

# Youth Voices in Education Research

## Editors' Introduction

How can we make young people's voices too loud to ignore?

—*Intergenerational Change Initiative*

The focus on youth in education scholarship is so ubiquitous it often goes unquestioned. Across our interdisciplinary field, researchers are asking and answering important normative and empirical questions about the education of children and youth using a wide range of methodologies and lenses.<sup>1</sup> We analyze young people's test scores, measure their beliefs about themselves, and observe their behaviors and comments in classrooms. In the pages of recent issues of *Harvard Educational Review (HER)* alone, scholars have investigated which youth get identified as gifted (Grindal, Schifter, Schwartz, & Hehir, 2019), how immigrant African youth navigate the college application process (George Mwangi, 2019), and the multiple ways kindergarten teachers respond to student mistakes (Donaldson, 2020). These studies and many others have built crucial knowledge and scholarship about youth and education, and, in line with the particular aim of our journal, helped scholars, practitioners, and policy makers work toward creating a society where all young people have equal opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive.

Yet, only a very small proportion of the studies in our field are initiated, shaped, or designed by youth themselves. This Special Issue was born from questions we as an Editorial Board began asking about the limitations of traditional research paradigms, the power of incorporating youth more directly into the knowledge production process, and the responsibilities we hold to the populations we aim to understand and empower. We wonder, when youth are the object of our interventions but not invited into the conversations that determine the educational problems they face, what detrimental practices and policies go unnoticed? What do we lose when we only prioritize the interests, questions, and aims that adult researchers bring to the table? What new insights would we gain if we gave the mic to young people and listened to them as experts? Finally, given higher education's long history of racial and ethnic exclusion, classism, and heterosexism, when the scholars and research-

ers who are asking and shaping these questions frequently have little in common with the youth for whom their research holds the greatest stakes, what knowledge, experiences, and perspectives go unheard?

Although we certainly do not see “insider” status as a prerequisite for engaging in research, we are concerned about the extent to which youth insiders are relegated to the margins in much of education research. Too often in our work, the voices of youth live inside the confines of quotation marks; their outrage is edited, preoccupations condensed through ellipses, and vivid vernacular obfuscated through academic jargon. While traditional paradigms of expertise and validity may argue that it is strange to incorporate insiders and their questions, insights, and concerns into the research process, we join participatory action researchers (PAR) and the rich history of research for social action (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1970) in fundamentally questioning this assumption and its implications for youth involvement in knowledge production.

As Cammarota and Fine (2008) explain, PAR is a “radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science [which] assumes that those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and the fracture points in unjust social arrangements” (p. 215). Critical participatory action research (CPAR) builds on PAR, explicitly placing democratic participation and critical theory at the center of PAR processes. It rests on a commitment to working toward social justice, “anticipating from the start, how to produce evidence that can be mobilized for change” (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012, p. 181). PAR’s/CPAR’s youth-centered offshoot, YPAR, works to harness the “revealing wisdom” that youth who have borne the brunt of educational injustice hold about the world around them and trains them to engage in research that investigates the sources of injustice and identifies avenues for critical collective action. YPAR therefore engages an epistemological and pedagogical commitment to center youth, which is unique in the education research landscape. However, YPAR scholars themselves frequently point out how difficult this work can be, especially within the structural constraints and increasing standardization of schools (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Buttimer, 2019; Rubin, Ayala, & Zaal, 2017). And while YPAR is a crucial approach for elevating the concerns and priorities of young people, it is not the only way that youth and adults can collaborate to produce knowledge. From narrative, arts-based, and embodied methods to post-positivist quantitative and qualitative methods, authentic collaboration with youth and a commitment to serving their interests in design, methods, and analysis can help us better understand what education is, how it is experienced, and its impacts on individuals, communities, and society.

For this Special Issue on Youth Voices in Education Research, we therefore sought to create an expansive call that would surface research articles, methodological essays, and reflections that elevate the voices of young people as

key contributors to academic conversations that aim to improve the schools, communities, and complex social contexts in which they live. We invited adults and youth from a wide range of youth-centric scholarship to contribute; we were interested in the reflections of both seasoned YPAR researchers and scholars who are in more emergent stages of developing a youth-centered research agenda. Similarly, we hoped to hear from youth who had participated in research for the first time, as well as from those who had developed a sustained commitment to a research team.

