

# Youth Participatory Action Research and School Improvement: The Missing Voices of Black Youth in Montreal

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## Abstract

The article discusses the implementation and results of a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project carried out with black high school students in 2009 and 2010 in Montreal, QC. The aim of the project was to involve black youth in studying the factors that either enhance or impede their success in school and thereby have them identify solutions that would be effective in reducing the high dropout rate of black students in Montreal. The participating students were 15 to 18 years of age, attended four high schools located across the city, and thus represented the cultural and linguistic diversity of Montreal's black community. The results demonstrate that YPAR can lead to a deeper

and fuller understanding of the factors that shape students' experiences and performance in school than research that ignores the voices of young people. The study shows that black youth believe academic achievement is influenced by multiple and inter-related factors, including family, peers, school, and neighbourhood. The youth contend that high schools must do more to support black students by setting high expectations for success, maintaining positive teacher–student relations, integrating multicultural curricula such as courses on black history, promoting more innovative pedagogies in the classroom, expanding the range of extra-curricular activities, and working more closely with black community organizations.

*Keywords:* youth participatory action research, black students, academic achievement, success in school, school policy, school improvement, high school dropout

## Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'un projet de recherche participative qui s'est tenu en 2009–2010 avec un groupe de jeunes élèves noirs fréquentant des écoles secondaires de Montréal (Québec). L'objectif du projet était d'impliquer des jeunes noirs dans un processus d'étude des facteurs pouvant encourager ou inhiber leur succès scolaire, et ainsi d'identifier avec eux des mesures pouvant réduire les taux de décrochage scolaire des étudiants noirs à Montréal. Les élèves recrutés pour ce projet étaient âgés de 15 à 18 ans et fréquentaient quatre écoles secondaires situées dans différents quartiers de l'île de Montréal, et ainsi représentaient bien la diversité culturelle et linguistique des communautés noires de Montréal. Les résultats démontrent que les recherches participatives impliquant des élèves peuvent mener à une compréhension plus riche et plus profonde des facteurs qui influencent les expériences et les performances scolaires des élèves que les études qui ne prennent pas en considération leurs considérations. Les résultats de notre étude démontrent que les jeunes noirs y ayant participé expliquent que la réussite scolaire est influencée par des facteurs multiples et interreliés, incluant la famille, les pairs, l'école, et la communauté environnante. Ces jeunes croient que les écoles devraient offrir plus de soutien aux étudiants noirs afin qu'ils et elles réussissent, avec des mesures telles un meilleur climat à l'école, des interrelations positives entre les étudiants et les

enseignants, l'implantation d'un curriculum interculturel incluant des cours sur l'histoire des noirs, des approches pédagogiques variées et novatrices, un plus grand choix d'activités parascolaires, et des partenariats avec des organismes de la communauté noire.

*Mots clés* : recherche participative, élèves noirs, réussite scolaire, décrochage scolaire, écoles secondaires, politiques scolaires, amélioration scolaire

## Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, youth participatory action research (YPAR) has become an increasingly popular and well-established practice around the world, and has been used both in academic and community settings as a way of making the voices of youth more central to research, policy, and community organizing. Today, there is a substantial and continually growing body of literature written about the theoretical and methodological dimensions of YPAR (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Delgado, 2006; Sabo, 2003). For Torre and Fine (2006), the essential purpose of YPAR is to shift the objective of doing research “on youth” to doing research “with youth.” Young people become the authors of their own research, rather than its object. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) define YPAR as a means of “involving young people in knowledge development at the community level” (p. 2). Typically, YPAR projects centre on issues that matter most to youth, whether it is the quality of education and community services or problems of violence, homelessness, and racial profiling. The primary objectives are to give youth a platform on which to express their own thoughts about critical social issues, contribute their unique insights as adolescents, and propose solutions that will be best suited to addressing the issues that concern them (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

In North America, the interest in YPAR really began to flourish about two decades ago and reflects the integration of several different and related fields, namely, participatory action research (PAR), youth development, community development, and community organizing (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Sabo, 2003). The practice of PAR began in the 1970s and was greatly inspired by the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who has written extensively about popular education as a mode of consciousness-raising and empowerment. One of the first authors to coin the term “action research” was Kurt Lewin (1952), who believed that PAR was necessary to generate knowledge with people rather than it being controlled solely by trained scientists.

