

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



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.¹

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.”*²

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.”*³ 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-Orientation** 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.

¹ 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).

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

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

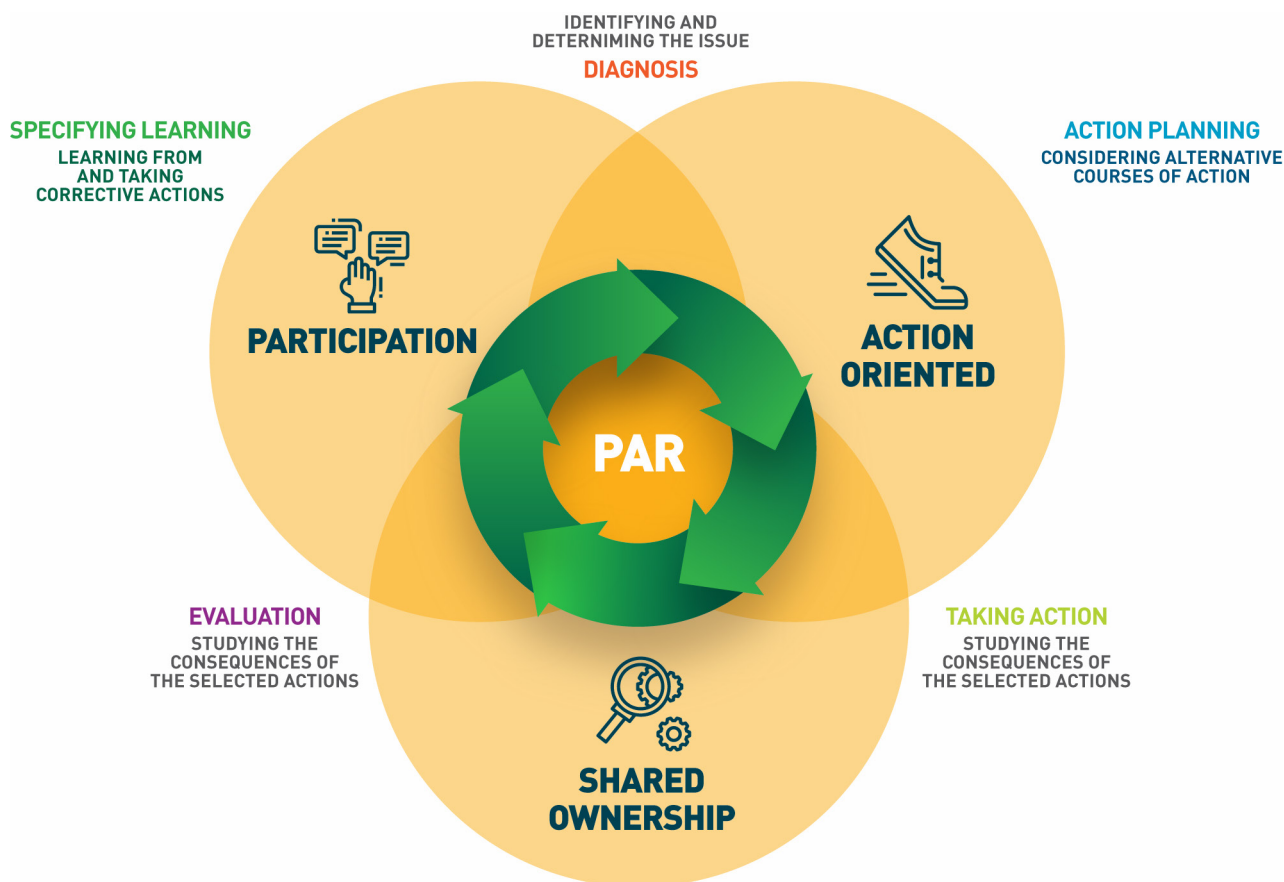
PAR can be used to develop or redesign career-readiness programs to meet diverse needs such as creating community-based employment opportunities for high-school students seeking to build 21st-century skill sets; providing educators and school administrators with affordable and accessible career and college 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

afterschool 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.

[View the full Review and Resources here.](#)

