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“I want to know about everything that’s happening in the world:” Enhancing critical awareness  
through youth participatory action research with Latinx youth

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the impact of critical pedagogy when practiced with urban Latinx youth to develop critical awareness. This is a qualitative study that examines data gathered during a year-long youth participatory action research (YPAR) project that identifies and documents the learning outcomes achieved when core principles of critical pedagogy are brought into practice. Analysis reveals three themes around how critical awareness was raised: attention to current events, ethics of care, and challenging traditional curriculum.

The “Latinization” of schools in the United States (Irizarry, 2011) makes the Latinx population the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group. Despite growing numbers of Latinx youth within the U.S. K-12 education system, schools fail to provide culturally relevant, academically rigorous instruction for these students (Nieto & Bode, 2008), Latinos/as have the lowest rates of education, the highest dropout rates, and the largest groups of children living in poverty (Fry, 2010). These challenges are magnified by the lack of access to adequately resourced schools, leading to vast inequalities in educational achievements in the Latinx community (Conchas, 2006). This “Latinization” has presented challenges that have not been solved by educators and failing education reform strategies.

Little empirical work theorizes the possible implementation and adaptation of critical pedagogical strategies in urban contexts with Latinx youth, or examines the outcomes of such practices (Irizarry and Raible, 2011). This study examines the potential of youth participatory action research (YPAR) as an illustration of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) for Latinx youth to support their development of critical awareness. Findings advance the development of grounded theory in critical pedagogy and illustrate key outcomes of such practices.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review explores how critical pedagogy has encouraged teachers and students to work together toward liberation, how a humanizing critical pedagogy achieves the goal of generating critical awareness among the youth, and how YPAR has been used as a tool to empower students.

### **From Theory to Practice**

Deficit model frameworks and overemphasis on accountability have understated and ignored research that emphasizes how culturally, ideologically, and locally relevant curriculum has proven to be more effective in raising the social, academic, and intellectual development of marginalized students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). Duncan-Andrade (2007) claims, “we should be spending more time figuring out who [the students] are, and studying what they do and why it works” (p. 636). Such endeavor requires pedagogy and curricula that challenge the socioeconomic inequities that Latinx youth face, and that also develops a sense of agency for them to change those conditions.

For education reforms to be effective they must advance “pedagogies that prepare youth with the academic skills, critical sensibilities, and necessary social consciousness to transform their lives and the lives of others in their community” (Camangian, 2009, p. 30). Research has proven that accountability and academic achievement are attainable when critical pedagogies that build critical consciousness, solidarity, and community are used (Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Humanizing pedagogies, defined as those that are culturally, ideologically, and locally relevant to students’ lives, require attention and consideration by researchers and teachers who work with Latinx youth.

### **Toward a Humanizing Critical Pedagogy**

As a challenge to traditional systems of education, Freire (1970) advocated the idea of liberatory education that encourages the development of higher stages of consciousness through participatory methods that promote inquiry around issues relevant to the socio-political realities of people’s lives. Salazar (2013) claims that humanization, in the Freirean sense, is “the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world” (p. 126). Thus, education practices that

are humanizing examine and draw from the lives of urban youth, allowing for the construction of curriculum and pedagogy that reflects those lives (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008).

Such pedagogy encompasses Freire's (1970) conceptualization of humanizing pedagogy, an approach rooted in relationships between teachers and students as they go through a journey for "mutual humanization" (p. 51). Cannella (2014) found that a humanizing pedagogy affords students "a framework for envisioning concrete ways they can take positive action in the world every day" (p. 189). The practice of a humanizing pedagogy is not free of challenges.

Cammarota and Romero (2006) faced difficulties in encouraging working class Latinx youth to think critically, voice their opinions, and participate in the construction of knowledge. Their work corroborates the need to create opportunities for Latinx youth to "become more confident and capable of expressing their own opinions and engage in critical dialogue" (p. 308). Such dialogue is possible when students are provided opportunities to explore, question, and create new knowledge.