YPAR also builds on concepts from the field of positive youth development (PYD), which emerged in the last couple of decades as a way of overcoming the limitation in mainstream community-based youth programs of viewing youth as “problems to be managed” rather than as individuals with untapped skills and potential (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). The premise of PYD is that programs must

begin by recognizing that all youth, whatever their backgrounds, possess innate talents and strengths. Evaluations of PYD programs have shown that youth perform best in community programs that acknowledge and enhance their strengths and potential, and provide opportunities for them to form positive and nurturing relationships with other peers and with adult mentors and role models (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Much like PYD, the purpose of YPAR is to provide youth with opportunities to gain valuable skills and self-confidence, which can then be transferred to their success in schools and other arenas. In YPAR, youth may acquire new competencies in leadership, critical thinking, public speaking, teamwork, writing, and community organizing. The focus on civic participation and positive social change within YPAR can also inspire young people to become more actively engaged in the governance of their schools and communities. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) assert that YPAR enables youth to exercise their political rights by participating in the democratization of knowledge, thus enhancing their ability to become active citizens. Cammarota and Fine (2008) claim that YPAR should engage young people in a process whereby they can “contest and transform systems and institutions to produce greater justice” (p. 2).

Examples of YPAR projects consistently show that the participation of young people in empirical research significantly enriches the quality and depth of findings, for the simple reason that youth possess a more intimate knowledge of the adolescent world than the adults in their lives. Smith, Monaghan, and Broad (2002) report that the use of YPAR in a community health study in England elicited a definition of health that was both broader and more precise, because the youth made it known that their feelings of health were inseparable from their real-life experiences with violence and victimization and their lack of access to appropriate services. In another study in the United States, Fallis and Opotow (2003) found that the manner in which youth interpreted the causes of truancy and class cutting in school was markedly different from the staff. While school personnel claimed that class cutting was a reflection of a student’s “lack of motivation,” the students implicated the culture and actions of the school, which they described as sterile, bureaucratic, and disrespectful of their interests, abilities, and contributions.

The exact form and extent of youth participation in YPAR will vary considerably from one project to the next (Checkoway, 2011; Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichy, & Aoun, 2010). In one review of the literature, Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) found that the precise forms of youth participation in YPAR can be categorized into four distinct

and continuous levels: youth as subjects, youth as consultants, youth as partners, and youth as directors. The fourth and highest level of participation—in which youth serve as the directors and lead research without the input of adults—is generally rare. The more common form of participation is one in which adults initiate a study and recruit youth as partners and co-investigators. In theory, YPAR should allow youth to play the same substantive roles as adults in the creation, implementation, and dissemination of research.

One of the notable strengths of YPAR is its fundamentally collaborative nature. Teams of young people and adults work closely together over time and engage in a continuous and active dialogue about the research questions, methods, and findings (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Throughout these conversations, the youth are positioned as the experts and the ones who are “insiders” in the adolescent world. The role of adults is to serve as teachers, facilitators, and mentors, and genuinely share the decision-making and leadership responsibilities with youth. As such, YPAR is essentially team-driven, open-ended, consensual, and inclusive (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Connor, 2005).

As the number of YPAR projects has flourished in recent years, the conversations in the literature have turned from questions of theory to the more precise and complex issues involved in implementation. Articles have been written about the ethical challenges involved in doing research with minors, the methodological and organizational requirements for recruiting and sustaining the participation of a diverse group of youth, and methods for innovating with data collection and analysis such as the use of photography and PhotoVoice (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; McLaughlin, 2006; Smith et al., 2002; Walsh, Hewson, Shier, & Morales, 2008). Given that YPAR requires a significant level of youth involvement and breaks away from established hierarchies of power between youth and adults, it demands more time, energy, and care than most traditional research methods. For these same reasons, however, the approach is one that has the potential to be more transformative and rewarding for youth and adults, as well as for the organizations involved (Cahill, 2004; Smith et al., 2002).

The topics that YPAR addresses are often quite sensitive and complex. Program organizers must be prepared to support youth through an intense learning process in which they may be confronted with difficult and painful realities. Trusting and nurturing relationships are vital so that youth feel safe examining sensitive topics. In the process of reflecting critically on these topics with adults, youth should acquire a deeper and more

systemic understanding of their present realities, and thereby move from a position of frustration and powerlessness to one of hope and empowerment (Cahill, 2004).

