

# INCREASING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH VOICE IN NAF ACADEMIES USING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH



BE FUTURE  
READY

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ON PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

### HOW TO INCREASE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH VOICE TO CO-DESIGN MORE EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS.

NAF had conducted this summary review of the literature on participatory action research (PAR) and its implementation with youth in formal and informal learning environments.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1980, NAF has partnered with communities and leaders in education, business, and society to improve student outcomes through NAF academies, small learning communities in high schools. NAF wants to ensure that high school students across the United States are college, career, and future-ready. To support its work, NAF is seeking to build capacity for implementing PAR approaches across the network. NAF wants to support the creation of new spaces within academies for youth-centered approaches to knowledge and power sharing to advance more equitable learning experiences and environments. NAF will use these insights to support youth-informed and youth-led, localized decision-making and planning within NAF academies and to communicate the organization's work externally

#### What is Participatory Action Research and Why Should It Be Implemented with Youth in their Learning Environments?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) *"is collaborative research, education, and action used to gather information to use for [a range of] issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it."*<sup>2</sup>

So why PAR and why PAR with youth? Youth-centered PAR is an *"innovative approach to positive youth and community development based in social justice principles in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them."*<sup>3</sup> Youth-centered PAR is a process whereby youth are empowered as experts and, along with adult allies, co-develop learning experiences and environments that better address their needs and priorities. Adult allies can be researchers, educators, practitioners, business leaders, and community members

The principles that drive PAR are:

- **Participation** PAR advocates that those most affected by an issue, such as youth, be involved throughout the process.
- **Action-Oriented** Action is achieved through a reflective cycle, whereby youth and their adult allies collect and analyze data on an issue, then determine what action should follow. The purpose of an action is to change or improve an issue being researched.
- **Shared Ownership** PAR is driven by those with a stake in an issue. Outside stakeholders (such as researchers) can support youth and their adult allies, but youth and allies drive the process.

<sup>1</sup> For this report, formal learning environments include, but are not limited to, primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Informal learning environments include, but are not limited to, afterschool and out-of-school programs run by schools or districts, local government agencies (e.g., libraries), and non-profit or community-based organizations (CBOs).

<sup>2</sup> Kindon, S., Pain, R., & Kesby, M. (2007). *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> YPAR Hub, <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>; last retrieved on April 16, 2020.

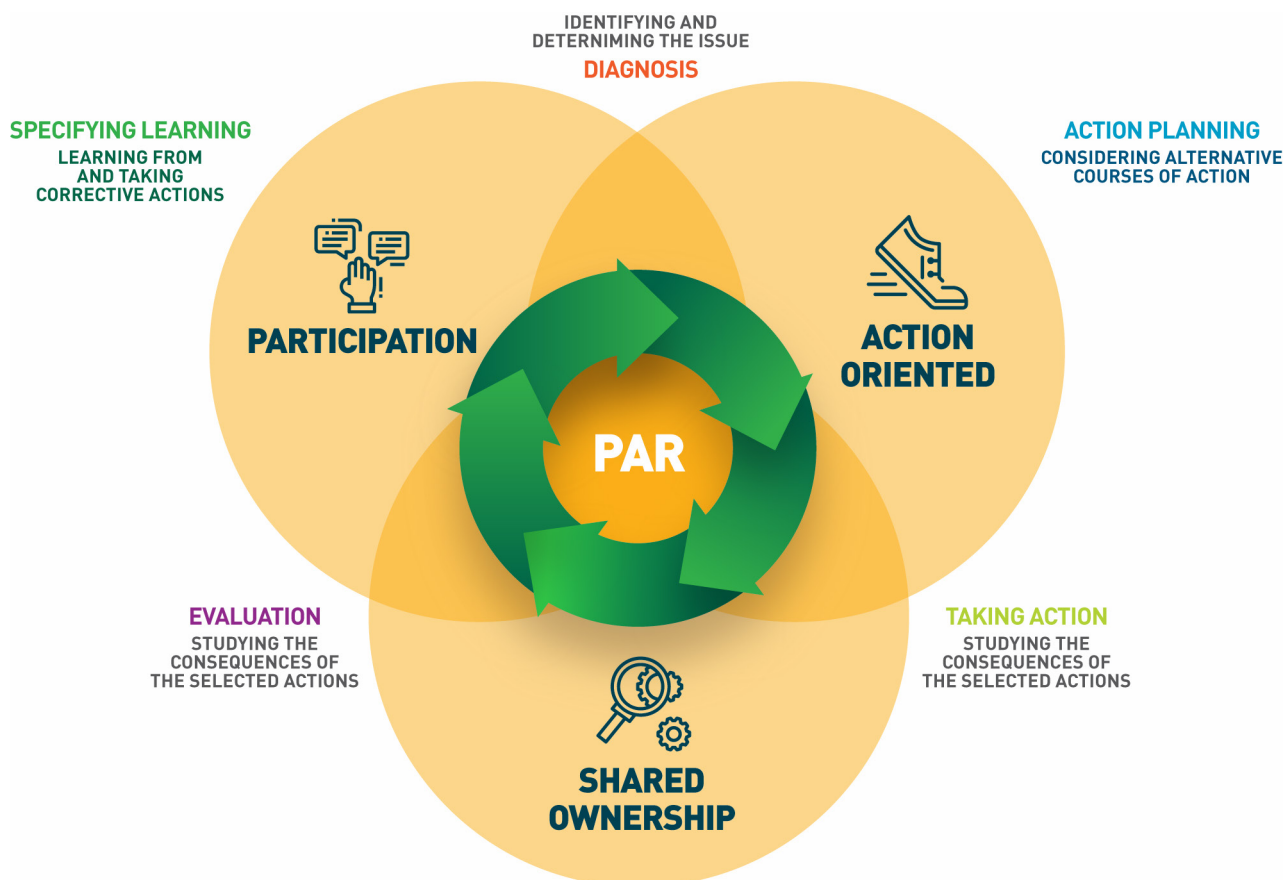
PAR can be used to develop or redesign career-readiness programs to meet diverse needs such as creating community-based employment opportunities for high-school students seeking to build 21st-century skill sets; providing educators and school administrators with affordable and accessible career and college readiness options for their scholars; supporting local businesses who need access to skilled local talent. Youth-centered PAR produces a more equitable educational experience for students.

## How is Participatory Action Research Implemented in Learning Environments?

A typical PAR process is structured around three recurrent stages: planning, action-taking, and evaluation and reflection. PAR involves flexible research and program development methods that can be adapted to local needs.

PAR usually involves multiple cycles (see the figure below).

1. Planning entails: youth-led diagnosis or identification of a salient issue at school or in the community; undertaking actions that will address an issue; preparing for knowledge-gathering efforts such as data collection.
2. Action-taking implements, for example, the piloting of a new internship program or career readiness curriculum or the execution of an event (e.g., a career fair or a community workshop).
3. Evaluation & Reflection take stock of the effects of action-taking through data collection and analysis and group reflection on the analysis of work and what findings mean for the next PAR cycle (e.g., starting with planning).



