SPECIAL ISSUE • Opening up evidence-based policy: exploring citizen and service
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practice

Opportunities for youth participatory action research to inform school district decisions

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Background Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is an equity-focused approach intended
to generate local knowledge and democratise the production of research evidence.

Aims/objectives We explore the promise and challenges of YPAR to inform education policy
decision making. We focus on California's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF)'s Local Control and
Accountability Plan (LCAP) initiative, which requires districts to engage with diverse stakeholders to
make decisions. We provide a case example of California's Stockton Unified School District. Stockton
currently uses the Peer Leaders Uniting Students's YPAR curriculum to inform their LCAP work.

Key conclusions YPAR offers opportunities for new insights, and can be implemented successfully
at scale. While Stockton was doing YPAR before LCFF and LCAP existed, they enabled Stockton to
expand its YPAR programming, with the goal of using YPAR evidence to provide useful information
for educational decision making, policies, and programmes. For example, one YPAR project focused
on student tardiness and, using data from multiple sources, proposed lengthening the passing period
so that it was physically possible to walk to class in the time permitted. Here, YPAR supports those
people most affected by education policy – the students – to have the power to inform decisions
that affect them. YPAR can broaden the set of evidence and perspectives that decision makers review

to inform policy decisions. We encourage researchers and practitioners to study and create policy structures that support using YPAR to inform policy. We also encourage policy makers to develop more policies that can facilitate the use of YPAR, in education and beyond.

Key messages
- In youth participatory action research (YPAR), youth conduct research relevant to their lives.
- In California, there is an education policy that encourages community engagement with local data.
- YPAR can be implemented at scale, and should be used to generate policy-relevant data.
- YPAR can offer new insights, different from traditional research, to policy conversations.

Interest in both the use of evidence in education policy and youth–led research is increasing (Ozer et al, pending; Tseng and Nutley, 2014). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) evidence is typically not used to inform policy, but could be. We explore YPAR's promises and challenges for creating rigorous, relevant, youth-generated evidence to inform educational policies and practices. We focus on California's LCAP (Local Control and Accountability Plan) and LCFF (Local Control Funding Formula) initiative, which requires that school districts seek stakeholder input in their work towards more equitable student outcomes.

LCAP/LCFF is an important innovation to incentivise using stakeholder–generated evidence to inform policy. However, few have studied how locally-generated evidence can be integrated into education policy processes. Here, we present a case example of how one school district implemented a strategy to use student-generated evidence (YPAR) to inform their LCAP.

Youth participatory action research

YPAR, a form of Community–Based Participatory Research (Wallerstein et al, 2017), engages youth as researchers with unique insights from lived experiences (Libby et al, 2005), often with scaffolding by adults (Anyon et al, 2018), as part of a youth–driven, power-sharing partnership. YPAR is committed to equity by including youth from historically marginalised populations. Youth conduct research on relevant topics in a cyclical, iterative process. They often present their findings to stakeholders, advocating for research-informed policy and/or programme action.

A key YPAR component is transformational change. YPAR can result in changes in systems, adults, and participating youth. Well-implemented YPAR projects often conclude with action-oriented presentations to relevant decision makers. These interactions offer a rare, critical way for youth to inform policy (Kirshner, 2015), but this potential is not always realised. YPAR projects' policy impacts vary widely, partly due to entrenched biases against youth as legitimate political actors, ambiguity about proposed actions, and/or limited mechanisms to ensure YPAR evidence

informs decision making (Su, 2010; Ozer and Wright, 2012; Kirshner, 2015). YPAR projects lead to smaller-scale, school-level changes (for example, to curricula, school meals) more often than organisational and community-level changes (Shamrova and Cummings, 2017). Changes in participants also occur, such as adults' perceptions of youth power, increased youth empowerment and positive youth development (Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Anyon et al, 2018).