Out of an extraordinarily diverse and exciting pool of submissions, this Special Issue presents eight manuscripts that span contexts, generations, and methodologies. Five pieces are written by youth or adult/youth teams in which youth are primary or equal authors, and three are written by adult researchers. Although each piece offers a unique contribution to the conversation, some common themes emerge.

First, in many pieces we hear stories of youth engaging directly with the organizations, agencies, and people who, while tasked with supporting and protecting them, often appear to be pursuing their own interests. The challenges and critical importance of not only listening to but truly *hearing* youth is a central theme across this issue. Second, many of the featured writers add to the national conversation on the complicated relationship between schools and law enforcement. Across several pieces, youth recount their racialized experiences of being controlled, punished, and excluded from school by police and of forcefully pushing back against policies and policy makers who have increasingly invited law enforcement into many educational spaces. Third, as youth authors reflect on their experiences in schools, they describe the challenges and joys of being young people with complex, intersectional identities. They remind us of the power of educational experiences in validating and expanding their understanding of who they are and who they hope to become. Finally, on a critically hopeful note, in almost all of the pieces we hear about the transformative power of storytelling. For youth, the experience of sharing their own stories, listening to the stories of their peers, and then seeing their stories received and valued by adults in power is a profound developmental and educational experience. For adult researchers, practitioners, and policy makers, the experience of hearing directly from the people they hope to impact can also be transformative. But as youth across these pages warn, adults must be ready to receive these stories with humility, commitment, and action.

The issue opens with three pieces that describe how youth have provided critical feedback on policy initiatives related to law enforcement in their states, cities, and schools. Jeffrey S. Moyer, Mark R. Warren, and Andrew R. King present a success story: a case study of the campaign by Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) to pass a state law combating zero-tolerance school discipline policies and the school-to-prison pipeline. Using storytelling for personal empowerment and political strategy, the VOYCE student activists were

able to control their own narrative during a fraught legislative process and use that narrative to create change. Next, Alan McCullough Jr., Felton Morrell Jr., Bernard Thomas III, Vincente Waugh, Nicholas Shubert, and Amy Donofrio of Jacksonville, Florida's EVAC movement reflect on their experience speaking up about criminal justice reform. They offer an important counternarrative and describe how youth voices can also be perceived as a threat by those in power, particularly when the voices are coming from empowered youth of color. Addressed to high school students as well as the academy, their narrative offers no-holds-barred recommendations to students, teachers, and community leaders intent on making community change. Lastly, Sarah Zeller-Berkman, Jessica Barreto, and Asha Sandler, members of the youth-adult research collaborative, the Intergenerational Change Initiative (ICI), reflect on their experiences utilizing YPAR to help New York City agencies to revise youth-directed policy. They build upon a disappointing collaboration to imagine new ways that technology can be harnessed to "not just to change a specific policy . . . but to democratize the way that we create municipal youth policy ensuring broad and diverse youth participation." The authors challenge critical youth participatory action groups to think about creating change on a systems level and holding adult power brokers accountable for delivering their side of the "action" component in "action research."

The next set of pieces shift from policy making to schooling as they interrogate how complex indigenous, cultural, and national histories are understood, incorporated, and excluded in classrooms and curricula. Robert Petrone and Nicholas Rink, with Charlie Speicher, point out the irony that "while teacher education is replete with talk *about* young people[,] it rarely, if ever, involves talking *with* youth." They propose a "repositioning pedagogy" framework that thoughtfully invites youth into the spaces of teacher preparation as expert consultants. In this research article, they present an empirical case study of three Native youth consultants who shared their linguistic expertise and experiences of marginalization in traditional public schools with preservice teachers, challenging them to question dominant ideologies related to language, expertise, and goodness. Next, adult scholar Nancy Acevedo and two younger members of her extended family, Citlalli Bejarano, and Natalie Ibarra Collazo, describe and reflect on their own experiences of cultural and class-based marginalization in schools. They use the concept of *neplantleras* to describe the experience of being cultural insiders in multiple and overlapping worlds and question why their Chicana identities are often the least celebrated or understood world within these academic spaces. Similarly, Hong Kong university student Chung-Hin Kevin HO recounts his own experience of living and learning in overlapping but conflicting worlds as he negotiates his Chinese and Hong Konger identities and engages in "root-searching" amidst the current youth-led protests. He describes the important role history education plays in helping Hong Kong youth explore the contradictions and possibilities of a civic

