A “civic opportunity gap” marks the experiences of many young people living and attending school in urban communities. These youth frequently experience a disjuncture between the civic ideals of the United States and their day-to-day experiences within the civic institutions that shape their lives (Abu El-Haj, 2007, 2015; Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007b). This is compounded by a paucity of meaningful civic education experiences in their schools (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Youth participatory action research (YPAR), in which young people investigate and act upon issues of concern to them, is one means to bridge this civic opportunity gap. Although it can take a variety of forms, in general, young people conducting YPAR projects identify issues and problems within their schools and communities, learn tools of inquiry, and conduct research with the goal of informing and affecting these problems (Rubin & Jones, 2007). Projects address a wide diversity of student-generated concerns (e.g., school lunches, lack of recreational opportunities in the community, theft in school, uniforms, treatment of immigrant students) and frequently culminate in presentations to audiences that can include peers, teachers, family and community members, university students and educators, and relevant professionals. Research has shown that through YPAR, youth can gain a sense of civic empowerment as they discuss, investigate, analyze, and speak with authority on issues that affect their lives (Abu El-Haj, 2009; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Rubin, 2012).

This is encouraging news. However, this type of civic learning requires teachers to skillfully empower student leadership, design and implement complex curriculum and pedagogy that draws upon the knowledge that students bring to their classrooms, and understand the larger structural inequalities framing students’ encounters with civic life (Rubin, 2012). Unfortunately, teacher education programs do not generally emphasize the cultivation of such capacities. The 2004 Advancing the Civic Mission of Schools Report notes that preservice programs “seldom help aspiring teachers learn to foster students’ civic learning”; such programs “rarely demonstrate interactive teaching strategies that encourage students’ participation, although these dynamic approaches are known to engage students’ interest, and few programs provide strategies to help teachers manage classroom conversations about important civic matters” (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004, p. 9).

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Abstract
This article considers how youth participatory action research (YPAR) can be used to build the civic teaching capacities of preservice teachers working in urban settings. In the final semester of an urban-focused teacher education program, preservice teachers led YPAR programs in the urban schools in which they student-taught the previous semester. This article analyzes what preservice teachers learn through the process of YPAR. Specifically, we found that YPAR supported teacher learning in three areas: cultivating student-centered teaching practices, observing and documenting students’ strengths and capacities, and developing new understandings of the structural inequalities that shaped the lives of the students in urban schools. Drawing on data collected over the past 6 years, we argue that leading children and young people in participatory action research projects can contribute to the creation of the transformative civic educators so sorely needed in urban settings.

Keywords
equity, field experiences, urban teacher education, social justice, preservice teacher education

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Research about YPAR has typically explored it as a method for empowering youth (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Fine et al., 2004; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2008; Morrell, 2004; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). This article instead considers how YPAR can be used to build the civic teaching capacities of preservice teachers working in urban settings at all grade levels and in all subject areas. In the final semester of an urban-focused teacher education program co-directed by the first two authors, preservice teachers (also referred to as “fellows”) led YPAR programs in the schools in which they student-taught the previous semester. This article analyzes what these preservice teachers learned through the process of facilitating YPAR. Specifically, we found that YPAR supported teacher learning in three areas: cultivating student-centered teaching practices, observing and documenting students’ strengths, and developing new understandings of the structural inequalities that shaped the lives of the students in urban schools. Analyzing data collected over the past 6 years, we argue that the experience of facilitating YPAR can help new teachers become civic educators who are able to leverage students’ strengths and concerns, and create transformative educational experiences in urban settings.

Urban Teacher Education and the Civic Opportunity Gap

Urban Teacher Education

Research on preparing teachers for urban schools suggests a need to design programs addressing the specific conditions of teaching and learning in urban contexts (Carter Andrews, 2009; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014; K. Schultz, Jones-Walker, & Chikkatur, 2008). This call for specialized preservice teacher education acknowledges that in cities across the United States, the majority of schools serve students whose lives bear the brunt of unjust economic and political policies that marginalize people from low-income communities and communities of color. The idea that teachers need specific preparation for urban schools has generated a wide range of responses, from the development of programs such as Teach for America to targeted preservice education in university settings, and much debate about what specific preparation is needed.

Early approaches to the question of how to best prepare teachers for urban settings focused primarily on educating candidates to be more aware of the relationship between their own cultural backgrounds and those of the students they serve, and to design more culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (e.g., Cochransmith, 1995; Irvine & York, 1995). Recent approaches focus more directly on helping new teachers understand and address the structural inequalities underlying urban education (Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Aronson & Anderson, 2013; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014), while also learning about and drawing on the strengths and capacities of students, families, and communities (Carroll, Featherstone, Featherstone, Feiman-Nemser, & Roosevelt, 2007).

A number of innovative approaches (see, for example, Abu El-Haj & Rubin, 2009; Matsko & Hammerness, 2014; K. Schultz et al., 2008) shift away from viewing urban teacher education as a process of teaching preservice educators about differences between cultural groups toward one of preparing them to resist deficit discourses about urban communities. Such approaches highlight training new teachers to address “opportunity gaps” — structural constraints on achievement (Carter & Welner, 2013); to recognize the knowledge and strengths that children and their families bring to the table; and to learn to teach in ways that can be characterized as student-centered and constructivist. These approaches may also extend beyond “socially just pedagogies” that “ensure all youth have equitable opportunities to learn” to transformative “social justice pedagogies” that “provide opportunities to question, challenge and reconstruct knowledge” (Moje, 2007, pp. 3-4).