Participatory processes in formal and informal learning environments have been:

→ Implemented in a range of educational or enhancement settings such as elective or required classes, during

after-school out-of-school (OST) programs, learning communities or in student leadership initiatives.

→ Conducted over the course of a year or more (e.g., during the school year and over the summer).

- Held in situations in which youth and adult allies are trained in PAR.
- Focused on school-related issues or issues directly affecting youth.
- Initiated by adult allies, typically a university researcher or a representative from a community-based organization (CBO) or education non-profit.
- Chosen for the quality of the setting of and transactions within formal or informal learning.

Given PAR's research and program development methods – *participation, action-orientation, and shared ownership* – when adult allies conceptualize youth as assets and youth have power to participate fully, a program is more likely to succeed.

## What Can Participatory Action Research do for Youth and their Learning Environments?

PAR affects youth and their learning environments in numerous ways. Youth-level outcomes are relevant to NAF's mission to ensure that high school students across the United States are college, career, and future-ready. PAR has been shown to:

- improve academic outcomes
- strengthen problem solving and critical thinking skills
- increase awareness of and exposure to higher education
- foster civic engagement, civic identities, and political awareness
- promote intergenerational relationships

PAR can also improve formal or informal learning environments: *"The opportunity to consider [issues] from the student's point of view can be beneficial, revealing points of school life that go unnoticed by adults but are significant to the students. Students can be a source of creative ideas for improving schools, improving student interest and participation."*

## What to Consider when Doing Participatory Action Research with Youth

When deciding whether they are ready to implement youth-centered PAR processes, educators, administrators, and local business should ask:

- *Are adult allies trusted by youth? Will they support and empower youth as agents for change? Are adult allies committed to participatory action-oriented and shared ownership processes? Will they be receptive to youth-led recommendations for change?*

- *Do pre-existing power structures within the learning environment allow for power-sharing? Will youth be permitted to lead the selection and diagnosis of the issue without authorities rejecting chosen themes? Will adultism hinder youth-centered PAR?*
- *Will youth be compensated for their efforts, financially, via credits, or other support (e.g., food during meetings, supplies to aid the process)? Learning environments should be designed to accommodate other aspects of the lives of young people and competing interests (e.g., caregiving, test preparation).*
- *Will administrators, principals, and other gatekeepers gladly accept youth-centered PAR? Are these stakeholders ready to leverage their power and influence to make PAR happen at their sites and connect youth to adult allies with resources?*
- *Will PAR fit into existing schedules? Can learning environments provide the time and flexibility needed for PAR to succeed? Will sites provide youth and adult allies with the space and materials to support participation and follow-through in the processes?*

## How Can we get Started with PAR?

Many PAR practices, activities, and tools have been developed, tested, and used effectively with youth in formal and informal learning environments. NAF hopes information summarized in the literature review will inform PAR planning and decision-making in its academies and organizational efforts.

NAF will use PAR to increase youth voice in the development of the organization's college and career readiness programs. At the same time, and as a result of their participation in the process, NAF hopes youth will amplify their readiness skills such as critical thinking and leadership. Also, NAF seeks a process through which it can embrace the diversity of its academy networks and increase shared ownership of information and its application to support youth, schools, and communities.

NAF recognizes the power imbalances that exist between adults and youth, within formal and informal learning environments, and between their governing bodies. As such, the organization envisions PAR as a mechanism for bringing together youth, educators, administrators, businesses, and community leaders to collaborate, share insights, and encourage youth-informed or youth-led decisions to improve or develop more effective college and career pathways.







# INTRODUCTION

NAF, in partnership with JPC, an external consultant, conducted a summary review of the literature on Participatory Action Research (PAR) and its implementation with youth in formal and informal learning environments.<sup>4</sup> The literature review provides an introduction to PAR and PAR with youth, identifies what does and does not work in this context, and presents key youth-centered PAR practices, activities, and tools.

Since 1980, NAF has partnered with communities and leaders in education, business, and society to improve student outcomes through NAF academies, small learning communities in high schools. NAF wants to ensure that high school students across the United States are college, career, and future-ready. To support

its work, NAF is seeking to build its capacity to implement PAR approaches. It seeks youth and educators who will tell stories of academy experiences with intentionality and authenticity. Also, NAF seeks to create new spaces within its academies for youth-centered approaches to knowledge and power sharing to advance more equitable learning experiences and environments. NAF will use these insights to support youth-informed and youth-led, localized decision-making and planning within NAF academies and to communicate the organization's work with external constituents.

## WHAT IS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) *“is collaborative research, education, and action used to gather information to use for [a range of] issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it.”*<sup>5</sup>

Youth-centered PAR is an *“innovative approach to positive youth and community development based in social justice principles in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them.”*<sup>6</sup> Youth-centered PAR empowers the expertise of young people and develops with adults more equitable learning experiences and environments.

**PAR is used by youth and adult allies – researchers, educators, practitioners, business leaders, and community members – to gather information that will benefit those most affected by an issue.** PAR can be used to develop or redesign career-readiness programs to meet diverse needs such as creating community-based employment opportunities for high-school students seeking to build 21st-century skill sets; providing educators and school administrators with affordable and accessible career and college readiness options for their scholars; supporting local businesses who need access to skilled local talent. Youth-centered PAR produces a more equitable educational experience for students.

<sup>4</sup> For this report, formal learning environments include, but are not limited to, primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools. Informal learning environments include, but are not limited to, afterschool and out-of-school programs run by schools or districts, local government agencies (e.g., libraries), and non-profit or community-based organizations (CBOs).

<sup>5</sup> Kindon S., Pain R., & Kesby M., [2007]

<sup>6</sup> YPAR Hub, <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>; last retrieved on April 16, 2020.

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*“PAR has to remain flexible in use. This means that plans or actions sometimes change, and even questions can change, as everyone in the group puts their learning into the ring. This doesn’t mean that PAR is a ‘soft’ or ‘unscientific’ way to do research. It is a valid, widely accepted alternative to a traditional scientific approach...”<sup>9</sup>*

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The social sciences have long been interested in participatory action research and the role it has played in program and community development. PAR, also known as Action Learning, Participatory Action and Learning, Participatory Appraisal, or Community-based Participatory Research, has roots in the convergence of theoretical and practical traditions.<sup>7</sup> While there are differences in PAR models, they each encompass three elements: (1) participation or collaboration; (2) action-taking; and (3) research, reflection, and learning.

PAR is distinguished from the conventional methodologies of research or program development by its shared ownership of local projects with (research or program) participants, community-based analysis of local social problems, and community action goals.<sup>8</sup> PAR calls for the redistributing traditional researcher-participant power relationships. Those most impacted by the work decide what is researched, how it is researched, and what local actions need to be taken to resolve any issues.

The principles that drive PAR are:

- **Participation** PAR advocates that those most affected by an issue, such as youth, be involved throughout the process.
- **Action-Oriented** Action is achieved through a reflective cycle, whereby youth and their adult allies collect and analyze data on an issue, then determine what action should follow. The purpose of an action is to change or improve a situation being researched.
- **Shared Ownership** PAR is driven by those with a stake in an issue. Outside stakeholders (such as university researchers) can support youth and their adult allies, but youth and allies drive the process.

