

The Purple Room: A YPAR-Designed Healing Space Grounded in Community-Engaged School Leadership

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Abstract

This article explores how a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) team and adult co-conspirators in varied school leadership positions became partners, an unusual pairing as urban schools do not often prioritize young people as leaders. The school leveraged the district's community-engaged mission and their collective power to increase youth organizing and mental health in an urban-based community school. Drawing from community engagement and social justice, the authors use the concepts of sharing power and engaging healing to better understand the development of this YPAR project, a youth-designed healing space called "The Purple Room." Findings show that multiple levels of school leadership can set the conditions with youth researchers to build trust and to support the justice-oriented work that students know is needed.

Keywords: community engagement, youth participatory action research, urban, sharing power, leadership, healing

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Recent overlapping crises (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter protests, 2020 presidential election, anti-Asian racism) have had an overwhelming global impact, particularly among young people (Castrellón et al., 2021). In school, some students have experienced islands of decency with humanizing staff "allowing" space to process; simultaneously, students remain subsumed by educators, administrators, curriculum, and policies that range from avoiding race to racist. As students have ramped up in-school activism (including sit-ins, teach-ins, and walk-outs), school-building leadership has played varying roles in engaging young people. This prompted us to ask in our local context: How does school leadership, within a community-engagement and equity frame, involve youth as leaders?

In this article, we write about the possibility of youth participatory action research (YPAR) intentionally connected to school leadership. Community-engaged research, like YPAR, encourages young people to engage with research and action that affects them, with justice that they care about, and it gives adult leaders in schools the chance to collaborate in ways that honor the knowledge and experiences of youth. Next, we review literature on engagement initiatives of school leadership and examples using YPAR. Then, we describe a community-engaged conceptual framework that includes sharing power for healing to analyze a YPAR project, "The Purple Room": a youth-designed, youth-centered healing space in Racial Justice Community Schools (RJCS, a pseudonym). Finally, we propose implications to increase shared power between adult leaders and youth in schools and to prioritize students as community-connected decision makers and valued agents of change.

Literature Review

School leadership includes building-level leaders (e.g., principals and assistant principals), district-level administrators and personnel (e.g., superintendents, coordinators), community leaders,

and teacher leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016). School leaders are held accountable for improving school environments through inclusive practices and goals for equity. In leadership for social justice, trust within and across communities is an essential element for transformative change (Rivera-Mc-Cutchen & Watson, 2014). Urban school leadership has improved school climate and academic achievement by valuing families and communities and incorporating pedagogies driven by equity and social justice (Medina et al., 2020).

Sampson and Horsford (2017) substantiate a robust equity agenda for school leaders working with communities. They draw from policies in the Every Student Succeeds Act and use multiple case studies across three school districts focusing on Black, Latinx, and multilingual learners. They list 11 recommendations for school leadership regarding community engagement and advocacy. Their first five recommendations focus on how community advocates—like those supporting the YPAR team in this article—can help school leaders identify inequities. Their second five recommendations ask school leaders to “implement structural and systematic avenues for community advocates” to participate with district and school level leadership. Their last recommendation emphasizes federal protections and the courts for addressing educational inequities.

While exemplary scholarship exists for how principals can build lasting community relationships (Khalifa et al., 2016), there remain too many principals, particularly those working in diverse schools, who demonstrate an inability to lead around issues that matter to those communities (Young et al., 2010). Likewise, “scant research focuses on the role of *district* leadership in community organizing approaches to education reform” (Ishimaru, 2014, p. 190). Making use of community engagement efforts with students can raise considerable improvements for equitable school leadership and positive student outcomes such as those outlined in this article.

YPAR is an inclusive approach to critical investigations in education, highlighting the expertise and knowledge youth bring to transformative change within schools and communities (Caraballo et al., 2017). YPAR positions youth as leaders who act against injustices (Fox et al., 2010). Too often school leadership undervalues youth even though they have the most at stake regarding educational decision making (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018). In fact, as Bertrand and Rodela (2018) state, “social justice leadership scholarship, despite its focus on equity as an *end*, often overlooks equity in decision making as the *means* to this end” (p. 11). Partnering with and prioritizing young people as decision makers is a way to increase equity in the process of community-engaged work.