The present article describes the objectives, methodology, and results of a YPAR project carried out by a team of two adult researchers, two community workers, and 16 black high school students in Montreal, QC, in 2009. The project was designed to create a space for black high school students to articulate their views on the problem of high school dropouts, because their voices were largely missing from the literature and the various public forums held in the past decade. The goal of the project was twofold: to examine the causes that lead black students to drop out of high school, and to identify strategies that will increase their success in school and prevent them from dropping out. The goal of the present article is to describe, analyze, and reflect on the logistical, methodological, and theoretical aspects of the project and on the YPAR methodology more broadly. The article is based on data from meeting minutes, field notes, focus group transcripts, student writings, the research report, and observations. The authors are three former members of the team, including two adult researchers and one youth researcher.

## **Methodology**

The YPAR project was part of a larger study on the black community in Montreal, conducted by a team of academics, community organizers, and independent researchers associated with the Consortium for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning, based in the School of Social Work at McGill University. That study was called the “2006 Black Communities Demographic Project” (BCDP) and its primary purpose was to utilize data from the 2006 census to create a comprehensive demographic and socio-economic profile of the black community in Montreal, Quebec. The YPAR project was one of a handful of qualitative studies undertaken to complement the quantitative piece of the BCDP. The qualitative studies were designed to evaluate the progress in public policy and community-based programs since the first BCDP was completed in 2001. The YPAR project was funded partly by the Services aux Communautés Culturelles of the Ministry of Education, Sports, and Leisure (MELS) and partly by the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation (Livingstone et al., 2010).

The YPAR project brought together a team of four adults and 16 high school students, who ranged in age from 15 to 18 years old and were in Grades 10 and 11. The adults included a researcher and consultant with the BCDP, a doctoral candidate at McGill University, and two black community workers. Three out of the four adults were members of the black community. The second author of this paper was pursuing doctoral research on anti-racism in education at the time of the study and decided to make the YPAR project a focus of her dissertation.

Given the larger aims of the BCDP study, the YPAR project began with a set of pre-determined objectives and research methods. However, it sought to engage the youth researchers as leaders and decision makers in every possible way. The broad purpose of the research was to gather youths' perspectives on the causes of, and solutions to, the higher dropout rates of black students, as well as to assess existing school policies and programs. The major responsibilities of the youth were as follows: define the research questions; develop a protocol for focus group discussions with their peers; evaluate services and programs in their schools; lead focus group discussions; analyze the research data; and frame the findings and conclusions for the research report. The adults remained responsible for the overall administration and coordination of the project.

### **The Team of Youth Researchers**

The youth researchers were recruited from four different high schools, reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of Montreal's black community. The goal was to involve students in Grades 9 to 11, including an even balance of boys and girls, and students with varying academic and non-academic abilities. The original plan was to circulate a flyer about the YPAR, invite interested students to a meeting, and have youth fill out a simple form if they wished to apply. From this pool of applicants, we would choose up to 20 youth (four to five from each school) according to a set of criteria: bilingualism, gender, age, grade, ethnicity, and academic and non-academic interests. Two of the schools refused to accept this proposal because they claimed it would be time-consuming and less effective than recruiting handpicked students. In one of the schools, a social worker invited a group of five students that she felt would be most dependable (four of them were active on the student council). In the second school, a vice-principal (VP)



selected the four students. We asked the VP to respect certain selection criteria, though it is uncertain if they were. Students were to be recruited only on the condition that they volunteered, and not by invitation. Local community organizations had warned us that this second high school was resistant to community involvement and so we chose to tread carefully and comply with the VP's decision. When we first met this VP, she had insisted that she would help with the recruitment but could not be counted on for anything else, because her workload was already too heavy. For the remainder of the term, we were on our own and without any support from the school. In contrast, the social worker at the first school played an invaluable role throughout the project and provided crucial assistance with tasks such as the focus groups and the collection of consent forms.

It is plausible that these two schools chose to handpick students because they wanted to ensure that only the "best" and most positive students would speak on behalf of their school. At the time, one of the schools was caught in the middle of a controversy stemming from a fatal police shooting of a young minority male in the neighbourhood. While it cannot be proven, it is conceivable that administrators at this school acted more cautiously in order to protect the school's reputation and counter the bad press. In the end, the five students from this school would turn out to be some of the most committed team members. The four students recruited by the VP, on the other hand, were not as engaged. Three of the four students eventually dropped out of the project. Calls were made to follow up on absences and keep students involved, but to no avail. The question remains whether the students at this second school enrolled in the project because they felt compelled or pressured by the VP or because they chose to do so voluntarily.

