

“I Didn’t Think Many Teachers Cared:” Using Youth Participatory Action Research with Middle Schoolers to Advance Trauma-Informed Practice in Schools

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ABSTRACT

Student voice has been largely absent in the trauma-informed schools movement. Student perspectives on trauma-informed approaches are particularly critical for students who identify as Black and Hispanic. Black and Hispanic students consistently report more negative school experiences than their white peers, including negative school climate and lower levels of school equity and personal belonging. This article describes a youth participatory action research (YPAR) program with 18 Black and Hispanic middle school students. We describe how YPAR was integrated with trauma-informed principles to engage student voice. We outline student-led research projects and results related to core features of trauma-informed schools. Finally, we describe how students used their findings to advocate for change within their schools. We conclude that YPAR presents a promising avenue through which school leaders and their partners can directly and meaningfully involve young people in the creation of trauma-informed schools.

Keywords: Youth Participatory Action Research, trauma-informed schools, middle school

Recognition of the prevalence and educational consequences of childhood trauma has led to national discourse in education regarding best practices in pedagogy and policy to support the needs of students who have experienced trauma (Simon et al., 2020).



Schools across the country are adopting trauma-informed pedagogies and policies that aim to create physically and psychologically safe environments that allow all students to thrive academically. Emerging findings suggest that trauma-informed schools increase educators' knowledge of trauma and their confidence in addressing it and decrease student suspensions and expulsions (Fondren et al., 2020; McIntyre et al., 2019). These changes, in turn, are thought to influence positive student outcomes, such as higher attendance, engagement, and achievement (Berger, 2019; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021). Despite promising early findings, the overall body of research is fundamentally incomplete due to the omission of student perspectives on how trauma-informed pedagogies and policies impact their school environments and their personal well-being (Berger, 2019; Thomas, et al., 2019).

Student perspectives on trauma-informed approaches are critical, particularly for students who identify as Black and Hispanic. Black and Hispanic students consistently report more negative school experiences than their white peers, including negative school climate and lower levels of school equity and personal belongingness (Bottiani, et al., 2017; Konold et al., 2017; Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). These discrepancies in perceptions of school climate are associated with disparate student outcomes in discipline and academics (Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). Results from a study of urban public schools similar to those included in this project are in line with these findings (Weixler et al., 2020). Black students rated their school climates significantly lower than white students, with the largest differences in perceptions of school safety and feelings of emotional safety. Relatedly, Black students rated their teachers as less likely to show concern for their well-being and less likely to value their ideas and views than white students. Hispanic students similarly report lower experiences of safety, connectedness and opportunities to participate in school compared to their white peers (Voight et al., 2015).

These findings are particularly relevant to the conversation about trauma-informed schools, which aim to transform many of the very factors that drive the discrepancies in student perceptions. Trauma-informed approaches are designed to promote feelings of physical, social, and emotional safety in students, positive student-teacher relationships, and positive and culturally responsive discipline policies and practices (Simon et al., 2020). Unfortunately, student perceptions of these approaches and their impact has not been studied to date in the context of trauma-informed schools. This manuscript describes how a youth participatory action research (YPAR) framework was integrated with trauma-informed principles to engage student voice to inform and enrich trauma-informed policies and practices within their schools.

TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS AND SAMHSA'S SIX KEY PRINCIPLES

The Little ROCCs project was administered through the Institution Masked for Review, a federally funded National Child and Traumatic Stress Network Category II Center located in Masked Location, charged with providing training to schools to support the adoption and implementation of trauma-informed approaches. The Masked Institution defines trauma as individual and collective experiences, often driven by systemic oppression, which have damaging effects due to the harmful

interruption of safety, agency, dignity, and belonging (McGlynn-Wright & Briner, 2021). The Masked Institution supports schools in the restoration of safety, agency, dignity, and belonging through the application of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA, 2014) six key principles of trauma-informed organizations. The Masked Institution's training and implementation supports are designed to help schools build an awareness of cultural and historical trauma with the goal of creating safe and trustworthy environments through the use of effective practices, interventions, and systems-change strategies that emphasize collaboration and mutuality, peer support, and empowerment, voice, and choice.