## How is PAR Implemented?

A typical PAR process is structured around three recurrent stages: planning, action-taking, and evaluation and reflection. PAR involves flexible research and program development methods that can be adapted to local needs. PAR usually involves multiple cycles. (see Figure 1).

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<sup>7</sup> Zeller-Berkman, S., (2014)

<sup>8</sup> Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R., (2005)

<sup>9</sup> Klinton S., Pain R., & Kesby M., (2007), p.4.





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## PLANNING ENTAILS

Youth-led diagnosis or identification of a salient issue at school or in the community; undertaking actions that will address an issue; preparing for knowledge-gathering efforts such as data collection.



2

## ACTION-TAKING

For example, the piloting of a new internship program, career readiness curriculum, or the execution of an event (e.g., a career fair or a community workshop).



3

## EVALUATION & REFLECTION

Take stock of the effects of action-taking through data collection and analysis and group reflection on the analysis of work and what the findings mean for the next PAR cycle (e.g., starting with planning).

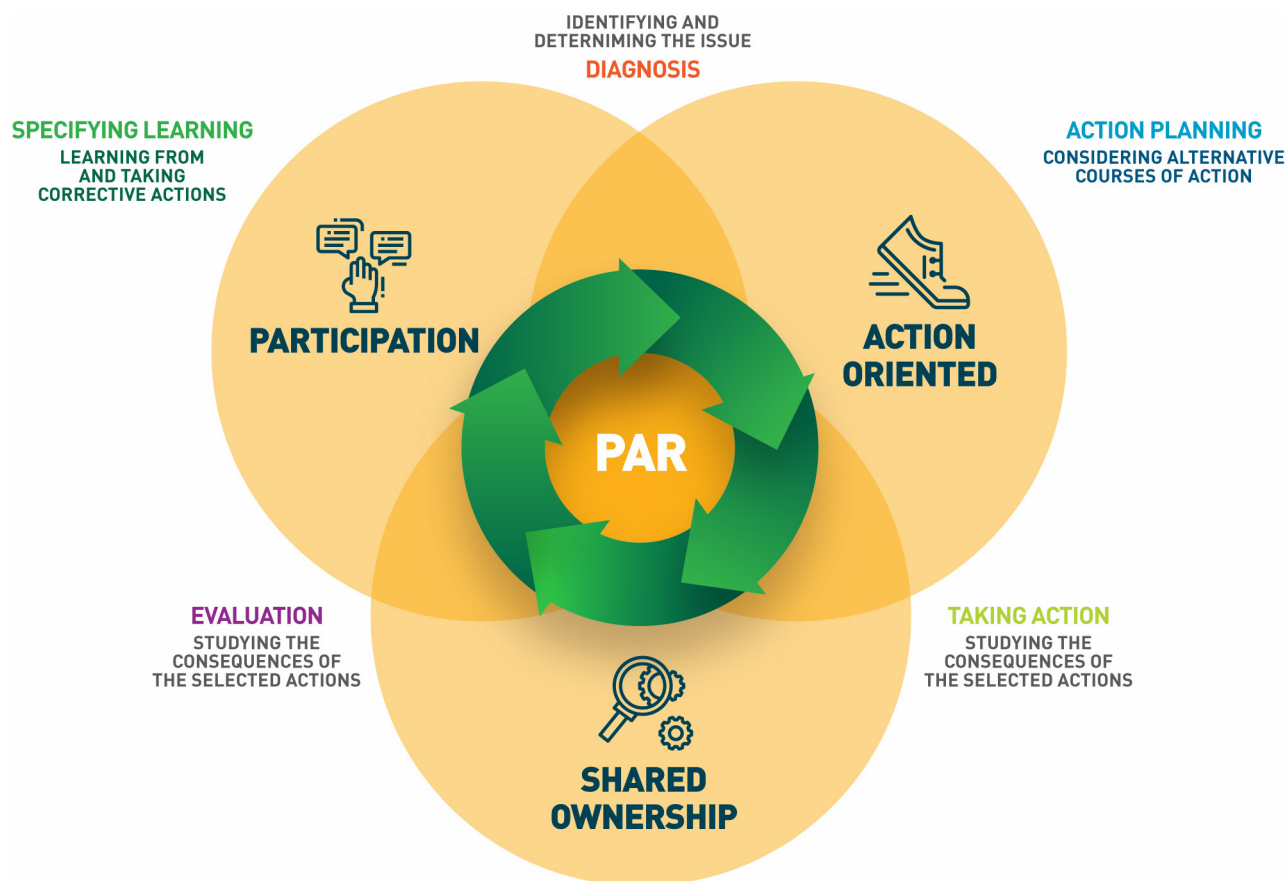


Figure 1: The Stages in One PAR Cycle

## HOW IS PAR USED

### WITH YOUTH IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS?

This NAF review incorporates findings from over 20 peer-reviewed studies on participatory action research (PAR) with youth in formal and informal learning environments. One study included the use of PAR with young people in the context of career readiness programs.<sup>10</sup>

#### How Adults Conceptualize Youth Matters to the Success of PAR

Given that *participation, action-orientation, and shared ownership* make PAR distinct from other research or development methodologies, youth-centered PAR succeeds only within assets-based approaches to youth development and where youth have the power to participate fully. One of NAF's goals for PAR is to ensure youth voices inform the development of programs designed to meet local career and higher learning institutional needs.

Before we address how educators, practitioners, or researchers use youth-centered PAR, we need to consider youth participation in the context of youth development, which includes programs offering formal and informal learning opportunities. Since the criminalization of the 'stubborn child' by the Court of Massachusetts Bay in 1649, government and non-government agencies have devised programs and policies to support young people and their families. How adult allies conceptualize youth matters; there is a difference between thinking about youth as assets instead of as people who need to be fixed. Historically, conventional approaches to youth development, in formal or informal arenas, have intended to redress and prevent problem behaviors and

deficiencies. These deficit-based models stereotyped youth as sources of strife in communities, branding them as "at-risk" or the naughty, needy recipients of remedial services.<sup>11</sup> Deficit-based models position adults as the authority and experts driving decision-making on what matters to a young person and their learning journey and how best to "fix" youth. In contrast, contemporary approaches to development frame youth as assets: capable, resourceful agents with aspirations and a positive sense of self who engage in developmentally beneficial activities such as school, work, and extra-curricular activities. Some approaches go beyond the theme of "positive youth development" to focus on transformative models that position youth as partners in community development, organizing, or social justice work.