Civic Learning in Urban Schools

Young people face a disparate landscape in relation to their rights and experiences as citizens (Abu El-Haj, 2007; Levinson, 2012; Maira, 2009; Nygreen, 2013; Rubin, 2007b). A spate of high-profile cases of police abuse of the rights of people of color coupled with activist response from the African American community and allies has brought this issue into the public eye, revealing long-standing differences in the civic experiences of youth of color, particularly in urban settings (e.g., Coates, 2015). Civic education researchers note the ramifications of these disjunctures between the stated ideals of the United States and the daily civic experiences of youth of color, both in and out of school, for the development of empowered civic identities. Compounding these disjunctures is a documented “civic opportunity gap” — a lack of access to high quality civic educational practices for young people in underserved settings (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009; Levinson, 2012).

YPAR has been identified as an effective means for engaging young people in critical, applied, and authentic civic learning, as cited earlier. Built on the understanding that civic experiences take place within an inequitable society, YPAR encourages young people to directly engage with questions of inequality that are often sidestepped in traditional forms of civic education. Apprenticing young people into the practice of critical research, YPAR can build on disjuncture, transforming civic education into a means of empowering students to analyze their circumstances and take an active role in relation to their concerns. This is in line with social justice pedagogies that “offer possibilities for transformation, not only of the learner but also of the social and political contexts in which learning and other social action take place” (Moje, 2007, p. 4).

Developing Urban Teachers as Civic Educators

Teaching for critical civic learning and active citizenship calls for a complex array of competencies that often escape
attention in preservice urban teacher education programs. These include the ability to draw on knowledge, experiences, and strengths students bring to the classroom; facilitate student-centered learning; and lead discussions on difficult and contentious issues (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2009).

Teaching for critical civic learning also calls for knowledge of the ways that larger structures of inequality shape civic learning in urban settings, as described above.

Numerous studies examine the use of YPAR as a means of promoting civic empowerment for youth living in low-income and racially minoritized communities (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Nygreen, 2013; B. D. Schultz, 2008). A few consider the relationship between YPAR and the development of teacher identity (Mirra & Morell, 2011) and teachers’ ideas about curriculum and pedagogy (Caraballo & Hill, 2014). Our project addresses the use of YPAR in preservice teachers’ development as civic educators in urban settings, considering the following question:

How can YPAR be used to cultivate new teachers who can provide learning opportunities for engaged, active citizenship, for young people living in contexts marked by injustice and inequality?

Method

Context: Training Urban Educators to Be Civic Educators

The Urban Teaching Fellows (UTF) program at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, has, for the past 6 years, offered an intensive 18-month residency in urban schools to a self-selected group of students from across all of the teacher education programs. Abu El-Haj and Rubin designed the program to take a “capacity-oriented” approach to teacher education organized around three principles: understanding the structural conditions affecting teaching and learning in urban schools, developing systematic ways of learning about their students’ strengths and capacities, and learning to create curriculum and pedagogy that draw on young people’s knowledge and experiences (see also, Barton, 2012; Epstein, 2013).

A core component of the urban fellows program is a YPAR project run by preservice teachers in the final semester of their teacher education program, directly following their completion of student teaching. Although all of the teacher education programs at the university emphasize a student-centered, constructivist approach to learning, the urban fellows are all enrolled in an additional seminar in which they learn how to design, implement, and reflect upon YPAR. This seminar provides a place for the urban fellows to extend their teaching competencies and learn to navigate classrooms emphasizing student empowerment. During this final semester in the program, the fellows return to their student-teaching sites in teams of three to five to lead a semester-long after-school program in which they teach their students how to conduct research on a student-selected school or community issue. Free from the constraints of standardized curriculum and assessment, fellows are able to teach in new ways, and the student-centered, critical, and capacity-oriented pedagogy of the university seminar models the approach fellows are striving to achieve as they facilitate these projects. At the end of the semester, the program hosts a daylong event at the university for all the participants. The campus visit culminates in an event during which students present their research projects to an audience of peers, family members, school personnel, and university students and faculty.

Fellows learn to design and implement YPAR through an iterative process between the seminar and their work with students in schools. The seminar is structured to model curriculum and activities similar to those that they will be teaching. It begins with fellows designing and implementing their own mini-PAR project on an issue they identify in their school community; they learn what it takes to develop a question, design research methods, analyze data, and think about change. Modeling the expectation for YPAR pedagogy, each class period begins with a community-building activity—an activity for which fellows take responsibility after the first few weeks. Fellows write an overall unit plan for YPAR, which is continually assessed and revised in light of what happens during the after-school program. This revision process gives fellows practice writing flexible curriculum that is responsive to student learning.

In seminar, fellows try out aspects of the curriculum (e.g., leading community activities or designing interviews) and discuss specific issues as they arise. A central component of the seminar is a child/adolescent study that utilizes the descriptive inquiry process of the Prospect Center for Education and Research (Himley & Carini, 2000). This descriptive inquiry offers fellows practice in phenomenological observation that supports them to see children’s and adolescents’ strengths and abiding interests in broader terms than is typical in schools, and to consider these as a starting place for teaching and learning. Fellows also read academic research about YPAR (e.g., Cushman, 2008; Fine et al., 2004; Kwon, 2008; Rubin & Hayes, 2010; Stoudt, 2009), and each week, we consider the political nature of this work, as the fellows make connections between the texts they are reading and what they are doing in their schools. Building on historical and sociological understandings of racism and structural inequality developed in a course in urban education that the fellows take in their first year in the program, the group considers how the problems identified by their students reflect deeper structural inequalities embedded in communities, discussing how they might support critical, analytic dialogue about the issues at hand. The seminar’s assignments, readings, activities, and discussions all focus on building fellows’ capacities to recognize and draw on the strengths and capacities of their students, think about inequality from a structural (rather than individual deficit) model, and consider how they
can design educational experiences that draw on the knowledge and resources that exist in their schools and communities.

