

Opportunities to Strengthen SEL Impact through Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR)



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High school youth in Aurora, CO created a 6-word story project called "mental health is all our stories", which turned into a traveling exhibit to generate dialogue about teen mental health (photo credit: Heather Kennedy).

This issue brief, created by The Pennsylvania State University, is one of a series of briefs that addresses the future needs and challenges for research, practice, and policy on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This is the second series of briefs that address SEL, made possible through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The first set synthesized current SEL research on early support for parent engagement and its effects on child outcomes; SEL in infancy/toddlerhood, the preschool years, the elementary school period, and middle-high school timeframes; and how SEL influences teacher well-being, health equity, and school climate. Learn more at: www.prevention.psu.edu/sel

Executive Summary

Social and emotional learning has recently moved “toward the center of educational curricular and pedagogy”.¹ Yet, concerns regarding SEL programming, particularly in secondary schools, have led to calls for innovation.^{2,3} Specifically, these concerns encompass programmatic issues (i.e., positive effects attenuated among adolescents relative to children); contextual challenges (i.e., misfit with the structure, routines, and emphases of secondary schools)² and developmental concerns (i.e., incongruence between the top-down pedagogical approach of some SEL programs and emerging adolescent status, autonomy, and identity). In this brief, we consider how youth empowerment approaches—here, focusing on Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in particular—may meaningfully address these challenges to better promote the social-emotional wellbeing of adolescents in secondary schools. YPAR is a youth-led, adult-facilitated empowerment process whereby young people are supported in building research and advocacy skills to study and improve their schools and communities.⁴⁻¹¹ Youth-led inquiry guides action and disrupts traditional hierarchies to center power-sharing among adults and young people, with a focus on social justice and equity.

This brief invites SEL audiences concerned with promoting young people’s wellbeing to consider YPAR as a complementary approach to support students in addressing inequities that affect their wellbeing and limit their rights and opportunities to learn and thrive.

Middle and high school-aged youth in Greeley, CO, conducted a PhotoVoice on youth’s experiences with mental health and presented their findings to the police department (photo credit: Heather Kennedy)



Key Findings

We highlight potential synergies between YPAR and SEL. YPAR is a model of iterative inquiry and action that focuses on systems-level factors—especially related to equity and power—that shape students’ emotional experiences, social interactions, and wellbeing, supporting students’ work to identify and intervene in underlying conditions. The complementary (and high-quality) implementation of YPAR in schools can potentially augment SEL by working on systems-level factors that SEL programs do not explicitly address. SEL, in turn, can build students’ capacities to perceive problems, navigate emotions, and collaborate toward solutions—all important competencies that strengthen students’ capacities as changemakers in YPAR and other youth empowerment approaches. We argue that complementary YPAR implementation may help address concerns of SEL at the secondary school level in particular. While emphasizing the promise of this complementarity, we note challenges to integrating high-quality YPAR and SEL initiatives, such as the need for adult and student capacity-building for implementing YPAR, adults’ openness to youth-generated research findings as a valid form of evidence, embracing emotional and political risk-taking for students and teachers, and explicit attention to advancing student power and equity.

Conclusion and Recommendation

YPAR is an intensive and inquiry-focused form of youth empowerment that can complement and augment SEL in secondary schools. Building on this brief, we encourage (1) further dialogue, understanding, and cross-capacity-building among SEL and YPAR scholars and practitioners; (2) the development of strong and well-implemented complementary models; (3) the systematic evaluation of their benefits and drawbacks; and (4) the identification and implementation of opportunities to learn from students themselves in developing and evaluating complementary models.