Although SAMHSA's key principles were developed in collaboration with adult trauma survivors, most frameworks for trauma-informed schools have failed to partner meaningfully with students as they develop, adopt, and implement trauma-informed approaches (Berger, 2019). The fact that most models of trauma-informed schools do not include student voice is a major gap in the application of SAMHSA's conceptual framework, which holds that students should have significant involvement and meaningful voice in identifying how they can be best supported. Little ROCCs was developed to expand the Masked Institution's implementation framework to include student voice, using youth participatory action research methods.

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

As a systems-change strategy, youth participatory action research (YPAR) is strongly aligned with the trauma-informed principles of collaboration and mutuality and empowerment, voice, and choice. YPAR methodology empowers youth by positioning them as researchers who use their voice and choice to provide scholarly insight on social issues that directly affect their lives and communities. Through YPAR, students have the opportunity to identify issues that affect them, such as punitive school policies, and to work to change them (Ozer et al., 2012). Within schools, YPAR requires a commitment to collaboration and mutuality between school leaders and youth researchers and a belief that young people should play a role in co-constructing school environments. In addition, following data collection and analysis, the YPAR framework demands that young people—and their adult allies—then take “action” based on their findings to try to improve the social and material conditions of their lives. In this way, YPAR positions research as praxis, with the power to foster agency, dignity, and belonging in youth attending trauma-informed schools.

YPAR also has the potential to transform the material reality of schools and other institutions serving youth (Fine & Torre, 2021; Ozer et al., 2024). For example, in a district-wide YPAR project in Minneapolis, students at some schools saw positive shifts in school climate and were able to create training videos and materials that were used to improve teachers' awareness of and ability to respond to student needs (Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). This presents a powerful example of mutuality in which district officials collaborated with student researchers to reimagine what teacher preparation might look like. By centering youth voice and young people's expertise, YPAR provides a framework for schools to collaborate with students to reimagine what leadership looks like, how decisions are made, and the policies and procedures that structure student experiences in schools.

THE LITTLE RESEARCHERS OF CREATIVE CHANGE (LITTLE ROCCs)

The Little ROCCs project was designed to integrate trauma-informed principles with youth participatory action research methods to engage youth voice in the design, implementation, and evaluation of trauma-informed policies and practices. Providing opportunities for student voice recognizes and builds upon the strengths, experiences and resilience of students and serves to restore the sense of agency often disrupted by trauma. Student voice can also offer insightful perspectives that can inform the development and evaluation of trauma-informed schools. In this section and Table 1, we describe how SAMHSA’s six key principles of trauma-informed care informed the structure of the project, the curriculum, and the products developed from student research.

Table 1: Application SAMHSA’s Six Key Principles within Little ROCCs

Trauma-Informed Care Principle	Application within the Little ROCCs Project
Cultural Humility & Educational Equity	<i>Structure</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YPAR students are recruited for diversity. • Effort is made to recruit undergraduates from diverse cultural backgrounds, including those that match students. • YPAR students are situated as experts. • Youth are paid for their time and parents are paid for providing rides.
	<i>Process & Content</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YPAR students are empowered to develop research questions important to them and their peers. • Undergraduate facilitators are trained to engage as co-learners, understand historical and ongoing inequities, and minimize power differentials. • Curricular focus includes empathy and understanding the experiences of others. • Curricular focus includes analyzing systems of power and whose stories carry more weight.
Safety	<i>Structure</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational safety is prioritized by consistent pairing of undergraduate facilitators with each YPAR group.

- Regular communication with caregivers occurs in their home language.
- Program is constructed as a safe way for students to give negative feedback to school administrators.

Process and Content

- Curricular focus includes discipline & the school to prison pipeline. We discuss: what really makes us feel safe?
 - Curricular focus includes research ethics and how to conduct research respectfully, without harming participants.
-

Structure

Trust and
Transparency

- Clear goals and outcomes are presented at the beginning.
- Every session includes games, brain breaks, and activities aimed at building stronger relationships.