Educators, researchers, and practitioners reason that youth acquire a sense of responsibility and empowerment when they participate in issues of consequence to them and matters of community development or placemaking.<sup>12</sup> Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of citizenship participation" (1969) describes the degree to which the "have-not" citizens participate or exercise power.<sup>13</sup> The first rungs represent forms of non-participation, such as the manipulation of constituents or the making of token gestures toward the "have-nots."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the top rungs identify full participation as politically marginalized constituents initiating and leading initiatives and sharing decision-making with those in power. In 1997, Roger Hart adapted Arnstein's ladder to represent levels of youth participation. Hart notes that youth participation is successful when young people, who are politically,

<sup>10</sup> Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>11</sup> Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J., (2002), Jennings et al., (2006), Sutton, et al., (2006)

<sup>12</sup> Hart, R., (1997)

<sup>13</sup> Arnstein, S., (1969)

<sup>14</sup> Arnstein, S., (1969).



socially, and economically marginalized, effect a process or policy by influencing decisions, determining project outcomes, and bringing about change through direct action.<sup>15</sup> See Figure 3.

We recognize that achieving the top rung in Hart's ladder, *child-initiated, shared decisions with adults*, may not be feasible in some learning environments, but the ladder offers educators, practitioners, researchers, and youth with a spectrum of youth-adult opportunities for participatory shared ownership and action-taking.

Initially, NAF should seek-out and practice *adult-initiated and shared decision-making with children*. A focus on shared decision-making will give NAF and its academies the time and space to co-construct meaningful PAR practices, including how to effectively use the insights they glean. A flexible timetable will also give rise to PAR ambassadors within NAF and its academies, value spokespeople, and promote equitable youth-centered practices.

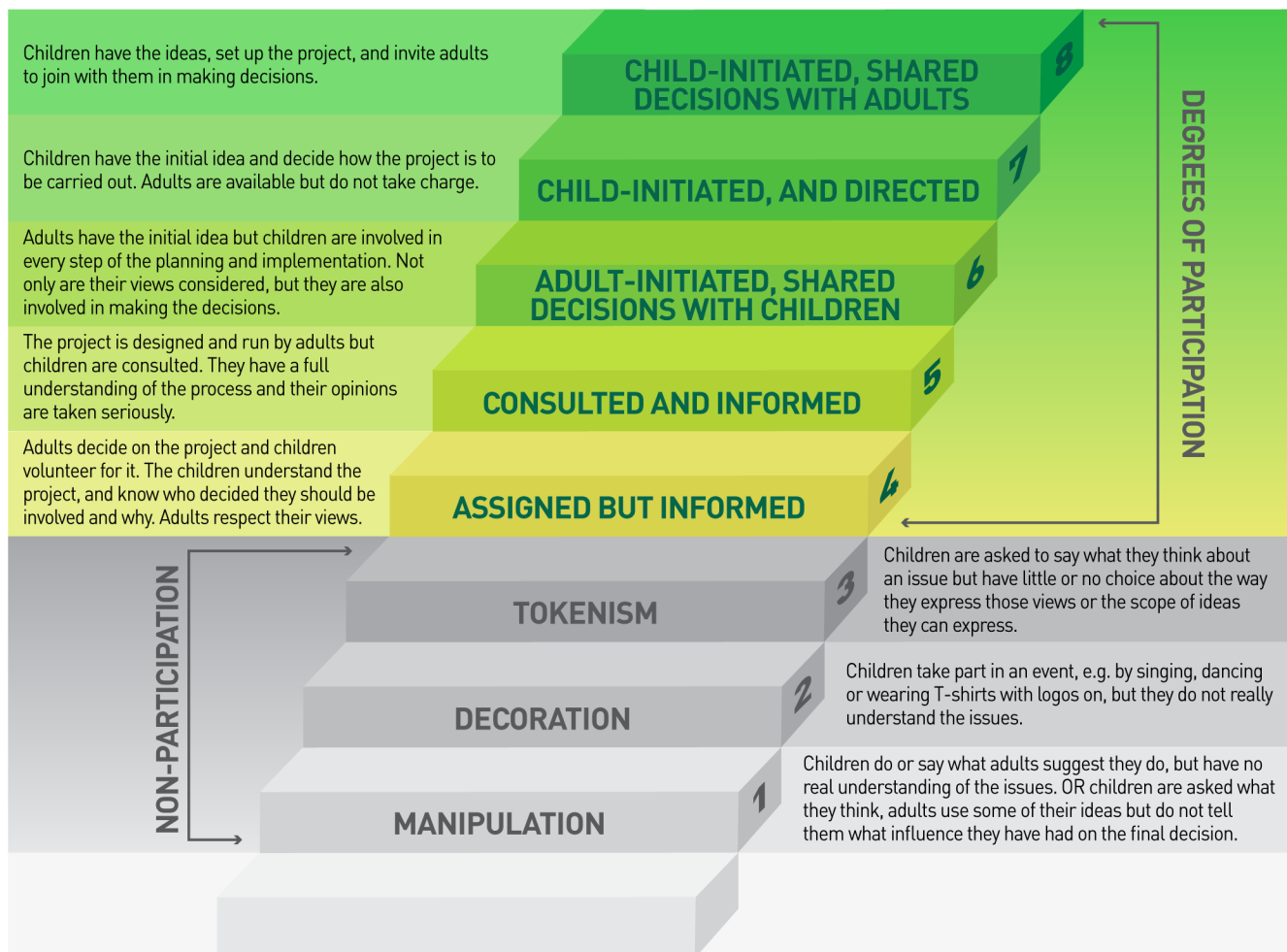


Figure 3: Roger Hart's (1997) Ladder of Youth Participation

<sup>15</sup> Checkoway, B., & Richards-Schuster, K., [2003]

## PAR with Youth in Informal and Formal Learning Environments

Participatory processes in informal and formal learning environments have been:

- **Implemented in a range of educational or enhancement settings** such as elective or required classes, during afterschool out-of-school (OST) programs, learning communities or in student leadership initiatives.<sup>16</sup> PAR integrated into formal learning environments must be conducive to the course's subject (e.g., social studies, history, STEM).<sup>17</sup> Some research suggests that PAR projects implemented in informal learning environments, such as afterschool or OST, may benefit from greater independence from the demands or rigor of formal instruction. In contrast to required classes, however, afterschool or OST programs and electives are likely reliant on uncertain resources (e.g., inconsistent funding or the availability of educators).<sup>18</sup>
- **Conducted over the course of a year or more** (e.g., during the school year and over the summer).<sup>19</sup> The span is to ensure sufficient time for buy-in from influential stakeholders, to build trusting relationships between youth and the adult allies,<sup>20</sup> to train youth and adult allies, to scaffold their skills development (e.g., problem solving, critical thinking, research, advocacy), and to implement actions that require the coordination of multiple stakeholders.<sup>21</sup>
- **Held in situations in which youth and adult allies are trained in PAR.**<sup>22</sup>
- **Focused on school-related issues or issues affect youth directly.**<sup>23</sup>

→ **Initiated by adult allies**, typically a university researcher, or a representative from community-based organization (CBOs) or education non-profit.<sup>24</sup>

→ **Chosen for the quality of the setting of and transactions within formal or informal learning.**

Youth-centered PAR processes should take place in and reinforce developmentally beneficial settings. Transactions between youth and adults should occur in environments that foster “*physical and psychological safety, appropriate structures, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and the integration of family, school, and community efforts.*”<sup>25</sup>