identity rooted in colonialism and democracy, providing a youth perspective on the role that education can play in shaping a major political movement.

The final two pieces center possibilities for raising youth voices through pedagogy and extracurricular opportunities. Nicole Mirra and Antero Garcia imagine a form of civic instruction that “privilege[s] young people—who they are, what they care about, and how they want to live.” Through the “speculative civic literacies” of the Digital Democratic Dialogue (3D) project, high school teachers and students engage in learning experiences that center their unique and realistic civic perspectives, allowing them the space to connect across lines of difference and to imagine new futures. And to close the Special Issue, sixteen-year-old Mingda Sun advocates for the direct involvement of youth in research across the disciplines. She reflects on her experience as a summer research assistant in a biofilm lab, providing a firsthand account of how access to authentic research experiences and strong mentorship can contribute to knowledge building and to developing a passionate, prepared, and diverse future generation of scholars. Sun’s essay reminds us that the tangible process of inviting youth to work alongside expert researchers can demystify the research process and provide valuable professional experience in any field.

Developing this Special Issue on Youth Voices in Education Research came with its own affordances and challenges. We are grateful to be able to use our platform to amplify the voices most impacted by the work done on our campus and the articles we publish. As a diverse group of former teachers and practitioners from many corners of the education world, we feel a sense of responsibility toward the students, colleagues, and family members who inspire the work we now take on as researchers. This issue acts on that responsibility and aims to shift the balance of who benefits most from the educational research enterprise. Yet, we’d be remiss in not recognizing the chorus of youth whose voices do not speak from these pages. Academic journals are a form of media with a massive barrier to entry. And while we took pains to break down those barriers in developing this issue, we recognize that the voices included in these pages had to navigate a publishing call and process developed for the idiosyncrasies and power structures of the academy. This process has led us to reflect on our role in disrupting and reifying scholarly publishing’s self-selecting tendencies and how we can become more accessible to youth, practitioners, and those without a direct connection to the academy. We are inspired by ICI’s and EVAC’s calls to not consider work with youth as a one-off project but as a sustained commitment that is integrated into the structure of our work. We envision a world in which the concerns of youth do not have to be “academized” to be taken seriously and where youth themselves play a more active role in shaping the frameworks, findings, and publications that purport to summarize their experiences. We are grateful to the authors in this issue for pushing us as an Editorial Board to listen more carefully and think more creatively about what youth voices in the academy can look like, and we appreci-

ate their engagement in our publishing process. As this issue goes to print, the world is experiencing an unprecedented health crisis which has interrupted the schooling of millions of children around the world and reminded us of the invaluable role that schools play in our lives and communities. As educators and school administrators work to reimagine what classrooms and schools look like during this crisis, we urge them to listen to the experiences and suggestions of the youth who are experiencing this disruption firsthand. Schools may never look the same after Covid-19, but if adults enlist youth as partners in envisioning how schools should adapt and change, we will all receive an invaluable education.

We invite you to listen carefully to the voices represented here and make good on their calls to action. We hope that together, we can reduce the distance between the students who inspired our scholarly journeys and the goals, processes, and products of our research. As the classrooms, communities, and concerns of young people change, we invite you to join us in asking, How will we adapt our own lines of inquiry to change alongside them?

BECCA SPINDEL BASSETT AND TATIANA GERON

## Note

1. We use the United Nations definitions of *children* (ages 0–14) and *youth* (ages 15–24).

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