### **Critical Pedagogy and Critical Awareness**

Critical pedagogy is a civic, political, and moral practice that in its most humanized form provides students with the opportunity to become critically thinking citizens capable of engaging their cultural agency to pursue greater democracy through social and political change. This approach puts problem-posing at the center of education to allow "people [to] develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" (Freire, 1970, p. 83). A liberatory education strives to develop critical awareness and an intellectual identity that is vital for individuals' self-determination.

The development of a critical thinking citizen occurs when a student's level of critical awareness is raised, enabling the youth the development of more informed critical analysis of

their own communities and social contexts. Classrooms become spaces where teachers act as facilitators who guide dialogue and challenge traditional power relations. Students are encouraged to examine the production and reproduction of social disparities that exist in their social context. Such critical reading of the world requires “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 33). In our study, this critical reading and reflection of the world was a key component of the students’ experience through the integration of an English Language Arts class with YPAR.

### **YPAR as Critical Pedagogy**

Through YPAR, youth are encouraged to question and critique the social norms and dominant narratives that contribute to injustice and oppression. They realize that these norms are not natural, but rather socially constructed (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Tuck et al. 2008). By extension, they come to see that they are not to blame for the oppression that they face, and they have “opportunities to remake [their] own names, to be seen in the ways [they] desire to be seen” (Tuck et al., 2008, p. 81). In these projects, participation in YPAR pedagogy creates “changes of consciousness that allow the young person to perceive him/herself as capable of struggling for and promoting social justice within his or her community” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 10) and potentially challenging the material conditions that affect their educational experiences.

As a result of YPAR work, urban Latinx youth have come to develop identities leading to advocacy and action for social and educational justice. Mirra and colleagues (2013) argue that “schools serving low-income minority youth fail to provide them with the curricular learning experiences necessary to promote civic engagement” (p. 2). The lack of these experiences creates a disempowerment gap between people of color and white populations in terms of civic and political engagement, knowledge, and agency. To eliminate those opportunity gaps, we must

invest in efforts that value marginalized youth as active producers of knowledge and recognize them as change agents. The YPAR literature informed our work with the Latinx youth in the Our Literate Lives Matter (OLLM) class by providing models of how other researchers have pursued YPAR in different contexts.

### **Methods**

This study builds on existing knowledge about engaging urban Latinx youth in critical pedagogy and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to ask the research question: how do Latinx high school students perceive the impact of YPAR curriculum on their critical awareness? In order to answer this research question, the study drew upon a critical ethnographic approach. This approach emphasizes an investigation of oppressive structures as well as cultural norms within a setting by placing the researcher in the setting alongside research participants (Carspecken, 1996). Critical ethnography informed our research design's use of prolonged participation in the field (nine and half months), a critical theory-based framework (critical pedagogy/YPAR), and a focus on culture (specifically school and classroom culture/climate). Additionally, critical ethnography centered our inquiry on how the classroom space was constructed, shared, and navigated by the students and ourselves, as well as aligned with our emphasis on youth engagement for social change and justice (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2005).

### **Research Site**

Our study took place at Hillside Vocational High School (HVHS; pseudonym), located in the urban community of Hillside in the Northeastern United States. Approximately 24% of Hillside residents, age 18 or older do not have a high school diploma or equivalent certification. HVHS is categorized by the state as a Level 4 school, defined as being amongst the lowest



achieving and least improving schools in the state. Most of the students at HVHS come from low-income backgrounds, with many identifying as Puerto Rican or Latinx.

Our study was embedded in the OLLM course at HVHS, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts class facilitated by the authors of this paper, two faculty members and two doctoral research assistants. The course was taught every other day for 90 minutes over one academic year to a group of 15 students. The course included culturally sustaining pedagogies and literature as well as a YPAR component in which the students selected and researched topics impacting their community.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

Students were selected for participation in this study based on their enrollment in the OLLM class. The class is a coed group of fifteen students, with nine identifying as female and six as male. Thirteen of the students identify as Latinx, among other identifications including biracial and white. It was not possible to interview all thirteen students who identify as Latinx. This study specifically utilizes the interview data of three male and seven female students of Latinx descent. These students identified as Puerto Rican, Dominican, or Mexican/Puerto Rican. Our OLLM class was categorized as a pre-Advanced Placement course, meaning that all students in the course had passed the English Language Arts state examination.