How YPAR can inform policy making

Conditions that increase the likelihood of research use in policy making are: building trusting, strong researcher-practitioner relationships; triangulating research with local, practice-based expertise; providing timely, useful, and locally-relevant research; and including practice recommendations (Dagenais et al, 2012; Asen et al, 2013; Palinkas et al, 2014; Tseng and Nutley, 2014). YPAR projects have many of these conditions. YPAR is: conducted in collaboration with school and/or district practitioners, responsive to local issues, and parlayed into recommendations for action. Additionally, YPAR can leverage students' insider status to enhance study validity (Kirshner et al, 2011; Ozer and Wright, 2012); this is especially helpful when studying sensitive topics (for example, mental health, school climate). Local data, practical suggestions, and valid student perspectives obtained through YPAR can be used to modify or create new policy.

YPAR and LCAP in California

We present a case example of YPAR implemented in a sizeable, diverse school district (Stockton, California), and how they use YPAR-generated evidence to inform decision making for California's LCFF and LCAP. First, we systematically review the literature to provide an overview of LCAP and LCFF, which created a context supportive of using YPAR evidence. Then, we detail Stockton Unified School District ('Stockton')'s experience.

Education policy context

Most US education decisions happen at the municipality, known as 'school district', or state levels, rather than federally (Asen et al, 2013). Historically, education policy has seesawed between community and expert perspectives; in the last century, expert perspectives have dominated (Tyack, 1974). Evidence-based and data-driven decision making are increasingly common in education (Datnow and Hubbard, 2016).

California is the largest US state by population (US Census, 2017). It is at the forefront of US demographic shifts, including being more racially/ethnically diverse. Substantial inequities in student opportunities and outcomes exist in California (for example, see Kucsera et al, 2015). In 2013, the California state legislature, aiming to achieve more equitable student outcomes, mandated parent and community stakeholder input into the LCFF and LCAP. LCAP requires that schools create stakeholder networks that meet regularly and collect data monthly. LCFF requires that district budgets be responsive to the families and students served. In the US, few policy structures require youth participation (Mitra et al, 2014). Even though LCFF and LCAP do not explicitly name youth as community stakeholders, this nod to youth participation remains notable.

To our knowledge, no research has examined how to sustainably generate authentic, representative youth input through YPAR to inform educational decision making. YPAR can be useful because anecdotal (versus research-informed) youth input could lead to simplistic and/or reactive policies. However, structures rarely exist to systematically use YPAR evidence to inform decision making.

Research on California's LCAP and LCFF

We systematically reviewed the literature in Google Scholar in July 2018, using the search terms: 'local control and accountability plan', 'schools', 'LCAP', and 'LCFF'. We found four peer-reviewed articles and six non-peer-reviewed reports.

Of the peer-reviewed articles, only one tackled community engagement (Heilig et al, 2017). It evaluated how LCAPs and LCFF met English learners' needs. Most districts obtained feedback from their (required) English learner stakeholder committees, but few additional stakeholders, on LCAP drafts. (The other papers (Heilig et al, 2014; Affeldt, 2015; Menefee-Libey and Kerchner, 2015) focused on LCAP and LCFF's funding implications.)

Six non-peer-reviewed reports (Hahnel, 2014; Humphrey and Koppich, 2014; Knudson, 2014; Blum and Knudson, 2016; Knudson, 2016; Terriquez et al, 2016) reported on LCAP implementation and adult stakeholder engagement. They documented LCAP's cumbersome nature and difficulties engaging community stakeholders, especially parents (Hahnel, 2014; Humphrey and Koppich, 2014). Overall, districts struggled early on with meaningful community engagement.

Only one report, Terriquez et al (2016), focused on youth engagement; high school students were involved in LCAPs via community-based organisations. Involvement took many forms (for example, attending school board meetings, town halls, and advisory committees; assessing student needs). Youth advocated for funding for high-need students, academic support, parent engagement, and institutionalising student voice.

LCAPs sought to engage communities. However, budgeting and deadlines took precedence, the LCAP was burdensome, and youth engagement was rare (Blum and Knudson, 2016; Humphrey and Koppich, 2014; Knudson, 2016). Districts did seek to increase adult stakeholder engagement, through providing childcare, meetings at convenient locations and times, and translators (Humphrey and Koppich, 2014), and expressed a desire to increase their capacity for meaningful stakeholder involvement (Knudson, 2016).

