"Oh Gosh! Am I Going to Be Like This for the Rest of My Life?"
Promoting Critical Literacy Among Latinx Students Through Youth Participatory Action Research

Thomas Angiello

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“OH GOSH! AM I GOING TO BE LIKE THIS FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE?”:
PROMOTING CRITICAL LITERACY AMONG LATINX STUDENTS
THROUGH YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY
THOMAS ANGIELLO

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
MAY 2020
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Writing a dissertation is no small task under any circumstances, but doing so while balancing a full-time teaching job, extracurricular activities at school, and a growing family at home is an enormous undertaking. With this in mind, I would like to thank those who helped bring this dissertation to fruition.

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I can’t wait to see what they accomplish with their healthy skepticism and disruption of the status quo.
Dedicated to the students, both past and present, at St. Toribio.
Your zeal and resilience inspire me daily.
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ABSTRACT

The researcher implemented a Youth Participatory Action Research project within the context of a summer reading assignment for rising high school seniors. Meeting once a week over the summer leading into their senior year, the Latinx student researchers used their critical lenses and summer reading texts as a springboard for their YPAR investigations into sociopolitical issues relevant to their communities. In facilitating this project, the researcher set out to study the ways in which Latinx high school students interact with critical literacy and YPAR and the ways in which these students incorporate the tenets of critical literacy into their literature discussions and activities. The researcher found that by intersecting YPAR with critical literacy in this study, the student researchers utilized their critical lenses and qualitative research skills to problematize assigned canonical texts and traditional pedagogy within their senior year classes, explored the nuances of norms, expectations, and the status quo within their own lived experiences and communities, and eventually took action in response to this exploration. With their critical exploration of curricula and pedagogy, the canon, and their own lived experiences, the student researchers experienced greater understanding of and appreciation for the rigorous texts assigned in their literature classes. This study indicates the tremendous possibilities of leveraging critical literacy and YPAR in a literature class. With this study taking place over the summer, future research should further explore the possibilities of bringing YPAR into literature classes during the academic year.
CHAPTER I
YPAR AND THE NEED FOR CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Introduction

Like the moments immediately preceding a highly anticipated heavyweight prize fight, there was a palpable buzz in the auditorium. The anxious crowd - a mixture of students, faculty, and people outside of the university community - streamed into Mandel Hall on the campus of the University of Chicago, eagerly awaiting the night’s speaker, Pulitzer Prize winning author, Junot Diaz. With “streetwise, caffeinated, and wonderfully eclectic” prose, Diaz has been hailed as “one of the most distinctive and magnetic voices in contemporary fiction” (Kakutani, 2012, para. 1). As such, Diaz’s audience on that night in October 2015 was keen to hear from and converse with this ascendant star of the literary world.

Because my juniors at St. Toribio High School (STHS) read his latest series of short stories entitled, This Is How You Lose Her, in our American literature class, I spearheaded a fieldtrip to attend this event. Through a colleague’s connection with the University of Chicago, our high school contingent received a generous block of tickets and the red carpet treatment. When our bus pulled up to the curb, we were instructed to bypass the line that wrapped around the block and were ushered to our reserved seats at the front of the auditorium. After Diaz made his entrance on the stage just past seven o’clock, he immediately took note of our presence. Following an informal survey regarding the composition of the audience (“How many folks are actually students at
University of Chicago…How many folks are not from the university community?”), Diaz asked skeptically, “Is there a [high] school here?” When our group enthusiastically shot our hands into the air, Diaz responded incredulously “Yo…who took you? Where’s the teachers, yo?” Part of his incredulity stemmed from the fact that his “high school teachers didn’t take me any-fucking- where” (OMSA Heritage Series: Junot Diaz). However, he also registered disbelief that our entire contingent of students was assigned to read his controversial writing, which employs profane and graphic depictions of sex to shine a light on male privilege and misogyny within our culture.

I blushed at Diaz’s reaction to our presence, but this embarrassment quickly gave way to nervousness when he announced that he would allow our high school students to kick off the question and answer portion of the evening. He announced, in fact, that he would give our students the first three and the last three questions of the night. Like an over-protective parent, I was worried for our students, concerned that they might freeze up in talking to such a prominent writer in front of hundreds of elite college students from across the country and the world. However, Diaz generously demonstrated a faith in my students that I regrettably lacked in that precise moment. Speaking directly to our contingent, Diaz told our high school students that he wanted to hear specifically from them because they “are going to have to ask questions of people with power…and you want to make sure to be able to smash them” (Although he admitted he was just an “old man writing nerd,” bereft of power, he asserted that he would serve as “good practice” for my students in this pursuit). My nervousness proved to be completely unfounded as our students shined in the spotlight Diaz provided them. For example, one student got a resounding laugh from the crowd when she kicked off the Q and A by wondering how
“the women in your life react to your book *This is How You Lose Her,*” a text predicated on the philandering exploits of its flawed narrator. Diaz admitted that, while his mother and sisters did not care, his ex-girlfriends probably did not even read the book as they were simply “happy to have escaped” him. This light-hearted banter then gave way to a more nuanced and serious discussion of the text as Diaz took pains to contextualize the experiences of the narrator, Yunior, demonstrating that he is simultaneously both a victimizer and victim of sexual trauma himself. As Diaz moved on to his next high school interrogator, he encouraged her to “finish” off the rest of him as our group “already took” his “teeth out” with the first question (OMSA Heritage Series: Junot Diaz). With this quip, Junot Diaz affirmed both the insightfulness of my students and the potential they possess as probing interrogators.

**The Context for this Study**

I reflect on this memorable night at the University of Chicago not just because it was one of the joyful highlights of that particular academic year, but because it also serves to remind me of the power that my students possess when given the opportunity to pose their own questions. When Junot Diaz told my young students he wanted them to learn to “smash” people with power through their questions, he succinctly and eloquently crystallized my pedagogical aims over the last few years at St. Toribio. By using critical pedagogy strategies and developing their critical literacy skills, I have striven to help my Latinx1 students, who hail from low-income immigrant communities on the Southside of

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1The term “Latinx” is a gender-neutral demographic category that includes any person of Latin American origin or descent. Chang (2018) provides an explanation of this gender-neutral term by citing Baez. Baez noted, “La flexión de género en “x” apunta a contrastar críticamente el protocolo hegemónico de la construcción masculina del sujeto universal. No es la mera inclusión -políticamente correcta- de "ellos y ellas", sino una crítica al sentido distribucionista y prescriptivo de lo masculino y lo femenino en el uso
Chicago, the Near Southwest Side, and the neighboring suburbs, interrogate the aspects of society that serve to oppress marginalized groups, like their own, by posing questions and forging their own knowledge. In doing so, I work to develop a curriculum that can help students find their power and voice in order to resist such marginalization. I am adamant about encouraging my students to pose their own questions, resist knowledge passed down to them, and forge their own knowledge because I am acutely aware of the fact that the literature in our English department curricula, particularly at the junior and senior levels, can be oppressive if not viewed through a critical lens. When our canonical work is not viewed through a critical lens, I risk alienating my students. After all, these texts serve to silence or invalidate the perspectives of marginalized communities due to a lack of diversity in voices. When such voices and perspectives are silenced, traditionally marginalized students are prone to disengaging from their schooling or experience blows to their self-esteem.

My concerns over this potentially oppressive curricula has consumed my thoughts since my earliest days at St. Toribio. When I first began teaching at STHS, I was confronted with an American literature curriculum that was completely bereft of diversity. While our school’s mission to serve the low-income Latinx immigrant
community on the South and Southwest Side of Chicago with a demanding college prep education is certainly progressive, our American literature curriculum was decidedly more whitestream\(^2\) in nature in my first few years at the school. This whitestream curriculum was devoted almost entirely to the mainstays of the Western canon. Essentially, we taught dead, white male literature. In conversations with administrators in my early days at the school, I learned the school’s rationale for constructing such a curriculum. Through feedback provided by early graduates of STHS, administrators and teachers recognized a need to revamp the curricula to provide students with a stronger foundation in the Western canon before sending them off to college. Apparently, these early alums felt ill-equipped to handle their college English courses due to a lack of exposure to the “classics.” With this feedback from these alumni, the English department devised a junior year American literature curriculum that skewed heavily toward Western “classics.” Juniors taking this class would encounter canonical authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, to name just a few.

**Forging a More Critical Curriculum at St. Toribio**

The STHS administrators and teachers who designed the reading list that I inherited are not alone in their support of teaching canonical texts. Canon proponents emphasize that teaching such texts helps to produce students who possess “cultural literacy.” E.D. Hirsch (1983) defined “cultural literacy” as “shared, canonical knowledge” (p. 165) within a given culture. In making the case for the importance of

\(^2\)According to Cabrera (2011), Urrieta advocates for the term “‘whitestream’ in order to ‘decenter whiteness as dominant’ (p. 181) and to highlight the value of non-whitestream cultural capital” (p. 595) in education.
cultural literacy, Hirsch argued that there is a link “between linguistic proficiency and…cultural knowledge” (pp. 165-166). He reasoned that, for example, “to get very far in reading or writing in French, a student must come to know facets of French culture” (p. 166). This belief in the importance of cultural literacy led Hirsch to devise a list of thousands of names, phrases, dates, and concepts in his text *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Hirsch (1988) asserted that to be culturally literate and “participate in the literate national culture is to have acquired a sense of the information that is shared in that culture” (p. 59). Essentially, Hirsch’s massive list reflected his attempt to provide his readers with those names, phrases, and concepts that he deemed necessary for a culturally literate person. However, in looking at this list, it is clear that Hirsch privileges the cultural knowledge of the dominant West. Clearly, to Hirsch, to be a culturally literate person is to embrace the Western tradition and dismiss the cultural knowledge of indigenous groups, those who were colonized by Western powers, and other groups who are outside of the dominant culture.

Following Hirsch’s lead, canon proponents maintain that cultural literacy can be developed with a heavy emphasis on “classic” texts in the classroom. With a curriculum that emphasizes the canon, students develop their culturally literacy of the dominant Western culture and “are able to successfully navigate the middle and upper echelons of society and economy” (Fairbrother, 2000, p. 14) as a result. Studies of curriculum offerings over the past several decades have shown that students in advanced classes or academically elite schools receive a heavy dose of canonical works (Anyon, 1980; Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992). As they revamped the English curriculum, STHS administrators maintained the belief that, in order for our Latinx students to compete with
students from such elite high schools across the country, they too must develop some degree of cultural literacy with regard to the Western canon. By exposing them to the canon and developing their cultural literacy of the dominant culture, St. Toribio administrators and teachers set out help students compete in college classrooms. Not exposing these students to the Western canon, the belief went, meant hampering their ability to succeed in their college coursework. This push for canonical texts, unfortunately, came at the expense of including diverse voices and perspectives that are outside of the dominant culture. For example, while St. Toribio students have the opportunity to engage with Latinx voices in their Spanish literature classes (which all STHS students take due to our dual-language program), the English department assigned texts that reflect Hirsch’s emphasis on the importance of the dominant Western tradition.

Support for teaching the Western canon also comes from critical pedagogues like Duncan-Andrade and Morrell. They made the case for including canonical texts in high school curricula because they recognized that students are “expected to demonstrate knowledge of canonical literature to pass Advanced Placement exams or to succeed in college-level coursework in the discipline” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 50). However, while Duncan-Andrade and Morrell cautioned teachers not to “shy away from the ‘classics,’” (p. 52) they advocated for designing curricular units involving canonical texts that help traditionally marginalized students, like my Latinx students at STHS, to foster a critical consciousness. With such units, students are prompted to interrogate texts through a critical lens, probing for ways in which these texts can be oppressive for students of color or other marginalized groups. By taking these canonical authors off of their pedestals and exploring the ways in which their texts can be oppressive, these
traditionally marginalized students see that they can challenge or question the work of traditionally revered canonical authors. To Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, this realization is empowering for traditionally marginalized students. With their critical consciousness and ability to strip away at the veneer of the “immutability or ultimate authority” of the classics, students can become “capable producers of counter-information” (p. 53). By challenging the authority of these revered authors and producing this counter-information, critically conscious students are effectively resisting the hegemony of elites. They don’t absorb the values and ideas passed down to them. Instead, they generate their own knowledge and, in doing so, free themselves from the oppressive aspects of traditional pedagogy and curricula.

**The Need for Critical Pedagogies**

Strategies for interrogating canonical works in secondary schools are critical for educating students of color, of low socio-economic status, or other groups who are traditionally alienated from and under-served by our nation’s schools. When working with these marginalized students, critical pedagogies have emerged as a way to “motivate students, to develop literacies and numeracies of power, and to employ students and their communities in the struggle for educational justice” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007, p. 183). Critical pedagogues maintain that it is vital to develop the literacies and numeracies of power amongst marginalized students and help them fight for educational justice due to the tremendous inequities that they experience in our education system. For decades, researchers have documented such inequities. For example, researchers have pointed out that affluent suburban schools provide their mostly white students with high-quality, experienced teachers, small class sizes, excellent resources, and access to
demanding curricula that promote growth (Darling-Hammond, 2010; George Dover, 2009; Kozol, 1991). On the other hand, their low-income and minority counterparts in urban areas attend schools that do not possess such features. These schools are unable to provide their diverse student populations with “expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials, and plentiful information resources” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 28). As such, our society features a two-tiered educational system where one group is set up for academic success and put on a path to college while the other group is set up to fail.

