

YA4-H! Youth Advocates for Health: Youth Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

Youth participatory action research is a process that is particularly relevant for health-related topics. YA4-H! Youth Advocates for Health: Youth Participatory Action Research is a resource that youth development professionals can use to guide a group through such a project. The 124-page curriculum is based on key principles of youth development and youth participatory action research. It has 7 sections, each with activities built on the same template that includes the time needed, materials, and facilitator tips, which contributes to ease of use. Youth development professionals can feel confident knowing that the curriculum is research based and addresses adolescents' developmental needs.

Key words: youth participatory action research, health, youth–adult partnerships

Introduction

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) has become a popular approach for engaging youth in the exploration of community issues, with the ultimate goal of creating community change (Ozer, 2016a, 2016b). In general, participatory action research is a collaborative process that has three components (Ozer, 2016a, 2016b; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Powers & Allaman, 2012; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009):

- investigating meaningful social topics,
- participating in research to understand the root causes of problems, and
- taking leadership to disseminate the research findings to policymakers and stakeholders.

YPAR has been used to investigate a wide array of health issues, including tobacco use (Haines-Saah, Oliffe, White, & Botoroff, 2013; Jardine & James, 2012), quality of school lunches (Reich, Kay, & Lin, 2015), environmental health (Madrigal et al., 2014), teen pregnancy (Noone et al., 2016), and suicide prevention (Lindquist-Grantz, 2017). Data collection methods are varied, ranging from observation and surveys, to interviews and focus groups, to photovoice and mapping techniques.

Curriculum Description

The *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)* curriculum (Arnold & Gifford, 2015) is based on a youth-adult partnership model. It is one of three components of *YA4-H! Youth Advocates for Health (YA4H)*, a teen leadership program developed at Oregon State University. The other two companion pieces address building successful youth–adult partnerships (Arnold & Gifford, 2014; Flesch, Lile, & Arnold, 2016) and teens as teachers (Arnold & Gifford, 2015; Arnold et al., 2016; Flesch, Lile, & Arnold, 2015).

Background

Key principles and a solid grounding in youth development research form the foundation of the curriculum. Youth leadership is crucial throughout participatory action research projects; thus, the authors note that a background in youth–adult partnerships is a prerequisite for successfully engaging in these projects (Arnold & Gifford, 2015). This does not mean that adults turn everything over to youth, but that there is shared power and give-and-take in the process (Ozer, 2016b). Table 1 summarizes key principles guiding YPAR projects as identified in the curriculum.

Table 1. Key Principles Guiding the Youth Participatory Action Research Curriculum (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018; Arnold & Gifford, 2015)

Principle	Description
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs engage youth in partnership with adults to experience the full cycle of social science research, from problem identification to taking action.
Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs engage youth to think critically about issues that affect them and their communities. • Programs are active, where research is the means to an end, and the knowledge created is translated into action • Programs are practical; they address real community issues
Transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs help youth envision the future and create change. • Programs emphasize social justice and empowerment of youth. • Programs directly engage youth, and thus may be more effective in eliminating health disparities.

Format

The *YPAR* curriculum has seven sections, plus an introduction and a handouts section (see Table 2). There is an emphasis on learning through interactive methods. All the activities include the time, materials, and facilitator tips, as well as the activity's purpose, skills developed, room set-up, instructions, and discussion questions. Activity instructions are detailed enough, but brief and to the point, which makes them easy to use.

The curriculum integrates the key processes of YPAR. Power sharing is one of these processes (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018; Ozer et al., 2010), and it is embodied in the youth–adult partnership approach. Training and practice in research skills is another YPAR key process (Ozer, 2016a; Ozer et al., 2010). Thus, the section on data analysis is particularly relevant, as youth do not always get to participate in this aspect of a project (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). A third process is building alliances with stakeholders (Anyon et al., 2018), emphasized in the “Sharing Your Story” and “Taking Action” sections. The “Reflection and Evaluation” section completes the experiential learning cycle.

Table 2. Description of Youth Participatory Action Research Curriculum Contents (Arnold & Gifford, 2015)

Section	Number of activities	Description
Introduction	--	Provides background, outlines key principles, gives an overview of a YPAR project, and provides a program logic model.
All Together Now!	4	Includes activities designed to help participants get to know each other so they can work together effectively; combining this section with at least 4 hours from <i>Building Youth-Adult Partnerships</i> (Arnold & Gifford, 2014) is recommended.
Asking Questions: What Do You Want to Know?	5	Engages youth in identifying areas of concern, selecting a focus, and generating research questions.
Collecting and Managing Data	5	Reviews the various options for collecting data to answer their research questions and gives opportunities to practice collecting data by observation, interviews, surveys, and focus groups.
Making Sense of It All: Analyzing Your Data	2	Illustrates techniques for organizing, analyzing, and summarizing data.
Sharing Your Story: Communicating Your Research	3	Helps youth summarize and prepare to present their process and findings to appropriate audiences.
Taking Action: Using Research to Improve Your Community	2	Helps youth identify stakeholders and analyze potential barriers and facilitating factors, with an emphasis on decision making, strategic planning, and teamwork.
Reflection and Evaluation	4	Aids in reflecting on what was learned and how to apply it in other settings.
Handouts	--	Contains handouts that correspond to specific activities in the curriculum; handouts are listed under the materials heading in each activity as needed. In addition to the handouts, there are supplemental materials on a website http://oregon.4h.oregonstate.edu/projects/ya4-h/research

Considerations for Youth Development Professionals

Research points to outcomes associated with YPAR at the individual, organizational, and community levels (Anyon et al., 2018; Ozer, 2016b; Ozer, 2017; Ozer et al., 2010; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). A recent review concluded that it is likely the principles and processes involved in YPAR, rather than the research topic, that generate these results (Anyon, et al., 2018). In addition to these benefits, youth development professionals should consider the following points:

1. Having a high quality, organized curriculum available can be a deciding factor for whether to tackle a complex process such as YPAR. Although there are multiple sources and toolkits outlining YPAR concepts and the steps involved, actually having the activities to provide structure for the process sets the *YPAR* curriculum apart.
2. Although all youth will benefit from this approach, YPAR may have particular relevance for audiences considered to be underserved or marginalized (Anyon et al., 2018).
3. Those who want to undertake a YPAR project should consider the time commitment involved. Community change takes time, and therefore YPAR requires multiple sessions. The *YPAR* curriculum provides a suggested timetable. If the group has not worked together previously, it may take even more time to build a foundation of a trusting relationship between youth and adults. The curriculum is designed to span an academic year, and it could be used in community or in-school settings (Ozer et al. [2010] discuss the benefits and challenges of both settings).
4. The data collection methods included in the curriculum are observation, survey, interviews, and focus groups. Those interested in other YPAR techniques, such as photovoice and mapping, will need to supplement this curriculum with other resources (e.g., Partnership for the Public's Health, 2009).

Conclusion

The benefits of YPAR make it worthy of consideration by youth development professionals. Youth development professionals who take advantage of this resource will not only find it easy to use, they can feel confident knowing that it is research based and by design addresses adolescents' developmental needs.

Ordering Information

Title: *YA4-H! Youth Advocates for Health: Youth Participatory Action Research*

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Cost: \$80 + \$5 shipping to continental United States

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