YPAR and LCAP in Stockton

YPAR can elicit youth-generated evidence for the LCAP as part of efforts to achieve stakeholder involvement in decision making. Yet most California school districts have not systematically engaged youth. Stockton's implementation of the Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) programme, a YPAR experience, is an illustrative case of systematic youth engagement with LCAP implications.

Case example methods

The Stockton case example draws from semi-structured conversations that Cohen, Ozer, and Abraczinskas in August 2017 through May 2019 with leaders of Stockton's PLUS

work: PLUS founder John Vandenburgh, Jillian Glende, Stockton's PLUS programme coordinator, and Reyes Gauna, Stockton's assistant superintendent overseeing educational support services (including PLUS). We used general prompts to discuss PLUS, YPAR, and LCAP, probing further with follow-up questions. Responses were recorded using handwritten notes and analysed to narratively depict what occurred.

The University of California Berkeley's Institutional Review Board (responsible for ethical research conduct) deemed this study exempt from review, as all participants discussed topics related to their professional responsibilities. We told participants that we would use this information for publication purposes. No study authors are involved in developing or implementing PLUS.

Stockton

The city of Stockton includes primarily residents of colour (78% are non–White) and has a median household income of approximately $46,000 (US Census, 2018).

Stockton serves approximately 40,000 students, of whom 82% are high poverty and 29% are English learners. Almost all (93%) students are non–White (SUSD, 2018).

PLUS

Former teacher John Vandenburgh developed the PLUS programme, which is currently implemented in 110 schools across 30-plus California school districts (Vandenburgh, personal communication, 2018). In PLUS classes (typically electives) and clubs, students conduct a version of YPAR (Vandenburgh, personal communication, 2017). PLUS students work in monthly YPAR cycles, developing research questions based on perceived student issues and collecting data to identify areas of need. They survey and conduct focus groups with their classmates, develop an action plan to address student need informed by their findings, and hold a student forum to obtain feedback from peers and brainstorm next steps for activities or an intervention to address the need. PLUS seeks to help diverse students develop meaningful collaborative relationships, both through the YPAR process and via youth-selected interventions to improve school connectedness, with the goal of promoting youth voice in school and district policy conversations and using youth-generated findings for LCAP/LCFF-related data-based decision making (Vandenburgh, personal communication, 2017). Before starting PLUS, educators must attend multi-day training and agree to use a survey to assess school climate and track the progress of interventions implemented to address research-identified issues.

Stockton began implementing PLUS in December 2012 with 6th to 12th grade students (Gauna, personal communication, 2018) to address school climate issues (Vandenburgh, personal communication, 2018), and has expanded since to 1000-plus students at 49 kindergarten through 8th grade and high schools. Almost all (95%) PLUS students were people of colour. Across Stockton, through PLUS, 28,203 students provided survey data and 8,925 provided forum data (Glende, personal communication, 2018).

In Stockton, students can participate in PLUS in a college-preparatory class (29 schools) or a club (20 schools) (Glende, personal communication, 2018). Students are admitted to PLUS based on their ability to be peer influencers. They learn

conflict resolution and trauma–informed restorative practices to reduce bullying and improve school climate through connections with Stockton's larger school–wide positive behaviour and intervention supports (SW-PBIS) programme. In Stockton's modification of SW-PBIS, PLUS students model the positive behavioural norms and conduct YPAR to inform data-based decisions to select prevention and targeted supports to meet their peers' needs. Furthermore, the identified needs and activities are integrated into the LCAP for additional funding.

Intersections between LCAP and PLUS in Stockton

PLUS and LCAP share two goals relevant to citizen expertise informing policy: community engagement and generating local evidence. They also share the goal of serving higher–need student populations. Given these overlaps, Stockton made PLUS part of its LCAP strategy, which facilitated PLUS's expansion.

PLUS aligns with LCAP's priority of stakeholder (including youth) engagement. Stockton leadership viewed PLUS as a way to meaningfully communicate with students and adults, including for LCAP purposes (Gauna, personal communication, 2018). LCAP's mandate allowed Stockton to justify using LCAP funds to expand PLUS and hire a PLUS coordinator to oversee district-wide PLUS implementation, support student engagement, and share PLUS data with decision makers (Glende, personal communication, 2018).