Process and Content

- Facilitators openly acknowledge and discuss how advocacy may not always lead to changes in the system, but can still be part of individual growth.
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Structure

Empowerment,
Voice & Choice

- Youth design their own project including research topics, methods, and mode of dissemination.
- Youth lead presentations and present recommendations to adults in the school building.
- Methods of students interviewing and surveying adults shift power dynamics.

Process and Content

- YPAR students practice voice and agency within the program by making small decisions, such as deciding lunch or snack foods, and planning and leading games and opening activities for our sessions.
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- YPAR students obtain the perspectives of other students that are not in the program.
 - Young people's ideas and expertise are valued.
 - Curricular focus includes how to advocate and organize to make the changes youth want to see in their schools a reality.
 - YPAR students asked to think expansively and creatively to imagine an ideal school or society.
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Structure

- YPAR students and undergraduate facilitators co-construct projects.
- The program connects youth to other groups in the community that are doing similar work.

Collaboration &
Mutuality

Process and Content

- Curricular focus includes the existence of multiple truths and understanding our own biases.
 - YPAR projects may lead to greater collaboration between youth and school administrators as they may co-create or revise school policies and practices.
 - Multi-year engagement is intended to institutionalize the inclusion of youth voice in school decision making.
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Structure

- The program challenges adultism with peer to peer collaboration.

Peer Support &
Learning

Process and Content

- YPAR students learn from their classmates as they research their topics.
 - YPAR students find connections through research and build relationships with peers from different schools.
 - YPAR students support each other in growth areas (e.g. public speaking).
 - YPAR students delegate based on strengths.
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Note: Many of the Little ROCCs components fit under more than one of SAMHSA's principles. For example, all of the structural components of the project lend themselves to increase the psychological safety of the YPAR students.

a Refers to the original SAMHSA principle of Cultural, Historic, and Gender Issues. This principle serves as the foundation of the TISP framework to ensure that we, and the schools we work with, understand the historical and ongoing systems of oppression at the root of trauma and educational inequities. We chose cultural humility because it has no endpoint; it requires ongoing critical self-reflection. We chose educational equity because it acknowledges the reality that schools themselves have been sources of trauma for students and families.

The project took place in three schools that had received or were receiving implementation supports from the Masked Institution. Each school created YPAR teams of six students in the 7th and 8th grades. School administrators were asked to recruit students who reflected the diversity of the student body; we instructed them to not select only high performing students, but also students with IEPs, students who are learning English, and students who receive discipline referrals. This diversity was intended to lead to more equitable solutions as different experiences and perspectives are included.

Over the course of one academic year, students engaged in weekly school-based sessions and monthly community-based sessions (see Table 2 for an overview of our YPAR curriculum). Sessions were designed and facilitated by the first author and by undergraduate YPAR facilitators from three local universities. These facilitators worked with students for the entire academic year, allowing for the development of deep and trusting relationships. The weekly small-group meetings at their schools were designed to foster learning about overarching topics such as identity and power, research methods, and the design and implementation of student-led research projects intended to investigate what they saw as the most significant issues in their schools. We additionally developed a curricular focus on empathy to help students think critically and compassionately about how their peers' experiences might differ from their own.

Month	Research Activities	YPAR Themes / Questions
August	Recruitment of Youth	
September	Introductions – What is YPAR?	Power Analysis / Who tells stories?
October	Research Questions	Trauma-Informed Schools / What do we want our school to look like? What issues do we see in our schools?
November	Developing Data Collection Instruments	Evidence / How do we prove something? Whose truths matter? Can we hold multiple truths?
December	Data Collection	Student as Researcher / How do we conduct research effectively, respectfully, and professionally?

January	Data Collection	Community / What roles do schools play in the larger community? What role do WE play in the larger community?
February	Analyzing Results	Understanding Bias / How do our prior ideas shape our assumptions and conclusions?

