

# From Youth Activism to Youth-Powered Curriculum

YoUthROC<sup>1a</sup>

Abigail Rombalski<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Minnesota

## Abstract

*How do youth move in an uprising? Members of YoUthROC, a BIPOC-centered, youth-led research group with young people from both the university and the community, reflect on creating a youth-powered curriculum that processes years of activism and inspires young people to use teaching as a way to create change in their communities. To ensure the relevance of their curriculum to the current needs, strengths, and curiosities of young people, the YoUthROC team wrote and collected autoethnographies, cataloged historical artifacts, analyzed social media, and conducted public focus groups and Instagram spotlight interviews during a year of uprising and unrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Results from this research include the following themes: the centrality of collectivism, internal and collective self-determination, and young people's already-existing commitment to analysis and change. Educators, adult activists, and youth need to see that young people are central to social movements and are already contributing profoundly to anti-racist, anti-oppression work. This reflection and YoUthROC's ongoing work is for young people eager to engage in activism, teachers looking to create authentic student-centered classrooms, and adult researchers ready to learn from and create with youth researchers.*

**Keywords:** student organizing, collectivism, social movements, YPAR, student-centered lessons

This paper is written from the experiences of youth activist researchers who have worked together on a team—YoUthROC—over several years. YoUthROC is a group of predominantly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) community members and university-connected youth researchers committed to racial justice in education in Minneapolis, Minnesota.<sup>2</sup> All of the members of YoUthROC are connected through our ties to North Minneapolis through the University of Minnesota's R.J.J. Urban Research

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence can be sent to Abigail Rombalski, [romba005@umn.edu](mailto:romba005@umn.edu).

<sup>a</sup> With contributions from Amina Smaller, Shaunassey Johnson, Eva García, Savannah McCullough, Nhia Chang, Karla García, and Yasmin Smaller

<sup>2</sup> Shaunassey is a Black woman who graduated with an African and African American studies major and with her M.Ed. in 2023; she is now teaching Social Studies. Amina and Savannah are both Black women who work in schools and are completing their undergraduate degrees in education and psychology, respectively. Eva and Karla both identify as Latina women. Eva is a recent graduate with an undergraduate degree in Political Science and minors in Spanish and Chicano Latino Studies. Karla recently started her undergraduate program. Nhia is a Hmong man who is finishing his undergraduate degree in education as well, and Yasmin is a Black woman who graduated high school in 2023. Abby is a middle-aged white woman, mother, and organizer. Abby, Shaunassey, Amina, and Savannah are YoUthROC co-founders.

Outreach-Engagement Center. Through our different lived experiences as youth and activists, we've become passionate about educational and community change to center BIPOC youth. As we began to get to know each other, it was clear that in that middle-grey<sup>3</sup> area of youth, we were interested in how our experiences in school, youth programs, and activism shaped us and our life trajectories.

For BIPOC youth, activism has been a historical and persistent component in schools and communities. Youth engagement in organizing continues to grow (CIRCLE, 2018) and youth of color “have been organizing for the right to courses that prepare them for college, for better educational funding, and for a resolution of other social justice issues like an end to police violence and mass incarceration of their peers” (Anyon, 2014, p. 158). Just as our team did not often see school as a youth-centered space, we did not get to learn about activism within schools. Nonetheless, we often participated in and learned from local activism.

Thus, our 2020 research goal was to track local and historical youth organizing and activism to understand it better. We used the information from our findings to generate youth-powered curricula for social action that centered collective experiences of young people and their/our place in social movements. We argue that such a localized curriculum would re-engage students in their education in a way that traditional curricula and teachers cannot. In this paper, we start by reflecting briefly on the authors’ local activism. Next, we explain our methodological approach to researching youth activism. Finally, we outline key research findings that we used to create categories within a curriculum for social change (to be available on our website).

### **Reflections on Local Student Organizing**

In the Twin Cities of Minnesota, youth organizing has critically contributed to local activism. For example, youth thrive as comrades in organizations such as the Black Disability Collective, Youth 4 Ethnic Studies, and other formal and informal groups. Below, three YoUthROC members reflect briefly on local activism in years past.