Student-generated data supplements traditionally–gathered data to inform the LCAP. The California Healthy Kids Survey is only conducted biennially. Stockton supplements this with PLUS school climate data (gathered thrice yearly by school staff and monthly by students) when developing LCAP plans and monitoring outcomes. For consistency for LCAP planning, Stockton required that all PLUS surveys include the same core questions. While YPAR typically is youth-led, this adaptation aligned with the LCAP mandate, substantially increasing institutional support for PLUS. Importantly, students could administer survey questions for their research area of interest monthly to peers during a forum, and generate their own questions. Data from both the staff-administered and student-administered surveys were analysed to inform data-based decisions about student need and interventions to improve student outcomes, including those targeted in the LCAP. PLUS students analysed data with an equity lens by examining subgroups to help identify specific and unique needs for the LCAP-identified vulnerable groups.

LCAP encouraged interest in non-academic outcomes, including school climate, attendance, and suspensions. In one PLUS class's YPAR project, PLUS students analysed survey data and identified attendance, especially tardiness, as problematic. They examined data on factors linked to attendance and conducted a forum with students who were chronically absent/tardy. They discovered a barrier to on–time attendance; the between–class passing period was too short. PLUS students conducted school-wide surveys to learn more, and presented the findings to school administrators, who tried and failed to walk a student schedule on time. PLUS students advocated for a longer passing period to reduce student tardiness to administrators, school staff, and the counselling team. There will be a trial with interested teachers to assess the impact of an extended passing period this year (Glende, personal communication, 2019).

Students have informed Stockton's LCAP in many ways. In response to concerns about bullying, PLUS students participated in a 'no one eats lunch alone' activity to build new relationships and mutual understanding. Students also advocated for the basic needs of foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness, which are populations specifically targeted in the LCAP. Finally, survey results identified that students wanted increased funds for engagement activities, which led to more funding for PLUS, as an identified LCAP service to promote engagement. Overall, PLUS students' research helped Stockton understand student needs and support student-led activities to address them.

Discussion

YPAR provides an approach for the service users and citizens most directly affected by education policy – the students – to generate evidence to inform policy. Well-implemented YPAR projects have no tension between the 'best' evidence and the evidence generated through community engagement: YPAR can generate valid evidence and offer new insights that might otherwise go unstudied. While YPAR may be time- and resource-intensive, the Stockton case example demonstrates that embedding YPAR (or, at minimum, YPAR as implemented via PLUS) into routine district decision making is possible.

In Stockton, youth specifically aimed to improve school climate-related outcomes via YPAR. They used data to identify high-need student populations and then selected interventions to improve their outcomes. For example, students created interventions to support foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness, and used their research findings to work with school stakeholders to improve attendance, an LCAP priority outcome.

We posit that YPAR can be used to inform the LCAP while still maintaining its three key principles: inquiry-based, participatory, and transformative. Students conducted monthly research cycles and used data to develop activities for high-need student subpopulations. The research and interventions were student-designed and student-led, with adult support. System-level transformative changes happened in the form of improved student–teacher relationships, plans to support students with class transitions, and support for students in greatest need. Additionally, based on both the California Healthy Kids Survey and the district survey, school climate changes have occurred since PLUS implementation began, including reduced bullying and suspension rates, improved attendance, and students reporting feeling safe at school (Glende, personal communication, 2018). Transformative change also occurred for youth participants: a recent graduate speaks often at Stockton community events about how PLUS impacted him. He enjoyed and benefitted from helping his peers, and wanted to continue helping others post-graduation. He first got a job with county behavioural health as a facilitator, and now coordinates a youth programme. He reported that PLUS made him begin to see himself as a leader when no one else (including himself) saw that in him. Participating in PLUS led him to integrate leadership into his self-concept, and to take the skills he learned in PLUS and apply them to benefit his community.

Use of YPAR evidence for policy

Our Stockton example demonstrates a case of YPAR generating evidence relevant for district decision making, in the context of a state-wide policy that mandates the inclusion of parent stakeholder participation and encourages the input of students

into decision making. Importantly, like YPAR, the overarching goal of LCAP/LCFF is to promote equity.