Data for this article was drawn from the broader critical ethnography study that was conducted for approximately nine and half months (one academic school year). In alignment with this methodological approach, all four authors were immersed at the site and participated in multiple ways as teachers, researchers, and participant observers. We collected data via participant observations, individual student interviews, student focus groups, and students' photographs, written narratives, and reflections. This paper centers specifically on the 30-minute

individual semi-structured interviews with students conducted by the research assistants for the project (the first two authors on this paper) during the seventh month of the course, with other data used as supplementary for context and triangulation. The interviews focused on the students' experiences with the OLLM course, their participation in YPAR, and issues related to their critical awareness. All students were enrolled in the course since the beginning of the year, and thus were able to reflect on its cumulative impact.

### **Data Analysis**

First, the research team read the interview transcripts as a form of preliminary analysis to document initial reflections and interpretations as well as to identify guiding themes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Using an ethnographic item level of analysis, we then reviewed the interview data and our reflections to begin naming patterns (items) in the data that emerged from the students' narrative and to develop a set of inductive codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). We also used our theoretical framework and literature to develop deductive codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We generated initial codes independently, and then collaboratively discussed them to generate our codebook. We also engaged in pattern level of analysis, which involves organizing and connecting codes into broader thematic categories relating to cultural factors and participants' shared experiences (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Specifically, we focused on the OLLM classroom culture that was developed and patterns in how students perceived the classroom culture. Lastly, we used structural analysis to consider how the patterns identified in the data addressed our research question (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), which centered on participants' development of critical awareness.

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Several steps were taken by the research team to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We triangulated our findings by engaging in investigator or analyst triangulation (Denzin, 1978), and by placing our interviews in the context of the OLLM class and YPAR project. For example, interview transcripts were triangulated with other forms of data to confirm participants' narratives. This allowed us to triangulate our findings through multiple data sources to increase trustworthiness (Krefting, 1999).

Considering positionality and engaging in reflexivity (e.g., the process of self-examination and self-disclosure) are crucial parts of critical ethnography (Madison, 2005). We as researchers acknowledge that our identities intersect with the study and shape our perceptions of students' narratives. The research team included four individuals: two doctoral students and two faculty members. The two faculty members are Black American women and tenure-track assistant professors in education at a public land grant state university. One doctoral student is a non-U.S.-born Latino man whose first language is Spanish. The second doctoral student is a White American woman. We were not local to the Hillside community prior to the beginning of the study, nor do they formally work for the Hillside school district. We worked to ensure the trustworthiness of our data by engaging in reflexivity about our interpretations of what we were experiencing throughout the study and during data analysis.

### **Findings**

Data analysis revealed three major themes for how students gained critical awareness: attention to current events, ethics of care, and challenging traditional curriculum. Although the participants discussed a rise in their critical awareness associated with the YPAR class, a gap remained around how to enact change based on these ideas.

#### **Attention to Current Events**

Critical awareness of current events spanned both the national and local context, with the latter including Hillside High School and its surrounding community.

**National context.** For many participants, the class met a key priority to learn more about the world. Laura, in particular, shared that “I want to know about everything that’s happening in the world. That’s exactly what we’re doing.” These topics were not completely new to participants, but rather evident in their lived experiences. Sara noted that the YPAR course helped her support existing ideas. She had “always thought [racism] was wrong, it’s not fair. In the class, it helps me prove why it is not right.” For Mario, the school-to-prison pipeline helped him to unpack challenges around school discipline. He stated that he “didn’t know enough about it or the things that were happening in school. All I would see were videos of teachers hitting students.” After the participants went to a conference on the school-to-prison pipeline through the YPAR course, Mario was able to connect what he was seeing in media in a context of social systems. Before attending the conference, students accepted injustices as an inevitable part of life. These salient learning moments stayed with the students, often fueling their thought processes well beyond class. In one example, José noted the lasting impact of the video *Formation* by Beyoncé. The “Formation” single was released in February 2016 along with a video that challenged police brutality and injustice. He shared

Every once in a while [I] will see something about a cop or whatever and I’ll just think about [the video]. I’ll think about how she had that whole line of cops against that kid in that video. What she was trying to represent and what you actually see.