**Host Schools and Preservice Teachers**

Over the past 6 years, 91 UTFs have graduated from the program. They have interned in eight public urban elementary, middle, and high schools and taught more than 500 students in the YPAR program. Fellows are placed in high-poverty schools serving, almost exclusively, African American and Latino students, where they teach in math, science, social studies, language arts, world languages, ELL (English language learners), special education, and general elementary classrooms. To challenge preservice teachers’ preconceptions about students, and to support them to learn about students’ strengths and capacities, we explicitly encourage them to recruit a wide range of students to participate voluntarily in the YPAR program, taking care to include students from a variety of academic tracks and with different labels (“special education,” “ELL”) and students the fellows described as challenging for them during their student-teaching experience.

**Data Sources and Analytic Procedures**

Rubin and Abu El-Haj have been collecting data on the program since its inception in 2009, focusing on preservice teachers’ work with their students in urban classrooms and their intellectual and reflective experiences in the program. The data set includes blogs and reflections (51), surveys (55), and curricular materials gathered from the 91 preservice teacher education students, a group that included 65 women, 26 men, 47 White students, six African American students, 15 Asian American students, 21 Latino students, and two students of Middle Eastern descent. Recognizing the power inherent in our (Rubin and Abu El-Haj) relationships with our students, we collected class documents and surveys only after the semester was over, and had a third party conduct interviews.

During the spring 2014 semester, two graduate students, Authors 3 and 4, joined the project as researchers, and we focused more intensively on two of the after-school projects: one in a high school and one in an elementary school. The decision to have graduate students be the participant observers and conduct the interviews reflected a recognition of the problem of power and authority inherent in our positions as co-directors of the program, and in Abu El-Haj’s case, instructor of the seminar. In 2014, in addition to collecting data from class discussions, student blogs, and assignments, the graduate assistants were participant observers in these two projects, taking field notes on 17 of the YPAR sessions run by the fellows in their assigned schools. They also conducted two 45-min, semi-structured interviews with each of the 10 preservice teachers in those two schools, at the beginning and the end of the program, to better understand the fellows’ experiences, including key challenges and insights, and to identify shifts in their thinking about the students and their communities. The graduate student researchers were partners in developing the research questions, data collection plan, and all protocols. Although YPAR was the subject of this research, the research project itself was not a participatory action research project. The experiences of the youth participating in YPAR were not the focus of this particular analysis; no data were collected from them, and they did not take part in planning the inquiry. Neither did student teachers participate in study design, data collection, or analysis; their focus was on learning to teach and on completing the many demands of their full-time teacher education programs.

Grounded in a critical, interpretive approach attentive to the socially constructed nature of learning amid larger structures of inequality, this article draws on our data analysis across all sources (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Mehan, 1992). Through an inductive process designed to “allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data,” the team worked together to generate a large number of codes (77) through multiple readings and open coding of the data set, beginning with the data collected prior to spring 2014 (blogs, interviews, and surveys) and then proceeding to the classroom observations and interviews conducted by the graduate student researchers (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). We sorted the codes into categories (e.g., pedagogical practices, YPAR process, student-centered instruction, authority) informed by our research questions, and wrote memos on major themes (e.g., wrestling with the balance between guidance and freedom, grappling with structural inequality, seeing students’ capacities) that we identified across data sources. We used the collaboration-enhancing Dedoose software to code and memo, which, once the data were fully coded (and all data were coded by at least two team members), greatly facilitated our exploration and analysis of this extensive data set by allowing us move easily across and through all data to identify themes and patterns. We discussed emerging themes, refined codes, and collectively analyzed data in team meetings. Our major themes, described below, are triangulated across varied forms and sources of data.

**Findings**

Our analysis illustrated three primary themes about teacher learning through the YPAR process. First, while leading students in YPAR, a more radically student-centered approach than was typically permitted in the fellows’ student-teaching placements, fellows developed their skills as practitioners of student-centered learning, wrestling with the difficult and essential balance between guidance and freedom. Second, preservice teachers were able to focus their attention on what students knew and could do—on their strengths and capacities as knowers and learners. Finally, YPAR created opportunities for the fellows to develop their understandings of the
relationship between structural inequalities and the issues faced by their students. In what follows, we explore these interwoven aspects of leading YPAR and their connection to preservice teachers’ development as urban civic educators.

**Developing a Student-Centered Approach:**

**Learning to Balance Guidance With Freedom**

The civic concerns of urban students are frequently neglected in traditional forms of civic education, as described earlier. A student-centered approach that foregrounds these concerns is both vital and infrequent in urban settings (Kahne & Middaugh, 2009). Due to the curricular constraints and pressure to prepare students for standardized tests that prevailed in their student-teaching placements, for many fellows, facilitating YPAR was their first real experience in tackling a truly student-centered form of teaching—one focused on civic issues identified by the students. As they learned to design and implement a curriculum driven by student interest, a central challenge that the fellows faced was the balance between guidance and freedom in two areas: facilitating a student-centered classroom and scaffolding the research process.

**A different kind of teaching.** Working with students through the YPAR project gave fellows an opportunity to do a different type of teaching than they had in their student-teaching placements. Although their university courses had emphasized student-centered teaching, given current curricular and assessment mandates in urban public schools, their student-teaching placements were often not conducive to such practices. Rebecca reflected in an interview that YPAR

> honestly was my first big experience of just seeing genuine student-led activity, because it was completely in their hands. I really liked it. Because everyone [in the GSE] is “student-led, student-led,” but they don’t actually tell us what that is . . . It was nice being able to actually see something.

Leading YPAR projects also gave fellows experience with putting students’ lives at the center of the learning process. As Lourdes shared, “with student teaching you are focused on your subject and that’s it. In student teaching you want to relate it to their lives, and sometimes it’s a stretch, but here, it’s present throughout.” Terry concurred on the importance of YPAR for learning to teach, saying, “Honestly, I think it is something that should be available to all student-teaching candidates . . . GSE should give all preservice teachers the opportunity to run a YPAR.” Leading YPAR allowed fellows to put student-centered teaching, essential for civic learning, into action.