In addition to these school-based meetings, all 18 students met monthly for a 3-hour Saturday session to compare their experiences, learn new concepts, and build a community of student researchers across schools. These community sessions required that youth work collaboratively with students from their own schools as well as from other schools across the city, thus allowing them to build collective knowledge both within and across their schools. At these sessions, students reflected on similarities and differences between their schools, compared their research experiences, and honed their research design. YPAR students also had the opportunity to practice public speaking and leadership skills at the community sessions by leading whole group opening activities and games. Students were paid a stipend of \$80/month for their participation. Following the completion of their projects, the Little ROCCs held a community showcase at the end of the school year to highlight their findings and recommendations.

The students' projects were guided by the question "What will work for *all* of the students in our school?" This generative approach to engaging youth voice was utilized to position youth as experts on their own experiences. Moreover, it aligns with adolescent developmental needs by creating opportunities for authentic youth agency as well as mutuality and collaboration with both peers and adults (Abraczinskas et al, 2022). Ultimately, this approach provided opportunities for the co-creation of policies and practices that center young people's perspectives.

To prepare the Little ROCCs to have challenging conversations with school administrators, the curriculum and cadence guided them through the implementation of a rigorous research project while also analyzing power and understanding how change occurs. The presentation of evidence—in the form of survey results, classroom observations, and quotes from interviews and focus groups—allowed young people to feel confident presenting their recommendations and also motivated school administrators to take their ideas seriously. The YPAR students collectively developed recommendations rooted both in the data and in their lived experiences.

The year-long Little ROCCs project ended with a period of reflection and self-assessment, in which youth considered how they will use the knowledge and skills they built in their future endeavors. This helped youth conceptualize themselves as leaders whose work will carry on beyond the conclusion of the Little ROCCs, regardless of whether their recommendations were implemented.

STUDENT PROJECTS AND WORKSHOP

Student-led research projects and results related to core features of trauma-informed schools, including teacher-student relationships, how school culture can impact

student motivation, and how schools communicate with students about potentially traumatic events (in this case, school closure). After analyzing data collected through participant observation, focus groups, interviews, and surveys, YPAR teams at each school created presentations to share their results with school administrators. Each of these projects included recommendations intended to improve student experiences at each school (see Table 3 for a summary of student projects). Student projects largely focused on the lack of trust and transparency at schools and few opportunities for students—and, in some cases, staff as well—to experience empowerment, voice, and choice. When they presented their final projects at our end-of-year showcase, students emphasized their desire for mutuality, i.e. that adults listen to and take their ideas and perspectives seriously.

Table 3: Little ROCCs Student Presentations and Connections to Key Principles

Topic	Issues Identified	Recommendations	Connections to Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Systems
School 1			
Student-Teacher Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students do not feel like teachers treat them fairly • Students do not always feel respected by teachers • Teachers do not receive consequences when they act inappropriately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The school should devote meeting time to help teachers gain a better connection with students • Teachers should co-create policies with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust & Transparency • Collaboration and Mutuality • Empowerment, Voice, and Choice • Safety
School 2			
Unmotivated Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students seem unmotivated to achieve academically • Students rarely receive breaks or recess • The discipline system is 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers should engage students more in class with games and activities • Students need breaks and free time • The discipline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empowerment, Voice, and Choice • Trust & Transparency

arbitrary and contributes to lack of student motivation	system must be clarified and be followed consistently by all teachers
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School 3

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|----------------|---|---|--|
| School Closure | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The district decided to close the school without meaningful inclusion of student, family, and teacher perspectives• Once the announcement was made, some teachers left, other teachers blamed students, and some stopped teaching. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• If a district is considering closing a school, they should let students and staff have a voice in the decision• If a school is closing, the district should make sure education keeps happening for the students who are still there | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empowerment, Voice, and Choice• Trust & Transparency• Educational Equity |
|----------------|---|---|--|
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Following the school-year program, students had the opportunity to participate in a 3-week “YPAR summer camp,” which was intended to help them transform some of their ideas into a professional development seminar for teachers. During this camp, students delved deeper into some of the issues touched on during the school year program, such as lack of student agency and how certain students, like English language learners and students with IEPs, are marginalized within their school communities. They developed a 45-minute workshop which included a big paper reflection activity that asked teachers to respond silently to quotes and graphs from their original data collection, a PowerPoint presentation entitled “What Students Need” and then a “four corners” activity that asked teachers to move around the room to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with eight statements. The PowerPoint focused on the following topics: Communication and Respect, Mental Health, Safety, Improving Teaching, and Discipline. The creation of this workshop, as well as the more expansive time afforded by the summer camp structure, allowed students to explore with more depth the meaning of trauma-informed schools and to think expansively and creatively about how their schools might improve.