Through engaging with news stories and popular media, students were able to apply different analytic frameworks to the national environment in ways that showed new understandings and made connections with their environments.

While these topics drew student attention, participants struggled at times to make connections to ideas that they did not see as directly applicable in their lives. After a guest speaker talked to the class about crime, José noted that his experience was comparatively stable, sharing “I’ve done kind of a lot less risky things. I mean I never really do anything crazy.” Aileen often disengaged from class content to talk to a friend in the class. When asked about how these concepts related to her, she emphasized that she did not get into trouble, so the class content didn’t relate to her. Other students saw these broader themes as cautionary tales for their own lives. As Yvette described, the class “tells me not to do it because if I do, it shows me where I end up.”

For the most part, these national conversations had a deep impact on participants’ individual understandings and views of the world. Yvette noted, “my perspective before was different than it is now...every time I see a Black person working or I see a Hispanic working, it gets in my head. They’re not getting the same treatment as everyone else.” For Juan, this had a personal resonance with his experiences within education. He was in an altercation at school that resulted in suspension and connected the incident to the school-to-prison pipeline curriculum: “I felt like a statistic right there. Another Latino fighting with another Latino.” During the course of the YPAR course, our participants engaged in new ways with not only the national environment but also their place within it.

**Local environments.** The YPAR project focused on many local aspects at Hillside, bringing to attention topics such as school discipline and culture. Just as understanding national

events helped students provide meaning behind their experiences, discussing school culture helped students contextualize what they were seeing around them. For Mario, this change was from a deficit view of his community to an asset based one. He noted “it changed my opinion about [the Hillside community] because most everyone defines it as a wasteland where everybody doesn’t serve a purpose. Then there’s people out there that actually care about [the Hillside community] and try to make it better.” This local awareness helped students to learn about the school in new ways. After meeting with teachers and students in the school discipline program, Laura noted that her view of the program shifted. She was able to connect students at her school labeled with a deficit perspective with her own experiences at home. Her realization came after the course visit when “some of [the students] were talking about what they had in their lives and the struggles they have. It’s like I could relate to that because my brother’s in that program, but in middle school. He’s the same thing. It’s the same thing.” In both cases, engaging with their environment in a new perspective helped the students see different ways of examining their communities.

However, the students were largely divided on if this newfound awareness empowered or stymied their ability to address these issues. One theme across interviews was that the class helped the students to feel informed, but did not necessarily result in a corresponding ability to act. This was especially relevant in the context of American elections in 2016, where discriminatory remarks were said about Latinos/as and other groups. Aileen said that even if she could vote in the context of national elections, “my vote is just one vote.” Stacey shared that “I feel like if there is racism, there’s no stopping it. There are always going to be racist people.” For a few others that were less obviously discouraged, there was still the sense that students could do little to create change.” Sara, in talking about change at the school, said change was unlikely.

When asked if she could change a challenging situation at her school, she was indecisive: “It might. But it might not because I’m not the superintendent, so they may not change whatever it is. They’re still going to do whatever they want to do with the school.” This was particularly illuminating for Connie, who led a student group focused on improving the school climate. She shared that “not having the proper support that someone should have with an activist group that’s trying to change the school with just students and no kind of administration, it kind of sucks.” The unstable and under resourced environment within Hillside discouraged many students from attempting to create change.

As a result, the one area of change that the students could reliably achieve was their own engagement with others. Laura commented: “I talk to my friends sometimes about it when it was a topic that was really interesting, like how Black Lives Matter, how we were studying that.” The Black Lives Matter movement originated in the African-American community and it campaigned against systemic racism and violence against Black people. During class, the students watched videos about the movement to learn about systemic oppression, empowerment and liberation. For Lily, the class empowered her to make an informed opinion about a number of different topics, helping her to “know what I can say or do to help defend myself [against injustice].” She went on to share an anecdote of a time when a customer at her job was rude and disruptive, and she used her research skills from YPAR to look up relevant laws to address the situation. Even Connie, despite being discouraged from activism in many ways, still recognized that the class helped her to grow as a leader. She shared

[The class] makes me a better activist for my school. It gives me everyone’s ideas of how they feel about the school, like when we had that debate about how

[Hillside] should be. It gave me a chance to feel for how more students feel about the school and what they want changed about the school.