At the two remaining schools, the original recruitment plan was followed. Despite attempts to involve students in Grade 9, all of the youth researchers were in Grades 10 and 11. The few Grade 9 students who were invited at the beginning never showed up for the meetings. Once the team was formed, it met from 1 to 4 p.m. every second Saturday between March and June 2009. Meetings were held at a community organization in downtown Montreal, situated within easy reach of public transportation. Each youth received a scholarship of \$500 if they attended 80% of the team meetings. Five students who volunteered to work on the research over the summer also received a gift certificate of \$200. In addition, the four schools agreed to award extra academic credits to the students.

Sixteen of the original 20 students stayed in the project from beginning to end. The remaining four dropped out at different points during the process. As indicated above, three may have left because they originally signed up for the project under some pressure from their VP. Another student left due to his responsibilities as editor of the school newspaper. In general, student attendance at meetings was high, even though it fluctuated. Some absences in June were to be expected, because students were preparing for exams and graduation proms. Others were travelling long distances of 60–90 minutes to and from the meetings. We were concerned that this was demanding for a lot of the students; however, the youth reassured us that the distance was manageable because they were highly motivated to participate in the project. Indeed, the most important reasons students gave for choosing to participate was the opportunity to make a difference in their schools and to be in the “researcher’s seat” rather than the ones being studied and dissected.

### **Research Training**

The first two months of the project focused on training the youth in qualitative methods, and familiarizing them with issues that would be addressed in the research such as anti-racism, intercultural education, school policy, and community-based programs. The training on research methods covered a selected number of topics, specifically observations and field notes, artifacts (e.g., uniforms, newspapers), and focus group discussions. Mock exercises were organized to give youth the opportunity to practise observations and focus groups. Feedback from the youth indicated that the training on methods was somewhat too abstract. Students needed more time to learn about the methods and put them into practice, especially since the topics were new to them.

A series of five workshops was organized with guest speakers: (a) a presentation on black history in Montreal with a local black historian; (b) a workshop on dialogue and active listening with the Center for Community Organizations; (c) a presentation on intercultural policy with the director of the Department of Cultural Communities at the Quebec Ministry of Education, Sports, and Leisure; (d) a workshop on anti-racism with a facilitator from the Quebec Human Rights Commission; and (e) a discussion on community organizing and social change with a school commissioner from the black community.

The youth described the guest speakers as one of their favorite activities, because they found the individual speakers and the subjects both interesting and inspiring. In response to these workshops one of the youth wrote, “Each person who came to talk to us really touched me; therefore, I would like to share this with other people.”

## **Data Collection**

For the first stage of data collection, students completed a “mapping” of services and activities in their schools, based on the well-known method of “community asset mapping” that was adapted for a school. A nine-page questionnaire, composed of questions and diagrams, was created for the youth to compile the information by touring the building, making observations, interviewing people, and consulting written documentation. This particular tool was developed without the direct input of the youth because the four-month schedule of training and data collection was already too full. The questionnaire drew some inspiration from the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium’s template “Criteria for an Equitable School” (1991), and included sections on a variety of themes, namely, equity and diversity, school climate, student-led initiatives, curriculum, academic support, library materials, school-community partnerships, and extra-curricular activities. Results of the mapping are summarized in detail in the team’s research report.

The priority for the second stage of data collection in April and May was the organization of four focus group discussions with students, one at each school. The youth and adult researchers worked together designing the protocol, planning the recruitment strategy, and setting dates for the meetings. A focus group guide was created with questions corresponding to three major themes: (1) experiences of black students; (2) support available in the school and community; and (3) strategies for preventing dropout and increasing school success. Flyers advertising the focus groups were designed and printed. Over a period of three weeks, the youth researchers were to distribute these flyers, get youth to sign up for the focus groups, and hand out parent and youth consent forms.

Each focus group lasted for up to 90 minutes, and included an average of 12–15 participants in Grades 9 to 11. Adults from the project were present at each one of the focus groups in order to provide moral and practical support to the youth researchers. The adults also took responsibility for tape-recording the sessions. Throughout, they were

careful not to interfere, unless the youth facilitators clearly needed help in steering the discussion.