In the following school year, students had the opportunity to present their workshop to their parents, their peers, groups of teachers, and high school students in a pre-teacher training program. Student facilitators received stipends for these presentations in order to underscore the importance of their work. The workshop pushed participants to think more deeply about the social emotional needs of students (for example, they advocated for more mental health practitioners in schools), ways in which students could be given greater agency, and the importance of transparency around rules and policies to create a trusting environment. Some of the students' questions produced robust and surprising discussions. For example, one of the "four corners" statements was, "Students should co-create policies with teachers." This sparked disagreement among our teacher participants and resulted in a productive conversation about what it means to have authority in a classroom, how to get student buy-in, and the benefits (and drawbacks) of sharing power with students. The workshop also modeled teaching in a way that promotes active learning and discussion (see Figure 1), strategies that can result in much greater student engagement in the classroom, as well as provide opportunities for peer support and voice.

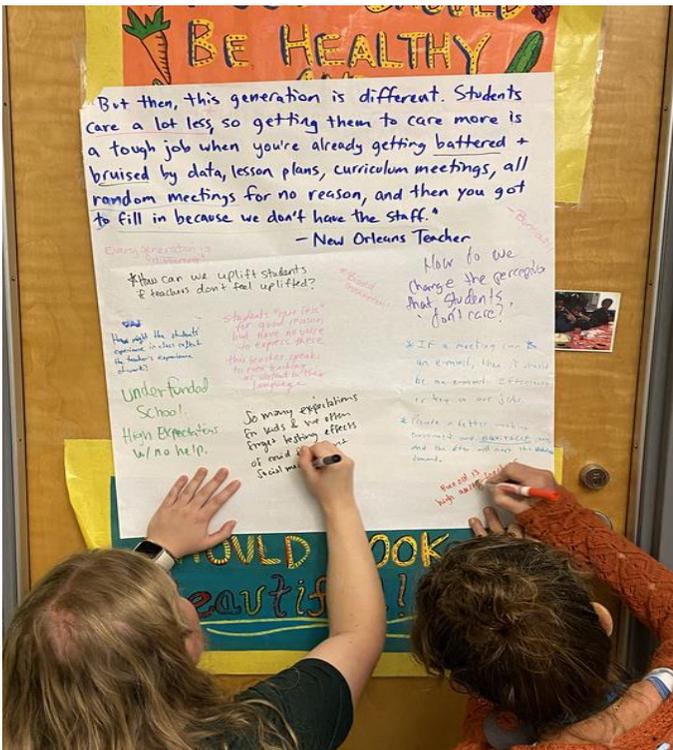


Figure 1: Teachers at a Little ROCCs Training Respond to a Quote during a Big Paper Activity

ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

A key element of YPAR is using research findings to advocate for solutions to issues identified by youth. Accomplishing this successfully requires a commitment to mutuality by both YPAR participants and school administrators, who will need to be willing to listen to each other's ideas and collaborate in developing potential solutions. This can prove challenging; various scholars and YPAR practitioners have identified poor institutional support and scheduling issues as barriers to YPAR program success, especially within schools (Buttimer, 2018; Keddie, 2021; Kirschner et al., 2011; Schensul et al., 2004). School administrators can be resistant to change, react defensively to student suggestions and critiques, and act as "gatekeepers" (Anderson, 2020) rather than supporting student leadership and collaboration. School leaders' dismissal of YPAR findings, and inaction in the face of student researchers' demands, is a frequent barrier to effective school-based YPAR programming (Keddie, 2021; Ozer et al., 2010). These issues speak to the importance of YPAR facilitators pro-actively working with school administrators and other stakeholders to build their capacity for mutuality and prepare them to receive feedback from YPAR participants (Richards-Schuster et al., 2021). Ultimately, we failed to effectively lay this groundwork with adults at our partner schools. Despite three different opportunities to engage with the Little ROCCs efforts to advocate for change in their schools, participation from school administrators was minimal.