Wilhelm et al. (2021) reflected on a community-academic partnership, Training for Resiliency in Urban Students and Teachers (TRUST). TRUST used both youth and parent participatory action research to develop youth-oriented school environments and promote school connectedness. The partnership included middle and high school students, parents, university researchers, community organizations, and school leaders in an urban school district. During the school-based intervention, building a sense of community supported the participatory action research process. Adult and youth researchers were able to explore their individual identities as well as foster group cohesion when applying research methods. The ability of the TRUST project to research with community helped push school leadership to meet the needs of marginalized youth and to make transformative change in health and academics.

Growing research about YPAR bridges the possibilities between adult and youth partners. Bertrand’s (2018) study detailed YPAR as a process to include students of color in school decision making and to leverage their experiential knowledge about institutional racism and white supremacy with school leadership. During this afterschool program: a) adults (including teachers and university researchers) facilitated conversations about theories, including community cultural wealth and intersectionality, b) students connected theories with lived experiences to suggest research topics, c) students surveyed and interviewed teachers and students with the guidance of adults, and d) students presented their findings and called for teachers and administrators to make change. Through this YPAR program, students and adult supporters repositioned the young people as school leaders. Our manuscript builds on this existing literature by describing a YPAR project with intentional collaboration between youth and adult leaders in a secondary community school.

A Conceptual Frame: Community-Engagement and the Role of Shared Power and Healing

Community engagement is a collaborative, action-centered practice which considers the shared interests within a network of connected individuals. According to Noel (2011), who writes from an urban teacher education context, three important steps support authentic community engagement: 1) becoming integrated into the community to develop trust, 2) conducting studies to learn about communities' practices and histories, and 3) becoming involved in community engagement activities. Implications for integrating community engagement into public education include improving the social context of education, fostering family and community participation, transforming the culture of schools, holding school officials accountable, and building political capital to redistribute resources (Warren, 2005). To bring these implications to fruition, culturally responsive leadership can access, leverage, and support youth leadership through community organizing for change. A strategic cousin to community engagement, community organizing has been a historical and contemporary approach towards social justice in education. "It is important that we aim for a community engagement praxis that centers social justice—that seeks to bring more just conditions to our communities and more just futures for the people in those communities" (Mitchell & Chavous, 2021, p. 4). Thus, we bring in two justice-oriented concepts to this conceptual frame: sharing power and engaging healing.

Sharing Power

Sharing power, through traditionally uneven relationships, holds the potential to elevate oft-unheard voices and to broaden the idea of who can create educational change. Capacity-building, individually and collectively, can address power imbalances in community–district collaborations (Ishimaru, 2014). Education scholar Bettina Love (2019) recalls long-time community organizer Ella Baker, recognizing "the power of oppressed people and communities to create pathways to leadership that were decentralized and not hierarchical" (p. 65). New leadership pathways can be paved from sharing power, including with young people. Decentering hierarchies in schools is not common, but young people crave it (Rombalski, 2020). And, based on shared leadership research, there are some roadmaps. For instance, while engaging youth leaders of color, adults can share power by 1) being open to new sources of knowledge especially around inequity, 2) initiating opportunities for youth of color leadership, and 3) buffering student leaders from outside pressures (Salisbury, 2021). This manuscript illustrates that sharing power between youth and multiple levels of culturally responsive adult leadership in schools (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018) has great potential for better utilizing young people who are already full of knowledge, resistance, and truth-telling.

Engaging Healing

In addition to the concept of sharing power, the need for healing is also a serious and unrealized—though emerging—endeavor in most urban school communities (Ginwright, 2015). This is especially true following the COVID-19 pandemic (Castrellón et al., 2021) and global racial justice uprisings (Navarro, 2018), through which restorative practices have begun to address some healing from harm. In education contexts, critical youth-centered research acknowledges trauma-informed care and outlines the need to move toward healing-centered engagement, with youth as agents in the creation of their own well-being (Ginwright, 2018). Ginwright outlines healing-centered engagement as political, culturally grounded, and asset-driven, with healing identity work for both youth and adults. In reflecting on organizing and leadership within Black communities, Ginwright (2015) analyzed how the Black Lives Matter movement enacted a healing justice frame through restoration, resistance, and reclamation. In this article, the movement for Black lives was pivotal to the lived experience of the YPAR team and the development of an in-school healing space. Thus, we use Ginwright's ideas to ask: How did this YPAR team's research restore collective well-being, meaning, and purpose? What hegemonic notions of justice and race were disrupted and rejected? How was capacity grown to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine the future? In the next section, we explore the context of youth researchers and administrative leaders as they create opportunities for shared power and healing.