Without access to quality teaching, adequate resources, and rigorous courses, students in these urban schools experience an opportunity gap. Darling-Hammond (2010) stated that the opportunity gap is “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources…that support learning” (p. 28). While students from well-resourced and well-funded suburban schools are provided the opportunity to fully develop their academic capabilities, preparing them for college, students in under-resourced and under-funded urban schools lack such opportunities. In studying this opportunity gap, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) pointed out that these urban schools are, in fact, not failures. Instead, these researchers argued that “urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do” and that “when one set of schools is given the resources necessary to succeed and another group of schools is not, we have predetermined winners and losers” (p. 1). Essentially, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell asserted that urban students have been set up to fail by a system that provides them with under-resourced schools. In making this point, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell
exonerated the students for their lack of academic success. Instead, they charge our nation’s school systems with failing to provide such students the opportunity to succeed.

With attempts to help marginalized students succeed academically, schools too often focus “on improving instruction and learning conditions with the goal of increasing the number of students who are able to ‘escape’ poverty…‘better themselves’” and “‘move up’” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 7). In order to help students “escape” their backgrounds, these reform efforts, regrettably, force traditionally marginalized students to forsake their home language, culture, and identities in exchange for academic assimilation and success as defined by the dominant culture. Valenzuela (1998) defined this trade as “subtractive schooling” (p. 339). With subtractive schooling, traditional education reinforces the belief that home language and culture adversely affects the pursuit of academic success for a student of color. For example, in her study of a large urban high school with a sizable Mexican-American population, Valenzuela argued that the school aimed to “divest” its students “of their Mexican identities and…impede their prospects for fully vested bilingualism” (p. 340). At this particular high school in Texas, this subtractive schooling manifested itself in the dearth of advanced Spanish language classes or Mexican-American history courses offered to students. With a curriculum that was bereft of challenging Spanish language or Mexican-American history classes, the school reinforced the idea that Mexican-American students’ home language, background, and culture were viewed as impediments to academic success.

When faced with subtractive schooling, students of color are placed in a lamentable position. Such students must maintain their home language and culture at the risk of failing academically. However, to enjoy academic success through subtractive
schooling, they are asked to deny their identities and turn their backs on their cultural background. When students of color are “faced with the prospect of leaving their communities behind to be successful, many non-white youth opt out of school” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 7). To combat the alienation of subtractive schooling, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell and Valenzuela (1998) argued for an “additive” approach to education. With “additive” education, schools aim to capitalize on the home language and cultural knowledge that students of color possess. By viewing their cultural background as an asset, rather than an impediment, additive education builds on the students’ background in order to drive them toward academic success (Valenzuela, 1998; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) maintained that critical pedagogies can offer this type of additive education to traditionally marginalized and under-served students. Through critical pedagogies, students are able to retain “their identities as urban youth” as they are prompted to identify and study “the conditions of social and economic inequity in their daily lives” (p. 7). Critical pedagogies that provide additive education can take on a variety forms and be implemented in diverse settings. For example, Quintero (2007) demonstrated that a “Where I’m From” poetry activity successfully implemented critical pedagogy in a kindergarten classroom. This particular poetry activity had the hallmarks of critical pedagogy in that it prompted young children to tap into their personal experiences to think critically about the world around them. On the other hand, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2007) have documented different strategies for implementing critical pedagogy in a high school English class. Through critical
pedagogy, these educators sought to create “meaningful links between the worlds of the students and the worlds of the canonical texts” (p. 195).

In one particular unit, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2007) capitalized on their students’ knowledge of hip-hop culture to create this link. By “pairing hip-hop texts with canonical works of poetry,” Duncan-Andrade and Morrell sought to “scaffold students’ heavy investments in hip hop into deeper understandings of school-based forms of poetry” (p. 192). Duncan-Andrade and Morrell also created this link between the world of the students and canonical texts by pairing Richard Wright’s *Native Son* with *A Time to Kill*, a popular Hollywood film in which a black man is placed on trial for avenging the rape of his young daughter at the hands of Klu Klux Klan members. By building this film into their unit, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell prompted the students to have “personal and meaningful transaction with the film that facilitated a healthy dialogic space and the completion of superior academic work” (p. 194). With these various critical pedagogy strategies, students simultaneously develop academic skills and a critical consciousness that prepare them be engaged, civic-minded citizens who can affect social change.

**The Researcher’s Development as a Critical Pedagogue**

Throughout my education, I have deepened my understanding of critical pedagogy and implemented its strategies in my classroom as I have sought to provide an “additive” education to my traditionally under-served urban Latinx students. By following Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2007) example, I have left much of the canon-heavy reading list that I inherited intact (my colleague and I have brought in some texts with diverse voices, like Junot Diaz’s short stories and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, but we still teach Hawthorne, Twain, Fitzgerald, and other canonical writers). However, I
have made strides to revamp our curricular units to develop my students’ critical literacy as we read these Western canonical texts. By promoting critical literacy, I have prompted my students to interrogate “texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, underlying assumptions and ideologies, and power structures that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices” (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 2). As I have developed activities and lessons to enhance my students’ critical literacy skills, I have witnessed the ways in which this educational approach empowers my urban Latinx students. While they make their way through the American literature curriculum, they do not simply absorb the values or lessons espoused by the “classics” that they read. Instead, they learn how to take these revered canonical authors off of their pedestal and interrogate their texts, exploring the voices and perspectives that are present and those that are silenced (p. 8). By exploring the perspectives espoused by the author and the perspectives that are silenced, my students consider the ways in which these perspectives (or lack thereof) shape the lessons and values of the text. In doing so, they study the ways in which the author tries to use texts to position their readers through these values. This exploration helps students confront ways in which texts can perpetuate oppression by forcing a particular point of view and silencing diverse voices.

Furthermore, by developing their critical literacy, students also make connections between the canonical texts in the curriculum and inequity issues in their own lives and communities. For example, they study the ways in which canonical texts try to position them concerning race, class, gender, and power, explore how these themes play out in their own communities, and reflect on how other communities view them. By making these connections between the texts and their own lives, they use their voices to speak
back to the canonical authors. They give voice to their own experiences concerning race, class, gender, and power. In the process, these students create their own questions and generate their own knowledge concerning the inequities perpetuated by texts rather than rely on the author’s positionality or the knowledge passed down to them by the canonical authors (Mulcahy, 2011). With their own knowledge construction, students are empowered as they enter into dialogue with the voices within the canon.

While I have been successful in prompting my students to enter into an empowering dialogue with revered canonical authors, I recognize that I’m still developing as a critical pedagogue. With this in mind, I strive to refine and further expand my use of critical pedagogies in an effort to help my students develop their critical literacy. In doing so, my goal is to amplify my students’ voices to an even greater extent and encourage them to resist the knowledge and values passed down to them by societal elites by asking their own questions and forging their own knowledge. Through this process, these students can apply their newly-generated knowledge and use their voices to become engaged citizens who can affect positive change in their communities.

This pursuit has led me to embrace Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR, simultaneously a pedagogy, research method, and epistemology (Cammarota, 2016), turns educational research on its head by transforming the role that students play in the research process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Through YPAR, students are not just under the gaze of the educational researcher. Instead, they partner with their teachers or collaborating researchers to study social and economic inequity issues at play in their lives and communities through rigorous academic research. Through their collaboration with teachers and researchers, these students learn to conduct rigorous
academic research, employing the methodology that academic researchers use in their respective fields. During such projects, students identify their topics of interest, generate their own research questions and eventually use data collection techniques to gather evidence in answering their questions. Once the data has been collected, students study their findings to reach conclusions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, YPAR student researchers are given the power to disseminate their findings in any way they see fit, ultimately taking action to rectify the inequity issues under investigation. By facilitating a YPAR project with their students, teachers can accomplish the “three major goals for critical pedagogy: academic achievement, empowered identity development, and action for social change” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 107). Over the past two decades, a variety of studies have demonstrated these three positive outcomes of YPAR projects as students cease to be passive recipients of elite knowledge and culture through traditional pedagogy and actively generate their own questions and knowledge concerning issues pertinent to their schools and communities. While students emerge from their YPAR projects empowered in this way, educational research as a field benefits as well. With their redefined role in the research process, “the youth are positioned as the experts and the ones who are ‘insiders’ in the adolescent world” (Livingstone, Celemencki, & Calixte, 2014, p. 288). By legitimizing their expertise and recognizing their work as researchers, the field gains insights and arrive at understandings that could elude adult researchers due to their outsider status with regard to youth culture.

The year 2008 proved to be a pivotal year for YPAR as a pedagogy and research method. In this year, Cammarota and Fine (2008) published Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion and Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008)
published *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*. These texts are regarded as the seminal works on this type of critical pedagogy and research. Through their work, Cammarota and Fine (2008) and Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) delineated the key features of YPAR, the primary outcomes, and the ways in which this approach can radically transform education for traditionally under-served and marginalized urban students. While they tried to open teachers’, administrators’, and researchers’ eyes to the powerful possibilities of implementing YPAR, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell concluded with a call for further qualitative research exploring the effects of this pedagogy. Through my qualitative research concerning my students conducting their own YPAR projects, I set out to answer this call.

**Developing as a Critical Pedagogue through YPAR**

In order to explore the possibilities of YPAR, I implemented a summer YPAR project with a group of rising St. Toribio seniors (I exclusively teach juniors at STHS. Therefore, by recruiting rising seniors for this project, I worked with students who are no longer in my class and whose grades I can no longer influence or control. In working with seniors on this project, I removed the possibility that the data could be skewed by students out of concern for their grades). Like Nicole Mirra, a former English language arts teacher and prominent YPAR researcher, I developed American literature curricular units that are “organized…around enduring tensions in American life that…resonate with my students, many of whom recognized themselves to be marginalized in society due to their racial and socioeconomic identities” (Mirra, Filipiak, & Garcia, 2015, p. 50). Similarly, St. Toribio senior year British literature curriculum has been developed surrounding similar tensions, particularly with regard to gender, colonialism, and power
imbalances within society. Because the selected senior year “texts contained themes that encouraged students to analyze issues they cared about in their own lives and communities” (p. 50), the senior summer reading texts served as jumping off points for our YPAR research projects. My students and I, essentially, worked together to develop research projects surrounding the themes or tensions within their summer reading texts that resonated with them. For example, through George Orwell’s (1961) *1984*, we examined government surveillance and freedom from government intrusion. In Bharati Mukherjee’s (1989) *Jasmine*, we explored issues surrounding immigration, assimilation, and patriarchal thinking. In this way, the themes and tensions that we explored in their English language arts summer reading intersected with the issues in their own lives and communities that the students delved into through their YPAR project.

**Research Questions**

As we used the senior English literature summer reading as a jumping off point for our YPAR investigation, I sought to fill a significant gap in the existing YPAR literature. YPAR studies have been conducted in a variety of academic and school-settings. For example, over the past several years, YPAR projects have taken place during extracurricular clubs or programs (Bertrand, Durand, & Gonzalez, 2017; Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010), elective classes (Voight & Velez, 2018; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Irizarry, 2011A), social studies classes (Rubin, Ayala, & Zaal, 2017), a “law class” with a “colloquium structure” (Stovall & Delgado, 2009), and summer seminars (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; Mirra, Morrell, Cain, Scorza, & Ford, 2013). However, to my knowledge, there have not been any studies that explore and
document the effects of implementing a YPAR project within an English literature curriculum unit. By prompting students to explore the themes and tensions that emerge from both their literature and their own lives through their summer YPAR projects, I hoped to continue to enhance my students’ critical literacy skills. With this goal in mind, I set out to use our qualitative study to explore the intersection between YPAR and critical literacy. To do so, I used critical theory and critical literacy theory as my theoretical frameworks in order to study the ways in which YPAR can be used to promote critical literacy amongst my traditional marginalized Latinx students within a traditional English literature curriculum. By studying this relationship between YPAR and critical literacy, I set out to answer the following research questions:

- How do traditionally marginalized Latinx students interact with tenets of critical literacy as a YPAR project is implemented within the context of an English literature unit?
- How do these students incorporate tenets of critical literacy in their literature discussion and activities?
- How do these students make meaning of social action and their own efforts toward social change in the context of critical literacy?

Unfortunately, this drive to forge critically conscious students who strive for social change is at odds with the current educational climate in the United States. With the implementation of the Common Core Standards across the country, administrators and teachers are charged with preparing their students for college and careers. However, with this emphasis on college and career readiness, the common core standards “do not explicitly recognize the civic aspects of literacy” (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016, p. 95)
and the importance of developing engaged citizens who work for social change. Critical pedagogues and Jesuit educators understand that college and career readiness are pivotal to the academic development of the student. However, we also recognize that a student’s education needs to be about so much more than merely preparing him or her for college and the workplace. Rather, we need to provide students with an education that also prompts them to consider the role they can play in effecting social change as engaged citizens within our society. For this reason, while Jesuit educators strive to forge “men and women for and with others” who are “committed to social justice,” critical pedagogues, similarly, advocate for an education that is “rooted in social change and the realization of students’ capacities in all areas of life, not only those related to their” (p. 4) academic or financial success.

Helping my traditionally under-served and marginalized Latinx students to develop their critical literacy has been central to my pedagogy as an educator for years. However, this aim has taken on greater significance not just in the current educational climate but in today’s political climate as well.