Students used the awareness they gained through the class as a means to enhance their own development even as they remained unsure of influencing larger change.

### **Ethics of Care**

Participants were invested in the YPAR curriculum in part because they felt that the teachers cared about them and could cite concrete examples of the dedication of the instructors to the course. Such care contrasted with many other spaces at the school, in which students perceived that teachers and administration were unmotivated and simply working for a paycheck. The participants in the study also felt challenged by the perceived disengagement and dedication of many of their peers, who they felt diluted the quality of the school.

**Teachers.** Many of the participants in the study noted that the instructional team leading the YPAR project was not from HVHS. This made the YPAR project seem like a special space because “normally you don’t see college teachers coming over here and trying to make students be involved in outside things and learn about things that are happening outside of school,” as Mario noted. Lily noted at length how acts of personal outreach and care shaped her experience in the class. Lily was beginning to think about college enrollment and felt largely unsupported by her school. She noted that even though she lived within a close radius of many post-secondary options, the only field trip she had to college campuses was with the YPAR class. In a second example, she noted that one of the instructors had texted her after she missed class to see where she was and how she was doing. She shared:

I don't have a regular English class, we have professors and students that are helping us and teaching us. It helps a lot because before, Lord Jesus have mercy.



Before we didn't really have the motivation or help...you guys aren't really teachers, you are more like a family. You're on top of us, you're right there, you won't let us down.

Like Lily, Juan also had a specific context of care that he was able to draw upon that illustrated the instructors' care for him. After Juan had been suspended for an altercation with another student at the school, the YPAR instructors had written a letter in support of Juan asking to rescind the suspension. Juan contrasted this directly with his perception of a lack of care from the administration. He asked about his administrators "for a student, why are you going to sit there and constantly bring them down? Why are you going to make them feel like they can't achieve anything?" Many participants articulated that the YPAR instructors cared about their success and cited specific examples of this care that made a difference in their experience.

The contrast between the YPAR class and much of the rest of the school was evident. For many students, there was the feeling that school administrators did not care about the students' success. Like Lily, Connie noted that no one had offered her support for her college aspirations, stating that "I don't think this school actually cares if you go to college or not. They just want you to get out." The school had a high degree of teacher turnover and participants felt they were not academically prepared for future education as a result. Stacey noted, "my freshman year was bad. We had subs in like every class." Mario admitted that he was "not as prepared for college due to the lack of teachers that we have." The lack of teacher care had a direct impact on students' planning for the future and preparation for college.

Several students voiced a sentiment that teachers were just there for the check. Aileen mentioned not feeling academically prepared because "everything we do in math I did in 8<sup>th</sup> grade." Stacey shared an anecdote in which she was placed into English Language Learners

(ELL) class even though she was a native English speaker. Across these cases, students felt as though curriculum was not challenging, teachers were not dedicated, and there was no real preparation for the participants' future education. Stacey alone expressed a belief that this might change, hoping that college preparation would be more present as she neared graduation: "I feel like now, our senior year, they probably will [talk about college and jobs] now that I'm a senior. But there hasn't been a lot of pressure." For many participants, the sense was that achievement would be based on their individual efforts alone.

**Students.** Some participants felt strongly that the teachers and administrators had low expectations of students, which led to disengagement and apathy from students at Hillside. Yvette noted that "teachers underestimate the students, so students don't really take education seriously. They don't really show that they actually encouraged or what education is." Juan made the connection between teacher care and student expectations broadly. He stated "young kids, 18, 19, crack heads, dope heads because they were expected so long to just fail, they let themselves believe that. They were so brainwashed." These students were able to begin to incorporate ideas around how the environment shaped individual experience and to question deficit perspectives of their peers.