Nhia: Years ago, students at Patrick Henry High School wanted to change the name [of the School] because the name does not represent the diversity, assets, and values of the students. This is more than history, of course, it sucks going to a school that is named after a slave owner, but this is also about the fight against white supremacy that is still well alive in our nation today. It is also about the power, curiosity, and strengths of youth. [Though it was a Black-led effort], I signed petitions, raised awareness through social media, and even engaged in difficult conversations with my parents who may not necessarily understand white supremacy or racism. Personal experiences with creating youth-powered organizations and the #ChangeTheName campaign made me realize that there is

---

<sup>3</sup> Middle-grey is a term Shaunasey created to describe young people ages 18 and 24 who are still learning and growing as youth, but people don't necessarily consider them so.

an importance of not always staying in the lines.

Savannah: I started research and activism at a young age. I didn't know what it was at first. I just knew I was pissed off, and I needed to do something about it (like the #Changethename campaign). Once I started voicing my opinions and speaking out about the issues, doors began to open, and I had people backing me up. I definitely wish I had YPAR guidelines and structures to help me out at the time because things could have been more organized, and we would have done a better job involving other youth and reaching out to our own community.

Shanassey: The most memorable student-led activism I remember attending was Racial Justice Day in 2016 (Rombalski, 2020). It was during my sophomore year in high school, and Abby invited me. I was in a place where students, teachers, [and community organizers] were interested in activism and it was cultivating space that I liked a lot. Students seeing people like them [leading] helps other youth envision themselves doing it.

Youth involvement in local activism over the past five to ten years, including growing the movement for Black Lives Matter, deeply informed the Twin Cities' ecosystem and reaction to the murder of George Floyd. At the time of our study, our city was burning after Darnella Frazier, a young Black woman, filmed the police murder of unarmed community member George Floyd. As a group, our participation and research into youth-led activism allowed us to understand youth participation more deeply in these movements. We found that some youth wanted to contribute to change but needed to receive the education and support necessary to join the movement. Alternatively, youth involved in activist movements were at the helm of so much action happening in our city, but their contributions were continuously erased from many narratives. Young people and youth activists are the living truths that need to be amplified. So, in the summer of 2020, we asked, "How do youth move in an uprising?"

## Researching Youth Activism

### Our Methodological Approach

Our guiding research question led us to investigate our own actions, the reflections of other young people, and the histories of elders when they were young (Lozenski, 2017). Our methodological approach included writing autoethnographies from the summer of 2020 (Camangian, 2010), gathering artifacts from public youth organizing social media accounts and from local historical and global events with youth organizers, and conducting public focus groups and Instagram spotlight interviews. We organized artifacts into spreadsheets and reviewed and analyzed the data sources using open-coding. Our initial codes included the following ideas (among others): *collectivism*, *education*, *rebellion*, *callout/accountability*, *systemic challenge*, *whiteness*, *community building*, *intergenerational connections*, and *victories/demands met*. Then, we used a framework provided by Diaz-Strong and colleagues (2014) whose research with undocumented or formerly undocumented youth organizers gave us the following deductive codes: self-

determination, collectivization, radical movements and analysis, and intellectual and dynamic work. Through ongoing analysis we synthesized themes--described in the rest of this paper—and used them as a guide to produce a web-based localized curriculum by, for, and about youth in social movements.

### **Toward Youth-Powered Curriculum for Change**

Our curriculum includes workshops and lessons based on the four major themes: collectivism for growth, healing, and change; internal and collective self-determinism; radical movements and analysis; and intellectual and dynamic work. Lessons also attended to three guiding questions: How do youth move in an uprising? How do young people impact social movements? How do youth find their place within a movement? Materials, activities, and resources on the website included examples from young people; they were created or vetted by members of the YoUthROC team and youth from other schools, colleges, and organizations, with the goal to connect and sustain each other while growing youth-centered social movement work in schools and other spaces.