Constructing and implementing a curriculum focused on students’ interests and experiences were new undertakings for the fellows. Throughout the YPAR project, fellows listened to students and allowed them to direct the flow of activity in ways that were very different from how they had guided students during student teaching. Lourdes described the differences as “listening to students more. What they want to do and how they feel things should go.” In some cases, this experience led fellows to discover that students had more to contribute than the fellows initially believed. In her blog, Cathy wrote,

> The group’s question is “why are school uniforms mandatory and how do they affect student morale?” Although I am personally not thrilled with this question and was slightly nervous initially that it just wasn’t “deep” enough, after listening to what they had to say today, I think it could actually lead to some interesting conclusions.

Similarly, Steven wrote about his concerns that his students’ desire to focus on the physical appearance of their school was “a little off base.” Each year, fellows expressed concern that students’ topics were not deep enough, not developmentally appropriate, or too big to handle.

These anxieties provided openings for fellows to consider how teachers might reach deeper understandings of their students’ concerns. For example, when students at the elementary school chose the topic of cyberbullying, fellows initially wondered whether this was relevant to the lives of these young children or whether it was “just something they heard about on TV.” Encouraged by our seminar discussion to take an inquiry stance toward this topic, fellows found out that their students had, indeed, experienced some cyberbullying, and also that they wanted more information about what constituted this type of bullying. With this new understanding of their students’ central issue, fellows were able to fully engage with the YPAR project that their students had chosen. The fellows learned to co-develop curriculum in conjunction with students’ interests and concerns, a teaching approach that is critical for meaningful civic learning.

As fellows!learned to implement a more substantively student-centered curriculum, however, they wrestled with the balance between guidance and freedom in two specific areas—classroom management and curricular scaffolding.

**“Managing” the student-centered classroom.** In a traditional classroom, the teacher is responsible for students’ behavior, in particular for ensuring that students adhere to expectations around classroom decorum and productivity. However, when leading a YPAR group, fellows had to figure out how to accomplish these tasks while sharing authority with students. Especially at first, preservice teachers drew on practices with which they were already familiar, such as requiring students to eat their snacks in silence and posting Do-Now assignments at the start of their after-school activities. Fellows facilitating the elementary group in particular relied on traditional techniques for classroom management, struggling with how much noise they were comfortable with, and how to get students’ attention. They tried traditional strategies...
emphasizing teacher authority: using a wand that made a chiming noise to get the group’s attention, using a call-and-response technique, holding up two fingers in the “peace” sign, and playing music in the background, instructing students that they should always be quiet enough to hear the music. Fellows tried to motivate students with accountability to teachers rather than to their peers, such as Jessica telling her students, “this will be collected” about an assigned “quick-write.” Despite the voluntary and non-graded nature of the program, early in the semester, fellows relied on more teacher-focused techniques they had learned during student teaching to manage and motivate students.

Fellows were simultaneously striving to realize a new vision of teaching in which students had more control. As Linda explained the first meeting with her students, “We’re going to be helping you, but you guys are going to be the leaders of this.” Finding balance between letting students take charge and directing their activities was difficult at times. Terrie commented in her blog:

Low point was somewhere in between when we needed the surveys to be done and the interviews to get done. Morale decreased. Frustrating—couldn’t tell the kids they had to do this, because it was voluntary, but didn’t want to flip flop. Hard to find the balance between getting them to do the work and not have it seem like homework.

The seminar was a critical space within which fellows could consider these quandaries. Through both modeling and explicit discussion, the instructor asked students to think about alternatives to dominant approaches to student “behavior” and “motivation” in classrooms. Fellows wrestled with envisioning this new model of shared authority. Jessica asked whether it was “okay” for her to tell the students not to draw so much on TV during their group discussions, saying she did not want to silence anyone. Leading YPAR gave fellows an opportunity to think through how their stance as authority figures in the classroom shaped students’ authentic engagement in the research process, pushing them to share leadership with students, a skill essential to youth civic learning.

**Scaffolding the research process.** A second area in which fellows struggled to balance guidance with freedom was during the research process. “Student-centered” pedagogy does not imply a total lack of structure; rather, teachers must determine which structures enable student participation, and which restrict student participation. As Linda explained, “It’s just like this push and pull where you have to go in at the right time and come out at the [right] time.” During the YPAR projects, fellows were told to let students take the lead; however, figuring how to balance this requirement with the need to support students’ effective use of research tools and methods could be difficult. This was a frequent topic in seminar discussions, blog posts, and interviews.

This dilemma was visible in the elementary school site as young students attempted the unfamiliar research process. For the first several weeks of YPAR, most of the fellows’ activities were designed to lead students toward predetermined processes and answers. These sessions included putting the steps of YPAR in order, categorizing questions as “thick” or “thin,” and practicing observation skills. When facilitating discussions, they relied heavily on leading questions that they believed would get the students to the “right” answers.

Victoria was particularly concerned with how to get students to achieve an adequate level of rigor in their research and had difficulty relinquishing control. As she supervised students conducting interviews, she continually leaned forward, whispering into the ear of the interviewer, making suggestions for what they should ask next. She tried to direct her group’s qualitative analysis of interviews, expressing her frustration when they lost focus rather than reading and highlighting the transcript. “You have to read the transcripts and they didn’t want to read,” she explained in an interview.

One just underlined random things. One just underlined one page. There were so many interviews and you didn’t listen to every single interview so you have to read them . . . Once they highlighted it I told them, “Now go online and go onto the Google Doc and type them out so you get to see what everybody says.” Some of them didn’t even type all of them out and I had to do it.

Victoria represents one end of the spectrum in the struggle between providing guidance and allowing freedom.