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) seeks to promote the social-emotional competencies (SEC) essential for developing healthy relationships, education, and job success, and facilitating civic engagement.¹ SEL is typically provided by adults to all children in a given school- or out-of-school-time (OST) program. Specifically, adults provide prosocial organizational routines, social skills instruction, and opportunities for students to apply these skills to their emotional experiences and social interactions. The existing evidence base for this model of SEL programming has been leveraged to call for wide-scale adoption of its strategies.^{12,13} Significant challenges have been noted, however, in the uptake of SEL in secondary schools, where typical SEL strategies may face developmental, contextual, and/or programmatic misfit.^{2,3} Youth-driven approaches that engage and empower students could enhance wellbeing for adolescents by addressing the underlying conditions that (1) shape their emotional experiences and social interactions, and (2) create structural barriers to educational, career, and political access.

Youth empowerment and engagement approaches seek to promote the skills and power of *youth as change agents*, working on issues they care about to improve their schools and communities. Diverse models for promoting youth empowerment in K–12 settings are relevant to SEL’s underlying goal of promoting youth wellbeing, including Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), youth organizing, youth-led planning and evaluation, and youth advisory boards.^{14–18} These approaches have in common the engagement of youth as leaders and the targeting of inquiry and/or intervention *at the school level* rather than the *individual level*. These approaches differ by key dimensions, including: (a) their emphasis on inquiry relative to action, (b) the power of youth relative to adults, (c) their focus on equity, and (d) the extent to which they have been formally evaluated.^{18,19} Of these, YPAR primarily emphasizes generating research evidence that guides action (i.e., dual emphasis on inquiry and action to address equity).

Youth organizing, which is often implemented and sustained by community-based non-profit organizations or led entirely by youth themselves in rapid response to critical events, is focused primarily on direct action (e.g., March for Our Lives movement; ongoing student-organized protests of police killings of Black Americans), though often conducting initial research to guide organizing goals.²⁰ Youth-led planning and evaluation, and user-centered design (also called “design thinking”), are youth engagement approaches that draw on student expertise as consultants or designers to respond to problems posed by adult stakeholders, such as when a city agency asks youth to inform changes in a bus route or to help design youth-serving services or apps.^{16,21,22} For an in-depth review of youth empowerment and engagement approaches, see Ozer et al.¹⁹

YPAR as an approach to youth participation and empowerment. As it is beyond our scope to consider all youth empowerment approaches in relation to SEL, we focus on YPAR, which (a) has received the most empirical attention,^{23,24} (b) is aligned with the K–12 Common Core curriculum that emphasizes evidence-based inquiry,²⁵ (c) is rooted in longstanding traditions of popular education,²⁶ and (d) offers complementary possibilities with SEL. In YPAR, students conduct research to inform actions to improve school climate and equity issues of *their choosing*. In the context of YPAR, equity efforts refer to students’ research and action directed towards fair and just opportunities for education and to live healthful lives.²⁷ Authors of prior briefs in this Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded project have discussed the relationship between SEL and equity,²⁸ primarily identifying barriers to accessing SEL programs and associated benefits to the development of social-emotional competencies. While YPAR does seek to promote positive youth development among participants, it is more explicitly focused on promoting student power and addressing inequities than on enhancing SEC.

Here, we review areas of convergence and distinction in the orientation, framework, and mechanisms of YPAR relative to traditional SEL programs. We consider opportunities for using YPAR to strengthen the promotion of student wellbeing, particularly for adolescents in secondary schools. This brief’s emphasis is aligned with Jagers et al.’s recent call to the field to advance *transformative SEL*, which cultivates the “knowledge, attitudes, and skills required for critical examination and collaborative action to address root causes of inequities.”²⁹ This call for “equity elaborations” on SEC adds another dimension to the programmatic, contextual, and developmental challenges around SEL fit among adolescents noted earlier. How will the SEL field respond to these challenges?

