators in a broader discussion of how the school serves their students, one that stretches beyond academics into how students' school experiences affect their lives after PreK-12 schooling. Collaborating with classroom teachers allows SCs to simultaneously engage in partnerships that enhance the effectiveness of their professional roles while reducing the enormous challenge of independently addressing institutional barriers for marginalized students.

Antiracist school counseling

SCs influence the overall school climate, through their training in SEL, ethical obligation to be culturally sustaining, and their responsibility to work in support of every student (American School Counseling Association, 2019). While SCs have only recently used the term antiracist practices in their work, the call for SCs to lead stakeholders (e.g., students, families, teachers, and community members), facilitate communication between culturally diverse stakeholders, dismantle systemic barriers for traditionally minoritized youth, and advocate for all students has long been part of their role (Portman, 2009). Notably,

Dr. Bettina Love, an antiracist advocate and abolitionist teacher educator, called for SCs to help teachers learn and implement antiracist principles in their classrooms (Love, 2021). In response YPAR offers SCs a tool for utilizing systemic collaboration and interpersonal influence with teachers to dismantle these racist policies (Young & Bryan, 2015).

Within an antiracist lens, SCs engage students and teachers in reflection of their identities and how they impact power differences in their environment within the context of their social-emotional development. Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the emphasis in workforce development on the need for SEL incorporated into classrooms, SCs also consult teachers as they integrate SEL in their classrooms (Yoder et al., 2020). SCs can specifically influence teachers to adopt antiracist SEL in their classrooms.

YPAR is a collective inquiry-based praxis centered in the work of young people exploring solutions to social problems affecting their lives. It is an ideal tool for empowering students to engage in self advocacy while collaborating with classroom teachers who have existing relationships with students and the responsibility for engaging them in the classroom. Rooted in the teachings of Paolo Freire (1993), YPAR challenges traditional methods of education, where students passively learn, thus making it a more effective strategy for engaging minoritized students.

YPAR is an intervention that can be used to integrate antiracist SEL principles within schools. With teachers, SCs can help facilitate critical discussions regarding the problems students face related to their learning and school climate. In collaboration, they can help students navigate advocating for solutions to the problems they are facing in their schools and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). SCs can further support teachers in reflecting on the responses from their students in a way that helps them use the students' voices to structure their classroom and school environment.

Lastly, SCs are positioned in the school to provide YPAR small groups because of their expertise in group counseling and the skills needed to support the reflection and processing of experiences in the small group setting. YPAR small groups have been used as part of comprehensive SC programs in which students research topics related to problems they are experiencing and develop a product to help share their experiences and collective solutions to alleviate the problem. Some examples of products include photographs (Edirmanasinghe, 2020), mixtapes (I. Levy & Travis, 2020), a recording studio (I. P. Levy & Adjapong, 2020), and a traditional PowerPoint presentation (Edirmanasinghe & Blaginin, 2019).

School counseling, SEL, and antiracist practice

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) refers to SEL as a framework that promote core competencies defined as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision making (Borowski, 2019). Researchers have posited SEL should be taught to students through collaborative programming across educational levels/systems (Weissberg et al., 2015) — a natural fit for school counseling professionals. In fact, Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2021) found that an SEL mindfulness-based intervention facilitated in a classroom setting by teachers and SCs increased student's stress tolerance, social curiosity, executive functioning, and academic achievement.

Group counseling has historically been a vehicle through which SCs sought to empower student voice and aid in social-emotional development. However, approaches to counseling have lacked the ability to be culturally sustaining, to process the various intersections of

Black and Brown youths' identities (Singh et al., 2020), and to relinquish control to allow pathways for youth to lead (Cook & Kruger-Henny, 2017). Without strategies that position youth at the helm, and welcome the presentation of complex personhood (Love, 2016), the school counseling profession has been complicit in the maintenance of our historically racist education system. So, when it comes to the convergence of intersectionality and SEL competencies, there are some critiques.