As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump generalized Mexican-American immigrants as rapists and drug-toting criminals (Burns, 2015), serving to bring xenophobia and racism into the mainstream. In acting on campaign promises, President Trump’s administration targeted an increased number of undocumented immigrants for deportation in the opening days of his administration. More recently, Trump’s administration sought to discourage Latinx migrants and asylum seekers from entering the country by separating hundreds of migrant parents from their children along the Southwest border (Raff, 2018). Furthermore, in the days leading up to the 2018 mid-term
elections, President Trump sought to galvanize his base by characterizing a caravan of asylum-seekers from Central America as an invading horde, even going so far as to dispatch federal troops to the border to protect against this supposed threat. More recently, the Trump administration’s policies in dealing with migrants at the border has only become more inhumane (Romero et al., 2019) while leaked emails revealed a Trump advisor, who is purported to be one of the primary architects of the administration’s immigration policies, promoting racist white nationalist ideologies (Bouie, 2019). With such inhumane policies and the normalization of Trump’s xenophobic rhetoric in the wake of the 2016 presidential election and throughout his presidency, I feel an even more urgent need to partner with my students as they seek defy such characterizations and harmful stereotypes. In this fraught political climate and the normalization of the xenophobia of Donald Trump, the alt-right movement, and other white supremacist groups (NPR staff, 2016), my students need to be proactive in their efforts to resist these harmful stereotypes and the aspects of society that conspire to oppress them. Through their YPAR projects, they can “dismantle” the “oppressive structures” that malign and oppress their communities while taking steps to “positively shape” their “trajector[ies]” (Irizarry, 2011B, p. 12).

When we went to see Junot Diaz at the University of Chicago that October several years ago, he called on my students to “smash” the societal elites, who conspire to oppress them and their communities, with the power of their questions. This YPAR project emerged as an opportunity for my students to pose such questions, forge their own knowledge, and tear down oppressive structures. As they embark on this journey, I
set out to explore the possibilities and challenges of implementing a YPAR project within an English language arts curriculum that is centered on promoting critical literacy.

Beyond the lessons concerning students empowering themselves through their own questions and knowledge construction, this Junot Diaz anecdote has other important implications when it comes to critical literacy. Four years after this event at the University of Chicago, the English Department and administration at St. Toribio decided to discontinue our use of *This is How You Lose Her* in our classes. This decision came on the heels of a variety of allegations made against Diaz. To begin with, Diaz’s playful response to my students’ questions that night in 2015 stood in stark contrast to the experiences that others have had when questioning Diaz about the misogynistic behavior of his narrator. In the Spring of 2018, writer Carmen Maria Machado took to Twitter to charge Diaz with verbally abusing her when, at a book reading, she challenged his narrator’s treatment of women. Furthermore, Machado’s charges of verbal abuse came in the wake of other accusations concerning Diaz as writer Zinzi Clemmons accused Diaz of forcibly kissing her when she was a graduate student (Gold, 2018). With this accusation of a sexual misconduct surfacing in May 2018, the English department and administration at St. Toribio made the collective decision to remove Diaz’s work from the curriculum and seek other Latinx voices to replace his.  

However, while Diaz’s text is no longer in our curriculum, this anecdote reminds us to use our critical literacy skills to read all “texts,” both bound and unbound. Just as Diaz’s words encouraged my students to pose questions, his actions prompt us to bring a critical lens to reckon with these

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3In an attempt at poetic justice, we actually decided to bring in Carmen Maria Machado’s *Her Body and Other Parties* as one of the texts used to replace Diaz’s *This is How You Lose Her.*
troubling allegations. When weighing Diaz’s gracious treatment of my students with his abhorrent behavior against Machado and Clemmons, we must consider that Diaz, like his characters, is profoundly nuanced, contradictory, and flawed. With this understanding in mind, we must remain committed to exploring and reckoning with such complexities as we embark on YPAR projects at STHS. Through our commitment to grappling with such complexities using our critical lenses, we can resist superficial, facile conclusions and come to deeper understandings of the issues under investigation. In doing so, our efforts to pose questions, grapple with nuance, and ultimately generate knowledge can have a transformative effect on our students.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON YPAR, CRITICAL THEORY,
AND CRITICAL LITERACY

Theoretical Frameworks: Critical Theory and Critical Literacy

My effort to work in partnership with my students to develop YPAR projects and study the ways in which YPAR promotes critical literacy will be viewed through critical theory and critical literacy theory frameworks. In fact, these theories will shape every aspect of my qualitative study and the resulting YPAR project(s), from the philosophical underpinnings of the study as a whole to the generation of research questions, data collection, data interpretation, and the dissemination of our research findings.

Critical Theory

When exploring traditional curricula and schooling, critical theorists in education focus on issues surrounding power. These critical theorists “begin with the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (McLaren, 1994, p. 175). Essentially, societal elites are able to use this imbalance of power that tilts in their favor in order to oppress subordinate groups and maintain their privilege. Critical theory sets out to explore these “oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation” (Tierney as cited in Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 311). Critical theorists strive
to create this transformation in order to disrupt the status quo and emancipate groups and individuals oppressed within this society.

According to critical theorists, to grapple with these imbalances in power and transcend the status quo, teachers and students must first arrive at an understanding as to how knowledge is constructed (McLaren, 1994). The Frankfurt School, a collection of thinkers who developed critical theory in the twentieth century, rejected positivism, a theory of knowledge construction that emerged from Enlightenment thinking. To the Frankfurt School, positivism is guilty of the “fetishism of facts” (Giroux, 2001, p. 16) and objectivity. With their preoccupation with “facts,” positivists maintain that objective knowledge can be accrued through scientifically designed empirical studies. However, in its vehement objections to this theory of knowledge construction, the Frankfurt School argued that “positivist thought…endangers the nature of critical thinking itself” as it’s “emphasis on objectivity…precludes its ability to judge the complicated interaction of power, knowledge, and values” (p. 16). To illustrate the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism, Giroux presents a hypothetical study concerning the productivity of native workers versus imported workers in a colonized region. In Giroux’s example, the empirical study reveals that the imported labor force works more efficiently than the natives. To positivists, this empirically designed study renders objective facts concerning the productivity of two different groups of workers. However, Giroux counters that the objective facts of this study reveal “little about the notion of domination or the resistance of workers under its sway. That the native workers may slow down their rate as an act of resistance is not considered here” (p. 16). To the Frankfurt School, positivism is flawed in that it fails to take into account the ways in which imbalances in power shaped the
outcomes of the study. Clearly, the “fetishism of facts” and the objective results produce a skewed understanding of the situation that Giroux describes.

To counter positivist thought, the Frankfurt school proposed their own theories concerning knowledge construction. These theorists assert that knowledge construction is not objective. Instead, power and our context-dependent perceptions shape the knowledge that we construct. To critical theorists, our perceptions of the world around us are “constructed symbolically by the mind through social interaction with others and is heavily dependent on culture, context, custom, and historical specificity” (McLaren, 1994, p. 178). These differing backgrounds lead individuals to view the world and create knowledge in different ways. In this way, knowledge construction is subjective as our differing backgrounds, including the “complicated interaction of power, knowledge, and values,” (Giroux, 2001, p. 16) shape the ways we perceive the world and create knowledge.

This interplay between power, knowledge, values, and the ways in which these relationships drive our understanding of the world has powerful implications for schools. Critical theorists argue that schools serve to “legitimate certain gender, class, and racial interests” by promoting certain forms of socially-constructed knowledge over another. For example, in his experiences as an educator, researcher, and theorist, McLaren (1994) found that science and math curricula are privileged in our schools. He argued “the needs of big business to compete in world markets” has driven the legitimization of math and science over the liberal arts. When studying the different forms of knowledge promoted by schools, critical theorists ask, “Whose interests does this knowledge serve? Who gets excluded as a result? Who is marginalized?” (p. 178). By asking these questions, critical
theorists aim to determine the ways in which certain classes or groups benefit from the legitimization of different types of knowledge over another. The answers to such questions are important to critical theorists, for they argue that privileging some knowledge over others maintains the status quo. Essentially, when forms of knowledge beneficial to societal elites are privileged within schools, marginalized groups remain subordinate.

Critical theorists argue that hegemony, where the “powerful win consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression” (McLaren, 1994, p. 182) effectively serves to maintain this status quo, particularly within schools. In turning a critical lens on his own teaching practices, McLaren found that even he was guilty of hegemonic instruction during his time as an elementary school teacher. He was complicit in maintaining the status quo when he “did not teach” his “students to question the prevailing values, attitudes, and social practices of the dominant society in a sustained critical manner” (p. 182).

The hegemonic teaching that McLaren admitted to is common in whitestream schools. To combat this type of teaching, Paulo Freire (1970), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, advocated for the type of curriculum and instruction that McLaren regretted not providing for his students. Through this seminal text, Freire asserted that students must be taught to question values, knowledge construction, and culture in a critical manner. When teachers do not prompt students to do so, then “education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 58). Instead of questioning the world in which they live and challenging hegemony, low-income, students of color and other marginalized groups simply “receive,
memorize, and repeat” the knowledge and values that are forced upon them by traditional schools and curricula. By simply absorbing the content delivered by hegemonic teachers through this “banking conception of education,” (see Figure 1) marginalized students remain in an oppressed state and are not taught to liberate themselves or their communities. With the traditional banking method of education, elites determined what is recognized as legitimate knowledge and it is incumbent on the student to absorb and regurgitate this knowledge. As such, the status quo is maintained through the banking method as the act of absorbing elite values and knowledge “serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire, 1970, p. 60).

In the wake of Freire’s (1970) explication of the traditional banking method, critically conscious educators have sought to develop strategies and instruction to help students liberate themselves. For his part, Freire argued that “problem-posing” (see Figure 2) must be employed to combat the traditional banking method of education. With Freire’s problem-posing, students “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (pp. 70-71). Critical pedagogues aid in this pursuit as they ask “thought provoking questions and” and prompt “students to ask their own questions” (Shor, 1993, p. 26). When students are encouraged to ask their own questions, they successfully develop “curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world.” With this newfound activism, students think “critically about subject matters, doctrines,” and “the learning process itself” (pp. 25-26). As they pose questions and think critically, students are better positioned to transform society by challenging oppression and the status quo.
By utilizing critical theory to drive this study, I am following the lead of more seasoned educational researchers who have used this theoretical framework and Freirean ideals to shape their YPAR studies (Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2013; McIntyre, 2000). For example, the adult researchers who spearhead the Council of Youth Research (the Council) each summer at UCLA based this summer program on a “theoretical foundation that views education as a tool for democracy and transformation” (Mirra et al., 2013). With this work rooted in the Freirean tradition, these researchers embraced praxis as a central element to the Council’s work. As the adult and student researchers entered into a partnership and stripped away traditional educational power dynamics, the Council members “engage in critical dialogue together,” explore oppression together, co-
create knowledge, and, in doing so, move “toward a more authentically democratic society” (Mirra et al., 2013). Similarly, McIntyre’s empirical work exploring the potential of PAR with youth researchers was guided by critical theory and the Freirean tradition. Through her partnership with youth researchers in an effort to understand violence in urban life, the research participants were provided “the opportunity to mobilize, organize, and implement individual, and/or collection action” (McIntyre, 2000).

Like McIntyre and the researchers at UCLA’s summer YPAR seminar, my empirical study followed in this Freirean tradition. Through our YPAR project, my students and I disrupted the power dynamics of a traditional classroom. Rather than assert my role as teacher and the authority figure within the project, I partnered with my students throughout this experience. We disrupted traditional power dynamics as I relinquished control over the direction of our projects. As the student researchers embraced critical literacy and used the summer reading to stimulate their research, they determined the topics that they wanted to explore. As some students gravitated toward the issues of governmental surveillance that emerged from 1984 and others keyed in on gender norms and expectations in Jasmine, the students took the reins of the YPAR project by deciding to cleave into two separate groups. From there, the research projects came to life as I took on a facilitator role in helping the students to refine their research questions and acquire the data collection skills needed to enter the field.

In this way, we were co-creators of knowledge as we problem-posed together in the Freirean tradition. Through this process of problem-posing and designing the research projects together, we embraced Freirean praxis as central to our work. Cammarota and Fine (2008) define praxis as “critical and collective inquiry, reflection, and action focused
on…speaking back to the reality of the world” (p. 2). With our inquiry into inequity issues that affect the students and their communities during our YPAR study, we initiated the first phase of Freirean praxis. This initial inquiry led to reflection and collective action intended to rectify the social justice or inequity issues that we investigated throughout the course of our research.

**Critical Literacy**

For critical theorists and critical pedagogues, schools should be institutions where “democratically minded people can work to overcome the inequalities and social injustices of the dominant society” (Kretovics, 1985, p. 51). Critical literacy, which stems from critical theory and Freirean tradition, advances this goal by teaching students to interrogate texts – both bound and unbound – “in order to identify and challenge social constructs, underlying assumptions and ideologies, and power structures that intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices” (Mulcahy, 2011, p. 2). To carry out this educational goal, critical pedagogues advocate for helping students to develop literacy skills that go beyond functional literacy (Kretovics, 1985; McDaniel, 2004; Mulcahy, 2011).

Functional literacy refers to “the basic ability to read and write well enough to understand signs, ads, and newspaper headlines; to make shopping lists; to write checks; and to fill out job applications” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 474). For critical pedagogues, teaching these “basic” literacy skills to traditionally marginalized students only serves to maintain the status quo. As such, critical theorists and pedagogues maintain that solely teaching functional literacy within our schools is insufficient and oppressive. Instead, they advocate for critical literacy, which aims to provide students with not just functional
readings skills, “but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices” (Kretovics, 1985, p. 51). Through critical literacy, students are able to confront their oppressive society by developing the ability to think critically and question the world around them (McDaniel, 2004). By prompting students to question not just written texts but the world around them, critical literacy proponents recognize that anything can be a text meant to position or influence the audience. For this reason, Freire and Macedo (1987) insist in the title of their book that critical literacy involves “reading the word and the world.”

