Creating College-Going Culture Through Middle School Student Led Youth Participatory Action Research: Unity For Change, Believe In Us!
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Abstract
Student-led middle school youth participatory action research projects were undertaken to increase the college-going climate in two middle schools. Students engaged in participatory dialogue, surveys, and action-based school-wide campaigns. The survey findings demonstrate that the majority of youth aspire to finish high school, and go to college, yet lack resource and role models to guide them on a successful academic track. Throughout the project youth identified the need for schools and teachers to support college-going culture among all the students in the school not only among those who had high grades. They felt particularly strong about not giving up on the peers who were not performing well in school. Our findings demonstrate how supportive and positive social relationships with peers can increase college-going attitudes. Results also provide insight into mechanisms through which youth can influence school climate to increase college-going attitudes.

Background
- Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory argues that school contexts are important for youth development. As such, school climate is important to successful academic outcomes. Previous research often overemphasizes individual factors while not considering school-level context.
- Positive and college-going school climate and positive peer relationships are associated with better academic outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Kahnlou & Way, 2014; Lynch et al., 2013).
- Increased awareness about positive school engagement and college aspirations is one way to address social and economic inequities of poverty among Mexican descent and Native American youth (Croninger & Lee, 2001).
- Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) increases better educational outcomes through youth-led research that leads to action strategies at the school level (Kahnlou & Wray, 2014). YPAR is a youth-led strategy that focuses on youth participation in research strategies that lead to action to create change in youth-identified problems in their schools or communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Fundamental to YPAR is the believe in collective efficacy of groups that can come together to collectively create change.

Methods
- YPAR Process:
  - Youth identified their vision for solving school-level problems.
  - Youth engaged in participatory dialogue, youth-led survey research, and action-based school-wide campaigns to improve school climate and college-going messages. They met regularly with university researchers who guided the YPAR process.
  - Youth created their own questions and administered surveys to 371 of their peers. They also created artwork and their own t-shirts for the project to gain visibility. They created their own videos with their vision and the survey research. School-wide pep rallies were held to share their videos and research. Students shared results with principals. Student subcommittees were created in each class comprised of (1) surveys (2) video/poster/music (3) pep-rally (4) t-shirt committee.

Results (cont.)

Table 1: Analysis of students’ post-project reflections about the YPAR projects in both schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflections</th>
<th>Finding values and goals</th>
<th>Fighting for what you believe in</th>
<th>Taking responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding values and goals</td>
<td>Taking responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting for what you believe in</td>
<td>Helping community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking responsibility</td>
<td>Contributing to positive changes</td>
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Note: The students expressed a sense of responsibility and a sense of belonging throughout their participation of the YPAR project. Some students highlighted their motivations to pursue their dreams through education. Many students realized how important it is to stay connected to school, and be responsible to empower themselves and their future.

Conclusions and Implications
- Key findings show that youth who participated in YPAR felt more empowered, more autonomous, and they learned skills to communicate their school experiences. They felt that they were realizing the importance of education as a passage to pursue their dreams.
- Positive peer relationships and collective efficacy to create change are fundamental to improving school climate.
- Providing opportunities to discuss and learn about the systemic challenges inherent in poverty and school-level problems is essential to building hope based on critical thinking, or critical hope (Duncan-Andrade, 2005).
- Collective sense of critical hope at the school-level contributes to positive school climate, supportive peer relationships, and academic success among youth of color.

Figure 1. Results from Youth-led Survey on the Importance of High School to Middle School Students

Figure 2. Youth-led Survey Results about Important of High School Graduation

Figure 3. Youth-Led Survey Results about the Number of Role Models who went to College and Graduated.

The authors thank Helen Education Foundation, the Arizona Community Foundation, and the Frances McClelland Institute for Children, Youth, and Families.