While the research is evident, SEL is often criticized for hindering expression and fostering conditioned emotional responses and teaching children to "act white." Dena Simmons (2019) explains that when SEL is taught to students of color without any context, specifically the impact of racism and white supremacy, it can become harmful by asking Black students as an example to "calm down" when challenging a classmate on microaggressions. In this example, a student who possesses enough self-awareness and social awareness to challenge their own minimization is read as lacking SEL skills like self-management. SCs should stand in opposition to this reality, as believers in highlighting and fostering youth assets (Henry & Bryan, 2021). For this reason, SC research has detailed that the same Black and Brown youth can effortlessly tap into their own cultural forms of expression (i.e., hip-hop lyric writing) to display robust emotional self-awareness, stress-coping, and agency (I. Levy & Travis, 2020).

Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR)

Basic characteristics of YPAR projects make it distinct from traditional pedagogical approaches, and ideal for SCs committed to engaging in SEL and antiracist practices. Although exhaustive explanations of how to implement YPAR are beyond the scope of this article, we briefly explain three aspects of YPAR most related to SCs professional roles. First, research includes youth who direct experience the systemic issue being studied (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Participants grow with and through the group process, reflecting on how they have experienced the social problem and imagining ways they can collectively address the challenge.

Second, most YPAR projects draw from Critical Race Theory (CRT), centering knowledge and experiences of historically oppressed populations (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Co-researchers in YPAR acknowledge that race and racism impact systems in which youth are situated while exploring the intersections of other identities that can impact power within systems. To this end, the goal of participation is to deconstruct and better understand the root cause of injustice by situating the problem studied within the individuals experiencing it while also exploring the historical and current power structures that influence it (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Finally, YPAR projects are inherently action-oriented. The reflection and research serve as a space to develop actionable solutions. Overall, YPAR mirrors the group counseling process as the counselor facilitates participants in processing their experiences in relation to a shared challenge. As participants share the impact of the social problem on them, they develop universality in how they are situated in the context of the challenge studied. As they gain critical consciousness within the group, the counselor helps youth actualize their power in positive systemic change.

SCs who engage in group counseling processes can integrate YPAR into their existing practices by taking youth through a critical cycle of investigative inquiry (See Figure 2; Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017). Following this inquiry, students collectively identify an action
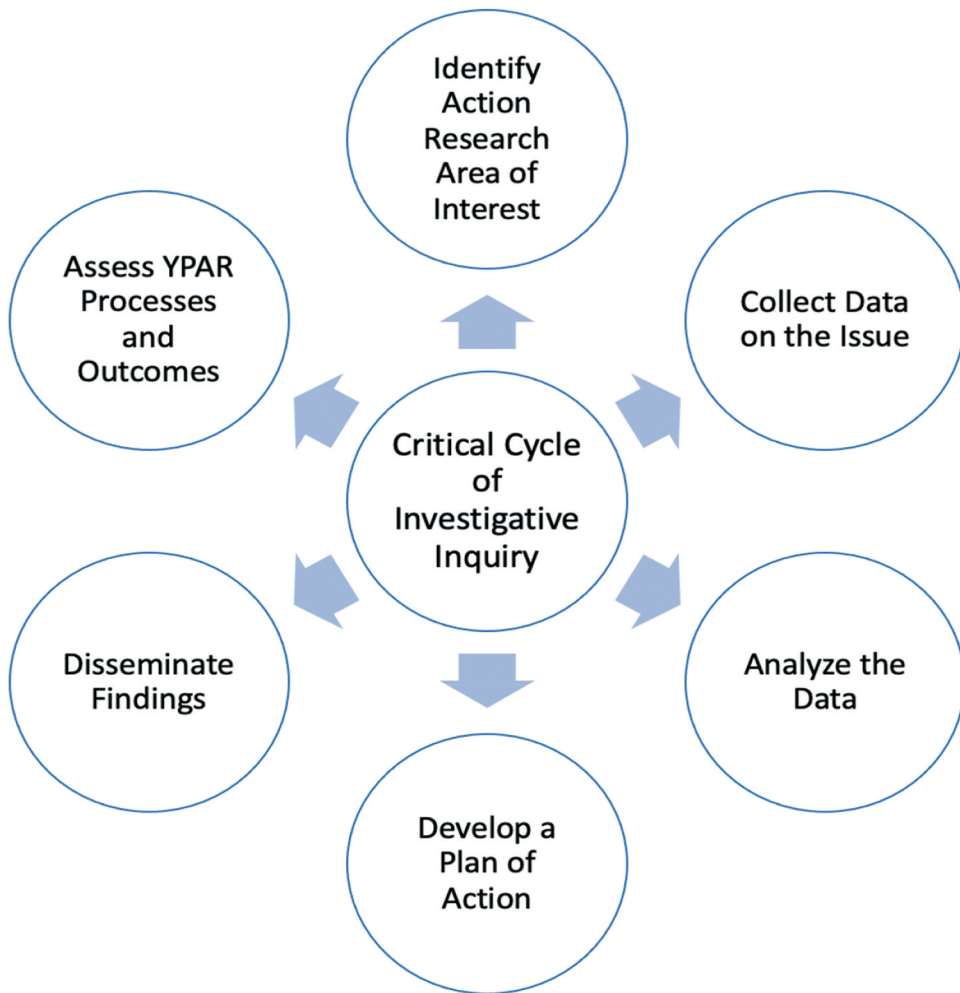
Figure 2. YPAR process. (Adapted from Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017)