Because of its iterative and developmental nature, PAR is well suited to shared learning and ownership as found in cross-disciplinary and intergenerational opportunities.<sup>26</sup> In particular, **PAR aligns with problem-based learning and culturally-relevant pedagogy.**<sup>27</sup> As a research or developmental methodology it differentiates itself from traditional educational practices by leveling the power disparities between adults and youth and ensuring that collaboration focuses on the individuals most affected. Learning opportunities, for adults and youth, are optimized because they share knowledge and assets.<sup>28</sup>

## The Effects of PAR on Youth and their Learning Environments

PAR affects youth and their learning environments in numerous ways. **PAR can:**

<sup>16</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019); Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018); Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018); Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Ozer, E., et al., (2010), Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), Schuch, J. C. (2018), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007), Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018)

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Gonell, E., et al., (2020)

<sup>18</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>19</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019); Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018); Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018); Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Ozer, E., et al., (2010), Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), Schuch, J. C. (2018), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>20</sup> For this report, adult allies are those who support youth in the PAR process directly. This can include educators, researchers from a university, non-profit or CBO representatives, business leaders, or community members.

<sup>21</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>22</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010), Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Cohen, A., et al., (2019).

<sup>23</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>24</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019); Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018); Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018); Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Ozer, E., et al., (2010), Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), Schuch, J. C. (2018), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>25</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>26</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019)

<sup>27</sup> Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018); “Problem-based learning involves presenting students with a problem and tasking them with extending existing knowledge and understanding and applying their learning to generating solutions, and there is increasing evidence that it is more effective than traditional lecture-discussion pedagogies in increasing student achievement.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, Amy J., (2019)



- **improve academic outcomes** – e.g., attendance rates, literacy skills, academic self-confidence.<sup>29</sup>
- **strengthen problem solving and critical thinking skills** – e.g., problem identification, root cause analysis, and data collection and interpretation.<sup>30</sup>
- **increase awareness of and exposure to higher education.**<sup>31</sup>
- **foster civic engagement, civic identities, and political awareness.**<sup>32</sup>
- **promote intergenerational relationships.**<sup>33</sup>

All youth-level outcomes are relevant to NAF’s mission to ensure that high school students across the United States are college, career, and future-ready.

PAR benefits formal or informal learning environments, too: *“The opportunity to consider [issues] from the student’s point of view can be beneficial, revealing points of school life that go unnoticed by adults but are significant to the students. Students can be a source of creative ideas for improving schools, improving student interest and participation.”*<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, we should not overemphasize academic outcomes when implementing youth-centered PAR. Instead, we should stress the purpose and value of engaging youth in a participatory action-learning process: youth working alongside adults as peers, generating ideas, testing assumptions, making decisions, and redressing salient issues.




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*“The clearest critique of the use of [youth-centered] PAR in school settings stems from the concern that it will be co-opted for the purpose of improving standardized academic outcomes.”*<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Voight, A. & Velez, V., (2018), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>30</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>31</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>32</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>33</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>34</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>35</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Cohen, A., et al., (2019), Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Schuch, J. C. (2018)

# WHAT TO CONSIDER

## WHEN IMPLEMENTING YOUTH-CENTERED PAR

The following section details barriers to and factors that support the successful implementation of youth-centered PAR. Table One summarizes factors according to PAR principles.

TABLE ONE: WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN IMPLEMENTING PAR WITH YOUTH		
PAR PRINCIPLES	SUPPORTIVE FACTORS	BARRIERS
Shared Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Adult allies who support and empower youth as agents of change</li> <li>» Youth-led diagnosis and issue selection</li> <li>» Youth compensation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Adultism, pre-existing power structures, and the challenges of authenticity in power-sharing with youth</li> <li>» The rejection of youth-led issue selection or diagnosis</li> </ul>
Participatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Adult allies and youth understanding of PAR processes and participatory practices for shared ownership and action-taking</li> <li>» Adult allies committed to participatory action learning processes with youth</li> <li>» Gatekeeper buy-in and leverage of influential partnerships</li> <li>» PAR processes that fit into existing schedules</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Lack of time, flexible timelines, and accessible resources</li> <li>» Inconsistent participation by adult allies and youth</li> <li>» Lengthy informed consent processes</li> </ul>
Action Oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Incremental progress that is key to maintaining youth engagement</li> <li>» Receptive adults who will bring about change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Resistance by adults, especially administrators and policymakers, to acting upon the PAR finding</li> </ul>

### Factors that Contribute to the Successful Implementation of Youth-centered PAR

Given the traditional imbalance of power in learning environments between adults and youth, we recommend adopting the practices and insights gleaned from work involving marginalized and/or underrepresented population in implementation of PAR in schools and other sites.

#### Shared Ownership – PAR Is Driven by Participants

→ **Adults allies who support and empower youth as agents for change.**<sup>35</sup> In youth-centered PAR, youth have “the freedom and authority” to research the conditions of their lives and communities.<sup>36</sup> Adults allies should have a strong and positive relationship with youth, recognizing their position not only as

<sup>35</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Cohen, A., et al., (2019), Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>36</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019)



adults with greater power and access to resources but also how they express their gender, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, and role in the PAR process.<sup>37</sup>

- **Youth-led diagnosis and issue selection.**<sup>39</sup> Salient PAR issues are those that affect youth directly and which adults may not consider unless experienced personally. Special consideration must be given to what happens when youth select a topic that adults see as controversial or of low quality (see subsequent section - *Barriers to Successful Implementation of Youth-centered PAR*).<sup>40</sup>
- **Youth compensation.**<sup>41</sup> Compensation for youth or non-staff stakeholders can reduce power imbalances in participatory processes. Examples of compensation include academic grades or credits (although this may conflict with the values of PAR), monetary payments, or access to resources (e.g., food during meetings, gift cards, project-specific swag, office supplies, transportation passes).

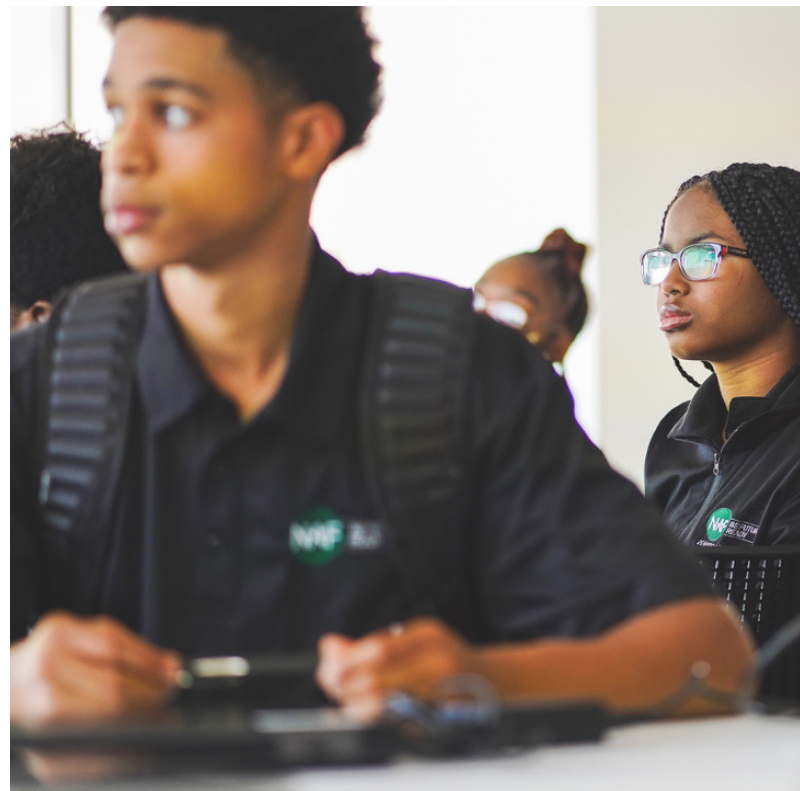
#### Participation – PAR Is Collaborative Throughout