At the other end of this spectrum were times when the fellows either hesitated to provide guidance or were not sure how to do it. One group of students, for example, was working on creating a survey without having ever looked at a model. When one of the researchers asked Luis, who was overseeing that group, whether it might be helpful to explain the concept of a Likert-type scale, he answered that he was not doing that because “the kids have not suggested it.” Responding to feedback the group had gotten from the program coordinator after she visited their after-school program, he felt he was “letting the kids get in there and figure it out,” as she had suggested. During students’ small group discussions, fellows struggled to know how much to direct the conversation. Rebecca exclaimed to one of the researchers that the kids are often saying such interesting stuff, “I don’t know when to cut them off!” These dilemmas provided rich material for the seminar, allowing students, together with a more experienced mentor, to deeply engage with the difficult issue of how to balance freedom and guidance for students.

The fellows also displayed skill as facilitators and guides, as illustrated in the following field notes excerpt:

They begin interviews: one girl interviews another, while a third videotapes. The remaining girl, [preservice teacher] Linda, and I all watch. Once they finish, Linda asks, “What else can we do with the questions? Do we have to follow them in order, or . . . ?”
The girls say, “No,” and one girl says, “We could ask why.” Linda agrees and says, “So let’s do that in the next one.” A girl suggests saying, “Oh, really? Tell me more.” Linda asks what else they need to think about based on the video they watched. The girls remember that the background noise was loud, and the video was moving a lot.

In this instance, Linda found a balance between providing guidance and keeping students directly engaged by facilitating their reflections, helping students to become better interviewers through coaching rather than didactic instruction. Rebecca also used scaffolding when helping to prepare her group for the presentation. As she listened to them talk through what they wanted to say, she made a general guide on a white board. During the second run-through, the students largely kept to their initial points, but they also noticeably looked at the poster Rebecca made, although she said very little about it. The last two presenters, in particular, seemed to use it to figure out what had not yet been said. In this way, the content of the presentation was largely up to the students, but Rebecca supported them in keeping their thoughts organized.

For this group, receiving feedback from the UTF coordinator midway through the semester seemed to play a significant role in their learning. Following a visit to their YPAR group, she advised them to let students “get their hands dirty” and take a more active role. Subsequently, they largely shifted from a more teacher-centered classroom to one in which students were taking primary responsibility for the project. Many of them reflected on this shift in their final interviews. As Linda put it,

I think we have to figure it out along the way because at the beginning we were planning every step of every day. I don’t think we realized that we were hand-feeding them the information . . . I think I learned the most during the last few weeks when we were actually doing things with them . . . and just seeing that they got a lot more out of it when they were doing instead of us telling them what to do, actually getting their hands dirty doing it.

Leading the YPAR project provided a context within which the fellows could explicitly engage with and reflect upon how to balance the teacher guidance and student agency that are both essential to meaningful civic learning.

Reconceptualizing the teacher’s role for active civic learning. Overall, the process of doing YPAR provided an opportunity for the preservice teachers to explore and even revise their understandings of the teacher’s role in the classroom, a change necessary for meaningful civic learning. Lourdes explained,

I think to sort of not focus so much on teacher-centered teaching and letting students learn on their own and guide their own learning, and you can interrupt when you need to guide them, but letting students run with it and see what they can produce.

Student teaching, you focus on being up there and being the dominant person in the room, but sharing that space is important, and it’s something I feel more comfortable doing now.

Similarly, Luis explained, “we scaffolded how to research . . . we didn’t do that for them, we gave them the tools for that. Looked at good surveys and better surveys, asked them the difference, they decided. They evolve in the process.”

The moments of success in the YPAR process seemed pivotal to the preservice teachers’ reconceptualization of their role. Cathy reflected in her blog, “It was a bit of a challenge to stand back and really let them lead the internet investigation, however I am glad that I did because as I said before, we got some great results!” Luis saw what young people could learn from each other, impressed by, “[h]ow powerful group work is. How kids can collaboratively work in groups, then move them to a big group, then get together as a class . . . They learn more from each other sometimes.” This changed his view of his own role; it solidified my idea of facilitation. The idea of the teacher in the back, giving students the tools and having students nail it to the wall. We give them the hammer, the nail, tell them the function, and they can nail it anywhere on the wall.

For developing a student-centered approach to civic learning in which students play an active role, this kind of such a reconceptualization of teachers’ roles is essential.

Learning to See Students’ Strengths and Capacities

Teaching for civic engagement in urban settings requires that teachers be able to see and draw on students’ strengths and capacities—as engaged, knowledgeable, and empowered individuals. In designing the YPAR project to be an integral part of an urban teacher education program, we intended to create a space that would build opportunities for the preservice teachers to observe students’ strengths and capacities. Over the course of the YPAR project, our data show that the fellows began to describe their students in ways that were different from what they had observed about these same students during the student-teaching experience: as engaged, motivated, and internally driven; as experts on their own experience; and as capable of leadership.

Changing conceptions of student engagement. The YPAR project offered the fellows an opportunity to think in new ways about student engagement. Deficit views of urban students as disengaged learners are unfortunately prevalent in many schools (e.g., Lipman, 1998; Rubin, 2007a; Valencia, 1997), and the fellows often encountered these perspectives during their student-teaching experience. During YPAR, however, fellows observed students committing to their ideas and projects, working hard, and staying focused. Many of the fellows
reconsidered their previous views of their students as unmotivated; as one fellow shared, she “discovered that many of my students were self-motivated.” Another described her students as follows: “They’re awesome. They’re capable of having these amazing, high level thoughts all on their own.” Another fellow spoke about her changing views about her first-year students:

The freshmen have definitely defied my expectations. They are still less mature and sometimes need more guidance to stay on task, but when they are focused the work that they are capable of is incredible. I had heard a great deal during my student teaching about how “horrible the freshmen behaved” and how no teacher wanted to be stuck teaching a group of freshmen. I can only speak to the students that I see in YPAR, but thus far these freshmen are eager to learn.