area of interest (an issue important to them) and begin data collection. After data is collected, the group reconvenes to analyze and discuss their findings, informing how they design a product (plan of action). The product students create, rooted in their research, is disseminated in an attempt to impact their given issue. After dissemination, youth meet as a group to process their project and assess whether they made their desired impact. If they wish, they can then cycle back through the investigative inquiry.

Actualizing antiracist education & SEL through YPAR

SCs often face multifaceted work demands that pressure them to resolve many systemic issues in unrealistic ways. Integrating YPAR into their current roles may allow them to share the load of such tasks in ways mutually beneficial to students and classroom teachers. SCs are well-positioned to integrate YPAR into their existing group counseling process in small group, classrooms, and in collaboration with all educational stakeholders to support

youth in identifying and dismantling racist structures. This integration may serve to mitigate emergent challenges that arise from addressing systemic barriers facing minoritized populations.

As a multi-modal, malleable, and culturally sustaining framework, YPAR positions youth as experts and invites them to *demonstrate* competencies they already have. Through the YPAR process, youth learn tangible advocacy skills that help youth act on the depth of knowledge they possess about the social ills of our world. In the following demonstrations we illuminate how YPAR can foster the tenets of antiracist education (e.g., critical consciousness, antiblackness, intersectionality, ecological systems framework; Ieva et al., 2021).

YPAR demonstration #1: Mixtape making

An adaptation of the aforementioned YPAR process of investigative inquiry is hip-hop mixtape making (I. Levy & Travis, 2020). In this process youth work in a small group with their SC to process an issue impacting their lives, through researching, discussing, writing, recording, and performing hip-hop lyrics. In practice, this culturally responsive small-group YPAR process invokes various tenets of antiracist education while simultaneously supporting youth in processing thoughts/feelings. Below we outline various mixtape-making stages to describe this process.

Identifying action mixtape area of interest

To begin, youth and their SC must collectively identify a racist policy or practice within their school building that is inherently *antiblack* and causes them notable stress, which will function as the topic for their song. Like traditional group work processes, icebreaker activities can occur in this stage that both support theme identification and build group cohesion. For example, I. Levy and Travis (2020) tasked students with creating artist profiles where they wrote down various facts about themselves (Stage name; Hometown; Favorite artist & song; Group and Individual goal; Social Justice Theme; Your Strength/Superpower), which were shared with the group for rapport building and theme identification. Introductory activities of the like set a foundation for an antiracist YPAR process to unfold, while addressing SEL competencies of *self-awareness* and *relationship skill development*.