Examples of Strategies to Address the Problem

In YPAR, classes or student groups—scaffolded by an adult teacher/facilitator—develop research and advocacy skills to support their efforts to study and improve their schools and communities.⁴⁻¹¹ YPAR implementation models vary,³⁰ ranging from semester- or year-long peer education or leadership elective classes during the school day,^{31,32} to integration into academic social studies, civics, or science courses; to working with existing student councils. Adult leaders are often certified teachers with additional training to implement YPAR, or other adult district or community-based organization (CBO) staff trained in youth development approaches. YPAR groups in secondary school or after-school settings have tackled a range of equity issues in education and health such as punitive discipline policies, dating violence, bullying, access to healthy food and physical activity opportunities, social stress, and high concentrations of tobacco and liquor stores in economically disenfranchised communities.^{9,33-35}

In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, YPAR approaches can inform key issues for action such as school districts’ and sites’ understanding of students’ experiences with online education, how to maintain connection and mental health, and the ways that economic inequalities affect students’ ability to engage with schooling (see, for example, how a YPAR class in San Francisco pivoted during the pandemic to generate a “Quaranteen” podcast on key topics³⁶).

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YPAR groups typically start with training in team-building, communication, and analysis of power in their schools and communities. They engage in problem identification (i.e., deciding what to change) based on strategic analysis of the problem, including potential allies, barriers, and desired impacts. They then choose research methods (e.g., interviews, surveys, observations, and mapping), gather and analyze data, and report their findings and proposed solutions to relevant audiences (e.g., peers, principals, the school board, district administrators).³⁷ A range of YPAR and related youth inquiry models have been implemented and evaluated.^{23,24,35} One such example is Peer Leaders United Schools (PLUS), a student inquiry model focused on improving school climate whereby students conduct monthly online school climate surveys to provide guidance for peer-led activities. Now at 134 schools across 30 California school districts, PLUS has been integrated in some districts into school-wide programs such as School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SW-PBIS) and funded as part of core school climate and equity efforts.^{19,31,38}



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High school-aged youth researchers in Salinas, CA, processed scientific data for the LUCIR Study that measured and worked to reduce Latina women's exposures to harmful chemicals in conventional cleaning products (photo credit: James Earl Schier Nolan)

Understanding SEL Approaches and Addressing SEL Challenges

SEL programs have traditionally emphasized the promotion of CASEL-identified social-emotional competencies: promoting individual students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.³⁹ SEL approaches are evolving from primarily (a) free-standing "skill-focused promotion" lessons delivered to students, to now also include (b) integration of SEL into academic curricula, (c) the promotion of teachers' capacities to promote SEC as part of their instruction, and (d) whole-school reforms.² We focus here primarily on free-standing, skill-focused promotion programs such as Second Step[®] and RULER, which may have the most to gain from a complementary YPAR approach and are now implemented at notable scale. For example, RULER has been implemented in more than 2,000 schools in the U.S. and internationally. The Committee for Children reported that its Second Step[®] curriculum and related programs were in 30% of U.S. elementary schools in 2019, with aspirations to reach 100 million children by 2028.⁴⁰

Domitrovich and colleagues² raised important questions about the challenges of implementing SEL programming in secondary schools, calling for innovations to respond to the unique developmental needs of adolescents in promoting their health and wellbeing.^{2,3} These include:

- **Programmatic issues.** Positive SEL program effects are attenuated for adolescents relative to children. Authors call for innovation in program models, which should be done with attention to relevance to young people and adolescent development.
- **Contextual challenges.** Features of secondary school settings are distinct from elementary school settings, as the former typically involves many changes in teachers and classrooms throughout the day. Thus, SEL strategies at the secondary school level may need to consider *systems-level implementation* and change rather than focusing on student- or classroom-level changes.²
- **Developmental concerns.** Incongruence may be found between SEL programming and emerging adolescent status, autonomy, and identity. Are SEL programs *telling* adolescents what to do rather than acknowledging and encouraging their growing capacities for meta-cognition and critical thinking by inviting them to take up skills, make decisions that align with their personal values, and work together to shape their ecological contexts?³

Although less research has been conducted to date on emerging SEL approaches (e.g., integration of SEL into academic curricula, the promotion of teachers' capacities to promote SEC as part of their instruction, whole school reforms), these approaches have sought to overcome the programmatic, contextual, and developmental challenges of SEL in secondary schools. We envision YPAR as a logical and potentially powerful enhancement of this work, dovetailing with inquiry-oriented academic curricula, enhancing teachers' capacity as facilitators, and aspiring for youth-led, whole school reforms.