- **Adult allies and youth understand the PAR process and have in place participatory practices for shared ownership and action-taking.**<sup>42</sup> Adult allies and youth should be familiar with the PAR process (as laid out in the previous section) and co-create and adopt practices to guide their collaboration. Examples of successful practices and activities are described in the subsequent section and include the suggestion to establish a group agreement with guidelines for how stakeholders will interact and establish roles, responsibilities, and meeting structures. We recognize, however, limitations to integrating PAR practices into pre-existing curriculums and structures.
- **Adult allies who are committed to participatory action learning processes with youth.**<sup>43</sup> In the context of PAR, adult allies provide youth with navigational tools (i.e., skills and knowledge to succeed in the world as it is) and *transformational tools* (i.e., skills and knowledge to build the world into what it should be). Both are necessary.<sup>44</sup> The need for diverse skill sets reinforces the significance of training and mentoring.

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*“PAR projects must be differentiated from typical classroom relationships and curricula to avoid ‘business as usual’ interactions and role demands from teachers and students alike.”<sup>38</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Gonell, E., et al., (2020), Cohen, A., et al., (2019)

<sup>38</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010), p. 160.

<sup>39</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>40</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>41</sup> Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>42</sup> Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>43</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Cohen, A., et al., (2019)

<sup>44</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018)

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*“An effective approach to adult involvement is modeling, coaching and fading. In this approach, adults first modeled problem framing, then coached the students as they practice but ‘fade’ back during presentations and decisions.”<sup>47</sup>*

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*“Youth PAR curriculum requires a lots of teaching flexibility, where the different strengths of teachers are acknowledged and offer plans that accommodate for different interest levels, styles, and approaches.”<sup>48</sup>*

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*“This dynamic is challenging in that teachers must learn to allow students a sense of ‘ownership’ while still providing the scaffolding needed to assist students’ development in regard to the necessary research skills.”<sup>49</sup>*

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Adult allies should be comfortable with the flexible and iterative nature of PAR. For example, they may need to anticipate and communicate openly with youth about potential changes to a project’s plan, tensions between stakeholders or barriers to resources.<sup>45</sup> Adult allies are well-positioned to support, not over-power, youth by leveraging their access to resources (e.g., communicate with local media about young people’s efforts, schedule meeting spaces, or provide feedback on content).<sup>46</sup>

- **Gatekeeper buy-in and leverage of influential partnerships.**<sup>50</sup> Early buy-in from gatekeepers and influential stakeholders improves the likelihood of a successful PAR process.<sup>51</sup> Administrator buy-in and the leverage of influential alliances with researchers, non-profits, CBOs, and policymakers are crucial to the sustainability of a youth-centered PAR project. Managers or administrators of learning environments have the institutional power to determine whether to execute PAR, to support or supervise the project, or to hinder its progress by not allocating resources or providing required time or space. Researchers can help build capacity and PAR practices of adult allies and youth. Non-profits, CBOs, and policymakers can provide funds and other resources. Early buy-in from influential stakeholders improves the likelihood of a successful PAR process with youth.<sup>52</sup>
- **PAR processes that fit into existing schedules.**<sup>53</sup> Success requires scheduled time and space and that project timetables align with times when youth and adult allies can participate.

#### Action-Oriented - PAR Is Intended to Change or Improve Situations

- **Incremental progress is key to maintaining youth engagement.**<sup>54</sup> Integrating formative data collection activities (i.e., assessing what is working or not working) during the action-taking stage helps youth identify short-term gains towards their goal of addressing selected issues. Tracking incremental progress is helpful in projects that last longer than a few months.

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<sup>45</sup> Anderson, Amy J., [2019]

<sup>46</sup> Schuch, J. C. [2018]

<sup>47</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007), p. 372

<sup>48</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., [2019]

<sup>49</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., [2019], p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Gonell, E., et al., [2020], Cohen, A., et al., [2019], Ozer, E., et al., [2010], Kornbluh, M., et al., [2015]

<sup>51</sup> Ozer, E., et al., [2010]

<sup>52</sup> Ozer, E., et al., [2010]

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, Amy J., [2019]

<sup>54</sup> Ozer, E., et al., [2010]



→ **Receptive adults who will bring about change.**<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, youth need adults to recognize the knowledge generated and co-created with adult allies and to consider the recommendations that result from the PAR process and to act-upon the evidence.

## Barriers to the Successful Implementation of Youth-centered PAR

There are unique demands and barriers to working with youth and integrating PAR in formal or informal learning environments.

### Shared Ownership – PAR is Driven by Participants

- **Adultism, pre-existing power structures, and the challenges of authenticity in power-sharing with youth.**<sup>56</sup> It can be challenging for adults to overcome institutionalized prejudice and discrimination against youth. Adult-led decision-making and pre-determined time and student management tactics are deeply intertwined in educational power structures. Consequently, PAR can be counter-normative.<sup>57</sup> Even adult allies who conceptualize and engage youth as agents for change can find the pre-existing power structures preventing young people's full participation (according to Hart's ladder). As a result, some adult allies *"feel they are working in isolation"* against normative adult-youth interactions, common core requirements, testing pressures, pre-existing academic schedules, and district requirements.<sup>58</sup>
- **The rejection of youth-led issue selection or diagnosis.**<sup>61</sup> Issues identified by youth may not be selected for a PAR project because adult allies deem them to be too simple, cliched, or politically sensitive. Youth can feel unheard, left-out, and inconsequential, which reduces their participation or enthusiasm for the project.

### Participation – PAR is Collaborative Throughout

- **Lack of time, flexible timelines, and accessible resources.**<sup>62</sup> High-quality relationship-building is time-intensive and necessary for initiating and

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*"(Adult allies) juggle multiple responsibilities as teachers, mentors, and colleagues. In [youth PAR] projects a careful balance [has] to be struck between adult supervision and youth autonomy. Adults working on youth-adult partnerships must sharpen their abilities to balance, negotiate, and creatively adapt their roles to changing situations within group dynamics."*<sup>59</sup>

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*"Reaching the top levels of the ladder in school settings can be challenging because schools are not set up for cross-generational work on the collective construction of goals." (...) "The tension is often about when and how to turn over resources, space, time and money to young people and trust their judgement on how to use these resources."*<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>56</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Anderson, Amy J., (2019)

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, Amy J., (2019), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>58</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)

<sup>59</sup> Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014), p. 301.