YPAR Approach, Context, and Story

Overview

YPAR is a justice-oriented epistemology that honors marginalized youth and their knowledge and research toward action. YPAR is not a new trend in community-engaged research; the possibilities of YPAR are rich in organizing spaces (Fox et al., 2010). In school leadership, however, the scholarship is slimmer. In an exhaustive YPAR literature review (Anyon et al., 2018), 75% of the articles reported positive outcomes in youth agency and leadership, followed by academic and social growth. However, studies in school settings were less likely to report outcomes related to agency and leadership. As Bertrand and Lozenski (2021) attest, the outcomes of the YPAR projects are too often delivered to school decision makers with a lofty hope that something will be done, rather than school-based leaders working to share power and work with youth to change policies and practices. The Racial Justice Community School (RJCS, a pseudonym) in this article is unique, not only because of its model as a community school, but also because it has multiple levels of school and district leaders who value and prioritize community, research, and youth in their decision-making processes. YPAR was one method that this school leadership supported to engage with youth and work towards equity in an urban school.

Context and Positionality

This article stems from the engagement between an urban-based, community and university-connected youth research team and a local secondary school (grades 6-12). YoUthROC is a research team of young people with a few adult co-conspirators; the team collaborates with community partners who conduct YPAR projects that utilize the collective power of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) youth through culturally relevant research methods. In this context, co-conspirators are defined as adults who understand the systems of privilege and oppression related to youth-driven research and practice solidarity to confront power imbalances in youth-adult relationships (Love, 2019). YoUthROC's goals include co-constructing ethical knowledge to inform racial justice in education, challenging the status quo in areas of leadership and learning, and increasing the capacity of youth leaders especially in spaces intended for them. Those of us crafting this paper include a Black woman and YoUthROC leader working as a YPAR coordinator with RJCS's interracial high school YPAR team, a multiracial male school leader who is a research and equity coordinator at RJCS, and two others from YoUthROC: a white woman university faculty member and a Black woman graduate student. Together, we had a shared commitment to center BIPOC youth (YoUthROC, 2022) and we met multiple times a week to plan, work, and reflect about the YPAR teams. In addition, the data section comes directly from the secondary school's YPAR team.

In this article, we share one story from RJCS, a school partner for YoUthROC for over a year. RJCS is a community school located in a first-ring suburb with 82% of the student body eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Student demographics are as follows: 17.7% white, 39% Black, 12.7% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 22.4% Hispanic/Latino, 1.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. As a community school, RJCS acts as a community resource, providing childcare, school supplies, meals, and housing resources to families whose children attend RJCS as well as the local community. Being a community school is a centerpiece of the school district's identity, and a useful leverage point for racial justice in the community, specifically as it pertains to navigating institutional barriers and advocating for the RJCS YPAR program. In this article we ask what conditions were created to enable the development of a youth-led, in-school healing space and what roles both youth and adult leadership played in its creation.

The Purple Room as a Youth-Designed, Youth-Centered Healing Space: The YPAR Team Tells the Story

The idea of The Purple Room, a newly designed youth-centered healing room within RJCS, stemmed from students' experiences with trauma and harm, especially in school spaces. Many students felt they didn't have a sense of belonging or ownership in school, were struggling with mental

health, and didn't have an outlet to deal with their emotions at school or at home. Students resorted to sitting on floors and in bathrooms to fight off their emotions. This lack of mental support led to conflicts, including students being pushed out of classrooms or forced back into traumatic spaces without time to take a mental breather. Through the extended protests at the police department near RJCS following the murder of Daunte Wright [for more context see page 114], and the needs of community members amid the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and resulting distance/hybrid learning, students and school leaders had yet another chance to come together as a community to create a space for individual and collective healing.