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) identify four dimensions of critical literacy that students must embrace in order to interrogate written texts and the world in general in this way. By developing their critical literacy skills, students are taught to disrupt the status quo, view texts from multiple viewpoints, engage with sociopolitical issues, and work toward justice. With these four dimensions of critical literacy, students do not merely absorb the lessons, values, or knowledge within a text as they do in the banking method of education. Instead, students use these four dimensions of critical literacy to enter into dialogue with texts and the world around them. By embracing these dimensions of critical literacy, students develop a critical stance that enable them to “understand, analyze, critique, and transform our social, cultural, and political worlds” (Assaf & Delaney, 2013, p. 144).

As they develop these literacy skills, this theoretical framework encourages students to envision a more just world and explore the ways in which this world can be brought to fruition (Kretovics, 1985). Because it is steeped in the Freirean tradition and stems from critical theory, critical literacy distinguishes itself from other forms of literacy
– like functional or cultural – by pushing students to engage in praxis (Mulcahy, 2011), and its advocates maintain that working toward justice is essential for this theoretical framework. Students who develop critical literacy learn that it is their obligation, as critically conscious citizens, to transform their world. After all, “once we become aware of injustice” through the development of our critical literacy skills, “it is our duty as citizens to work toward change” (McDaniel, 2004, p. 475).

Through their work with YPAR embedded within an English curriculum unit, my students continued to develop the critical literacy skills that they gained exposure to in my classroom as juniors. The texts that we encountered through this English unit (the rising seniors summer reading texts *1984* and *Jasmine*) served as a jumping off point for research inquiry. For example, as we explored sociopolitical and justice issues surrounding government surveillance, privacy, and freedom in *1984* and immigration, assimilation, misogyny, and patriarchal double standards in *Jasmine*, students honed in on one of these themes to explore within the context of their own lives and communities. The connections that they drew between the themes in the novels and their own lives served as a catalyst for their YPAR inquiries. Finally, because critical literacy stems from the Freirean tradition, my students’ efforts to enhance their critical literacy through YPAR resulted in collective action to address the inequity issues under investigation, thereby enacting the principles of praxis and the dimensions of critical literacy.

**Youth Participatory Action Research: An Overview**

YPAR projects effectively advance the aims of critical theory and critical literacy as they offer “a chance for students to counter racism and other forms of structural oppression, including classism, linguicism, sexism, and nativism, as they are manifested
in schools and society at large” (Irizzary, 2011B, p. 13). YPAR begins to achieve these aims by first radically reconceptualizing who can do research and how it is conducted.

YPAR turns educational research on its head by transforming the role that students play in the research process (Bautista et al., 2013; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Traditionally, students are restricted to the role of subject in educational research. Essentially, research is done “‘on’ young people,” making “them the objects of our research gaze” (p. 106). However, through YPAR, adult researchers do not merely study the young people within a project. Instead, students are invited to participate as both subjects and co-researchers, working in collaboration with their adult counterparts (p. 108). With this redefined role, student researchers are valued for the insights and knowledge that they can provide throughout the research process, particularly with regard to their schooling and their communities (Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2013). For example, McIntyre (2000) argued that the educational research field can “more effectively frame research questions and teaching pedagogies” when we view “youth as agents of inquiry and as ‘experts’ about their own lives” (p. 26).

When positioned as experts concerning youth culture, schooling, and their communities, YPAR student researchers work in collaboration with teachers or university researchers to emerge as burgeoning social scientists. Under the tutelage of their teachers or participating academics, the student researchers take part in “all aspects of the research cycle, from developing research questions and examining relevant literature to collecting and analyzing data and offering findings about social issues that they find meaningful and relevant” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 2). Through this process, students, particularly those who are traditionally underserved or marginalized within urban schools, apply their newly
developed research skills to study social issues affecting their lives and communities. As a pedagogy and research methodology that grows out of critical theory, YPAR prompts these burgeoning student researchers to apply their critical research lens in order to study these issues, reflect on their findings, and take action to remedy the social ills under investigation (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

With this cycle of investigation, reflection, and action, YPAR advocates maintain that this pedagogy is an effective antidote to the harmful banking method of traditional education that Freire and other critical theorists warn that marginalized students must resist. By prompting students to take on the role of researcher, YPAR is a critical pedagogy that clearly reflects the principles of Freire’s ‘problem-posing’ approach to education. Instead of passively receiving knowledge as they do in more traditional pedagogies and curricula, students engaged in YPAR generate their own research questions and seek out answers to these questions through their research. In doing so, they are generating their own knowledge (Mirra et al., 2013; Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2014) and not simply accepting passed down knowledge that is constructed by and serves the interests of societal elites. When given the opportunity to ‘problem-pose’ through YPAR, students are able “to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions” that they will take in order “to rectify these problems” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). This process, which involves “critical…inquiry, reflection, and action” is what Freire refers to as praxis (p. 2). Because YPAR is consistent with Freire’s praxis, the research produced is not an end in and of itself. Instead, students are expected to use their research and newly developed expertise as social scientists to take action in an effort
to remedy the social ills that they explored through their projects (Scott et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2000).

When implementing YPAR projects, there is no prescription or playbook for researchers or practitioners to follow. After all, “context is crucial and every program must build upon its own unique strength” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 10). However, as this critical pedagogy and research methodology has evolved over the past two decades, it is clear that there are essential features that all YPAR projects share. According to McIntyre (2000), participatory action research involves “(1) the collective investigation of the problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand the problem, and (3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with stated problem” (p. 128). As I seek to embed a YPAR project within an English literature unit, I will design the research around these four guiding principles.

**YPAR in Educational Settings**

For more than two decades, YPAR has increased in popularity as it has been implemented in diverse settings. This emerging qualitative research methodology has been implemented in academic and community based settings as YPAR “reflects the integration of several different fields, namely, participatory action research (PAR), youth development, community development, and community organizing (Livingston et al., 2014, p. 286).

In community-based projects, YPAR has been embraced in this setting to engage youth in knowledge development (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Smith, Monaghan, & Broad, 2002). Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) noted that youth participation in these community projects aimed for “active participation and real
influence in decisions that affect their lives” and not merely “token or passive presence in adult agencies” (p. 22). Through this empirical study of multiple community-based organizations serving low-income areas, young people were sought to generate knowledge and drive change by participating in the evaluation of a variety of campaigns. Through their analysis of the community evaluation taking place in these various YPAR projects, Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) found that youth participation had the dual benefit of enhancing “the organizational development of young people” (p. 30) while also driving beneficial change in the community. Smith et al. (2002) echo Chechoway and Richards-Schuster’s (2003) findings that the community and researchers in the field benefit from youth input through YPAR in a community setting. In this particular YPAR study of community health, the youth involved in the study contributed significantly to the adult researchers’ knowledge of the ways in which young people regarded their health and access to services (Smith et al., 2002).

In addition to these community-based YPAR projects, educational research has also benefitted from the knowledge generation of youth researchers. For example, in collaborating with student researchers to analyze qualitative data concerning the factors that cause students to “cut” class, Fallis and Opotow (2003) arrived at deeper understandings of this prevalent student behavior at two large urban high schools in the Northeast. By lending their insights during data analysis, the student researchers “were able to connect the research to the daily realities of urban students and their analyses yielded insight into subtle contextual issues that would have otherwise remained hidden in the data” (pp. 107-108). With such connections and analysis, the adult researchers came away with an understanding of class cutting that drastically differed from the
explanations offered by administrators at these two urban schools. Similarly, Livingstone et al. (2014) found that the student researchers with whom they collaborated drove “the analysis further than it would have if their voiced had not been included” (p. 295) in their YPAR study exploring dropout rates among black high school students in Montreal.

The aforementioned YPAR studies in community and academic settings demonstrate some of the core theoretical dimensions of YPAR. However, in recent years, as YPAR projects have flourished in different settings, there have been an increasing number of studies devoted to exploring issues surrounding the implementation of such research. For example, Kohfeldt et al. (2011) set out to explore the structural tensions that arise within a school setting when YPAR projects are implemented. Using an ecological model as their theoretical framework, these researchers found that the aim to promote youth empowerment through YPAR “stood in stark contrast to the” school’s “normative practices of excluding their voices” (p. 35). In their study of the structural tensions arising from the implementation of an after-school YPAR project, Kohfeldt et al. also noted that the YPAR team’s efforts were constrained by “limited resources…the concentration of power within the higher echelons of hierarchies, or the formal and informal rules and channels of power that operate at a structural level” (p. 36).

Similarly, researchers Ozer et al. (2013) also demonstrated challenges presented when implementing a YPAR project in a school setting. These researchers were particularly interested in exploring the challenges of continuing a YPAR project across multiple semester cohorts. By examining the experiences of 15 semester cohorts, they found “sticking with the same topic” across multiple cohorts “enabled sustained building of strategic alliances and expertise for making change, but limited the incoming cohort’s
power to define the problem to be addressed.” However, the adult researchers successfully identified others ways in which to provide the student researchers with power within the project in the face of limited control over the problem under investigation (Ozer et al., 2013, p. 13).

Furthermore, Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) strove to implement an innovative data collection and analysis techniques to “tap into the wisdom of participating youth and promote their critical consciousness” (p. 79). To achieve these goals, the researchers designed a research method that they called Youth ReACT. Through this method, student researchers engaged in Photovoice, a process where they learned to take pictures, answer questions surrounding the pictures, and dialogue with peers concerning their pictures. According to the researchers, the photovoice project and the method surrounding this project was successful in producing an “in-depth analysis of current community conditions and substantive recommendations for action from the youth” thanks large part to the “group dialogue” (p. 79) concerning each photo.

As researchers have increasingly studied the challenges and opportunities presented by YPAR, these projects have cropped up in a variety of educational settings. Over the past several years, YPAR projects have taken place during extracurricular clubs or programs (Kohfeldt et al., 2011; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010), elective classes (Ozer et al., 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Irizarry, 2011A), a “law class” with a “colloquium structure” (Stovall & Delgado, 2009), and summer seminars (Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2013). However, despite this proliferation of YPAR studies within a school or academic setting, there are have been no studies – to my knowledge - that have explored the implementation of a YPAR project with the context of an English literature class.
Mirra et al. (2015) speak toward the tremendous potential of implementing YPAR within a literature class. In describing her experiences as an English teacher, Mirra states that she successfully integrated YPAR into her English classroom by “organizing my curriculum thematically so that my students could take on a yearlong YPAR project of their choice that would connect to the texts I introduced in class” (p. 50). With this integration of YPAR and English literature, Mirra “had the common core of my side” as the standards demand that students “conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions” (p. 50). However, while the authors describe their efforts and extol the possibilities of implementing YPAR in this way, they provide anecdotal statements and do not offer empirical data in support of such projects.

As an English teacher and burgeoning critical pedagogue, I was intrigued by Mirra et al.’s (2015) discussion of embedding YPAR within an English literature curriculum. For this reason, I used my qualitative study to build off of the ideas proposed in their article. In doing so, I also answered Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) call for more empirical research exploring the challenges and possibilities of YPAR. While empirical research on YPAR over the past two decades have explored the theoretical dimensions of the work as well as some of the benefits and obstacles surrounding its implementation, I honed in on the possibilities for embedding this pedagogical tool and research method within the context of an English literature curriculum unit. Specifically, I used critical theory, Freirean traditions, and critical literacy to explore the ways in which YPAR promotes the acquisition of critical literacy skills on the part of traditionally marginalized Latinx urban students.
Features of YPAR

As an ideology and research methodology, YPAR projects share three key features. Each project relies on the collective investigation of a social justice issue salient to the community under investigation. As the student-researchers explore such an issue within a community, they strive to take advantage of and promote indigenous knowledge and voices. Finally, when the researchers have arrived at conclusions concerning their research questions, they are expected to share their findings and take action to remedy the inequity issue that they studied.

Collective investigation. When conducting YPAR projects, individuals rarely, if ever, work in isolation. Instead, the research emerges as a “collective process enriched by multiple perspectives of several researchers working together” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 5). Multiple perspectives are necessary because these projects seek to amplify the voices that are traditionally silenced during the research process (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Scott et al., 2014). YPAR teams gain fresh insights and deeper understandings of issues when collaborators from different generations and walks of life merge to grapple with research topics. To gain such insights, YPAR researchers should take a broad and inclusive approach when it comes to identifying the stakeholders in a study. After all, “in any given situation, there might be different types of stakeholders with different interests (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, pp. 5-6). For example, if a YPAR project is investigating schools or the education system, Cammarota and Fine noted that there are numerous stakeholders who can lend their perspectives. Such “education-based PAR projects could feasibly include policy makers, teachers, administrators, parents, students, push outs and the public” (p. 6). When the various stakeholders are identified in
In a YPAR project focused on youth investigating the legacy of Brown vs. the Board of Education, Torre et al. (2008) sought out a group of student researchers characterized by their diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences. This convergence of different perspectives and experiences, referred to in this study as the “contact zone,” was designed to allow these diverse individuals to “grapple” with issues of inequity and oppression within their schools and society. Through the litany of perspectives brought to bear, the diverse young people involved in this project were able to greatly enhance their understanding of the issues at hand. For example, one Palestinian-American student, Tahani, lent her perspective concerning the oppression, suspicion, and vitriol she experienced, particularly after the September 11th attacks, as a Muslim woman. Through her voice and poetry, Tahani sought to disrupt post-9/11 narratives, provide a “structural analyses” of the oppression she experienced, and make “political demands for justice” (p. 36). On the other hand, many affluent white students brought their perspective by tackling “their own questions about privilege in ‘desegregated schools’ where they benefit enormously” (p. 39). The student researchers ultimately utilized their “differences (rather than ignoring them) to further thinking, research, writing, and speaking on educational equity and change” (p. 24).