<sup>60</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), p. 433.

<sup>61</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>62</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Cohen, A., et al., (2019), Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Ozer, E., et al., (2010)



*“The youth-led approach theoretically suggests that the students exert power over key aspects of the process with adults in a support role. This relationship is inherently complicated in the context of a school where there are pre-existing constructions of the student-teacher relationship and pre-existing expectations and routines about teacher roles and student roles in the classroom. The relationship is further complicated because, although this research is youth led, young people will rely on their teachers for learning new research methods and helping to facilitate the process.”<sup>63</sup>*

sustaining PAR. Under-resourced formal and informal learning programs may be limited in their ability to accommodate a dedicated time during the week and throughout the school year. PAR projects need time and space including during academic calendar “black-out periods” when projects compete with other interests. Competition may be most acute when students face pressures to improve standardized test scores.<sup>64</sup> Longer-range planning, which is necessary for some PAR projects, can be tricky when working within pre-existing schedules and statutory structures.<sup>65</sup>

→ **Inconsistent participation by adult allies and youth.**<sup>66</sup>

PAR places demands on the time and resources of adult allies and youth.<sup>67</sup> Pre-existing schedules and requirements, the size of the PAR project’s team, staff turn-over or job insecurity for adult allies (which can affect issue selection, and long-term planning), the personal responsibilities of youth (i.e., some may be caregivers), seasonality (e.g., availability during holiday or testing seasons, spring and summer) can affect PAR participation rates.

<sup>63</sup> Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019), p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> BÖzer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>65</sup> Özer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>66</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018), Özer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>67</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)



→ **Lengthy informed consent processes.**<sup>69</sup> Obtaining parent/guardian and youth consent is time intensive. Lengthy paper consent forms must be translated, distributed, and signed prior to the start of the project. It can be complicated, albeit necessary, if Internal Review Boards (IRB) require an ethical review of the PAR process and all supporting materials (this means certain PAR project materials may need to be developed without youth input).

#### Action-Oriented – PAR is Intended to Change or Improve Situations

→ **Resistance by adults, especially administrators or policymakers, to act upon the PAR findings.**<sup>70</sup> Administrators of formal and informal programs, managers, educators, or local policymakers may be indifferent to the youth's PAR findings and, given their power, reluctant to act upon the information. *"The gap between students' recommendations and adult perspectives on what is necessary and possible can be large, and student action research must be implemented with careful consideration of a number of key issues."*<sup>71</sup>

We hope the information listed supports adult allies in making context-based decisions. It may encourage them to pilot smaller PAR projects initially and emphasize the formative evaluation of the process to make improvements before scaling-up.

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*"We [adult allies] had limited time to refine the [PAR] lessons, we often find ourselves adjusting the session the same morning or during lunch breaks. Perhaps it was due to the unforeseen need for such an iterative reflexive planning process and our lack of available structured meeting time that we ended up having to make significant scheduling adjustments in order to meaningfully conclude the project before the end of the school year."*<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Gonell, E., et al., (2020), p. 10

<sup>69</sup> Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014)

<sup>70</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

<sup>71</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007), p. 372

# PRACTICES AND TOOLS

## FOR DOING YOUTH-CENTERED PAR

Many PAR practices, activities, and tools have been developed, tested, and used with youth for the implementation of PAR in learning environments. In partnership with experts, NAF and its academies will co-develop specific practices and tools that will become a part of a NAF PAR tool kit. The information below should generally inform NAF's planning and decision-making about PAR implementation within its academies and across the organization.

### Collaborative Structures

- **Establish guidelines.** Guidelines might include an agreement adult allies and youth develop during the first meeting(s) that outlines the project purpose, group expectations, roles, and responsibilities.<sup>72</sup> If many entities are involved in the project (e.g., schools, non-profits, CBOs, universities), an agreement or MOU should be established between parties clarifying purpose, timelines, and ensuring transparency.<sup>73</sup> Aligned with the need for PAR projects to be flexible, the guidelines or agreements should be revised periodically and updated based on the group's reflection on the process.
- **Vary meeting structures.** A mix of group meetings and individual or paired activities or discussions offer adult allies and youth varying opportunities and formats to participate. *"The small group format with students playing a more active role was effective in engaging youth who did not pay attention to whole-class activities. It also set the stage for peer-to-peer discussion and learning."*<sup>74</sup> Meetings can be facilitated by adult allies or youth.<sup>75</sup> Researchers or the adult ally who is co-leading the project may need to model

how to facilitate small and large group meetings and activities.

### Basic Outline of PAR Process with Youth

Youth and allies need to celebrate their achievements such as completing a PAR stage or realizing a crucial activity.<sup>76</sup>

- **Start the PAR process with relationship-building.**<sup>77</sup> First meetings should focus on building trust and transparency between youth and adult allies. *"Team building activities such as icebreakers and challenges that prompted students to learn more deeply about their own social identities and personalities as well as that of their peers and adult facilitators."*<sup>78</sup>
- **Followed by a planning stage** that should include the following:
  - » Introduction to PAR.
  - » Youth identify and define everyday salient issues and assets in learning environments or within the community and why the issues are important (i.e., personal connections).
  - » Adult allies and youth determine skills they need to research and act upon selected issues. They participate in issue-focused skill-building training and train for meeting facilitation and group management strategies.
  - » Research on selected issues; issues may require youth to perform initial analysis to understand the nuances of a problem or determine questions on which to focus. Literature reviews, interviews, or short surveys with peers or issue-specific adult stakeholders are standard practices.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>73</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>74</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>75</sup> Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>76</sup> Gonell, E., et al., (2020),

<sup>77</sup> Schuch, J. C. (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019); Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Gonell, E., et al., (2020)

<sup>78</sup> Gonell, E., et al., (2020), p.10

<sup>79</sup> Brion-Meisels, G. & Alter, Z., (2018); Bucklet-Marudas, M.F. & Soltis S., (2019); Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018); Schuch, J. C. (2018); Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015)



- » Plan issue-specific actions to be taken, the piloting of a new program or curriculum, the execution of an event (e.g., a demonstration, a community workshop, or a charrette), or sharing with or gathering information from peers. Also, youth and adult allies should consider how they will evaluate the effectiveness of their actions relative to the issue goals.

#### → **Followed by the action-taking stage.**

- » Youth and adult allies document their work, what steps they have taken during the action-taking stage, whom they engaged, and how.<sup>80</sup> Short memos, meeting notes, and videos are examples of PAR process documentation.
- » Adult allies should leverage their power and access to resources to support youth. For example, they may need to connect youth with issue-relevant stakeholders, ensure youth have the resources to implement their plan, do outreach in support of the youth (i.e., with influential stakeholders, the media).