#### ***Collectivism for Growth, Healing, and Change***

The first theme identified in our analysis was the centrality of collectivism. Collectivism is the deep understanding that kinship and strong relationships are the center of critical activism work, and we can only move towards our shared purpose with a village to lean on. Angela Davis (2020) wrote, “When ordinary people join together to create movements, they make change happen. We join social movements in order to transform our relatively powerless individual selves into a great collective self.” Social movements are grounded through collective response to trauma within a system we experienced as an ecology of grief. Collectives made us and sustained us. For instance, during the uprising in Minneapolis in 2020, youth grew personally and in their activism work through collectivism, or the sense of being together, to heal and create change. Social movements are grounded in collective trauma within an ecology of grief, trauma, and healing. Youth participants expressed a range of emotions within this ecology, including pain, joy, love, and comfort. Further, social media was used to extend community during the COVID pandemic. Creating or sharing art together expressed community needs and trauma as well as created kinship and joy.

The workshops featured on the website offer a variety of lessons that demonstrate how social activism centers collectivism. For example, the website contains several lessons that address efforts to prioritize community care and youth wellness over policing in schools (No2SROs) and lessons that address collective learning and action about Indigenous land back activism and writing land acknowledgments. Although we do not yet have a workshop on mutual aid, we do have related resources about the topic. For example, across our interviews on Instagram live, we saw persistent and collective effort towards mutual aid<sup>4</sup> in the community, especially led by Black and brown youth. Through

---

<sup>4</sup> Mutual aid is when the community all works together to meet each other's needs and turns inward to your community for resources. It can look like helping folks pay bills with financial donations, feeding the community, supply drives and even just giving people rides to and from community spaces.

this curriculum, we hope that young people can learn together by practicing collectivism in their activism.

### ***Internal and Collective Self-Determination***

The second theme we identified was internal and collective self-determination. In our observation of local uprisings and demands, we learned that self-determination was both internal and collective; it happened inside oneself and with others. For instance, young people “want more access to ethnic studies and to learning about themselves and others so that they can thrive and feel whole” (YoUthROC, 2022, p. 18). Through this process of young people creating content to be used directly in classrooms, we continually learned about the power of self-determination to shape and impact external goals, internal transformation, and collective movements.

As an example of self-determination, we will discuss the work of an art activist, Karla. Karla was a high school senior who created an art piece that critically examined the lack of diversity in her private high school compared to her city’s demographics. When creating and finding a public place to display her art, she was met with adult discomfort, which prompted her to create a website as a navigating space for students to explore a lesson about art activism.

Karla: My school's restrictive response to my art piece inspired me to create a lesson about the role of youth in Art Activism...The goal of my lesson is for youth to understand the distinction between activism and art activism, as it has been blurred. I also want youth to see concrete examples of youth using art for social change. It was amazing, powerful, and inspirational to see so many youth fighting for what is right through art. It was also difficult to center youth voices. In my research, I found many examples of youth activism being overpowered by adult voices whether those adults were supportive or critical of youth art activists.

As noted in Karla’s recount of her lived-experiences, self-determination is central to youth in social movements. Self-determination can be internal, reflective, and collective, and it guides youth in finding their truth and path. To find their truths, youth may follow Karla’s example by learning about local histories, identifying cultural values and issues, and demanding accountability (callouts) within greater communities to lead to change. Paths to solving societal issues and sustaining social movements include creativity and action. In this study and in these lessons, youth learn about self-determination to navigate themselves, systemic issues, and to determine their futures.

### ***Youth are Ready: Radical Movements and Analysis***

Just as Karla was engaged in self-determination to critically analyze her school demographics to create art activism, we witnessed other youth learning about and analyzing radical movements in schools, communities, and on social media. Just as youth engage in a variety of radical social movements that impact their communities’ future, they are ready social and historical analyses to be centered in self-generated classroom lessons. To this end, Shaunassey examined the histories of various activist movements and

used an intersectional analysis to create a youth movement-centered, historical lesson for YoUthROC's website.