With this collaborative and inclusive approach to research, relationships are critical (Irizarry, 2011A; Livingstone et al., 2014; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010; McItyre, 2000; Mirra et al., 2016; Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008). Mirra et al. (2016) argued that teachers or collaborating academics must, at the outset of any project, take the
time to cultivate trust with and amongst their student researchers. This trust is crucial because the research process can prove to be painful for student researchers or potentially put them at risk. Through YPAR, traditionally marginalized students are prompted to explore social and economic inequity issues that have profoundly adverse effects on their lives, families, and communities. As they explore such issues, student researchers are at risk of sustaining emotional or psychological wounds (Cahill et al., 2008; Livingstone et al., 2014; Mirra et al., 2016). Essentially, uncovering the societal machinations that conspire to oppress can be damaging to these students. With this in mind, Mirra et al. (2016) advise that teachers and other adult collaborators must take the time to “build relationships of caring and trust with young people so that they could discuss these provocative issues openly and encourage them to work through the emotions that would inevitably arise as” student researchers explore their “society that often attempted to marginalize their voices” (p. 43). The work of building these critical relationships began prior to work on the YPAR project as I had the pleasure of teaching the student researchers in my American literature during the previous academic year.

In their work with under-served and traditionally marginalized Los Angeles high school students of color in the UCLA Council of Youth Research, Mirra et al. (2016) and their colleagues employed a variety of methods for building this crucial trust with and amongst their student researchers. These adult researchers designed a variety of activities outside of the research work itself that demonstrated that they were invested in the lives and academic futures of their student collaborators. According to the researchers, this investment went a long way in building the trust needed for tackling the sensitive and potentially painful social issues under investigation that summer (Mirra et al., 2016).
Echoing this idea, McIntyre (2000) also pointed to importance of building rapport with students during her participatory action research project in an elementary school. She noted that the adult researchers in this study bonded extensively with their 6th grade collaborators as they visited classrooms, took part in extracurricular activities, tagged along on field trips, and invited the students to tour their university. In going to these lengths, McIntyre and her fellow researchers gained the trust and opened up channels of communication necessary to carry out research in collaboration with the students.

Building trust in this way is critical for any YPAR project as this pedagogy and methodology seeks to explore inequity issues that are sensitive and potentially painful for marginalized groups. However, YPAR advocates recognize that “it is often those at the bottom of social hierarchies who know the most about social oppression and also about the radical possibilities toward redressing domination” (Tuck et al., 2008, pp. 50-51). Because of the potential for “radical possibilities” that oppressed groups present, YPAR seeks to conduct research “alongside all stakeholders rather than research on a particular group” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 139). By working with such marginalized groups and not merely studying them, YPAR and its advocates seek a collaborative approach to the research process.

**Indigenous knowledge and insider voices.** When bringing together a chorus of voices and perspectives to inform a particular study, YPAR researchers are particularly intent on amplifying “insider” voices. In this way, YPAR differentiates itself from more traditional research methodology as it relies on what McIntyre (2000) calls “indigenous knowledge” to enhance and deepen understandings of the topics under investigations. Because of the immense value that YPAR proponents place on this “insider” or
“indigenous” knowledge, Mirra et al. (2016) warn that “YPAR is not simply ‘kids doing what researchers do’” (p. 75). Instead, the student researchers are valued for the perspectives they can bring to the research process. With the perspectives that they can provide concerning their schooling, youth culture, or other issues involving their communities or lived experiences, the youth researchers are regarded as experts in the YPAR process (Livingstone et al., 2014; McIntyre, 2000; Scott et al., 2014).

As experts, student researchers play various roles in YPAR projects. To begin with, when they study inequity issues in their own communities, they are simultaneously researchers and members of the community. YPAR aims to capitalize on the students’ status as “insiders” and experts on the subject matter to enhance the research findings. With their expertise, the student researchers are positioned as “insiders” to provide “the best vantage point” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 208, p. 108) to study the topic at hand. With the vantage point that comes with their positionality, student researchers can peer into the “crevices” that “escape the adult purview” of outsider researchers (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 16).

With its emphasis on insider knowledge, YPAR has important implications not just for educational pedagogy but for research methodology as well. Mirra et al. (2016) maintained that the student researchers’ positionality can profoundly alter the ways in which academia views research methodology. According to these researchers, “YPAR methodology expands and extends what counts as research” because the positionality of student researchers and their “unique life experiences count as methodology” (p. 75). By altering what we consider research, YPAR student researchers are indeed not just emulating adult academics. Rather, these student researchers are irrevocably changing the
way educational research is conducted by lending their voice and perspectives as both insiders and collaborators with the adult researchers. Ultimately, through the inclusion of youth voices throughout the research process, YPAR profoundly changes who does the research, how it is conducted, and why it is done (Mirra et al., 2016).

The Fed Up Honeys, a group of young women of color from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, conducted a YPAR project to study the effects of gentrification on their neighborhood. In doing so, they demonstrated the power of “indigenous knowledge” and the ways in which it can inform research. As lifelong residents of the Lower East Side, the Honeys were cognizant of and very much affected by the rapid changes coming to their neighborhood. The Honeys went on to use their expertise on this subject matter to inform each step of the research process. For example, as they developed their critical consciousness and delved into social science research, the Honeys perceived a connection between the stereotypes they experienced as young women of color and the rapid changes coming to their neighborhood. This insight produced one of the Honey’s primary research questions as they asked, “What is the relationship between the lack of resources (for example education) and the stereotypes of young urban women of color?” (Cahill et al., 2008, p. 105). By pursuing this question, the Honeys found that stereotypes were being employed to exclude them from their own community and hasten its gentrification. They were able to pose this penetrating question and arrive at this conclusion by virtue of their indigenous knowledge of the issues at hand.

Similarly, Bautista et al. (2013) found that the expertise and indigenous knowledge of student researchers could be leveraged to provide deep insights into the topic under investigation. In their work with the UCLA Council of Youth Researchers,
the adult researchers noted that their student collaborators enhanced the study with their own experiences as marginalized students in racist schools. To give voice to these experiences while investigating the educational system in Los Angeles, the student researchers produced counternarratives. The adult researchers recognized that these counternarratives were essential to their work as this data provided critical insights concerning the educational experiences of these students of color (Bautista et al., 2013). This type of data is critical when it comes to such issues, for student perspectives are often absent when researchers, administrators, and policy-makers discuss school reform (Mirra et al., 2013).

Irizarry (2011A) and McIntyre (2000) also found student driven narratives could shine new light on complex research topics. In trying to understand “the lack of academic success experienced by so many Latino youth” in urban schools, Irizarry (2011A) noted that his Latinx student researchers provided much needed insights. Through his experiences with these student researchers, Irizarry saw the value of “inserting new, heretofore silenced voices into the debate regarding the achievement gap.” In doing so, they were able to challenge deficit thinking, “inform the personal and professional development of educators” and potentially produce “changes in policy and pedagogy that might lead to improved learning opportunities for Latino students” (p. 2) and other marginalized groups. Similarly, in her study of violence in urban communities, McIntyre (2000) relied on her student collaborators to provide a more nuanced understanding of this issue. During her research, she became convinced “that by creating spaces for” students “to narrate…their stories” through participatory action research, “we contribute to further understanding the impact of urban life on participants and communities” (p.
148). The researcher went on to argue that such insights can prove to be valuable as they can inform policy at the community level and pedagogy within schools.

There are additional benefits of collaborating with young adults as research partners to gain an insider perspective. With the aid of collaborating student researchers, adult researchers are granted access to a youth culture that they might not be able to penetrate or fully understand (Crane & Brannock, 1996; Schwartz, 1988). For example, Schwartz noted that by allowing his student researchers to conduct group interviews, “subjects” were able “to express themselves differently, if not more honestly, than if they were speaking to a teacher” (p. 38). As the student researchers provoked this type of candor, Schwartz gained insights that he might not have received as an adult focus group facilitator. These insights proved to have a profound effect on Schwartz’s research as they directly contradicted his hypothesis at the outset of the study. Schwartz also found that student researchers bring a fresh perspective and unique insights into the design and implementation of the project by virtue of their positionality. He points out that his student researchers were able to help him “see more clearly how a student would approach the survey” (p. 39) included in his project.

Changing “…who does research fundamentally changes what research is and how and why it is done” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 75). By welcoming student researchers into the research process as collaborators and not as objects under the researcher’s gaze, the voices that are traditionally silenced by research are amplified. In fact, because YPAR places such an emphasis on the importance of insider and indigenous knowledge, these voices are exulted for the insights that they can provide. This feature of YPAR intersects with a key tenet of critical literacy. YPAR and critical literacy both promote the
importance of examining multiple perspectives to understand the complexity of a topic under investigation and to amplify traditionally silenced voices. My own YPAR study sought to embrace multiple perspectives through the amplification of student voices, and, in doing so, arrive at a deeper understanding of these students’ experiences within their communities and my English literature curriculum.

**Taking action.** In addition to being a collective process that relies heavily on indigenous knowledge, YPAR differentiates itself from more traditional research methodology in a third critical respect. When student researchers engage in YPAR, they are expected to use their research findings to take action. For the YPAR researcher, it is not enough to shine a light on social inequities through the research process. Instead, YPAR prompts student researchers to use the insights they have gleaned from the research process to work to rectify the inequities they have revealed (Bautista et al., 2013; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Kohfeldt et al., 2010; McIntyre, 2000; Scott et al., 2014). With this third guiding principle, the “research findings become launching pads for ideas, actions, plans, and strategies to initiate social change” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 6). This aspect of YPAR dovetails precisely with both Freirean pedagogy and one of the key tenets of critical literacy theory. Both Freire’s praxis and YPAR maintain that “students possess the agency to produce changes” in their pursuit of social justice (p. 6). Similarly, as students use critical literacy to interrogate written texts and the world around them, they are called upon to work toward justice as well. With the agency that students develop through Freirean praxis, critical literacy theory, and YPAR, it is an imperative that students take action in response to their findings rather than remain passive in their study of social inequity.
Through YPAR projects over the past two decades, student researchers and their adult collaborators have demonstrated numerous ways in which they have taken collective action to work toward justice (Bautista et al., 2013; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Irizarry, 2011A; McIntyre, 2000; Scott et al., 2014). A primary way for YPAR student researchers to take action is to disseminate their findings. For example, the 2010 iteration of the Council at UCLA created powerpoint presentations and documentaries that sought to “analyze, problematize, and address the conditions of students in public schools in the Los Angeles area” (Bautista et al., 2013, p. 4). These student researchers were provided a plethora of opportunities to share these presentations and films, often in front of influential politicians, policy-makers, and members of the research community. To begin with, the adult researchers made use of their connections to personally invite the mayor of Los Angeles, members of the City Council and Board of Education, and administrators as the students on the Council presented their findings at City Hall (Mirra et al., 2016). Furthermore, the student researchers were provided with another influential audience when they traveled to New Orleans to present their findings at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference. As they spoke truth to power in a way that is rarely afforded to marginalized students of color, these student researchers used their presentations and films to force their influential audience members to consider the ways in which policy-makers, schools, administrators, and teachers failed them through oppressive educational practices and conditions. Clearly, with these presentations, the Council members “did not engage in YPAR simply to shout their findings into a void.” Rather, they sought to “build knowledge that could be shared with others to create lasting change” (Mirra et al., p. 123). They did this by seizing the
opportunity to affect social change through the dissemination of their research to influential audiences.

Like the UCLA Council, other YPAR projects have enabled students to speak truth to power in order to disseminate their research findings regarding inadequate schooling for traditionally marginalized groups. Through Project FUERTE, Irizarry (2011A) and his student researchers sough to study the factors that contribute to the achievement gap amongst Latinx youth. At the beginning of their YPAR project, Irizarry’s student collaborators were skeptical with regard to their ability to effect change. He noted that the “students had little faith that oppressive conditions could be challenged and dismantled and even less confidence that they might play a role in the transformation” (p. 6). However, as the project and students evolved, Irizarry documented numerous “instances over the two years when students pursued freedom, identifying a problem and developing a vision for how things should be” (p. 6). Through the collective action of the FUERTE team, student researchers strove to disrupt the status quo that contributed to their lack of academic success in schools. Similarly, the Latinx students in the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) experienced the opportunity to speak truth to power in their efforts to disseminate their research findings and effect change. By presenting their YPAR findings to influential local politicians and policy-makers, the SJEP applied the pressure needed to improve school conditions for traditionally marginalized students. For example, school officials were forced “to address the egregious physical neglects, such as replacing missing urinals in the boys’ bathrooms, repairing the falling tiles in the gym ceiling, and repairing the water fountains” (Romero et al., 2008, p. 133). Furthermore, the SJEP researchers prompted school officials to
acquire updated books for the library, adopt new multicultural education classes, and find a new, suitable classroom for “exceptional education students” who until that point received instruction in a “woodshop” that was shockingly “filled with heavy, dangerous equipment, such as saws and drills!” (p. 133).

Ultimately, YPAR mandates researchers to take action. In this way, YPAR intersects with the theoretical foundation of my study. During our project, I prompted my students researchers to refrain from sitting idly by after exposing inequity. Instead, we emphasized that their research findings must result in action as my student researchers, in accordance with Freirean tradition and the tenets of critical literacy theory, understood the importance of disseminating their findings and rectifying the inequities that they uncovered.