Mobilizing students for focus groups proved to be one of the main challenges in the project, except in two schools where youth researchers were in complete charge of the process. In the other two schools, the youth researchers were not as well organized or as thorough in advertising the meeting or mobilizing students. The adults had to take over at the last minute to recruit students on the spot.

In the school where administrative support was lacking, we were denied the opportunity to hold the focus group in the school building. The session had to be held at a nearby community organization, which agreed to host us for a small fee. Arranging for a group of students to walk to this location after the school bell had rung was fairly complicated, because it was several blocks away. We managed to gather a group of about 12 willing participants. In the end, the mix of students was more diverse; a few of the black students came with friends who were of other racial and ethnic origins.

The research methods for the study (i.e., asset mapping and focus groups) were chosen because they were considered age-appropriate, fun, and practical for the youth. The project was also bound by a strict timeline, which made it impractical to pursue anything more ambitious. Once the formal project ended in 2009, the data collection had been completed, yet the coding of data had only just begun. The project coordinators asked for student volunteers to work on the research over the summer. Five youth volunteered and participated in a handful of meetings in July and August. A small committee of three students stayed with the project until the very end in February 2010, when the report was completed. Throughout this extended process, the youth and adults worked together analyzing the transcripts and determining the structure and content of the research report. The same three youth, who remained in the project until 2010, would play vital roles in the dissemination of the study. They gave presentations at two major conferences in the city in 2009 and 2010. Their presentations were a highlight of the conferences, as the youth impressed the audiences with their eloquence, maturity, and passion.

## **Ethics and Consent Forms**

One of the more complex challenges of the YPAR project was getting parent and youth consent forms signed and submitted on time. The university ethics department required that both consent forms be submitted before youth could participate in a focus group discussion. Meeting these requirements was stressful and challenging because it meant collecting two separate forms from over 40 youth in a few short weeks. The original goal was for youth researchers to collect the forms from their peers either on the day of the focus group or earlier. In the end, this objective was only met in two schools. In the other two schools, where focus group participants had to be recruited on the spot, consent forms were distributed at the meeting and collected afterwards.

## **Results**

### **High School Students as Young Scholars**

The quality and depth of the project's research findings confirm that high school students possess the maturity, intellect, and commitment to participate in challenging research endeavours. The experiences and knowledge they bring to bear as students pushes the analysis further than it would have if their voices had not been included. In general, findings of the YPAR project with black youth both corroborate and expand on what previous research has indicated about the conditions that support student success and retention in school (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992). More importantly, the project opened up a space for black youth to give a direct and first-hand account of their experiences and to help us understand the systemic roots of problems like dropping out of high school. As others have remarked, YPAR enables youth not only to be heard but also to challenge the way in which issues are actually framed, which is often itself a source of the problem and a reason why policies fail (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, D'Artagnan, & Matthews, 2013; McIntyre, 2000).

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes of black youth as “underachievers,” the research amply demonstrates that black students are highly motivated to succeed and graduate from school, yet often feel frustrated by structures that do not adequately support them. Students said they strongly believed in education as the key to a successful future. Their aspirations for the future were to settle into a secure job, pursue a rewarding profession, achieve economically, form stable and loving families, and give back to their parents and communities for the sacrifices they had made.

In exploring the reasons why black students drop out of school, the youth indicated that family, peers, schools, and neighbourhood surroundings all play a substantial role and may affect academic achievement in positive or negative ways. Financial stress and poverty were said to be significant challenges for some families and youth. Students also emphasized that conditions in their high schools were very influential, especially the school climate, the support of staff, and the range and quality of services. The main concerns students raised about their schools was the absence of multicultural curricula, the lack of teacher support, and the limited number of extra-curricular and after-school programs. Overall, the findings show that black students are very perceptive about the policies and practices that will do most to enhance their success in school. In line with the literature, the students believe that schools must take a holistic approach that fosters a climate of high expectations; positive student–teacher relations; a multicultural curriculum; effective and innovative classroom pedagogies; and fun and interesting extra-curricular and after-school activities (Phelan et al., 1992). The youth also emphasized that the physical conditions of schools should not be neglected. School buildings should feel safe, appealing, and motivating, and one proposal the students offered is to fill hallways with bright and warm colours, inspirational displays, and samples of students’ academic and non-academic achievements.