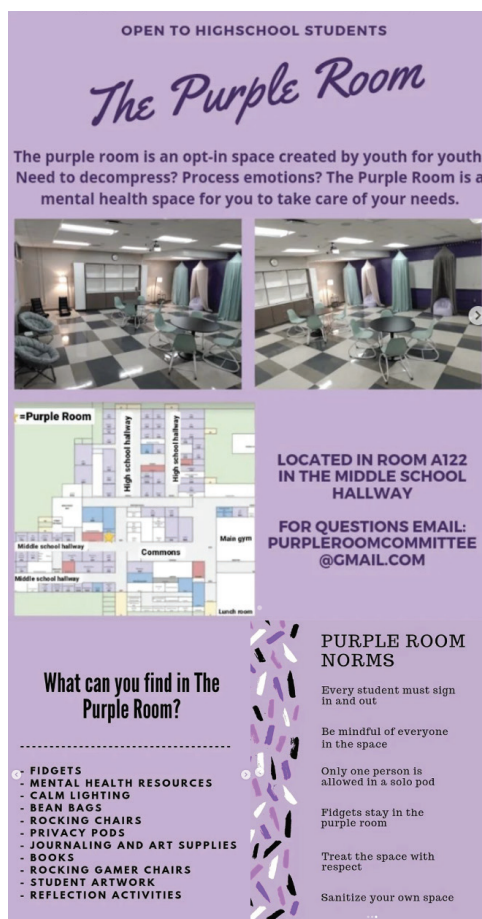
The RJCS YPAR team centered their community-engaged research project around student experiences with school discipline and mental health. Throughout the research process, the RJCS YPAR team practiced ethnographic inquiry and narrative storytelling, designed a school-based survey, and qualitatively analyzed over 150 responses from students in grades 6-12. Over the course of three weeks, the team held reflective meetings to discuss the major themes from their data collection: 1) Student-led space, 2) Conflict resolution, and 3) What stops conflict resolution in schools? The research showed that many students did not feel comfortable in school and adults escalated tensions and unproductively interfered with conflict resolution. Collectively, the RJCS YPAR team concluded that young people should not feel embarrassed, guilty, or judged for their emotions. Students deserved a space to process those emotions without adult interference.

Within the research process, two members of the RJCS YPAR team were invited to a budget meeting with community stakeholders, administrators, and other RJCS building leaders. The purpose of the meeting was to determine priorities for the upcoming school year and to allocate funds based on those priorities. RJCS YPAR members entered the budget meeting with the team's research findings guiding their engagement. The idea of a "Purple Room" was put on the table by one of the RJCS YPAR team members as a project that would align with their research findings as well as school priorities. Adults were generally supportive. Some claimed that a similar idea had been floated, but the team recognized that there had been no plans to enact it. After receiving feedback from more community stakeholders and building leaders, the YPAR team's research and next steps built a case for opening a healing space within RJCS that was youth-designed and youth-driven.

Following the budget meeting, the RJCS YPAR team worked closely with the wellness coordinator to transition the "Purple Room" from an idea to a reality. The principal was supportive of the development process and trusted other building leaders and "critical friends," including an equity coordinator, youth programs manager, and YPAR youth, to create norms and culture for the space. Additionally, the wellness coordinator and the university mentor helped connect the team to mental health initiative grants to fund it. The Purple Room officially opened in the spring of 2022. Figure 1 is the youth-generated Instagram account post from its opening day.

Figure 1

The Purple Room: A Youth-Generated Instagram Post



YPAR as an Organizing Tool for Social Justice in School: Sharing Power and Healing

Critical and participatory practices like YPAR not only strive towards social justice, they also sustain organizing efforts in education and healing for young people (Caraballo et al., 2017; Navarro, 2018). When students organize against injustice, they create new ways of seeing themselves as leaders and change makers (Rombalski, 2020). Based on examples in this article, youth leaders engaged in YPAR not only practiced what shared power might look like, but they also played a role toward collective healing. With these possibilities in mind, what can we learn from the YPAR team and their collaboration with school leadership?

When adult leaders in schools participate with, learn about, and advocate for youth, trust develops in bidirectional ways. School building leadership can take up new frames for sharing power with youth, families, and communities and for creating institutional memories that honor community contributions. In the continuing dual pandemics of racial violence and COVID-19, ideas for healing must be community-engaged, not decided in isolation behind the tall plexiglass of a front office. In the development of The Purple Room, youth and adults attended to a community-engagement frame (Noel, 2011); they learned more about student perspectives through YPAR and participated in activities together, building trust across groups. In this process, the idea of school leadership was broadened to include young people. However, even though community engagement tenets were present, examining the concepts of shared power and healing allow for deeper analysis and implications toward the schools and leadership that students deserve.