Teaching in the context of YPAR challenged negative generalizations about students’ immaturity and disengagement that permeate many school environments, particularly urban contexts. Fellows began to see qualities in students that had previously been invisible to them, shifting away from some of the deficit discourses they had encountered in their schools.

Many fellows also began to see that student engagement was, in large part, context-dependent. For example, one preservice teacher was impressed with “the ability of all of our students (some of who [sic] struggled during the regular school day) to display their leadership, passions, and hard work when tasked with a project they care about.” Another fellow described what she learned through closely observing one student over the course of the semester, as part of the seminar’s child study project:

The student I did my child study on, Jesus, I had him as a student in student teaching. I got to see him in a school setting, and after-school, doing something he loved. In an academic setting he was very shy, would call me over for response, was afraid to speak in class. In after-school he was very involved, always raised his hand, he did extra research on his own time, looking at videos of what [the city] used to look like. When [his group was] doing surveys of their peers, he realized some of the kids weren’t taking it seriously. He told them not to do it if they weren’t taking it serious. He stood up for it; [that was] different from in [school] class. It was the issue he could relate to. [This] goes back to the intrinsic motivation. Something they care about, they aren’t afraid to face their fears of participation.

This was, for the fellows, a tangible experience with the inseparability of curriculum and student engagement that is critical to meaningful civic learning.

Seeing students’ knowledge and expertise. YPAR helped the fellows see students as deeply knowledgeable about their own communities. As one preservice teacher noticed,

Students were VERY much aware of the problems/issues surrounding their community and wanted to do something to turn things around. Their awareness was surprising and it meshed well with all of our course readings in both the Urban Education and the Urban Teaching Professional course.

Rather than just reading about the idea that students were deeply invested in and knowledgeable about experiences and issues in their communities, preservice teachers were able to see this for themselves.

Fellows were also able to see that young people looked at complex school and community issues with an eye toward social justice. A preservice teacher reflected,

I was really surprised with the students and everything they had to say. They were talking about everything from tracking to issues of cohesion within the school itself in terms of bilingual and non-bilingual students, the community and its reputation. I was really surprised they were so aware and how they reacted. The bilingual issue, they thought everyone should be together, they didn’t see why there should be separation [referencing segregation of bilingual students in many schools]. You kind of turn your back on other students who are recent immigrants; I was glad they felt that shouldn’t be the case.

Through the YPAR process, this fellow learned that her students had deep knowledge about the issues facing their community and was surprised and pleased by the compassionate, inclusive stance the students held in opposition to the normative practice of segregating immigrant students in school.

Seeing new opportunities for students to lead and participate. Finally, fellows observed that the structure of YPAR pedagogy opened up new possibilities for students who were reticent in their school classrooms. As one preservice teacher pointed out, “Students who may have been shy in classroom settings are now taking charge of larger group work and speak excitedly during discussions.” Margaret reflected on the focal student she had chosen to observe closely over the semester:

She originally joined with her friend. Her friend was outspoken; she was quiet, and hung in back. I wondered if she was interested, was she only doing it because of her friend. All of us quickly found out that she did great in small group discussions; she had presence that gave her a leadership role. Her friend ended up dropping out, and she stuck with it. As it went on she felt more comfortable sharing in full group, and ended up being a prominent member.

YPAR allowed the fellows to see many students in a new light, as engaged group members who were capable of strong leadership.

Leila, an English as a second language (ESL) preservice teacher, observed the new opportunities YPAR provided for speaking English.

As an ESL teacher, I developed an even greater appreciation for my students and their determination to learn English and succeed in their new country. Seeing some of my former students push
themselves to interact with fluent English speakers during their YPAR sessions greatly impressed me. Witnessing one of my most recent immigrant students try her best to present in English to a collegiate audience is an image that I will always remember. I get goose bumps just thinking about it.

YPAR simultaneously created opportunities for children and adolescents to show what they knew and could do, and for the fellows to observe knowledge, skills, and capacities that their students had, but that were invisible in the context of typical school practices. Teachers need to be able to see their students as active and knowledgeable to create civic learning opportunities that empower students as civic participants. In urban settings, this is particularly critical, as students are often disenfranchised from civic life and seen by many adults as disengaged and lacking the skills necessary for civic participation.

Understanding Structural Inequality

Through leading their students in YPAR, preservice teachers came into direct contact with the issues of racial and economic inequality that marked their students’ lives. Such understandings are fundamental for urban civic educators, who will need to be able to both fully analyze the contexts of their students’ lives and also to help students grapple with the ways that inequality shapes their experiences. First, as the fellows read texts about YPAR in their seminar, they began to apply a critical analysis to the students’ situations, contextualizing their students’ concerns amid the structural inequalities that shaped their lives in urban contexts. Second, as they listened to their students’ questions and concerns, opportunities arose to move their students to think more critically about the root causes underlying these community problems. The data also illustrate that it can be difficult for some student teachers to sustain their structural analysis of inequality.

Learning to see inequality. Engaging with critical scholarship in their YPAR seminar provided analytic lenses through which the fellows could consider the broader societal conditions shaping their students’ communities and schools. Readings addressed issues ranging from the promise and complexity of YPAR and the challenges of organized social action to texts interrogating the very nature of structural inequality present in formal schooling and urban spaces. Karen’s weekly blog illustrates connections students made between texts and their experiences in urban schools.

We grew up in the NCLB era, where we have been conditioned to see the words “standardized testing” and “school” inseparable from each other. This is concerning for reasons illuminated in the text. If many new teachers see testing and other banking-model elements of teaching as the “norm” because it is what we grew up with, we are at risk for forcing the same type of education on our own students. One of the most intriguing points included in the Anderson [referencing Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007] text was its point about action-research being a political act. Conducting such research in such way provokes one to begin questioning what they are discovering. For instance, rather than simply accepting poor conditions teachers and students in urban areas are forced to endure, it could lead to both groups to ask: “Why do we have to face these conditions?” or “Why does our society passively accept this as the norm?”