First, efforts were made to schedule time for each school-based YPAR team to share their findings and recommendations with their school's administrative team. However, due to the rigorous end-of-year state testing schedule, as well as failed attempts to communicate with school administrators, we were unable to hold these meetings. Additionally, many of the students' recommendations were things the schools already believed they were doing, such as having a clear discipline system that teachers followed consistently or promoting positive student/teacher relationships. This reflects a gap between adults' and students' experiences of school culture, which further dialogue and intergenerational engagement might have helped bridge. However, because we ran out of time at the end of the year, we struggled to create specific, actionable solutions that schools could implement to respond to student concerns.

Second, we held a final showcase and celebration at a community center during which all three YPAR groups had the opportunity to present their findings. We invited the students' families, school communities, and collaborators who had supported the program and approximately sixty people attended. This event allowed students the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the audience about their research and recommendations, as well as share their vision for improving their school for all students. However, representatives from only one of our partner schools attended the showcase; the other two schools reported that scheduling challenges prevented them from attending. Notably, the one school that did attend was the school that was closing; we speculate that they were more open to hearing youth feedback since the target of the students' research was a district rather than school-based policy. That is, the students at this third school were aligned with the teachers and administrators in opposing the district's decision to close the school, whereas the students at the other

two schools were offering critical feedback directly to the teachers and administrators at their schools.

Our third and final attempt to advocate for change was through the development of the teacher workshop during the summer program. Though teachers responded positively when we facilitated the training, we were only able to find one school partner who would give us time in their professional development schedule. This partner was not one of the schools we had been previously working with. Again, this reflects the need to work more closely with school leaders throughout the YPAR process to lay the groundwork for mutuality and develop shared expectations for the school's engagement with YPAR findings and actions. Several studies have demonstrated the importance of school and district support for YPAR in developing successful programs that meaningfully uplift student voice (e.g. Gonell et al., 2021; Richards-Schuster et al, 2021). Though we were able to facilitate our program throughout the school year with fidelity, with minimal interruptions or cooptations from school leaders, when we attempted to advocate for change, the lack of administration support became a significant obstacle in our larger goal of creating more trauma-informed schools.

In summary, the Little ROCCs successfully identified issues, conducted research, and developed findings that would have made their schools—and the schools in the district more broadly—more trauma-informed, but they were unable to meaningfully share that message with school administrators in a way that would have enabled that change to occur. To address that issue, we have now moved to a model in which we embed the Little ROCCs program within schools that are actively working with the Masked Institution, so that we can include listening to and responding to youth feedback as a core part of the schools' commitment to trauma-informed practices. Part of this shift has involved educating school administrators about the YPAR process and intentionally preparing them to hear youth findings and recommendations. Moreover, since we are now embedded in the same schools for multiple years, administrative feedback can help inform future years' projects, hopefully establishing a relationship that allows for the development of deeper mutuality as well as the continuous involvement of student voice within school decision making.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Little ROCCs program successfully integrated SAMHSA's six key trauma-informed principles with youth participatory action research methods to cultivate student agency and authentic voice in shaping trauma-informed policies and practices. Although logistical barriers and limited administrative engagement presented challenges to the project and limited students' experiences of mutuality, embedding the program within schools' multi-year trauma-informed frameworks has begun to establish ongoing channels for youth feedback and institutional responsiveness. Other organizations looking to replicate this study or pilot a similar approach should ensure school and/or district understanding of YPAR and commitment to seeing the project through—including incorporating student suggestions and feedback—prior to initiating the project. By equipping YPAR students

with the skills to investigate and advocate for trauma-informed policies and practices, this approach both honors historically marginalized perspectives and lays the groundwork for sustainable, student-driven transformation. Ultimately, YPAR offers a promising pathway for school leaders and practitioners committed to healing-centered, equity-oriented practice to partner with the very students whose well-being they aim to support.

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