Data collection and digestion

Next students would collect research that informs the construction of lyrics. In mixtape making youth define what research is, and how it is collected. For example, youth might interview peers in the school building about the injustices they have experienced, send a survey out to the student body requesting similar information or locate and read articles/ videos online. After they collect data, the group comes together to share and discuss their findings. The digestion of student data that exposes injustices activates a *critical consciousness* and *social awareness* in youth in support of antiracist education. Sorting through data about injustices that youth feel in schools globally, or locally, invites a range of difficult emotions to enter the group space. The opportunity to sort through these thoughts and feelings, and then to create a project around them, fosters SEL competencies of *self-management skills* like self-regulation and/or co-regulation.

Planning and recording

The program also addresses the SEL competency of *responsible decision making* as the collection/digestion of data leads to youth co-defining both their mixtape topic, as well as roles group members will play to complete the project. Once all the data is made visible to the group, youths use it as the foundation for development of their project. In small-group work, this process involves creating a tracklist — a collection of song ideas that also identifies what songs will be created and by whom. SCs facilitate a group discussion around this simply asking "Based on our data, what could our songs be about?" Additionally, not every student needs to contribute to the project in the same way. For instance, some students may choose to write/perform lyrics, create album artwork, film a music video, create a choreographed dance, or create flyers that distill their findings and allow for eventual dissemination. The multimodal nature of mixtape-making allows for an *asset-based approach* that provides all students agency by contributing to the group project. Together, students then actualize their project and co-create a plan for dissemination.

Dissemination

The dissemination of the mixtape requires an intentional effort by the group to share their project, with the hopes of it impacting their research area of interest. This can look like a mixtape release party at the school where staff, students, family, and community are invited. Dissemination could also occur via a presentation of the research and final project from the students and their SC to the school administration. Students might create a series of videos and songs that live on a website, and then distribute that link to the school community. Regardless of the student's choice in dissemination medium, both *advocacy* and an ecological *systems framework* are promoted. Post-dissemination students may use the reaction to the mixtape listening party, from the larger community and/or administration, as a *culturally inclusive program evaluation*. Finally, the group should meet to evaluate the effectiveness of their dissemination, considering what went well and how their decision-making could be improved for their next project.

Process Questions

We recommend, but do not prescribe the following process questions that SCs could use to follow the mixtape-making process.

(1) What does it feel like to listen back to your mixtape?
(2) How well do you think you were able to advocate for your social justice issue with your mixtape?
(3) What do you think you learned from this process?

YPAR demonstration #2: Youth-led social media campaign

As a second demonstration, we explore a YPAR social media campaign co-facilitated by a teacher and SC that similarly addresses SEL competencies and antiracist education tenets. Given the large-group classroom setting for this SC intervention, the focus of YPAR in classrooms takes on a social action focus. While collaboration could occur across multiple

content disciplines, a large portion of YPAR work in classrooms has occurred as part of English teaching curricula. An initial start to this process should include a collaborative meeting between an English teacher and SC with the goal of co-creating a unit plan around the critical cycle of investigative inquiry, also accounting for logistical considerations (for example, having the SC push-in twice a week for 4 weeks). Together these educators should co-facilitate a process where youth identify an action research issue of particular interest, research and digest data around this area, and then collectively design and disseminate a social media campaign that aims to positively impact this issue.

Identifying action area for social media campaign

The YPAR classroom process should begin with an ice-breaker activity that both builds classroom community and helps the class identify a social media campaign theme of interest. The class might be asked to break off into groups and answer the following questions: 1) Generate a list of 5 social media influencers you follow, 2) For what social injustice issues do these influencers advocate?, and 3) Are there any social injustices you advocate for on social media? If not, what are some issues you might consider addressing? Youth should work to identify an injustice impacting their lives (*critical consciousness* and *social awareness)*. As each group shares, the educators should keep a list of possible topics, which the class can then discuss and vote on.