### **Multiculturalism and Black History**

Across the four schools, students believed that the school curriculum was not adequately adapted to the multicultural realities and backgrounds of students. In expressing his/her feelings about the curriculum, one focus group participant said: “We need some time for our history too, you know, we are people too.” In mapping and analyzing the services in

their schools, students discovered that multicultural activities were still fairly rare, except at one school. This latter school was known to have a group of black teachers who regularly organized school-wide events, such as Black History Month. It was also known that individual teachers in a couple of the schools would voluntarily incorporate black literature and subjects into their courses; however, this was still not the norm.

One of the schools had taken the innovative step of offering a course on black history. The subject of this course was brought up spontaneously in the focus group discussion at this school. Students said they greatly appreciated the effort the teacher had made to teach the course; however, they found the content less stimulating than they had hoped because it concentrated mostly on ancient history, which the students found too remote from their own experience. In discussing this feedback, the youth researchers concluded that the students were expressing a desire to learn about black history in ways that would resonate with their own contemporary experiences. As one of the youth articulated, the subject of black history is more than an intellectual curiosity for black youth, it is also a deeply personal, emotional, and even spiritual subject. Courses on the history and contributions of people of African descent are vital not only for black youth to learn about their heritage but also to form positive identities and to see empowering visions of themselves in the wider world. In the absence of this kind of instruction, black youth struggle to feel a sense of pride and belonging to Quebec society. As one of the youth researchers expressed, “You have to know yourself to know the other.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Teacher–Student Relationships**

One of the most salient issues to arise in the focus group discussions was the importance that black students attach to their relationships with teachers. In the words of one student, “Teachers also have a great influence and often they don’t realize it.” The youth claimed that the quality of teacher–student relationships varied; some teachers were exceptionally helpful and effective, while others were more aloof and unresponsive. As one student explained, “You have those who want you to pass, and you have those who help us, and those who don’t.” Across the schools, students claimed that some of their teachers looked

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1 This is a translation from the student’s comment in French, “Il faut se connaître pour connaître l’autre.”

visibly unmotivated and even demoralized, giving students the impression that they were working merely to “pick up their paycheque,” as a few of their teachers had been known to say. Feelings of dismay and frustration with teacher support were especially acute at one of the schools. Students at this school blamed the dismal school climate and tensions between teachers and students for the chronically high level of student absenteeism. As one student expressed, “Some of the factors that discouraged me are inadequate teachers. You see other kids who are not coming to school so you say, ‘Why should I come?’”

Another crucial finding of the study is that black students value and cherish teachers who set high expectations and who push them to succeed. As one student articulated, “You need a teacher that’s going to pressure you and be, like, ‘C’mon, c’mon, you gotta do this. You gotta do this!’” Another student explained, “The thing that motivates me the most is when I get a lot of encouragement from my teacher and when the teacher wants me to succeed.” Students said they actually worked harder for teachers who were caring and supportive, because they did not want to disappoint him or her. Students were also concerned that teachers often set lower expectations for black students because of racial stereotypes. In reflecting on her advanced math class, a student commented:

In math class, for example, you’re the only black person in the class. Each time you must prove that you are capable. I am capable of doing something. They have this idea, that since you’re black that means that you have nothing, nothing in your head. You’re always like, pushed to the side.

These findings show that black students want to be able to look to their teachers for support and guidance. Their confidence and motivation is elevated when teachers set high expectations for their success and provide the support and encouragement they need.

## **Whole School Reform**

The youth in the research team and the focus group discussions were careful to point out that teaching does not exist in a vacuum. As suggested above, an effective school has more than good teachers; it adopts a holistic package of policies that together create a vibrant learning atmosphere and provide opportunities for students to explore and develop their abilities both inside and outside the classroom. Students continuously



stressed that success in school depended on not only the actions of teachers but also the efforts of students, parents, peers, principals, community organizations, and upper levels of government. The following is an example of a quote from a student illustrating this idea of education as a collaborative enterprise: “Like sometimes, you say, the teacher this or, the teacher ‘that,’ you know, but it’s not always the teacher, we also have to keep our end of the bargain. They’ve learned things. When we learn things, we learn together.”

The recommendations for school improvement that the youth researchers came up with were impressively thoughtful and practical. They included the following: (a) providing teachers with more opportunities for professional development so that they may improve their expertise in teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds; (b) broadening the curriculum to better reflect the multicultural backgrounds and realities of students; and (c) continuing to develop partnerships with community organizations, such as those serving black youth. One specific recommendation for the latter strategy was to create a position in the school for a community worker who could help the school implement after-school programs and culturally relevant activities. In focus group discussions, students expressed how much they valued the support of local community organizations, because they filled the need for students to have nurturing adult mentors and role models. In speaking about a community worker who had once worked in her school, a student remarked: “He [the tutor from a community organization] used to pressure us. Like, he was a motivator. And he, like, believed in us. I think he like...made us proud to be black.”