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Intersecting YPAR and SEL: Strategies and Distinctions

The potential intersection of *youth empowerment* (i.e., young people developing inquiry and action skills, critical consciousness, and influence over the settings that shape their development) and SEL have been noted and championed,⁴¹ but the areas of convergence and distinction in the orientations and mechanisms of action have not been comprehensively analyzed and envisioned. For example, given our focus on YPAR as an intensive and potentially powerful form of youth participation, how might YPAR approaches address some of the barriers that free standing, skill-focused SEL programs encounter in reaching adolescents and improving their wellbeing? Conversely, how might SEL programs support the primary YPAR goals of empowerment and equity?

We envision two key synergies between YPAR and SEL: (1) YPAR provides a model for focusing on structural stressors shaping students' emotional experiences, social interactions, and wellbeing; and (2) SEL promotes social and emotional skills that build students' capacities to perceive problems, navigate emotions, collaborate toward solutions, and achieve change in their schools and communities.

YPAR complementarity may be particularly fruitful as children transition into adolescence. Adult-designed and -led school-based interventions have been found to have fewer benefits for adolescents compared to children.^{3,42} Interventions that recognize and build upon young people's knowledge, validate their potential to make meaningful contributions, and encourage them to exercise their agency may be particularly important at this developmental stage.³ As a youth-driven approach, rooted in a critical analysis of power, YPAR may augment SEL's efforts to engage secondary school students. Building from a foundation of communication and collaboration already integrated into the SEL curriculum, a YPAR approach can facilitate adolescents' emerging agency, honor their expertise in and scaffold their critical analysis of social issues impacting them and their communities, and influence the development of a new research design and methods skills that build on their existing talents and interests (e.g., data collection and analysis via interviews, surveys, photography, poetry).

Strategy #1: Enabling a focus on structural sources of stressors and problems

YPAR provides a model for collectively identifying, analyzing, and addressing systems-level stressors—such as policies or practices that create unequal opportunities to learn or engage, or that undermine students' sense of belonging—that shape students' emotional experiences, social interactions, and wellbeing. Without minimizing the importance of promoting social-emotional competencies, the primary focus of SEL on *individual-level change* does not address potential policies, practices, or conditions in the school or community that may underlie inequity in some students' emotional experiences or social experiences in school. Consider, for example, those students who must contend with policies or practices that contribute to experiences of unequal treatment by teachers or peers due to their racial, gender, or sexual identities, giving rise to a range of feelings such as rage, shame, loneliness, fear, and sadness. Or those students who navigate unreliable and/or unsafe public transit lines in long commutes to school, and thereby may experience significant anxiety, attendance, and academic difficulties related to lateness.⁴³

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(2) SEL promotes social and emotional skills that build students' capacities to perceive problems, navigate emotions, collaborate toward solutions, and achieve change in their schools and communities.

We suggest that SEL programs could benefit from complementary youth empowerment approaches such as YPAR. Specifically, opportunities for reflective inquiry, embedded within or in conjunction with SEL programs—which focus on the experiences and conditions that contribute to students’ emotions—could set the stage and inform complementary YPAR approaches that identify problems that students want to tackle through an iterative research and action process. Further, YPAR can extend inquiry and action as needed beyond the school context itself to focus on broader environmental factors that affect student well-being. For example, YPAR projects may focus on issues such as promoting the safety and efficiency of students’ bus and walking routes to school,^{43,44} how to better support students with unstable housing and/or food insecurity,⁴⁵ or how schools can respond to the myriad academic and health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and future such crises.