Using seminar texts to analyze her experiences as a student growing up in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), this preservice teacher wrestled with the fundamentally political nature of teaching, recognizing that change would require that students and teachers interrogate the nature of societal inequality and resist “common sense” understandings (Gross, 2011) of inequality that blame students, teachers, and families for the conditions and outcomes of urban schools.

Course readings also prompted fellows to rethink their hesitation to open up discussion with students on difficult and controversial topics, one of the hallmarks of excellent civic education (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2004). As Maria explained, On Tuesday, I remember having misgivings about identifying major problems in [NJ city], worrying that trying to answer a single question would only open up a whole can of worms, which could ultimately discourage students and make them feel hopeless. Cushman [referencing Cushman, 2008] refutes this hesitation. Students will embrace the complexity of their community’s challenges, and will deny the existence of a simple solution. They are in constant conflict with stereotypes assigned to both themselves and their community. These students will take any opportunity to prove that their situation is more complex than how the stereotype portrays them.

Maria’s initial concern that opening up conversation about community problems could reinforce a sense of hopelessness or self-blame among students reflected a common worry expressed by many fellows. As fellows recognized that “solving” problems was unlikely to be possible given the deeply entrenched structures of inequality, they began to imagine teaching students to embrace complexity, resist deficit framings of people and communities, and move continually toward change.

Working with students also helped the preservice teachers to more clearly see how the inequalities that shaped urban contexts were instantiated in students’ learning experiences. In a blog entry, preservice teacher Chuck reflected that I was helping one of my students set up her essay for college applications, yet she had little to no knowledge of how to set up a framework for what she was going to write. While I was helping her set up a simple graphic organizer to help collect her thoughts, it became increasingly clear that despite the fact that she had been taking 2-3 English [sic] classes a day for the past 3½ years, nobody had ever bothered to teach her how to write an expository essay. She blamed herself for this, despite the fact that she openly acknowledged that she never had a teacher who...
had taken the time to go over something that I take for granted on a regular basis. If you want to talk about greater social inequalities, I say the conversation starts here: poor and working class urban students often think that their schools are messed up because of them, even before they enter the building.

In this passage, rather than blaming his student for the difficulties she was having in writing an essay, Chuck connected her confusion to a flawed school system in which a student could reach her senior year in high school without acquiring critical academic competencies. Chuck speculated that students in the school where he student-taught and led YPAR blamed themselves rather than institutional failings for their lack of solid academic preparation, believing “that their schools are messed up because of them.” Through the blog assignment in the seminar, Chuck had the opportunity to question and reflect upon a central aspect of normative deficit discourses about urban schools, the tendency to blame students for the failings of the system. A critical part of teaching for meaningful civic learning in urban settings is identifying and building on the strengths, capacities, and resources of students, their families, and their communities. Problematizing deficit discourses about urban contexts is essential to this process.

*Learning to support students to develop more critical, structural analyses.* As fellows developed critical perspectives about the structural aspects of racial and economic oppression, many began to feel it was their job to address these issues more directly with their students. They also wanted to teach their students to name and analyze the issues they identified as embedded in structural conditions, rather than blaming individuals, families, and communities for the problems they identified (such as violence, addiction, and crime).

In the first weeks of the YPAR program, the fellows led students in small and large group discussions to identify school-related issues and community social problems that they wished to research. At the most basic level, addressing the structural inequalities that undergirded the topics students raised meant simply allowing certain conversations to be heard, and not silenced. For example, in one of the first meetings of the after-school program at an elementary school, children were discussing possible issues in their community that they might want to investigate. Field notes describe a student discussion about researching issues facing undocumented community members:

Jessica [a fellow] makes an effort to clarify this issue, saying something about people who “might get kicked out.” A boy asks, “Kicked out of the house?” She clarifies that she means kicked out of the country. A girl calls out, “My mom crossed the border.” [The preservice teachers mention after class hearing one kid say to another, “You’re not supposed to talk about that!”]

A bit later, a girl calls out, “Is it okay if your mom crossed the border?” Luis [a fellow] intervenes, saying that he’s noticing people looking around to try to figure out whether to stand up [to vote in support of doing research about undocumented community members]. Luis acknowledges that this is a sensitive issue, but emphasizes that this is a community, and it’s okay to stand up.

Although, Luis and his colleagues worked to create a classroom climate in which the children could talk about any issue of concern, they also knew they needed to think carefully about opening up topics that might put some children and families at risk. Luis and his peers brought this issue to our university seminar, asking whether and how they could ethically engage the issue of documentation given that some of the children had, for good reason, been taught to hide their family’s immigration status. The fellows felt confident that if the children chose to pursue this topic, they would be able to guide the process in such a way that individual families’ privacy would be protected. In the end, however, the children decided to pursue another topic instead.

Learning to teach critical perspectives and to interrupt deficit discourses about schools and communities was difficult and complex. As students in the YPAR program explored their school and community concerns, they grappled with the nature and origin of these problems. Fellows often tried to guide these conversations in ways that unearthed the structural nature of some of the students’ concerns. A discussion among students, all Latino, in the high school YPAR program illustrates how students sometimes blamed their communities for the problems they identified.

Andrea: It [the city, Mt. Historia] used to be all White people and it was really good, then the Latino people came and messed it all up.

Marisol: My boyfriend lives in Hope Springs [a nearby middle-class, majority White community] and his family doesn’t lock the door. He has a bunch of car protection devices when he comes to Historia like it’s a spaceship. [He says that he heard] “Mt. Historia was the ghetto.”

Jesus: I mean . . . they do steal cars.

These students, like many others, brought to YPAR theories regarding the nature of the social problems that in public discourse had come to define their community and others like it, mainstream political narratives that reduced explanations of urban inequality to the individual actions of people of color living there.