However, many more of the students voiced the idea that students' lack of effort and care resulted in an adverse climate for teachers. Connie shared her frustration that "some teachers have a lot of expectations for students, but students believe that everything should just be given to them so when they have a bad grade, they complain about it all the time." Furthermore, students were allowed to "do whatever the hell they want," according to Stacey. Laura noted that students would leave school right in front of teachers. Lily shared that "[other students] threw scissors at the smart board. They threw oranges down the stairs...they make you want to leave,

and I understand [why teachers do].” Many of our participants contrasted their care of school with these acts of disengagement with students and felt that this contributed to a culture where change was difficult.

### **Challenging Traditional Curriculum**

Participants noted challenges in traditional curriculums, which were already diluted in the unstable and complacent climate of HVHS. Aileen noted that her prior English classes felt repetitive, rooted in “reading a book, writing about the book, just doing essays.” This type of learning was often contradicted to the ways that students felt that they learned, which often had applied contexts. José noted that “a lot of education you learn and the curriculum is mediocre and whack. Life lessons are the education I like to learn.” Participants showed an interest in applied, practical education that they could see having real implications in the world around them.

These perceptions of education corresponded with the fact that the students had chosen to attend a vocational secondary school in order to pursue an applied, hands-on context. Our participants noted that they felt more prepared to work than they did for postsecondary education. Mario noted “I feel prepared because I’m learning new things every single day, every day in shop.” For Sara, the vocational and academic training were intertwined. She wanted to be a doctor or physician's assistant, and felt that her training in the health services would help in her eventual coursework.

I have my shop, which is health services, and I’m learning a lot. There are people that don’t go to a vocational high school, and they’re going to get to college and have to learn more. I’m going to get to college and already know a little bit about what I want to be.

For Sara, her vocational education was an asset to her academic pursuits. For many students, this direct overlap was relatively rare and for many students the two traditions were relatively separate.

Like their vocational classes, the students did not perceive the YPAR class as a traditional course, especially an English Language Arts class. For Sara, the class offered a different perspective on current events. She shared her experiences that typically “people just look at the bad things, but in class we go deep. We look at the good, the bad, and why they’re bad.” Yvette echoed the idea of critical thinking through the course, in which “it’s not like any other ordinary English class, it’s challenge, it gets you thinking.” In contrast to potentially more supervised classes, the YPAR course was given significant flexibility. For José, this dynamic alone made the course feel different.

It feels like [teachers] are scared that [the principal] is going to come around and have them fired for having normal conversation in class. I feel like a lot of teachers are just worried about their jobs and they don’t want to go beyond or outside the line that they are forced to follow.

A key part of the difference in curriculum was that the YPAR course treated youth as equals in the process, forcing participants to engage with their peers in different ways. Sara noted that her classmates “used to have no type of communication.” Connie found solidarity with some of her peers who also sought to create change, connecting with “people I didn’t know but had similar feelings about the school [about] what needs to be changed.” Sometimes these new degrees of connection also created tension. In one example of this, Laura felt frustrated with Aileen, perceiving herself as highly committed while her peer was not. Nonetheless, Laura also noted that the course helped her to engage with others in a different way so that she could get

“everybody’s opinion; why they think it’s wrong and what’s not wrong and what is.” Thus, YPAR not only redefined curriculum but also the students’ roles within the classroom environment.

### **Discussion**

In the OLLM course, the influence of YPAR was evident in the ways in which students began to challenge these deficit perspectives placed upon them. This study amplifies the voices of the students and documents the way in which they experience education in times of the Latinization of schools (Irizarry, 2011). A key theme to come out of the interviews was that students perceived higher levels of awareness, both within their communities and nationally. This awareness was often used to examine systems of oppression and to reframe for students how current events or challenges in their schools were part of a much larger cultural context. While the participants shared their interest in the national context, it was the ways in which these systems connected to their local lives that was most salient for participants. Whether it was Juan refusing to be an educational statistic, Laura applying the context of school behavior to her family, or Lily using her resources to challenge injustice, participants showed clear examples of ways in which YPAR curriculum helped them resist deficit narratives. The YPAR curriculum was even more important because it was one of the few spaces that students had at school or in the community to discuss issues and formulate their own viewpoints.