Next, we provide concrete examples of our SEL-YPAR vision using RULER and Second Step®—two widely implemented SEL programs. Our examples are informed by the published literature and program materials as well as personal communications with program developers and leaders to identify any relevant innovations and reflections not yet published.* We anticipate that this complementarity is also relevant to other skills-based SEL programs.

RULER is a whole-school approach to promoting emotional intelligence and SEL using four “anchor” tools: the Charter, Mood Meter, Meta-Moment, and Blueprint.²⁸ The latter three tools promote identifying, labeling, and navigating emotions, while the Charter is a “collaborative document” created by members of the school community to “describe how they want to feel at school, the behaviors that foster those feelings, and guidelines for preventing and managing unwanted feelings and conflict. By working together to build the Charter, everyone establishes common goals and holds each other accountable for creating the positive climate they envision.”⁴⁶ For example, to promote feeling appreciated and respected, students may pledge to be kinder to each other or be more inclusive in their social interactions.

The reflective process of Charter development provides a ripe opportunity for YPAR. For example, students working on a Charter might identify feeling angry, frustrated, or hopeless about racism or sexism at schools that, for example, results in Black students being disproportionately targeted in their schools for suspensions and expulsions.^{47,48} Using YPAR principles of interrogating systems, Charter development can serve as a means for identifying and documenting the organizational contexts manifesting these harmful experiences that undermine students’ sense of belonging at school or actively push them out.⁴⁸

Through this reflective process, addressing experiences like these, or of other school or community conditions, could be prioritized for intervention via changes in practices or policies to achieve the emotional climate envisioned in a Charter. Other school or community conditions may include challenges identified by students in effectively addressing chronic feelings of anxiety when school policies or cultures create pressures to: take heavy course loads, be submitted to repeated standardized testing, or consistently have insufficient sleep due to high homework burden, or family and/or work responsibilities.⁴⁹ The integration of YPAR could push the Charter process from focusing on individual behaviors of members of the school community (especially students) to analyzing broader conditions, policies, and practices.

* Information on the RULER, InspirED, Second Step®, and PLUS programs was gathered from several sources, including peer-reviewed literature, program websites, and personal communications. See the acknowledgments section of this issue brief for additional information on the personal communications that further informed our discussion of these programs.

While RULER may help students clarify emotions and identify situations that contribute to those emotions, the underlying causes of the students' feelings in these examples are tied to the schools' organizational, curricular, or teaching practices—school features over which students typically have no influence. Schools engaging in SEL programs that invite critical reflection on the sources of feelings could build on that process with YPAR. For example, data on the structural conditions that contribute to distressing emotions at school could be gathered through properly facilitated interactive exercises or via anonymous surveys as decided upon by the students and in a way that maximizes the classroom's utility as a safe space. These data could then be used as the initial steps in YPAR issue selection. Students would then undertake a YPAR project, present their findings, and with support and commitment from the adult facilitators, advocate for structural solutions aligned with the Charter's collective vision.

Second Step[®] seeks to enhance students' educational experiences through social-emotional skill-building around empathy, learning behaviors (or skills for learning), managing emotions, and problem-solving via direct instruction at the pre-kindergarten, elementary, and middle school levels.^{42,50-53} The classroom-based scripted lessons are coupled with opportunities for students to practice new skills through small-group, partner, and whole-class exercises.^{50,51} The middle school curriculum, in particular, aims to elevate student voice and choice.⁴² For example, in the Bullying and Sexual Harassment Prevention lessons, students are prompted to locate where bullying happens on their own campus, examine why that may be, plan for intervention, and identify a key person who can help implement the proposed changes.⁵⁴ Additionally, the 8th-grade curriculum currently has lessons on personal identity and social groups, and prompts students to consider how young people whose identities are structurally marginalized are treated unfairly. But as a Second Step[®] program leader put it, "SEL can really start those conversations [about unfair treatment], but I don't think the SEL curriculum alone is a tool for dismantling it."⁵⁴ Rather, complementary youth empowerment approaches, like YPAR, could use these prompts as a starting point to explicitly engage in discussions around power, gather and analyze relevant data, report findings to decision makers in their schools and communities, and advocate for action.