### **Breaking Stereotypes and Talking About Racism**

As a project designed with and for black youth, the youth researchers and focus group participants were not shy in talking openly and honestly about racism. On the one hand, there was a shared sense that racism was deeply damaging to black youth’s self-esteem and identities. On the other hand, a number of youth expressed that the reality of racism actually motivated them to work harder in school, because they wanted to defy racist stereotypes. In the words of one student, the motivation to work hard was “to show that blacks can also do well. Because the world says that there are too many prejudices against blacks. Like they’re always in street gangs, and me, I’m in school.” Other

students admitted to feeling often discouraged by racism, as one student explained: “It’s hard to say that we’re not affected by stereotypes. It affects us a lot, for sure.”

The subject of racial stereotypes also came up in a discussion about a recent newspaper article on the school, written in the aftermath of the fatal police shooting. The school staff had told us they found the article neutral and fair. The black students, on the other hand, found it hurtful and condescending. Here is how one student described it:

I think there was a journalist who did a feature report on black people that recently arrived from Haiti, and said that they didn’t even know how to hold a pencil in their hands. You know, I took that really badly, because she was trying to show the whole world that, “You see, blacks are like that, they’re all like that.” That really affected me.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, the discussions about racism show rather poignantly that black students are trying actively and courageously to overcome its impact on their lives. Yet they also find it a struggle to sustain their optimism and self-confidence, especially when confronted with racial biases and stereotypes in the media and other domains of life.

## **Youth Development**

Another vital outcome of the YPAR project is that it enabled the youth researchers to broaden and enhance their knowledge, experience, and capabilities. The third author of this paper credits the workshop on anti-racism for opening her eyes to the colonial origins of racism and for allowing her for the first time to question the very idea of race and the impact it has had in shaping her identity and perspective. For most, if not all of the youth, conversations and teachings about racism were absent in school. In addition to broadening youths’ intellectual horizons, the YPAR project provided the students with meaningful opportunities to develop their skills in critical thinking, research, organization, teamwork, leadership, and public speaking. In reflecting on the project, one youth wrote that she had

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2 The full article is available at <http://www.lapresse.ca/dossiers/montreal-nord/200901/24/01-820645-la-pauvrete-au-detour-de-chaque-corridor.php>. In the opening paragraph, the journalist likens a heavily black neighbourhood in Montreal to the “Bronx,” implying a racial stereotype of urban poverty in the United States. In another sentence, she writes that adolescents arriving from Haiti enter school not knowing how to hold a pencil.

discovered her “great sense of organization and responsibility.” Another commented that the experience had made him feel prouder of his African heritage. The third author of this article claims the project gave her a vital opportunity to gain new self-knowledge and to broaden her academic and professional goals.

### **Adult Facilitation, Support, and Mentoring**

Working with youth requires that adults juggle multiple responsibilities as teachers, mentors, and colleagues (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). In the YPAR project, a careful balance had to be struck between adult supervision and youth autonomy. At team meetings, the adults kept an eye on timing, attendance, and punctuality, because students would sometimes arrive late or fail to attend meetings. The adults’ most vital roles were to organize and lead team meetings and provide youth with technical support and backup. When youth were unable to complete certain tasks, it took some adult leadership and creativity to pick up where students left off. As we learned, the challenge for adults in YPAR projects is to adapt to changing situations while staying continually attentive to the needs and capacities of youth. As Zeldin et al. (2005) point out, adults working on youth–adult partnerships must “sharpen their abilities to balance, negotiate, and creatively adapt their roles to changing situations within group dynamics” (p. 5).

In youth–adult partnerships, it is natural to expect that adults will carry some of the heavier responsibilities, especially if funders and administrators are waiting to see results. With this in mind, adult partners must be quite intentional about creating egalitarian relations with youth (O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). In engaging the youth as the experts, the adult facilitators consciously took on the position that their primary duty was to listen, learn, and moderate the discussions. While performing this role, the adults remained constantly vigilant about not falling back into the usual power inequalities between adults and youth. As Starr (2003) explains, adults working with YPAR methods must “bring experience, confidence and resources without dominating or taking over” (p. 923). Zeldin et al. (2005) explain that the best working relationships between adults and youth are ones in which adults genuinely demonstrate respect for the voices of youth, take time to solicit their opinions, and respond to them in non-judgmental ways.