Data collection and digestion

Knowing the topic area of interest, the teacher and SC create lessons around data collection and digestion. As a modeling exercise around social media research and data collection, the educators should arrive to class having collected their own data around the identified student issue. For example, if students expressed interest in self-care, the educators would present an established self-care social media influencer to the class. After describing why this influencer and/or account is so compelling, a mini-lesson could have groups of students discuss and annotate a social media post from a said influencer, using the following questions: 1) What does the image in the post communicate about self-care? 2) What does the caption say about self-care? 3) Based on the comments, how is this post perceived by the audience? Moving into their own research, the goal is for students to identify research on self-care that they can create a social media campaign around. Again, in small groups, students work to generate a research list of 5 facts about self-care that they could create content from. Through analyzing articles/videos on self-care, or through the analysis of posts from social media accounts on self-care, each small group deduces a research list. The class should then share these findings for both a class discussion and toward establishing a full class list of research for content creation.

Content planning

In the content planning stage, students are to solidify their plan or group goal for their social media campaign. This includes determining the name of the campaign/social media account, what platform(s) will be used, how long the campaign will run, how many posts will be made, and what roles each group member would hold based on the *assets* they bring to the group. The teacher and SC can support the class in assembling teams of students

composed of members with all the necessary skills (image creating, video editor, caption creator, etc.) to begin the creation of content for the social media campaign. The use of multimodal social media content, centered on a youth-identified injustice, propels *conflict resolution* and creates opportunities for *advocacy.*

Completing and disseminating

Given that dissemination in social media campaigning is ongoing, we consider the project complete once students create a previously identified number of posts. The goal is not necessarily to post the content, though that might happen, but more to create content around research with the goal of impacting a specific issue. So, if students advocate for more opportunities for self-care with their campaign, then an *ecological systems framework* dissemination could look like sharing their social media campaign with the administration in their school building or at the district level. The ability to present, discuss and process the impact of their campaign, or how it was received, in real-time offers opportunities to bolster *self-awareness* and *self-management skills.*

Process Questions

We provide examples of process questions that the SC and teacher may use to process with students after sharing their social media campaign.

(1) How well do you think you were able to advocate for your social justice issue with your social media campaign?
(2) What do you think you learned from this process?
(3) Describe any changes you think resulted from sharing this campaign.

Implications on policy and practice

As demonstrated in the above examples, the use of YPAR is an evidence-based process that promotes student agency, attends to SEL and antiracist education, builds academic and advocacy skills, reaches a larger number of students, is cost-effective, provides opportunities for SCs and teachers to co-facilitate together, and ultimately builds a collaborative school community. As a result, integrating YPAR into small group counseling or working collaboratively with a teacher in the classroom has multiple implications for practice and policy.

Practice

The expertise of SCs in fostering education and mental health wellness within the school community ideally positions them to utilize YPAR processes that support district and school leaders to incorporate SEL and antiracist educational practices. YPAR provides SCs an opportunity to systematically work with classroom teachers and use data to provide a tiered response for small group counseling. Group counseling, SEL, antiracist education, and YPAR have multiple benefits to not only the students, but also to the advancement of inclusive school climates. Consequently, it would be advantageous for administrators to support school counseling programs with time to implement during the school day and ongoing professional development for SCs.

Beyond small group counseling, sufficient evidence supports the use of YPAR in the classroom with teachers (Anderson, 2020). YPAR specifically aligns with English and Social Studies classes as the curriculum draws attention to social issues that fit within broader state-curriculum standards (Cammorata, 2007). Since evidence supports the widespread use of YPAR in schools, national and state standards committees should consider how to align SEL standards in general and YPAR as critical pedagogy in delivering content standards. As teachers are pressured between state testing and specified curricula, integrating YPAR into the curricula is one way to ensure that students and teachers meet content standards through their engagement in the YPAR process. Further, incorporating SEL in the classroom requires teachers to build relationships with students, which is a direct goal of SEL. YPAR has the potential to validate youth knowledge in the face of different forms of marginalization within the school setting (Anderson, 2020). Systematic reviews of YPAR emphasize that administrators' support of collaborations between SCs and classroom teachers optimally utilizes SCs' processing expertise (Anyon et al., 2018).