Strategy #2: SEL builds students' capacities to perceive problems, navigate emotions, collaborate toward solutions, and achieve change in their schools and communities—skills they can both use and practice in related YPAR projects

Social-emotional skills and supports could bolster students in navigating the challenges of achieving school-wide change goals, particularly when those goals may trigger distressing experiences (e.g., students responding to unfair treatment or feeling unwelcome in their schools) or require collaborative solutions. SEL offers a set of skills, including what CASEL terms self-management and social awareness, which seeks to help students and teachers become emotionally prepared to engage in challenging conversations. Thus, SEL programs may help prepare *individual* students and teachers for the *structural* change pursued collectively in YPAR, where students lead research inquiry and pursue equity-focused actions.⁵⁴ As one program leader put it, "[SEL] is about building skills and good relationships....by doing that, we may enable other things to happen."⁵⁴

InspirED is a new model that seeks to integrate SEL with improved programmatic, contextual, and developmental fit by supporting secondary school students in becoming change-makers to improve their school climate.⁵⁵ The motivation for InspirED was a 2015 national survey of 22,000 high school students who demonstrated a gap between how they felt—tired, bored, and stressed—and how they wanted to feel—safe and contented, but also empowered, motivated, and purposeful.^{56,57}

InspirED parallels YPAR in some ways, but with a specific scope on school climate methods and improvement (rather than letting students choose their topic), and a more explicit emphasis on SEL rather than equity. InspirED starts with a small group of students who use or gather school climate survey data to identify patterns and target an issue. The “problem-finding” process draws on SEL skills because it requires students to consider what angers and disappoints them or their peers at school, which can be an emotionally unpredictable experience.⁵⁸ Other stages of the change process draw on SEL skills to advocate, collaborate, and navigate frustrations and setbacks. The program provides coaching to adult facilitators to build their capacities to hear students’ concerns without becoming offended or perceiving student agency as threatening.

Challenges to Integration Strategies

While emphasizing the promise of SEL and YPAR integration, we note several key integrative challenges:

- **Requisite adult capacities.** Adult capacity for high-quality implementation is an important consideration for both SEL and YPAR, but each poses distinct challenges. Traditional SEL programs are highly structured; adults may find it difficult to balance program fidelity with their practice wisdom and desires to tailor for students. Further, implementation quality may depend on adult SEC.⁵⁹ The youth-led and social-justice orientations of YPAR call for adult capacities in technical (e.g., scaffolding dynamic research inquiry and action, non-defensive listening), attitudinal (e.g., recognizing student expertise, respect for student capacities and power-sharing), and emotional domains (e.g., teachers supporting their students when triggering issues are discussed). Online curricula can support capacity,^{35,55} with intermediaries providing coaching and technical assistance at no financial cost in some cases. However, it is important to note that adult facilitation of a YPAR project demands shifting from traditional “adultist” cultures of schools, positioning adults not as those with the answers but as guides who scaffold student-led processes based on student expertise and data.
- **Evidence traditions.** The SEL field has largely embraced a hierarchy of evidence which suggests that evidence from randomized trials should guide decisions to adopt programs. While a growing number of quasi-experimental and experimental studies of YPAR demonstrate effects,^{23,24} the existing multi-method evidence base for YPAR may not be sufficiently compelling for some educational decision makers. However, the benefits of universal SEL programs for various subgroups also are largely unknown.⁶⁰ A narrow evidentiary frame also could create challenges for educational decision makers in valuing the research evidence generated by YPAR projects.