Shaunassey: I am a Black fat young adult who lives in North Minneapolis, I have done work around YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research) as well as organizing work. I stumbled across a Teen Vogue article (Stitt, 2020) about an Anti-Racist Action Network in Minneapolis and was interested in talking about anarchism and its grassroots connections. I believe a better understanding of non-normative (to the US) ways of organizing like anarchism and communism are important to unpack in accessible ways. The goal I have is for students and teachers to have an entry level introduction to anarchism that is "unbiased". The best thing was going through and reading about anarchism. I have always been interested in more direct forms of abolition. Anarchism is a broad term, and I had to figure out a way to explain [its broadness] while also narrowing it down to the type of anarchism I am teaching about.

In Shaunassey's historical lesson, participants watch a video, describe a scale about types of anarchism, and analyze direct, indirect, and restorative actions. Additionally, participants explore how music and pop culture are linked to anti-racist action networks like the one in her lesson. YoUthROC's curricular website features more workshops like Shaunassey's that address some histories of youth in social movements, including a lesson that high schooler Yasmin wrote about the analytical concepts of women of color feminism and womanism.

Youth involved in social movements are ready to analyze power and connect with others about their ideas. Radical movements stem from youth's ability to channel emotions, including anger, into action. Young people analyze and vocalize their wants, critiques, and demands for change. Their instincts and social norms to center community and those most marginalized, including young people, amplifies innovation within historical and revolutionary movements.

### ***Intellectual and Dynamic Work***

Even if the work that young people do is intellectual and dynamic, they do not always recognize it as such. As young people participate in protest and in workshops, it takes intellectual contributions, self-efficacy, and a responsiveness to change. For Amina's workshop, for example, she searched for resources created by young people on the topic of racial battle fatigue. She noted initially having trouble obtaining information from a youth perspective. Yet, young people were dynamically creating content all the time. She listened to her sister to find content from TikTok and continues to receive ideas from other youth.

Amina: I am a learner, educator, and researcher from North Minneapolis. I began my journey in education justice during my senior year of high school through YPAR...I was introduced to other education justice folx around the Twin Cities and was eager to be a part of those communities. In the last year Black and brown people have experienced a lot of collective trauma, which is why a lesson about

Self Care and Racial Battle Fatigue felt especially important. There is so much work to be done, but it cannot be done if our communities are unwell...Can my wellness come first? Audre Lorde wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Knowing how to care for ourselves is essential in this work. The best thing about creating this lesson was how much I actually learned during the process.

Amina’s goal in creating her workshop was to prioritize self-care and spread awareness about the physiological effects of racism and racial battle fatigue. Through her lesson creation and reflection on the content and activities, she allowed her own self-care to take shape as well. Young people deserve to see their contributions as intellectual and to recognize their willingness to change and grow—to be dynamic in the way that social movements need—as a gift.

In Amina’s lesson and further research about youth in social movements, youth engaged in political education and cross-cultural conversations. They attributed this process to continual intellectual learning. The dynamic, shifting work associated with social movements was exhausting and necessary. Youth were met with a number of obstacles, including negative adult-youth relationships, racial capitalism, and white supremacy. Youth used their power and relationships to stay flexible, to respond, to research, and to strategize, which we hope young people can do through the curriculum as well.

### **Concluding Thoughts and Continued Learning**

Youth have the power to do anything beyond measure!! Youth can always be part of creating or co-generating experiences for the classroom (Emdin, 2016), including about youths’ role in social movements. Our research on youth activism efforts showcased what young people were already doing, locally and historically. Additionally, youth deserve the opportunity to engage and grow these liberatory concepts and practices: collectivism for the purpose of growth, healing and change; internal and collective self-determination; radical movements and analysis; and intellectual and dynamic work. Our youth-powered curriculum tool include guides and resources that center collective youth action. Young people should be trusted to teach and to organize. To try, to lead, to fail, to overcome, and to succeed. YoUthROC’s curriculum<sup>5</sup> for social change was built by youth, for youth, specifically BIPOC youth and others who can push against systemic oppression in the education system. The education system is very white and denying the culture of students and families causes spirit murder, which strips BIPOC youth of their joy and humanity (Love, 2019). Finding something that makes BIPOC youth feel important, and feel like education is important, is necessary. We hope that the curriculum can spark interest and even strike a nerve in pushing towards racial and social justice because young people are—now—changing the world. Youth are the past, present, and the future. In social movements

---

<sup>5</sup> Future access to our curricular website can be found here: <https://sites.google.com/umn.edu/youthpoweredcurriculum> or through our team’s website: <https://youthroc.umn.edu/>

across America, youth have pushed for change, led movements, marches, and protests, and advanced into new roles. Youth are not waiting for adults to take action, YOUTH are already impacting change in their own communities, rising up from history, tragedies, and current events, concepts, and questions. They have bright ideas, creative minds, and great energy to shape a better world.