However, these moments also offered fellows opportunities to critically explore their students’ underlying assumptions about the issues at hand. As the discussion above continued, Chelsea, a fellow, attempted to historicize some of the students’ negative descriptions of their community. Field notes describe this exchange:

A Latina student says, “Mt. Historia is a bunch of good teachers and bad students. My mom won’t tell people I’m from Mt. Historia, she tries to be general and says that we’re from the
Crestview area (a nearby middle-class suburb).” Another student continues, “Latinos ruined Mt. Historia when they came; it was better off before when it was White people.” Chelsea interrupts, injecting some history. She says, “Really this community was segregated; Whites over here, Italians over there, and Jewish over here.” This sparks another Latina student to reflect, “Yeah, it was like . . . still bad back then.” Then a Black male student says, “Actually, things are getting better. Mt. Historia is average.”

By redirecting the tone of the conversation, Chelsea added complexity to some of the students’ deficit narratives about the school and its new Latino community, interjecting a perspective on the community’s long history of different forms of segregation. This provided an opening for a student to counter his peer’s negative judgment of their community.

Chelsea’s co-facilitator, Eva, encountered a similar situation when she solicited students’ thoughts about their community.

Eva: You said you have a negative view, why? Selina: When you live near Hispanics it is so loud and I used to live in Blinkston near White people. It’s not like that but when you live near Hispanics it’s so loud. Eva: This is a very densely populated city. There are only 4 square miles and over 50,000 people. Mt. Historia is 5 times the state average of people per square mile. This is the attributes of cities—is that they have a high population density.

Eva offered her understanding of urban settings to challenge the stereotype that Latinos are uniquely or culturally loud. Her comments revealed the structural nature of a social issue that typically becomes racialized in mainstream discourse to criticize immigrants and people of color, offering an alternate perspective on the spatial-structural design of urban topography.

Not every fellow was as successful at seizing opportunities such as these to help students make more critical, structural analyses. During a small group discussion, described in field notes, a high school group facilitated by Mike was tasked with discussing the issue of teen pregnancy in an effort to narrow down proposed topics of inquiry.

A few of the more vocal students made fun of their female peers at Mt. Historia high school who they say, “get pregnant and are irresponsible” and “they keep opening their legs and then they just give it to mom or grandma to raise.” They continue and someone suggests parents are the problem. Mike responds, “Good, we’re already breaking it down. Parents don’t care, why? Because their parents had them . . .” Mike says, “I want you to talk about why teen pregnancy is bad and what is making it ok.” Revealing the difficulties of guiding YPAR students away from cultural-deficit framing, in this conversation, the students, together with Mike, began pathologizing generations of Latinas. Reinforcing students’ assumptions and beliefs about teen pregnancy, Mike did not take this as an opportunity to help his students think more systemically about the issue.

The process of leading YPAR while also engaging in reading and discussing critical texts created opportunities for fellows to observe and analyze the ways that their students’ lives were framed by structural conditions, not simply characteristics of individuals and families. At the same time, YPAR offered the fellows a way to work with their students to speak back to the constraints, and to see opportunities to work toward social change. This does not mean that the fellows always saw the structural conditions embedded in school and community issues, nor did it lead easily to teaching practices that supported children and youth to think differently about their communities. These ways of seeing and teaching are complex and not necessarily linear. However, YPAR opened up opportunities to think and teach in new ways.

Conclusion

Civic learning in urban settings is complicated by the civic disenfranchisement of urban communities. However, young people learning in urban schools possess a wealth of experience to draw upon if given an opportunity to engage in authentic civic inquiry. YPAR, by mobilizing students’ strengths, capacities, and insights, putting students at the center of the learning experience, and engaging with issues of structural inequality, is a means by which new teachers might develop the capacities needed to be civic educators in urban settings. YPAR is a “social justice pedagogy” (Moje, 2007) that goes beyond providing an equitable civic education, instead aiming to create transformative civic learning experiences that help students to interpret, resist, and creatively address the forces that affect their lives. This analysis suggests that YPAR can be a powerful tool for helping preservice teachers learn to practice social justice pedagogy. Although we cannot make claims about whether what the fellows learned as preservice teachers continued to influence their practice as teachers, we do know that, inspired by this experience, a number of program graduates have gone on to start YPAR efforts in their schools.

This research suggests future avenues for inquiry to explore the process and potential of YPAR as a tool for social justice teacher education. Fine-grained research into preservice teachers’ learning processes, centering on their work within the seminar while leading YPAR, would provide insights into how new teachers develop understandings of structural inequality, civic engagement, and student-centered learning. A comparison study with new teachers who were not leading YPAR could clarify its role (if any) in this process. A follow-up study of program graduates, both those who initiated YPAR projects at their new schools and those who did not, would illuminate the potential impact of the YPAR experience on new teachers as they move into their careers. For different and revealing insights into the experience of leading and participating in YPAR, future studies could be designed to include student teachers and students as co-investigators. These projects
would advance our understandings of the process of preparing teachers to be critical civic educators who grasp how structural inequality affects schooling, are adept at student-centered pedagogies, and hold capacity-oriented views of students.

From this analysis and through our work in this program, we have come to understand that learning to teach in these ways is difficult, complex, and uneven, and must be explicitly learned and practiced. To close the “civic opportunity gap” for urban youth, teachers must learn to allow students to take the lead in their own learning, view their students as capable, and understand how students’ lives are shaped by structural inequality. Unfortunately, as both K-12 schools and teacher education programs are progressively more driven by external, standardized measures of accomplishment, there may be fewer opportunities than ever to cultivate such understandings and approaches. By leading YPAR projects within the structure of a program that allowed them time to read, discuss, and reflect, our preservice teachers built some of these complex skills and understandings. Although leading YPAR does not magically transform preservice teachers into seasoned critical civic educators, it does engage them in considering and addressing in their practice complex aspects of social justice pedagogy for civic learning in urban classrooms.

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