Such findings were congruent with the ways in which critical pedagogy supported broader awareness, helping students “read the world” in a Freirian (1970) sense. These skills were then used to interrogate social issues and institutions (i.e., the school-to-prison pipeline) supported by the dominant ideologies and structures upholding the status quo. Through critical pedagogy and YPAR, OLLM students became more socially aware of multiple forms of injustice

and were given opportunity to explore, interrogate, and construct theories of knowledge that equip them to start “challenging the status quo” (Tuck et al., 2008, p. 61). For example, students’ development of critical pedagogy skills enabled them to challenge why they were being suspended, why different students are treated differently, and even to use laws and rights to defend themselves. Additionally, the students’ ideas reflect Freire’s humanizing pedagogy (1970), which allows people to come together to change the world. Students who do not leave the classroom feeling hopeful and cared for might not do the intense, important work of reflecting of themselves and demanding change in the inequitable systems and contexts of schooling. The YPAR elements of the class provides youth with opportunities to investigate and act on problems that are personally and socially significant as well as to demonstrate understanding in ways that are more authentic and holistic than standardized testing.

It is important to note that not all students felt the same ways in examining the impact of the YPAR course. In one example, Aileen stated that she did not think about the class and it had not impacted her life outside, noting “I do whatever I want.” Her sentiment was shared by additional students, who at times disengaged in course content or participated in disruptive behaviors. Valenzuela (1999) argues in *Subtractive Schooling* that schools are not given opportunities to perform well academically in under resourced academic environments, making the process of challenging deficit socialization complex. Aileen may have critical awareness that she cannot yet articulate, or may have beginning notions that will only be actualized as she encounters other environments and support. For all the students in the class, critical awareness will be a continual journey that will iteratively shape their understandings and perspectives.

Another discrepancy that existed was that most students did not feel able to impact change at either of these levels. Although the YPAR environment helped the students to re-

envision curriculum and their role inside the OLLM class, the larger context of Hillside remained challenging. Those that did feel equipped to create change had already entered the class as change agents, such as Connie who came into the academic year starting a group on campus to reform the school environment. However, students did not always connect that they were changing their environment through self-awareness and learning. Moreover, developing critical awareness, such identity as a change agent is also an evolving process that will continue to grow with the students beyond the scope of the OLLM class. Such challenges also speak to the need for YPAR practitioners to work in tandem with larger environments to help support students in their goals so that they can find resources beyond the specific project context and environments.

### **Conclusions**

This study illustrates how the OLLM class stands as an example of successful “education,” a class that employed critical pedagogy and YPAR as a way of reframing the very purpose and process of educating Latinx youth. YPAR offers a pedagogy of relevance, one that humanizes and empowers and include consideration of the sociocultural–historical context in which it occurs as well as the related power dynamics (Ladson-Billings 1995). Critical pedagogy must be praxis-based, encouraging the development of higher stages of consciousness through participatory methods that encourage invention and inquiry around issues relevant to the socio-political realities of students’ lives, and to local as well as global struggles. This means developing curriculum that draws from culturally relevant material connected to students’ experiential knowledge base. This could reposition students on the road to critical awareness and to understanding themselves as relevant problem solvers with the potential to change their environment, material conditions, and schooling experience. Ladson-Billings (1995) has clearly stated that culturally relevant teachers require students to “engage the world and others

critically” and act upon it (p. 162). Engaging Latinx students through YPAR and critical pedagogy may provide an important structure through which to engage students’ prior knowledge and to support their development as critical agents in their communities.

In the current political climate, teachers are increasingly building alliances with students and community members to alter social conditions. The OLLM students experimented a critical pedagogy based in student engagement and a collective sense of purpose and community, where they felt valued by engaging in activities that affect their present and future. For the OLLM educators, intrinsic commitment was rooted in emancipation and humanizing education (Freire, 1970; Salazar, 2013). Implementing critical pedagogy in urban contexts requires educators to build relationships based in *cariño* (Valenzuela, 1999) with their students, and the communities in which they work. The YPAR approach afforded youth the opportunity to engage in research and to reflect on social structures in the process. The approach links students’ reflection around their critical awareness to their interest in and enactment of individual and collective agency for the purpose of producing social change in their school and their community.



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