**Outcomes of YPAR**

Critical pedagogies, like YPAR, strive to produce three key outcomes. To begin with, through their YPAR experiences, students are prompted to pursue social justice. Furthermore, by implementing YPAR, critical pedagogues hope to create educational experiences that empower their students and produce positive identity development. Finally, critical pedagogies aim to produce positive academic outcomes.

**Pursuing social justice.** The third guiding principle of YPAR outlined in the previous section – the call to action in pursuit of social justice – intersects with one of the three primary objectives of critical pedagogy. By aiming to spur students to action, critical pedagogy stands in stark contrast to today’s prevailing educational climate. Mirra et al. (2016) noted that the contemporary movement toward educational standards and standardized testing is predicated on the idea that “the purpose of K-12 schooling is to
provide students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies for college and career readiness” (p. 4). While proponents of YPAR and other critical pedagogies seek to inculcate academic proficiency in their students (in fact, this is another of the three objectives of critical pedagogy), this outcome is not sufficient in and of itself. Instead, students in critical education classrooms are expected to utilize their academic skills to delve into research concerning social justice issues. Because YPAR and other critical pedagogies prompt that students to become engaged in equity issues affecting their communities, these educational approaches produce students who are civic-minded citizens and fully invested in bringing about a just society. To produce such engaged citizens, YPAR and other critical pedagogies emphasize that critical students “have a responsibility to offer the world information that can lead to the betterment of people’s lives, rather than merely the advancement of one’s career” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 4). This sentiment was echoed in a qualitative study on YPAR in a college access program for economically disadvantaged students. In this study, high school students in the college access program came to embrace the role that research can play in remedying social ills. Scott et al. (2014) noted that “by investigating questions that arose from their lives and connecting their realities to the wider conversation about college access and equity,” the “student-researchers” in this program “discovered that the act of research…could become a personally meaningful and socially transformative tool” (p. 154). Clearly, justice and the well-being of the community is foremost on the mind of the civically-engaged critical student, not just their own economic interests.

**Empowered identities.** When YPAR takes students out from under the researcher’s gaze and provides them with a collaborative role in the research process, this
pedagogy and research methodology also helps students to develop new empowered identities, thereby achieving another primary objective of critical pedagogy and critical theory. YPAR facilitates the development of empowered identities by disrupting traditional power dynamics within educational settings (Irizarry, 2011A; Kohfeldt et al., 2010; Mirra et al., 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012). By offering the students an opportunity to work in collaboration with adults throughout the research process, YPAR essentially “turns the traditional adult/youth power relationship on its head” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 105). In traditional classrooms, students are severely limited when it comes to the roles that they play. In their traditional role as students, adolescents in the classroom lack autonomy or agency as they are expected to be the passive recipients of the teacher’s knowledge. For urban students in failing schools, exposure to this oppressive pedagogy is particularly damaging. As they are subjected to curricula and pedagogy that marginalize and alienate them, urban students routinely lack academic success (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Irizarry, 2011B; Valenzuela, 1998). As such, they are labeled as dumb and failures despite the fact that they have been set up to fail. However, YPAR enters students and adults enter into a partnership based on caring, trust, and mutual respect (Irizarry, 2011A; Livingstone et al., 2014; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010; McItyre, 2000; Mirra et al., 2016; Cahill et al., 2008). By developing research topics and questions, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating findings in collaboration with the adult researchers, students become knowledge producers throughout the YPAR project. This type of knowledge production, consistent with the tenets of critical theory and Freirean problem-posing, stands in stark contrast to the passivity of traditional, oppressive classrooms and curricula.
As they produce knowledge and embrace their new roles as researchers, YPAR participants develop a confidence that is all too often lacking for traditionally marginalized urban students (Irizarry, 2011A; Mirra et al., 2013; Ozer et al., 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2012). For example, Ozer and Wright noted that the “recently-immigrated or economically disadvantaged” students in their YPAR study developed their ability to communicate “confidently in a manner that enabled them to be ‘heard’ by adults and more advantaged young people” (p. 280) in their research on teaching practices. These YPAR student-researchers developed this confidence because they went through a process of “professionalization” during the project. By developing research, communication, and presentation skills, these student-researchers were not shy when it came to sharing their findings. They engaged with their teachers in dialogue regarding teacher pedagogy and best practices, “giving performance feedback to teachers” (p. 278).

YPAR advocates argue that the confidence and poise that the students develop through their training and research experiences help them to see themselves in a new, positive light. The student-researchers in Ozer and Wright’s (2012) study came to view themselves as experts when it came to effective teaching strategies. With this perspective, the student-researchers felt empowered to disrupt the traditional teacher-student power dynamic and offer insights regarding effective pedagogy through their exchanges with teachers. Similarly, Carmen, a member of Irrizary Project FUERTE, experienced a dramatic transformation by participating in this YPAR project that studied the ways in which students of color are traditionally underserved by U.S. schools. As a student in a failing, urban school, she was accustomed to demoralizing treatment and deficit thinking from her teachers. Sadly, she embraced the deficit thinking espoused by her teachers as
she did not question their negative characterizations of her. She stated, rather matter of factly, “I never thought anything about being treated bad by teachers and being made to think I’m dumb, that kids like me are dumb. I thought it was my fault, like something I did to deserve to be treated bad” (Irrizary & Brown, 2014, p. 78). However, by participating in Project FUERTE, Carmen eventually challenged the deficit thinking and harmful characterizations that plagued her academic life. This project helped her to realize that she was “smart, a researcher, a student” and above all “a full person,” not just a stereotype. Mirra et al. (2015) presented a student researcher who reached a similar conclusion as her YPAR project drew to a close. Like Carmen, this particular student struggled academically under the weight of traditionally oppressive pedagogies. She noted that “I never thought I could be an expert on anything or that research could be about real life” (p. 51). However, in the wake of her YPAR experience, she embraced this newly found role as expert.

As student-researchers begin to recognize the potential and power that they possess, their YPAR projects provides students with an opportunity to use their newly empowered voices. Through their YPAR experiences, student-researchers embrace the “importance of their voice” and learn to “become committed to participating in the democratic process” particularly when it comes to “raising their concerns to people in positions of power” (Mirra et al., 2013, p. 8). Rather than buy into the deficit thinking that they often encounter as marginalized students, YPAR student researchers understand that they can use their voices and agency to dismantle oppressive conditions. Whether they were galvanizing support for a teacher of color who clashed with administrators and was subsequently fired (Irizarry, 2011A), developing teaching strategies to improve
instruction for marginalized students (Ozer et al., 2013; Ozer & Wright, 2013), or proposing strategies for reducing graffiti within an elementary school (Kohfeldt et al., 2010), YPAR student-researchers emerged from their projects with empowered identities and the belief that they can effect positive change.

**Academic growth.** Empowered identity development can help to facilitate academic growth as well, another primary objective of critical pedagogy (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). YPAR students develop a critical consciousness by exploring “the true workings of their social contexts” (p. 7) throughout the research process. Through their exploration of machinations that serve to oppress marginalized groups and maintain the status quo, students recognize that they possess the intelligence and ability to grapple with complex subject matter and disrupt the commonplace (Lewison et al., 2002). Cammarota and Fine (2008) reasoned “academic capacities should increase along with problem-solving abilities” (p. 7) when young people understand their true potential as students and work to capitalize on it.

Bocci (2016) found evidence of this academic growth in her mixed-methods study of a world language class that employed YPAR in its revamped curriculum. Through their YPAR experience, the students were given the opportunity to “engage in linguistically and cognitively complex…authentic language tasks” (p. 474). In doing so, the students enjoyed “positive mean gain scores across all categories of communication skill” (p. 455) when it came to the World-Readiness Standards for learning Languages.

Furthermore, the various iterations of the Council at UCLA demonstrated the tremendous academic benefits that YPAR provides students. At the outset of these summer seminars, students in the Council were asked to “read important works in social
theory, critical pedagogy, the history of urban education, the sociology of education, and methods of critical educational research” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 112).

The teachers and university researchers taught these theories, histories, pedagogies, and research methods so that students could become project leaders, take ownership, and drive the research process themselves. In their time with the Council, these researchers found that this knowledge and skill building was tremendously successful. As the students learned the theories at the foundation of their research and developed the skills to carry out this research, they clearly “appropriated the tools and language of social science research” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 126). Scott et al. (2014) reported similar findings in their work with YPAR student-researchers in a college access program. At the outset of the program, these students believed that academic research for high school students merely entailed “achieving predetermined results in a science lab or looking up existing information for papers in social science or humanities class” (p. 145). However, as they progressed with their YPAR research, these came to understand that their social science research could help to remedy real-world problems, particularly those problems that plague marginalized students. With this understanding, the YPAR student-researchers in the college access program strove to sharpen their research skills, “not for the sake of the grade or personal perk, but rather to ensure effective arguments and powerful communication.” With this “sense of ownership” over the project, the student researchers experienced “metacognition...critical thinking, decision-making” and “self-reflection in ways their previous classroom-based research experiences had not” (p. 147) provided.
The academic skills that YPAR students develop through their appropriation of theories, academic language, and research tools are routinely displayed when it comes time to disseminate their research findings. For example, when Mirra et al. (2015) implemented a YPAR project in her English language arts class, she was impressed by the growth that her students demonstrated by the end of the yearlong project. She asserted, “My students produced reports that, based on my experience in the academy, were of equal rigor and quality as graduate-level research” (p. 51).

When YPAR students grapple with theoretical arguments in dense texts, develop research skills throughout each phase of the project, and augment their academic skills that are necessary to disseminate their findings, they are presented with a challenging and enriching educational experience. This type of rigorous learning is particularly important for traditionally underserved and marginalized students, for they are routinely denied such challenges in our urban schools. With the recent push for accountability through standardized testing, failing urban schools feel tremendous pressure to increase scores on high-stakes tests. To improve test performance at these failing schools, “teachers often prepare students by spending substantial instructional time on exercises that look just like test items, reverting to worksheets filled with multiple-choice questions and drill based on recall and recitation” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 71). This emphasis on worksheets and rote memorization comes at the expense of more enriching and engaging activities. Teachers and students have less time for “extended writing, research papers, investigations,” (p. 71) and other activities that promote student-inquiry and critical thinking. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond noted that teaching to the test narrows not just the types of activities in U.S. schools, but this practice also limits the topics and academic
subjects for students to explore. In her research, Darling-Hammond found that “nearly half of all elementary schools had reduced time for science, social studies, arts, music, and physical education in response to” (p. 71) the push more standardized tests.

Ultimately, instead of narrowing the achievement gap, teaching to the test actually exacerbates it. While students in failing urban schools are provided with heavy doses of worksheets, test-prep questions, and rote memorization, their affluent peers in higher performing schools are more likely to receive an intellectually stimulating education that leads to growth. In short, students in failing urban schools are prepped for tests as their affluent counterparts engage in the type of activities that prepare them for success in college (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Facing this unjust disparity in educational opportunities, critical pedagogues have embraced YPAR as a way to provide under-served, marginalized urban students with the rigorous, enriching education that they need and deserve. In fact, at the conclusion of their chapter of their experiences with the UCLA council, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) sent out a call for “more empirical research on youth participatory action research as a legitimate instantiation of critical pedagogy” (p. 131).

Like all YPAR studies, the summer YPAR project that I conducted with STHS rising seniors featured the three tenets of this methodology. By positioning these rising seniors as student researchers – rather than merely the object of the researcher’s gaze – we collaborated on this project and tapped into their indigenous knowledge concerning their lives and communities. In doing so, we also strove to produce the primary outcomes of sound critical pedagogy. Through our collective investigation of inequity issues, the project sought to empower these STHS students, develop their academic skills, prompt
them to work toward justice in their communities on the Southside of Chicago, Near Southwest Side, and the surrounding suburbs.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study explored the effects of embedding a YPAR project within an English literature curriculum unit. Specifically, I looked for ways in which the YPAR project might impact – if at all - the students’ abilities to develop critical literacy. In studying the intersection of YPAR and critical literacy development, I posed the following research questions:

- How do traditionally marginalized Latinx students interact with tenets of critical literacy as a YPAR project is implemented within the context of an English literature unit?
- How do these students incorporate tenets of critical literacy in their literature discussion and activities?
- How do these students make meaning of social action and their own efforts toward social change in the context of critical literacy?

To study the intersection of YPAR and critical literacy development, we carried out the YPAR project within the context of the students’ summer reading for their senior year English class. We used the themes and tensions within the summer reading unit as a jumping off point for our YPAR projects. As we initiated the YPAR projects, students dictated the direction of their investigations. The following chapter examines the ways in which students shaped their YPAR projects. It also explores the ways in which critical
theory and critical literacy shaped the dimensions of our study, from the methodology and research question generation to data collection, analysis, and dissemination.

**YPAR as Research Method**

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is more than just a pedagogical tool at the disposal of critical pedagogues. YPAR is also a research method that dramatically “expands and extends what counts as research and how we evaluate it” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 75) as it shifts young people out from under the researcher’s gaze and positions them as experts and insiders in the research process. In the field today, “educational researchers face increasingly limited notions of what counts as legitimate scholarship” because “many research institutions promote mainly quantitative, distanced, and ‘objective’ methodologies” (Bautista et al., 2013, p. 3). However, YPAR challenges our understanding of what research is capable of as it embraces the unique contributions that young people can provide to educational research and policy (Mirra et al., 2013; McIntyre, 2000).