Moreover, implementing YPAR enhances district and school leaders' ability to collaborate with family and community stakeholders. When students are leading and researching social action, families are more likely to support and connect with their students and school. As a result, school-community partnerships that fosters relationships and connectedness will be strengthened (Henry & Bryan, 2021). Additionally, since CASEL has partnered nationally with workforce development to collaborate on SEL outcomes that contribute to developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions of future workers (Yoder et al., 2020), local schools and districts should include the local community workforce as partners with the school and family in the YPAR implementation process.

Policy

There are many possibilities for federal and state policies to influence the YPAR implementation process. First, as schools rush to support students' social-emotional development, more educational policies are needed to support students' overall mental health. That includes naming and (re)defining what mental health supports look like in schools. More specifically, implementing YPAR in small group counseling supports SEL through an antiracist focus, and supports students' mental health. Additionally, since federal and state policies have the potential to create conditions for SEL to be an integral part of every student's education (CASEL, 2021), federal and state policies should exist that require a phased plan of implementation. This includes continuous professional development for current practitioners, changes to state appraisal and evaluation plans to include the intersection of SEL and critical pedagogy as part of the evaluation. This in turn would mean making changes to state certification requirements, which would result in educator preparation programs having to shift focus and require SEL and antiracist training, including how to embed in classroom policies and procedures and as previously mentioned, embedded in content-specific standards.

Lastly, federal and state policymakers might want to support efforts to increase funding for research and evidence-based practice related to SEL and antiracist education. Specifically, we suggest longitudinal and cross-sectional studies that look at short and long-term outcomes for students. Research can also look into the overall school climate, and

distinguish outcomes based on systemic implementation (e.g., whole school and comprehensive school counseling programming) versus individual classroom interventions associated with the intersection of SEL and antiracist education.

Conclusion

In this article, we describe YPAR and its implementation to support antiracist SEL practices. In SEL interventions students passively learn skills to build their social-emotional development. Students are assumed to lack knowledge and are in need of training. However, YPAR flips this assumption to believe that knowledge is a co-collaboration between teacher and student. In YPAR groups, educators learn how to resolve issues youth experience and youth learn interpersonal and advocacy skills. In the spirit of antiracism and interrogating inherently racist systems and practices, YPAR is the vehicle to change the deficit-based perspective of youth in education systems. In YPAR, youth act as the experts and reflect on their experiences to determine the curricula of the group. Through this process, they develop a critical consciousness that can empower students to see their ability to change systems.

We recommend that as school systems begin to think about how they will incorporate SEL practices and antiracist work into their work with students, policymakers consider ways to encourage collaboration between SCs and teachers to implement YPAR in schools. The urgent call for educators to integrate antiracist and SEL principles into their systems and practices has become louder, especially since the COVID-19 global health crisis. While SEL practices are becoming more integrated into classrooms, drawing upon the expertise of SCs trained to provide supports to social-emotional development will assist with schoolwide integration of SEL practices as a preventative and responsive support system to all students. SCs collaborative integration of YPAR enhances their leadership and advocacy to address systemic barriers to education for historically oppressed students.

Disclosure statement

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Additional Resources

(1) ***Virtual Resources.* (2015). YPAR Hub**. http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/sample-page-2/virtual-resources/

This website has resources for educators to start implementing YPAR in their schools.

(1) **Anderson, A. J. (2020). A qualitative systematic review of youth participatory action research implementation in U.S. high schools.** *American Journal of Community Psychology, 65*, 242-257. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12389

A systematic review to understand the factors impacting YPAR implementation in high schools. This may help those interested in implementation understand how to navigate the challenges.

(1) **Youth Activism Project. (2018, May).** *What is youth participatory action research?* https://youthactivismproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Youth-Activism-Project-YPAR-Guide.pdf

This guide provides the basics to better understand YPAR. The organization also provides toolkits and resources to help those interested in implementing YPAR.