#### → **And wrapping-up the PAR cycle of evaluation and reflection.**

- » Youth and adult allies develop tools or use existing tools, to gather feedback on the effectiveness of their actions.<sup>81</sup> Tools can include surveys, interviews, or participatory meeting agendas and activities. Youth

and adults should pilot the tools before deployment to build their skills and confidence and ensure information will be collected. Youth should be trained on the use of tools and involved in gathering the data. During data collection, youth and adults should reflect on the information they are collecting.

- » Youth and adult allies engage in collective data analysis and reflection to identify what happened, what changed (if anything), what worked, and what did not. They would need to be trained in data analysis and reflection if they have not received training during planning.<sup>82</sup>
- » Youth lead the sharing of their PAR project's findings with relevant stakeholders, especially those with influence to act upon the information.<sup>83</sup> Sharing can be part of action-taking, depending on the nature of the project. Youth and adults need to consider how audiences for the findings can and should be prepared to receive results. Adult allies should prepare youth for challenges to their work and its conclusions; mock presentations are an effective strategy during which adults can prepare youth to address tough questions they will encounter in critiques of the PAR process and its findings.

- **Plan the next PAR cycle** based on what was learned during the previous round and improve the process.



<sup>80</sup> Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018)

<sup>81</sup> Kornbluh, M., et al., (2015), Schuch, J. C. (2018)

<sup>82</sup> For example, youth and adult allies could be trained to conduct qualitative coding and theme identification. Gonell, E., et al., (2020) developed a process of supporting documents such as a Code & Theme Organizer that students use to list codes, draft definitions, list the number of quotes belonging to each code, and list three potential themes under which their codes could be grouped. Another supporting document was an Emerging Themes Organizer, which helped students draft statements that for each theme included a description and two or three compelling quotes that students coded for the theme.

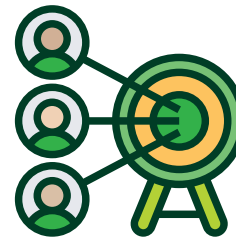
<sup>83</sup> Carl, N.M. & Revitch, S.M., (2018)

## PAR TOOLS AND ACTIVITIES

The following tools are a sample of data collection methods or activities that youth can use at all stages of the PAR process. This list is not intended to be an exhaustive. Several studies of existing PAR curriculums are listed below.



**SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, AND EXIT POLLS** are methods of gathering information from people targeted by one's research. The protocols should be short and easily completed by respondents. Surveys can be completed with paper/pen, digitally, or in a "human" survey (answers indicated by *moving* to a specific location in a room). Respondents (or their parent/guardian) need to consent to the recording of interviews. See survey development guidance in the footnote.<sup>84</sup>



**FOCUS GROUPS**<sup>85</sup> are a way of collecting perceptions and stories using a group interview format of approximately six to twelve people. A facilitator guides the group's discussion using predetermined questions and aims to create a welcoming and safe environment for conversation. Focus groups should be led by trained youth to ensure quality and substantive discussions and documentation.<sup>86</sup>



**ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS** or the **FIVE WHYS METHODS**.<sup>87</sup> Root Cause Analysis is an interactive analysis of a problem using the metaphor of a tree. Youth identify the problem (around the trunk), its causes (the roots), and its symptoms (the leaves). Also, youth can document existing efforts to address the problem or their ideas (fruits).<sup>88</sup> The Five Whys Methods also focuses on cause and effects whereby root causes are identified and explored by asking "Why" five times, which each response acting as the starting point for the next (why) question.



**PHOTO/VIDEO METHODS**.<sup>89</sup> Photovoice or videovoice "... is a process in which people – usually those with limited power due to poverty, language barriers, race, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, or other circumstances – use video and/or photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences and share them with others. The pictures can then be used, usually with captions composed by the photographers, to bring the realities of the photographers' lives home to the public and policy makers and to spur change."<sup>90</sup> The technique requires training and access to photo or video devices (like a mobile phone).

<sup>84</sup> Youth and adult allies can refer to the five-item checklist to draft survey questions. The five criteria for quantitative questions are: item is clearly linked to hypothesis statement or research question, item asks only one question, item is not an open-ended question, item includes multiple choice options for respondents to answer, language is easily understood by middle schoolers. The four criteria for qualitative items are: item clearly links to hypothesis statement, item is an open-ended question, item asks students about what should be done about the issue, language is easily understood by middle schoolers. - Gonell, E., et al., (2020), p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief13.pdf>

<sup>86</sup> Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014)

<sup>87</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010), Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2012

<sup>88</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

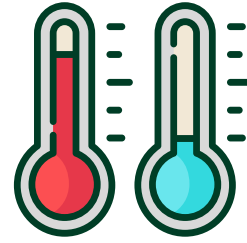
<sup>89</sup> Ozer, E., et al., (2010)

<sup>90</sup> <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main>

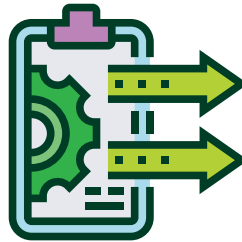




**MAPPING ACTIVITIES**<sup>91</sup> is an interactive, group exercise used to gather information on a range of topics or issues such as community assets, access to resources, mobility, or quality of life issues. With this approach, youth draw out their community and identify essential pieces of information related to the topic.



**TEMPERATURE GAUGE OR HIGH POINTS/LOW POINTS** is a simple way to capture “high” and “low” points in program or event experience. People can complete the activity individually or as a group at the end of a program or event.



#### LEVERAGE EXISTING RESOURCES:

- » PAR Hub (University of California, Berkeley) includes a complete curriculum for youth-led PAR- <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>
- » Youthprise Youth Participatory Action Toolkit - <https://youthprise.org/ypar-toolkit>
- » Liberating Structures is an assortment of activities that organize and facilitate meetings, workshops, and conferences - <http://www.liberatingstructures.com>

<sup>91</sup> Livingstone, A.M., et al., (2014)

## PAR, A TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH FOR NAF

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*“School leaders need to think ahead about what the end product looks like, where they will share their results, what type of product best help the school leaders and students to prompt changes or reflective thinking. Students can be a valuable resource for ideas about research products.”<sup>92</sup>*

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NAF intends to use PAR to increase youth voices in the development of the organization’s college and career readiness programs. At the same time, and as a result of their participation in the process, NAF hopes that youth will amplify their readiness skills such as critical thinking and leadership capacities. Also, NAF sees PAR as a unique process through which it can further embrace the diversity of its academy networks and increase shared ownership of information and its application to support youth, schools, and communities.

NAF recognizes the power imbalances that exist within formal and informal learning environments and between their governing bodies and between adults and youth. As such, the organization envisions PAR as a mechanism for bringing together youth, educators, administrators, businesses, and community leaders to collaborate, share insights, and make youth-informed or youth-led decisions to develop meaningful and effective college and career pathways and address issues of inequity.



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<sup>92</sup> Rubin, B.C & Jones, M., (2007)

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# INCREASING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH VOICE IN NAF ACADEMIES USING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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