By “valuing,” we are not advocating for uncritical adoption of YPAR findings and recommendations, but rather that student-generated research also would be considered as valid alongside other forms of data and research evidence. For example, the San Francisco Unified School District is now embarking on a Research-Practice Partnership, led by its research office, to integrate YPAR into its routine continuous improvement processes, including for school climate and educational equity.⁶¹ Schools’ and districts’ use of YPAR evidence can include “conceptual” use to frame understanding of a problem or solution, and “instrumental” use to guide specific changes to policies or practices.^{45,62,63} This is an important distinction from using youth-generated evidence “strategically” or “rhetorically” to further promote a pre-existing adult agenda.

- Potential risks and supports of scaling.** The adoption of SEL curricular standards has been a success in efforts to re-center whole-child education,⁶⁴ but standards for student progress can exert pressures on students and teachers. In YPAR, students seeking to make school-wide changes also will likely experience frustration and setbacks, even if they achieve success. In addition, YPAR efforts must consider the emotional and “political” risks for student changemakers who call out problems at their school, to avoid students (and their adult facilitators) being labelled and punished as “troublemakers” by empowered adults. The possibility of “tokenistic” student voice efforts is another major risk to navigate in YPAR generally but especially in the context of building on SEL. Clarity at the start of the YPAR process for how students’ research and recommendations will be considered, and accountability for response at the tail end, can help promote conditions for the use of YPAR evidence and effort. Considering the adult competencies outlined above and the potential challenges for implementation, it is important to consider how site- and district-level supports can be engaged for YPAR implementation. Districts that have been successful in sustaining and scaling YPAR have benefited from clear administrator support, development of learning communities, and capacity-building partnerships with CBOs and academic partners.

We suggest further dialogue and capacity-building across SEL and YPAR scholars and practitioners, with the development of strong and well-implemented complementary models, consideration of model fit for schools and out-of-school youth development settings, and systematic evaluation of impact on youth and the settings themselves.

Middle and high school-aged youth from Las Animas, CO, advocated for the passage of a policy to limit tobacco use in outdoor recreational facilities (photo credit: Heather Kennedy)



Conclusion

Traditional SEL programs seek to equip students with social and emotional competencies they can use to be more successful in engaging with others, managing their emotions, and responding to academic and other tasks. SEL's embedded values are intentionally uncontroversial with respect to the status quo in schools in order to facilitate acceptability and wide-scale adoption. YPAR, on the other hand, makes power explicit, intending to disrupt the status quo of schools as needed to advance equitable opportunities and outcomes for students. Over the course of the writing and editing of this brief, these critical issues have come to the fore in the SEL field--and require further direct consideration.

Towards a vision for *transformative* SEL,²⁹ we recommend strategies to connect and integrate the strengths of SEL and YPAR to address the conditions, policies, and practices within and outside of schools that affect students' wellbeing. Such conditions may be named but are typically not addressed in traditional SEL programs, whether located in schools or other settings.

Building on our analysis, we suggest further dialogue and capacity-building across SEL and YPAR scholars and practitioners, with the development of strong and well-implemented complementary models, consideration of model fit for schools and out-of-school youth development settings, and systematic evaluation of impact on youth and the settings themselves.

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Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge helpful conversations with the following program developers and leaders that informed our case examples relevant to their programs: Tia Kim, Ph.D. (Vice President of Education, Research, & Impact, Committee for Children); Jasmine D. Williams, Ph.D. (Research Scientist, Committee for Children); Marc A. Brackett, Ph.D. (Director, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence; Professor, Yale Child Study Center; Co-creator, RULER); Jessica D. Hoffmann, Ph.D. (Associate Research Scientist, Yale Child Study Center; Director of High School, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence); and Julie McGarry, MPH (Program Manager, InspiRED).

Suggested Citation

Ozer, E. J., Shapiro, V. B., & Duarte, C. d. P. (2020). *Opportunities to strengthen SEL impact through Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR)*. University Park, PA: Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center, The Pennsylvania State University.

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