Mirra et al. (2016) point out that critics may try to dismiss this shift in student positionality as merely “kids doing what researchers do” (p. 75). However, these researchers, who are seasoned YPAR facilitators themselves, cautioned that such thinking ignores the revolutionary aspects and tremendous potential of YPAR as a research paradigm. This methodology revolutionizes the field as it legitimizes the students’ voices, expertise, and experience in ways that other methodologies do not. Despite the best efforts of researchers to access and understand youth experiences, there is inevitably a distance between the researcher and youth subjects in traditional qualitative research. This inevitable distance comes as a result of the researcher’s positionality as an adult and
outsider of youth culture. In contrast, as researchers, students are uniquely positioned to focus their “empirical gaze both inward and on crevices of school life” and other aspects of youth experiences “that often escape the adult purview” (p. 76). By offering these insider perspectives throughout the research process – from forging research questions to analyzing data and disseminating findings – student researchers provide unique insights and expand our idea of what is possible when it comes to conducting qualitative research.

Our Summer YPAR Project at St. Toribio: An Overview

As teachers who are devoted to developing the critical literacy of our students, the junior and senior English teachers at St. Toribio have designed curricular units that make connections between the assigned literature and inequity issues at play within the students’ communities and society at large. For example, during junior year, our critical reading of *The Scarlet Letter* prompts discussions concerning gender expectations and damaging double standards within our own culture. Meanwhile, reading Twain’s *Huck Finn* through a racial lens, we prompt students to explore the ways in which harmful stereotypes are perpetuated by the novel as well as popular culture today.

During the summer entering their senior year, all STHS rising seniors were required to read two texts to prepare for their 12th grade Advanced Placement British Literature class: *1984* by George Orwell and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. STHS teachers use these novels to prompt our students to explore issues that are of concern in their own lives and communities (Mirra et al., 2015). These two summer reading texts served as the central readings for our summer YPAR project as the themes in these texts would ultimately shape the direction of our projects. To study the ways in which YPAR projects promote critical literacy development within the context of an English literature
curriculum unit, we used the themes, tensions, and inequity issues that we explored in *1984* and *Jasmine* to spark the students’ research interests. Through *1984*, the students examined a host of sociopolitical issues - such as government surveillance and control over citizens, privacy, and freedom - that are pertinent both to the text and the lives of my students. With *Jasmine*, a text that provides a subaltern perspective, we explored connections between their lives and the text by taking up topics surrounding immigration, assimilation, identity, and patriarchal control. As we explored these themes, I asked students to hone in on a topic of interest to them and their community. In doing so, they began the work of designing a YPAR project surrounding that particular topic.

While the student researchers and I read *1984* and *Jasmine* together, the students used these texts as a catalyst for their research and shaped their projects according to their own interests. To fully capitalize on youth perspectives and insights through YPAR methodology, adult facilitators and collaborators must be comfortable with relinquishing control over the project. In doing so, the student researchers become equal partners as the project aims to incorporate the ideas of all participants (Cahill et al., 2008). Because YPAR embraces the importance of collaboration amongst the student researchers and the adult facilitators and a reliance on insider youth perspectives, the direction of our summer YPAR project was shaped largely by the youth participants.

At the outset of the project, I conveyed to the student researchers that I was interested in exploring the ways in which – if any at all – the YPAR project enhanced their critical literacy skills. However, with that being said, I also conveyed the notion that the YPAR project was theirs to take in whatever direction they saw fit. After all, “one of the strengths of YPAR is its fundamentally collaborative nature” (Livingstone et al.,
2014, p. 288). I emphasized that the student-researchers were collaborators due to their expertise regarding the issues under investigation. As we made connections between the summer reading texts and their own lives and communities, the student researchers recognized that they had something to say in response to the reading and had valuable insights to provide concerning the effects of surveillance and gender norms and expectations on their Latinx communities. I helped to position them as experts on these issues by demonstrating to the student researchers that they possessed funds of knowledge (Romero et al., 2008) concerning their communities and how these issues play out in their communities.

I sought to access the students’ funds of knowledge from the outset of the project by asking them to complete an “I am from” poem during our first weekly session. With this poem, where the writer fills in a template to provide imagery concerning their experiences growing up, students successfully broke the ice and became comfortable sharing with each other. But they also discovered that they had quite a bit to teach me concerning their experiences growing up in predominantly Latinx communities in Chicago. For example, while sharing their “I’m from” poems and reflecting on their childhoods, the student researchers shared a laugh as they reflected on the child-rearing techniques that their parents used to ensure compliance during trips to the mall or Sunday mass. As the father of two rambunctious daughters under the age of five, I’m amazed when the younger siblings of St. Toribio students are able to sit through the duration of all-school masses without fussing at all (STHS masses are open to the entire St. Toribio community and it is common for alumni and parents with younger children in tow to attend mass). After listening to the students discuss these parenting techniques, I told
them I was eager to try them out on my daughters the next time we took a trip to a restaurant, boarded a plane, or went anywhere else where they needed to be on their best behavior. As the project progressed, we continued to tap into the students’ funds of knowledge through discussion questions that prompted the student researchers to make connections between the themes in the summer reading and their own experiences. While the students made connections between surveillance in their neighborhoods and 1984 and gender roles and expectations in both Jasmine and their communities, they understood that they had something to contribute to the discussion concerning these issues.

By tapping into their cultural funds of knowledge and helping the students to acquire qualitative research skills at the outset of the project, the youth researchers were positioned as experts, and I positioned myself as the facilitator. In doing so, our YPAR project strove to be “essentially team-driven, open-ended, consensual, and inclusive (Livingstone et al., 2014, p. 288). In the interest of collaboration and inclusivity, I used my role as facilitator to implement the project and guide students as they used their expertise and insider knowledge to generate research questions and develop these topics of inquiry that were clearly relevant to their communities. To do so, the students generated their topics by exploring the themes and inequity issues within the summer reading literature and using their funds of knowledge to reflect on the ways in which these issues play out in their own lives and communities. With this reflection concerning their lives and communities, we then used this idea to “make sense of our shared experience” (Cahill et al., 2008, p. 100) and how they differed from each other. Such analysis of their funds of knowledge and shared and contrasting experiences helped to generate their initial research questions.
This collaborative approach to research question generation gave way to collective data collection and analysis. We utilized a variety of techniques for collectively analyzing our data. For example, students were prompted to journal as a way to spend time “thinking through and developing one’s own perspective” (Cahill et al., 2008, p. 107) in response to the topic under investigation. Students then shared these reflections, and we recorded these perspectives on large poster-sized pieces of paper. These large pieces of paper remained on the wall throughout the project and serve as a “public memory of shared knowledge production from which we” will “build new ideas” (p. 108) and understandings.

In each phase of the project, I assisted the student researchers in developing their qualitative research skills, but they ultimately drove the projects. This gave them the freedom to determine their grouping, research topics, research questions, and the overall direction of the projects. As such, the groups organically cleaved into two distinct groups pursuing separate topics of interest. On the one hand, three female student researchers were inspired by the novel *Jasmine* to study gender norms and expectations within their communities. The remaining five student researchers were inspired by *1984* to explore the effects that police surveillance has on urban communities of color. With the students at the helm of the research projects, this study was consistent with Freirean pedagogy and critical literacy theory. To begin with, we employed Freirean problem-posing as the students took the initiative in generating the research topics and questions. Furthermore, by valuing the diverse perspectives that the students bring to this project, we studied the topics under investigation from multiple viewpoints in accordance with critical literacy theory.
**Setting.** At St. Toribio Jesuit High School, located in a predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago, our mission is to provide a rigorous dual-language, college preparatory education to the low-income Latinx immigrant community in this area. As this neighborhood has gentrified over the past two decades, the working class Latinx-immigrant families have gradually been priced out. Many of the families that STHS serves moved to other areas of the city and nearby suburbs. With the changing demographics of the neighborhood, STHS has expanded its reach to recruit students. As such, we now draw students from a variety of neighborhoods on the Southside, Near Southwest Side, South West suburbs.

Because many students commute to STHS from different areas around the city and near suburbs, they have experience with a diverse range of inequity issues. For example, students from certain neighborhoods have most likely been impacted, in some way, by the adverse effects of gentrification. On the other hand, students from other neighborhoods may have experience with gang violence. Many of our students’ communities struggle with a lack of economic opportunities, inadequate schooling, and access to quality health care. As inequity issues impact my students’ lives, the participants in my YPAR study will have a chance to use their funds of knowledge and experiences with such issues to drive their research. With their diverse backgrounds, students were encouraged to take up a research topic that affected their communities. They delved into and used their fledgling research skills to study inequity issues affecting their lives, families, and communities.

**Participants.** To conduct these YPAR projects, I recruited eight rising St. Toribio seniors. Because YPAR is collaborative and driven by the youth researchers, the projects
that we embarked on developed in a “slightly messy and organic way” as room was made for the “unexpected to occur” (Cahill et al., 2008, p. 99). I wanted to make room for the students’ projects to develop in this “messy and organic way.” A large part of this was to allow students to determine their research topics and their groupings. I remained flexible and responsive to the students’ desires as they decided to work in two distinct groups on separate topics. In order to maintain this flexibility and allow for students to determine their grouping, eight was the ideal number of student researchers. If I were to recruit a dozen or more students, my ability to effectively facilitate each project that could potentially emerge (be it a large collection of individual projects, projects done in pairs, multiple large group projects, etc.) would be diminished. Furthermore, one of the central aims of YPAR is to develop student voices (Scott et al., 2014). During her work with the Fed Up Honeys, the adult researcher Cahill facilitated a research project that was exceedingly successful in promoting these voices. The Fed Up Honeys noted that “Cahill made us realize that we are all equal partners and out collaborative project really would integrate all of our ideas” (Cahill et al., 2008, p. 97). I hoped to replicate Cahill’s success in designing a project that allowed all voices to be heard. For this reason, I decided to recruit eight student researchers. With this number of researchers, I aimed to make each participant feel like an equal partner, integrate all of their ideas, and amplify each of their voices.

Since I exclusively teach juniors at St. Toribio, I recruited STHS seniors to take part in the project. As seniors, I no longer controlled their grades and therefore could not influence them in this regard during the course of the study. Furthermore, over the course of this academic year, I cultivated tight-knit bonds with the juniors in my American
literature classes. Moreover, I aimed to strengthen these bonds by working with the students in other capacities during the YPAR project. For example, I used our time together to help them with their college application process and required summer work. These close relationships were critical as we tackled YPAR projects together. After all, YPAR requires a high degree of trust amongst the adult facilitators and student researchers (Irizarry, 2011A; McIntyre, 2000). This trust is necessary in that student researchers confronted potentially troubling or traumatic subject matter through their exploration of inequity issues. With the close-knit relationships that I enjoyed with the rising senior class, I was well-positioned to help my research participants confront “provocative issues openly and encourage them to work through the emotions that would inevitably arise as they tested out their civic agency in a society that often” seeks to “marginalize their voices” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 43). In doing so, we aimed to achieve the “vulnerability and openness needed for meaningful learning” (p. 38).

The pre-existing relationships that I have established with the rising seniors was beneficial when it came time to recruit potential research participants. I introduced my project to my four sections of American literature during the spring of 2017. By introducing my project, I gauged interest in the project amongst rising seniors and sought their consent to participate in the study. Ultimately, a total of 12 rising seniors expressed interest in the research project. To fill out the study, I chose the eight students (see Table 1 below) who could commit to fully participating in the project on a weekly basis. The other four students conveyed to me that they had travel plans with family and summer programs that would preclude them from attending each of our weekly sessions. However, while these four students had summer plans that precluded them from being
considered for one of the eight spots in our study, I invited them to attend our weekly meetings when their schedules and travel plans permitted. After all, I wanted to provide these students with the benefit of our weekly discussions and expose them to the critical literacy skills that we sought to develop.

Table 1

Student Researcher Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender Identification</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan</td>
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<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yesenia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latinx/White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementation of the YPAR Project

After I determined the eight research participants who could commit to participating throughout the summer, we met once a week for two hours to complete the students’ summer reading assignments and implement their YPAR projects. At the end of each weekly session, the student researchers and I decided on the work that needed to be complete before our next session. These weekly two hour meetings at St. Toribio High
School started the week of June 19th (this is the first week of STHS’s summer vacation) and ended the week of September 4th (this week marks the third week of the new school year), for a total of twelve weeks. However, after we ceased to meet formally as a group, the students continued – under their own volition - to work in their groups past the twelfth week in an effort to tie up loose ends when it came to coding their data and drawing conclusions in response to their research questions.

The twelve-week project was divided into three distinct segments. Weeks 1-4 were devoted to exploring the summer reading texts and building the students’ understanding of the theoretical foundations of YPAR. During weeks 5-10, we took the themes we explored in the summer reading texts and identified the topics that they wanted to pursue through our research. These five weeks were also devoted to carrying out the research by developing research skills, generating topics based on our summer reading texts, crafting research questions, entering the field to collect data, and analyzing the data. The final two weeks of the project were devoted to disseminating their research findings and taking action in response to the research findings (see Table 2 below for a week by week description of each session).

**Weeks 1-4.** During the first four meetings in June and early July, I introduced various scholarly articles and excerpts that helped the students to deepen their understandings of the academic discourse concerning YPAR, particularly with regard to its theoretical foundations (see Appendix A). Mirra et al. (2016) recommend assigning such theoretical articles “in order to ground students in critical understandings of education research, policy, and practice” and the “particular research topics” (p. 58) under investigation. To begin with, students read theoretical articles and excerpts that
provided them an understanding of critical theory and critical literacy. We started by reading excerpts from Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Shor’s (1993) scholarship on Freire’s pedagogy. In learning about banking education and problem-posing, I prompted students to reflect on ways in which they experienced this oppressive pedagogy and asked them to think about ways in which we could resist banking education and embrace problem-posing throughout our project. Following their reading of Freire and Shor, the students read Lewison et al. (2002) and excerpts from Mulcahy (2011) and Shannon (1995) to gain an understanding of critical literacy (see appendix A for list of citations regarding these reading assignment). As they explored the four facets of critical literacy in the opening weeks of the project, I gave students opportunities to practice implementing their critical literacy skills by looking at various pieces of pop culture, including children’s books and cartoons and their own favorite television shows and movies. By assigning these scholarly articles and excerpts, I provided them with an understanding as to the theoretical foundation of their work as student researchers engaged in praxis.