In this Stockton case, student-generated YPAR evidence aligned with the conditions that facilitate research use in education (Dagenais et al, 2012; Asen et al, 2013; Palinkas et al, 2014; Tseng and Nutley, 2014). First, there were strong relationships between the researchers (PLUS students) and the practitioners (Stockton school leaders and administrators), as evidenced by multiple points of communication and mutual respect. There were also positive relationships, as teachers sought to improve their relationships with students when they learned that students' feelings of connection were incongruent with their own. The boundaries experienced by university-based researchers and district staff were not evident (although different, student-adult boundaries present their own considerations). Second, research evidence was regularly triangulated with local and practical expertise. They obtained feedback from other students monthly about progress and areas for improvement; youth were experts on their own experiences. Third, Stockton decision makers had the capacity to use the research, which was typically simple descriptive statistics in familiar formats. Fourth, PLUS students' research was rooted in local issues, as students conducted research to identify activities to directly benefit students who were in need, making it clearly relevant to Stockton, and the monthly cycles meant research was conducted in a timely manner. Last, students did YPAR for practical reasons, as they almost always took action (via an activity or intervention) based on the findings. Due to these characteristics, PLUS students could overcome many of the common barriers to the use of research evidence in education policy making. Most Stockton staff treated PLUS students as legitimate researchers, were enthusiastic about PLUS research, and used it in decision making.

YPAR can offer new insights, potentially leading to better education policy decisions. For example, traditional decision makers may focus on macro, system-level concerns (and so may only seek evidence at that level), whereas youth can reveal the nuances of the policies in action, which can lead to new solutions (like the tardiness example).

While YPAR evidence can inform organisational and systems change, it rarely informs policy change. California's LCAP implementation provided opportunities for youth voice via YPAR to be heard by policy makers, since LCAP requires both evidence and community engagement. Although Stockton implemented PLUS programming before LCAP, LCAP facilitated YPAR's expansion through increased funding and decision maker interest. Stockton shows how YPAR can be integrated into LCAP. California's LCAP policy created a policy structure that incentivises the use of YPAR.

Challenges and lessons learned

There were strengths, challenges, and lessons learned in this work. First, students were primarily the change makers. Because projects were youth-led, oftentimes non-PLUS school staff were unfamiliar with them. One solution was to have youth present during staff meetings, but scheduling is difficult. When students do present, they often discuss actions they are already taking versus requesting adult support. Second, doing high-quality YPAR is time-intensive, and difficult with other competing priorities. A PLUS class, rather than a club, works best to ensure consistent YPAR cycles. Additionally, buy-in from administration and invested, compensated PLUS teachers, is key for success. Third, a barrier related to the LCAP itself is that it is cumbersome. Though youth-generated evidence informs the LCAP, youth do not actually

participate in writing or updating it. Rather, the PLUS coordinator integrates the student findings. Ideally, youth would collaboratively draft the LCAP. Finally, community visibility plays an important role, as non-public schools in Stockton now implement PLUS because of its positive publicity.

Scaling up YPAR

Since policy structures like LCAP can provide opportunities for YPAR, we must think about how to scale YPAR. Many YPAR programmes are in a single classroom/after-school setting (Kirshner et al, 2011; Lindquist-Grantz and Abraczinskas, 2018); some are in multiple schools within a district (Ozer and Wright, 2012). PLUS is a rare US YPAR programme operating across multiple districts. Some action civics programmes – an approach related to YPAR that emphasises civic action – operate across multiple districts in multiple states (Cohen et al, 2018). Stockton's PLUS experience shows how high-quality YPAR can be implemented at scale district-wide.

YPAR's expansion in Stockton is partly due to word of mouth by PLUS champions and observations of its success during PLUS summits, where youth present on their work to school and community leaders. Scaling up in Stockton also occurred because the district's survey is mandated for LCAP reporting. When schools use the survey, though unnecessary, they often also use other PLUS components.