Adult School Leadership Engaging in Shared Power

School administrators play a pivotal role in providing opportunities for youth and adults to share power in decision making. At RJCS, the YPAR team and its collaboration with adult leaders serves as an example for how leadership can be distributed to both students and other adults in the building. In this site, multiple levels of school leaders practiced centering equity and youth. The relationship between a few key educators and the YPAR team led to increased trust. The principal's open support for a mental health/healing space was a key factor. Together, the YPAR team and adult leaders supported engagement, staffing, and funding that led to The Purple Room.

The adults who supported the YPAR team and The Purple Room were open to new sources of knowledge around inequity, the first of three tenets to sharing power with youth of color in schools (Salisbury, 2021). This aligns with community engagement as well: "Community engagement rooted in care, trust and morality must take community members' knowledge seriously and directly benefit the community" (Campano et al., 2015). In fact, Amina and Abby had co-facilitated a professional development session for the district with YoUthROC, and the opening activity was entitled "Rethinking Youth Knowledge." It included a spectrum activity for participants to walk, think, talk, share out, and listen to consider the ways they position, value, or prioritize young people. Of course, not every staff member was "on the same page," but the opportunity to explore perceptions about youth and their knowledge was crucial in setting up conditions for a YPAR team at school. In addition, in the data shared above about The Purple Room, youth research revealed clear needs for mental health outlets; sitting on floors and in bathrooms and describing how adults interfered and escalated tensions warranted disruption. Just because some adults valued youth knowledge did not mean this work was seamless or easy, but it made opportunities for sustained engagement more possible.

Listening to youth knowledge, indeed believing young people, increased opportunities for youth of color leadership, Salisbury's (2021) second tenet in sharing power with youth in schools. Themes from the YPAR team's research also clamored for increased youth engagement, as students wanted student-led space, conflict resolution, and to engage with deep inquiry such as, "What stops conflict resolution in schools?" They built a case for opening The Purple Room as a youth-designed healing space. They worked with the wellness coordinator, equity coordinator, youth program manager from community education, some teachers and staff, university researchers, and were supported by school administration. This multilevel collaboration with varied adults moved research-based findings to an opportunity for action.

The third tenet in sharing power with youth is about the buffering that is needed from adult co-conspirators. Buffering practices include protecting youth from unrealistic timelines, racist criticisms, and defensiveness from unsupportive staff (Salisbury, 2021). In addition to being supportive of youth, some adult leaders who were involved in the development of The Purple Room created buffers for students. Sometimes that meant keeping certain adults away from meetings. It also meant having honest conversations with school administrators. At times, “the practical implications for [work as an administrator] started to get in the way of the process of youth leadership.” At one point Ryan paraphrased what he said as a buffer in a meeting:

It’s not about what you can do. This is a process, to let young people make choices for themselves and let the community see those things. It’s a much bigger project than just getting something up and running because it’s an action item on your list.

Young people will do work in a different way and with a different pace, especially in creating norms and culture for a space. It is a gift for administrators to have critical friends and youth advocates within a school community. Likewise, it is important—and can be unusual—to have administrators who trust and share power with their staff, who then help to push/guide both trust and sharing power with students. This multidimensional, youth advocacy approach to creating change in schools is pivotal when repositioning youth as school leaders.

Can Everyone Engage in Healing?

Conditions that created potential to engage healing in this urban school relied on the distribution of power from administrative leadership and the equity-driven engagement of a YPAR team. This school, like too many others, was a nearby site to the recent police killing of a young Black man. Within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, and continued protests, the school community had been increasingly conscious of the need for more mental health support for students. Gaining community and grant-based support was also helpful for public awareness and accountability. Beyond the context, however, we take the time here to explore what else we can learn about the part that restoration, resistance, and reclamation (Ginwright, 2015) play in this work toward healing justice.

The Purple Room could be considered a restoration project stemming from youth research and design, made tangible inside of a school. Restoration “involves actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning, and purpose” (Ginwright, 2015, p. 39). With an interracial group of YPAR team members who had been working together for years, they were able to create a shared purpose that supported the aches of their own stories and the experiences of other students yearning for a healing space. The purpose of The Purple Room aligned with the YPAR team’s research findings as well as school priorities; the collective work in young people creating the design, the norms, and the rollout restored meaning and purpose to their work while contributing to the collective well-being of students. One of their norms stated, “Be mindful of everyone in the space.” Mindfulness and well-being went beyond an individual need toward a collective responsibility. One YPAR member reported:

I feel like a lot of kids don’t know exactly what mental health is or how to express themselves. I know in the Black community where I grew up, a lot of people don’t know how to express themselves. They don’t really go to therapy . . . therapy is looked down on in my community specifically because it can break up families, so people don’t seek those mental health resources.