Finally, it is important to note that YPAR projects do not just benefit and transform the lives of youth. The experience for adult researchers can also be profoundly

enriching and inspiring, as we discovered in the current project. The youth amazed the adults with their brilliance and enthusiasm. With their idealism, curiosity, and honesty, they also reminded the adults to think “outside the box.”

## **Discussion**

The results of the YPAR project were more in-depth, relevant, and complex than they would have been without the participation of the youth researchers. The quality of the insights was only possible because of the continuous and intensive dialogue that took place between the youth and the adult researchers. Throughout the process, the commitment was to creating and sustaining an atmosphere in which the youth felt at ease, self-confident, and inspired to speak freely and express their opinions. Some of the most gratifying moments were when the youth showed enough confidence to disagree with an adult, as one student exclaimed, “That’s not how we see it!” This kind of mutual exchange was precisely what the project had intended. Apart from the relaxed and democratic climate of the meetings, the collaborative framework of the project undoubtedly enhanced the liveliness of the exchanges as well as feelings of mutual support and cooperation between team members. The friendships that developed in the team made the youth feel they could safely open up, not just about experiences at school but also about in life in general.

The role that youth played as focus group facilitators clearly had an impact on the quality and substance of the discussions. Participants were more open about their difficulties, anxieties, and concerns, because the facilitators were fellow students whom they knew, respected, and trusted. The level of excitement at the focus group discussions was palpable. The discussions were always lively and enthusiastic. For the youth researchers and focus group participants, one of the most rewarding aspects of the YPAR project was the experience of feeling heard, cared about, and understood. At one of the schools, a focus group participant even suggested that a group should be formed to give black students regular occasions to come together and share their experiences. Indeed, this is a recommendation that schools and community organizations should consider.

Results of the YPAR project confirm that school improvement really cannot happen successfully without the input of youth. The voices of youth increase the accuracy and depth of findings, and the relevance and effectiveness of interventions (McIntyre, 2000). As the youth in the present study articulated, there is much that schools can do to improve the success of black students. School improvement efforts must be directed at every aspect of school policy, namely, the school climate, teacher–student relations, pedagogy, multicultural curricula, extra-curricular and after-school programs, and community partnerships. The results also show that black youth face specific challenges that schools must take into account. Overwhelmingly, black students are troubled by the realities of racism and want adults who can help them navigate this terrain successfully.

The most complex issues for YPAR projects are likely to be methodological and organizational. Creating the right conditions for YPAR requires that some care be given to the precise mechanisms by which students will be recruited and engaged. A clear yet fluid structure is desirable to ensure that youth have adequate training and support, and to leave some room for creativity, innovation, and adaptation. YPAR projects must also be attentive and sensitive toward issues around race, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

The one limitation of the YPAR project was its effect on school policy, which had to be curtailed due to time and other constraints. Researchers write that the action component of YPAR is often the least developed and most complex part of the process (Camarota and Romero, 2011). Future papers should explore the successes and challenges of moving through research, action, and policy change. Some resistance to institutional change in schools is to be expected. We observed first-hand the tendency for school officials to be cautious and resistant to activities that challenge established practices. We also found, however, that YPAR methods can make significant headway if principals and other staff members believe in the project and lend their support.

The project chose to hold the YPAR project in a community organization because it was bringing black students together from across Montreal. There may be advantages to holding sessions either in community settings or schools. The advantage of a community-based setting is that youth feel more at ease speaking openly and critically about their schools. On the other hand, school meetings may reduce attrition and ensure a more consistent level of participation due to the proximity between home and school.

In conclusion, the results of YPAR project with black youth confirm what numerous other researchers have said about the power of the methodology to transform the lives

of young people and adults, and to generate vital knowledge about important social issues and public policies. Indeed, there is probably more the project could have achieved had it been carried out over a longer period. We recommend that schools consider introducing YPAR strategies as part of a long-term plan of school improvement. As the voices of youth in this study have clearly shown, solutions to problems like the dropout rate among black students are at hand. Tapping into the insights and idealism of youth allows us to see that these problems are not as intractable as we might think.

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