YPAR initiatives beyond California (and therefore without LCAP/LCFF) offer other means for scaling up and using YPAR evidence. The Cleveland, Ohio, school district mandated student advisory committees in secondary schools. These committees use survey data collected biannually from all high schoolers to identify problems and recommend solutions. They develop and share recommendations with school administrators (monthly) and district leadership (quarterly). Student committees also evaluate interventions they recommend, and register their findings in the district's evidence-based practice repository used to inform programming.

Denver, Colorado's Student Voice and Leadership programme supports high school student teams, led by teacher-coaches in after-school or elective classes, to do biannual YPAR cycles to identify issues at their schools, do research, identify policy solutions, and present recommendations to school and district decision makers. They support students developing high-quality, evidence-based policy arguments (Kirshner et al, 2017).

Future research directions

First, we focused specifically on documenting the perspectives of adults involved in the generation and use of YPAR evidence to inform decision making. We encourage future researchers to also interview YPAR participants.

Second, researchers should study the process of youth engagement in policy decision making, and elucidate effects on youth, schools, and education policy. Researchers could study youth involvement in LCFF/LCAP implementation, to explore if districts engage youth, if youth are as involved as other community stakeholders (for example, families), and strengths/areas for improvement. Researchers could also study how strictly the LCAP requirements are enforced, and whether youth involvement is enforced, as that may affect YPAR use.

Third, this case and other research raises broader questions about the relationship between young people's political power and the use of YPAR-generated evidence (Kirshner, 2015). For example, even LCAP does not specifically mandate youth participation, but does require parent/family (that is, adult) participation. Future researchers should compare YPAR versus community-based research conducted by adults, to see if the evidence informs policies differently and if these differences are driven by political power disparities. We also encourage researchers to examine facilitators and barriers to the use of YPAR evidence in policy making.

Sometimes YPAR initiatives appear naïve, assuming a well-functioning democracy that wants to use the best data and prioritises youth needs. There are many examples worldwide where YPAR evidence is interpreted through other, less technocratic filters. Perhaps YPAR evidence, to be taken seriously, needs to be generated in the context of community organising or social movements that policymakers respect (Warren and Mapp, 2011). Padres and Jovenes Unidos utilised youth-generated evidence to change school discipline policies in Colorado, within a broader, multi-year organising effort (Kirshner, 2015). In South Africa, youth-generated data led to the adoption of school Minimum Norms and Standards, but holding policy makers accountable for its enforcement required an extended, multi-pronged approach (Watts et al, 2018).

Future practice implications

We find that district- and state-level structures – for example, state laws, district support/staffing, an external non-profit organisation – help facilitate the spread of YPAR and use of YPAR-generated evidence. Both students and Stockton staff being involved in developing research questions and data collection tools facilitated Stockton's use of YPAR evidence.

Some practitioners resist scaling up YPAR because they perceive YPAR as burdensome. Stockton's district-level support structure facilitated school-level YPAR uptake, and PLUS provided curricular materials and other resources (for example, survey instruments); when possible, we encourage other districts to do the same. Additionally, YPAR helped Stockton address the LCAP compliance burden, perhaps creating a lower net burden. However, such external resources and forces do not always exist. At minimum, open-access resources (for example, yparhub.berkeley.edu) can support YPAR. Future researchers and practitioners should collaborate to explore if and how YPAR can be implemented at scale without partners like PLUS, support from school districts like Cleveland and Denver, and/or legislative mandates like LCAP/LCFF.

Finally, we encourage researchers and practitioners to explore how YPAR can be used elsewhere in California under LCAP/LCFF, and elsewhere in public school systems worldwide that may lack California's same direct incentives but could still benefit from youth insights. We also encourage policy makers to require youth participation in education decision making.

Conclusion

YPAR democratically generates evidence. In addition to doing community-engaged, policy-relevant research, policy contexts that incentivise using YPAR can help, since many decision makers remain resistant to youth-generated evidence. California's LCAP/LCFF is a bright example of a policy whose mandate is community-engaged

and evidence-based. We encourage researchers to study and practitioners to scale up the use of YPAR evidence, and urge policy makers to develop policies that encourage the use of YPAR in education and beyond.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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