Normalizing mental health, including in Black communities, was named by young people and began to be a goal closer to realization.

Prior to restoration, however, there was necessary disruption. In the spring of 2021, during distance learning and vast COVID-19 community needs, a police officer killed 20-year-old unarmed community member Daunte Wright. The police department is kitty-corner to the school’s backyard; protests and state-sanctioned community harm from tear gas, flash-bang grenades, rubber bullets,

and curfews ensued. How were students allowed to heal through this continued community trauma? Resmaa Menakem (2017) writes about healing on an individual level as mending, working through unprocessed trauma in one's own body. He also recognizes the potential in "mending our collective body," a concept to ground a group, which can take place through community activism. The school responded by organizing a large, ongoing community distribution center. During that time, the YPAR team planned and led a school-based day of protest by providing a time to speak up and a space to gather with students and staff. The social action of the rally and protest fueled the desire to claim space for community and for healing. That feeling continued through the YPAR team's initial research and the recommendation to set up a healing space within the bounds of the school; something youth-centered that was not a classroom. When hegemony and racial violence persist, then disruption must as well, when collective healing is a goal. What might happen in The Purple Room if this contextualized history and the memory of Daunte Wright is erased? If race is flattened and the needs of students of color are not centered? If participation in the room is threatened as a loss of privilege? Continual analysis and disruption will be an important part of the potential for collective healing.

The question of reclamation remains. How did The Purple Room project grow capacity "to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine a possible future" (Ginwright, 2015, p. 40) with youth at the center? First, the reclamation of youth decision makers within school leadership and the development of a healing space was an important model. Three adult coordinators in the building spoke about the project as a "mediated space" between and with adult and youth leaders. Second, the opportunity for youth to design a space within the school meant that there was enough trust for youth to define not only youth norms, but adult norms for the Purple Room. Some adults were reticent about the room's expectations, even those who had been named as allies or "safety nets" by young people. However, adult participants were surprised. More than one adult resonated with this comment: "It's a really good energy ... we didn't know that we also would feel so re-centered in this space ... We are benefitting from it. ... it's what we need too." Healing and identity work is needed for youth and adults alike (Ginwright, 2015). Starting with a youth research team that engages with school leadership, spilling over into a youth-driven protest, and designing a youth-led healing space, those were seeds for reimagining school futures.

Conclusion

The development and the potential of The Purple Room offers two elements that are not often accessible in schools: shared power and space to engage with healing. Thich Nhat Hanh writes (2020, p. 57):

To me, a meditation center is where you get back to yourself, you get a clearer understanding of reality, you get more strength in understanding and love, and you prepare for your reentry into society. If it's not like that, it's not a real meditation center. As we develop real understanding, we can re-enter society and make a real contribution.

The Purple Room may not be a meditation center, but it may become a youth-centered healing space where students can gain clarity of self and strength of community before re-entering school or where they can access resources to repair harm. Healing justice seeks both (a) collective healing and well-being, and (b) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place (Ginwright, 2015, p. 38). This can be challenging work for school leadership because it can mean admitting harm, and acknowledging those stories from youth, in the first place.

Community-engagement and trust, across varying levels, is key to YPAR. In school, YPAR was not a project for its own sake; it was tethered and accountable to a school and broader community. The YPAR team wasn't distanced from adult leadership. They were not a singular check box for youth voice. Administrative leaders leaned on equity-driven engaged research, including with school employees, university researchers, families, and youth. This YPAR team compensated youth leaders who guided discussions with adults and other youth; they were utilized in decision making and built into the community design of a school.

There are implications for multiple levels of community-engaged administrative leaders working with youth and YPAR teams. For adult leaders who are already in critical conversations about relationships, trust, and power, then sharing power with students is not such a stretch; however, there will always be adults to coach along the way. We are interested in seeing how administrative leaders prioritize structures in which young people of color are valued and prioritized to lead toward social justice, even when it may be easier or quicker to have someone else do the work. We wonder where The Purple Room will go next. An outdoor space? How will the memories of this work carry on? The Purple Room is a legacy and a hope that will take continued commitment with a new team of young people and adults working together who are willing to engage in both resistance and healing toward sustained change.

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