### ***A Final Note to Teachers***

It may feel a little strange to not be in full control of the classroom or learning process, but your students are gaining agency over their education. That's a beautiful thing to witness. Listen to your students. Even if you just include a small portion of what matters to them, it goes a long way. Give them space to creatively engage, co-collaborate, lead, and speak their truth. You will learn from them. This might be the first time that people learn about some of these ideas or historical events, and that's okay. This may be the perfect catalyst for creating change and fighting against systemic injustices that they have experienced in their own lives. By engaging young folks with the themes in this paper as well as with critical social issues and culture (Leonardo, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2021), we hope adults and youth can share perspectives and collaborate to act on what they learn together.

### ***A Final Note to Youth***

“Always advocate for yourself and what you believe in. Educate yourself on that topic and see what you can do to help better that cause.” –Yasmin (YoUthROC). Through this paper, we encourage you to act as collectives, to determine your futures, to be public intellectuals and to do dynamic work inside and outside of social movements. Together, power your own curriculum. Through the website, explore who you are and create what you want to see in workshops, like localized ethnic studies histories on the streets that run next to our schools, and sometimes the names of our schools. If you really care about some of the lessons on the website, great. But maybe it didn't fit the way you wanted it to. We hope that you create your own workshops and share them, because if you have little siblings, cousins, nephews, nieces, you want the education system to change for them. We can move forward together towards the social justice that we need.

## References

- Anyon, J. (2014). In *Radical possibilities: public policy, urban education, and a new social movement* (pp. 150–159). essay, Routledge.
- Camangian, P. (2010). Starting with self: Teaching autoethnography to foster critically caring literacies. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 179–204.
- Davis, A. (2020). March 1, 2020, in Lambert’s “‘History is made by ordinary people.’ Activist Angela Davis headlines Change the Status Quo Conference.” Cal Poly News. California Polytechnic State University.  
<https://www.calpoly.edu/news/history-made-ordinary-people-activist-angela-davis-headlines-change-status-quo-conference>
- Diaz-Strong, D., Gómez, C, Luna-Duarte, M., & Meiners, E. R. (2014). “Out for Immigration Justice: Thinking through Social and Political Change. *Youth resistance research and theories of change*. (Eds. Tuck & Yang). Routledge.
- Emdin, C. (2016). *For White folks who teach in the hood... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Beacon Press.
- Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2007). Youth activism in the urban community: learning critical civic praxis within community organizations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(6), 693–710.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390701630833>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). I’m here for the hard re-set: Post pandemic pedagogy to preserve our culture. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 54(1), 68–78.
- Leonardo, Z. (2004). Critical social theory and transformative knowledge: The functions of criticism in quality education. *Educational researcher*, 33(6), 11–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033006011>
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Lozanski, B. D. (2017). Pedagogies of black eldership: Exploring the impact of intergenerational contact on youth research. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 19(2), 65–75.
- Rombalski, A. (2020). I believe that we will win! Learning from youth activist pedagogies. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 50(1), 28–53.
- So Much for "Slacktivism": Youth Translate Online Engagement to Offline Political Action*. Circle at Tufts. (2018, October 15). <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/so-much-slacktivism-youth-translate-online-engagement-offline-political-action>
- Stitt, A. (October 5, 2020). “The anti-racist action network fought police, kkk in 1990s Minneapolis.” In OG History from *Teen Vogue*.  
<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/anti-racist-action-history-minneapolis>
- Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014), Eds. *Youth resistance research and theories of change*. Routledge.
- YoUthROC (Eds. A. Rombalski, A. Smaller, & S. Johnson). (2022). A YPAR Project Magazine about Centering BIPOC Youth. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/226603>.