While we worked to develop the student researchers’ understanding of the theoretical framework of YPAR and critical literacy in these first four weeks, the students and I also engaged with their summer reading texts, *1984* and *Jasmine*. During these first four sessions, the student researchers devised a reading schedule to tackle each book in a timely fashion. During each weekly session, I designed our work surrounding these texts just as I would design an English literature unit during the academic year. This included interrogating the texts by employing strategies to promote critical literacy. To begin with, we built the historical, social, and cultural context for each of the novels in
order to situate the students within the world that the authors created. With this context established, the students followed their reading schedule for each of our subsequent weekly sessions. As we made our way through the texts in these first four weeks, the student researchers and I used various student-centered literature discussion strategies to help them grapple with the texts and develop their critical literacy approach. For example, I provided students with text-dependent questions that prompted a close-reading of the texts and allowed the students delve into the texts and arrive at deeper understandings of the content. These text-dependent questions were used to stimulate our group discussions. Specifically, we worked together to identify and explore the themes and tensions that appear in the texts yet that are also relevant in the lives of the students (government control, surveillance, etc. in *1984* and immigration, assimilation, identity, etc. in *Jasmine*). During these discussions, we used graffiti boards (poster-sized sheets of paper where students choose a corner to brainstorm ideas concerning the theme) to share their thoughts on the theme as it plays out in the text and to make connections between their own lives and the texts. These text-dependent question and student-centered discussions enabled students to work on summer reading essays that they have been assigned by their 12th grade teachers. During our meetings, we worked together to craft and revise responses to these short essay questions.

By reading Freire (1970), Shor (1993), Lewison et al. (2002), Shannon (1995), and Mulcahy (2011), the student researchers sought to develop their understanding of the theories that underpinned our YPAR project, acquire or enhance their critical literacy skills, and apply these skills to their summer reading.
**Weeks 5-10.** As we finished reading the summer reading texts, we then used the themes and tensions that we explored as a springboard for our YPAR projects. I encouraged students to choose a theme that was of interest to them. At this point, the students formed themselves into two distinct groups. Liz, Yesenia, and Isabel - inspired by the *Jasmine* text - studied gender norms and expectations in Latinx communities while the other group - including Alejandro, Andy, Jonathon, and Evelyn - studied the effects of governmental surveillance on urban communities of color. Over the next six weeks (weeks 5 through 10), students developed their research interests into a YPAR project.

With a deeper understanding of the theoretical arguments at the heart of YPAR, the student researchers sought to forge their research questions and design their own YPAR projects. They came into the project “with some hypotheses about their communities and why certain conditions exist.” However, the students’ thinking and perspectives evolved through “the continuous development of new insights brought about by listening to peers, reading articles, and reflecting on long-held beliefs” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 60). Ultimately, students went down “new paths of inquiry” as they encountered these new perspectives or insights through our discussions and scholarly articles. In this way, Mirra et al. asserted that developing research questions is a cyclical process for YPAR student researchers. As they headed down these new paths of scholarly interest, students continually refined their research questions. They tweaked their research questions as each new reading, reflection, or discussion made “them rethink their entire framework” (p. 60). As students sought to tweak their research topics surrounding the themes that were of interest to them, I provided them with excerpts from Merriam’s
(2009) and Creswell’s (2009) texts. These texts on qualitative research helped the student researchers further refine their research questions.

As the groups took shape and the student researchers honed-in on their research questions, the student researchers then worked together to determine the methods that most effectively answered these questions. As I prompted the students to read about and practice qualitative data collection techniques, they learned to challenge “the positivist visions of labcoat-like collection of ideal data” and understood “the messiness of collecting data in the real world” (Mirra et al., 2016, pp. 80-81). To come to this understanding concerning the nature of qualitative research, they collected data through interviews and observations. To help them acquire these research skills, I assigned reading on conducting qualitative interviews and observations and built time into the schedule to help students practice their interviewing and observation techniques in mock exercises (Livingston et al., 2014). For example, I assigned the groups more excerpts from Merriam (2009) to help them develop and refine their interview questions. As the students read these excerpts, they were able to remotely collaborate on the formulation of interview questions using their Google document. When we came together as a group during our weekly meetings, we worked together to tweak their questions and interview protocol. After refining the interview questions, the students read excerpts from Merriam on how to best conduct qualitative interviews, and I went up about setting up practice interviews with St. Toribio alumni. By interviewing these former STHS students from the comfort of our workroom, the student researchers had the opportunity to practice their qualitative interviewing skills in a low-pressure, low-stakes environment before setting off into the field to collect more interview data.
In addition to the honing their interviewing skills, the gender norms and expectations group also read from Merriam to develop their observation skills. They implemented these skills to answer their research question by studying gender norms and expectations within Latinx communities by observing the interactions of family members and friends at social gatherings, such as backyard barbeques and family parties.

After the students collected their interview and observation data, we once again made use of Merriam in order to develop their coding skills. As they read Merriam’s (2009) section on coding, I provided students with a chance to “practice” this critical research skill. To do so, I gave the students a series of excerpts from Studs Terkel’s (1974) text entitled *Working*. By sifting through the interview data compiled in this oral history centered on the experiences of – among others – blue and white collar workers in Chicago and surrounding areas, the student researchers sought to draw research conclusions. With this practice under their belt, they were prepared to code their own qualitative data and reach conclusions concerning their research questions on surveillance in urban communities and gender norms and expectations in Latinx communities. In doing so, they derived conclusions from their data and eventually learned to shape these conclusions “into a coherent and unified story that will faithfully represent what was found” through the course of their research projects (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 101).

**Weeks 11-12.** Finally, in accordance with the central tenets of critical pedagogy and YPAR, the student researchers intended to use their research findings to disseminate their findings and plan to take action in the final two weeks of the YPAR projects. With critical theory, critical literacy, and Freirean tradition as the theoretical foundation of our study, we recognized that it is not enough to study inequities in the world around us.
Instead, we must investigate injustice and use our research to inform the steps we will take to work toward justice. With this in mind, our YPAR project must “help students examine their” experiences with injustice in their communities “through a more critical and politicized lens, but also to consider how they might develop a public voice” (Scott et al., 2014, p. 141). With this voice, the student researchers intended to disseminate their findings to shine a light on inequities under investigation and work toward remedying such inequity issues within their communities. Students had the freedom to determine the ways in which they wanted to disseminate their findings. As noted in the literature review, students often strive to effect change by presenting their findings to policy-makers, school administrators, teachers, and other concerned stakeholders (Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2016; Romero et al., 2008). During such presentations, students provided their findings through powerpoint presentations and documentaries. The planning to disseminate their findings was to take place during the last two weeks of the YPAR projects. Unfortunately, this planning and dissemination never fully materialized. With several fledgling filmmakers and movie buffs taking part in the project, the student researchers intended to disseminate their research findings on surveillance in urban communities of color and gender norms and expectations in Latinx communities by creating documentaries. In fact, they had plans on sharing these documentaries during STHS’s student film festival. However, the work on the documentaries came to a halt when the student researchers were faced with pressures of senior year. Following the productivity of our first ten meetings, sessions and 11 and 12 – which took place early on in the new school year – were sparsely attended. After all, the student researchers were under intense pressure on a variety of fronts at the outset of their senior year. The college
counseling office put them to work immediately on college applications while they also felt the pressure of sports, extracurricular activities, and STHS’s rigorous college prep curriculum, including a handful of Advanced Placement classes. Though the desire to complete their documentaries was evident (the student researchers routinely approached me in the hallway to assure me that they would finish the films once their hectic schedules allowed), the conflicts, stress, and pressures of senior year precluded the students from finishing their films.

Table 2

Details Regarding Each Weekly Session

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session #</th>
<th>Texts</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session #1</td>
<td>Freire (1970)</td>
<td>Icebreaker – “I’m from…” poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Determine reading schedule for Jasmine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Journal for next session –“Reflect on Freire and Shor readings. What experiences have you had with banking education? What experiences have you had with problem-posing? How can we ensure our project utilizes problem-posing?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Jasmine reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #2</td>
<td>Mulcahy (2011)</td>
<td>Share homework journal - Make connections between previous week’s readings on banking education vs. problem posing and the students’ educational experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lewison et al. (2002)</td>
<td>Discussion – What is literacy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #3</td>
<td>Assorted pieces of children’s literature</td>
<td>Discuss <em>Jasmine</em> homework reading by discussing text-dependent and student generated questions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Jasmine</em></td>
<td>Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Journal for next session – Practice applying the 4 tenets of critical literacy to a piece of popular culture chosen by student researchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Continue <em>Jasmine</em> reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #4</td>
<td><em>Jasmine</em></td>
<td>Continue practice using 4 tenets of critical literacy using children’s literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>1984</em></td>
<td>Share homework journal – Discuss the ways in which the student researchers applied the 4 tenets of critical literacy to their chosen piece of popular culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discuss <em>Jasmine</em> using text-dependent questions and student-generated questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Journal for next session - apply 4 tenets of critical literacy to <em>Jasmine</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #5</td>
<td><em>1984</em></td>
<td>Share homework journal – Discuss the ways in which the student researchers applied the 4 tenets of critical literacy to <em>1984</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Merriam</em> (2009)</td>
<td>Form research groups according to interest in the novels’ themes and justice issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Creswell</em> (2009)</td>
<td>Refined research topic and brainstormed possible research questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Refine research question using Google doc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #6</td>
<td>- Merriam (2009)</td>
<td>- Finalized research questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ewing (2017)</td>
<td>- Brainstorm interview questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Kass (2017)</td>
<td>- Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Refine interview questions on the Google doc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #7</td>
<td>- Merriam (2009)</td>
<td>- Tweaked research questions together – groups give feedback to each other.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Practice interview skills with STHS alumni</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Debrief on practice interviews.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Journal - What went well during our practice interviews with STHS alumni? What we can improve on with our interviewing skills?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Conduct interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Creswell (2009)</td>
<td>- Practice coding using Studs Terkel’s <em>Working</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Terkel (1974)</td>
<td>- Homework:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Continue gathering data from interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #9</td>
<td>- Merriam (2009)</td>
<td>- Continue gathering data from interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Creswell (2009)</td>
<td>- Begin coding interview data gathered by student researchers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session #10</td>
<td>- Merriam (2009)</td>
<td>- Code interview data and discuss research conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Creswell (2009)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessions #11 and #12</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Canceled/Sparsely attended due to academic, extracurricular, and college application pressures at STHS.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

In my study of my students’ experiences with YPAR, I drew data from four primary sources: focus groups, individual interviews, observations, and student artifacts. I gathered with the student researchers to conduct focus groups throughout their YPAR experiences. In doing so, I gauged their reactions to their experiences with the project. I also followed up with individual interviews with the student researchers at the end of the project. As we worked together on their project, I also took field notes after our weekly meetings to record my observations. Finally, throughout the course of the project, students produced artifacts as they wrote journals. I was able to derive information and understandings from these journals as they reflected on their readings and experiences with the project.

Focus groups and individual interviews. To observe these student experiences throughout the YPAR projects, I scheduled two focus group sessions with the eight student researchers. These focus group sessions took place before and during the students’ experiences with the YPAR projects. The individual interviews took place after the completion of the project. I conducted one interview per participant at the end of the study to strategically probe deeper into issues that emerged during the focus groups (see Appendix B for interview questions).

These strategically timed focus groups and individual interviews allowed me to gauge their experiences throughout the project and study the ways in which they made meaning of social justice in the context of critical literacy. I also gauged the ways in they incorporated critical literacy within their YPAR projects. During the focus groups, I utilized a semi-structured interview format to generate answers as to how they
experienced these topics (see Appendix B for questions). The semi-structured interview allowed me “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topics” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). In doing so, I allowed the students within the focus group to dictate the direction of the conversation. As they drove the discussions, the students were free to explore issues surrounding the YPAR projects that were meaningful to them. Through our series of focus group interviews and individual interviews, I delved into these issues to provide a “thick description” of my students’ experiences while implementing their YPAR projects. With this thick description, I effectively explored the ways in which my students experienced this YPAR project. These focus groups sessions and individual interviews were audio recorded, and I personally transcribed these recordings.

**Observation and field notes.** As the adult facilitator, I worked alongside my students to develop their YPAR projects. In this role, I worked in close partnership on their journey to developing their qualitative research skills and putting these skills to use. Because of this partnership, I had the opportunity to observe my students as they evolved through this process. With this in mind, I kept a journal to record my observations concerning my students’ development. This journal was both “highly descriptive” and “reflective” (Merriam, 2009, p. 130). By rendering an account of what I observed during our work together, I described in detail “the participants, the setting, the activities or behavior of the participants, and what the observer does” (p. 130). In addition to these detailed descriptions, I reflected on my own “feelings, reactions, hunches, initial interpretations, speculations and working hypotheses” (p. 131). By registering these reflections in my daily journal, I tried to make sense of and forge an interpretation out of
the descriptions that I provided. In particular, I looked for evidence of the ways in which the student researchers employed the tenets of critical literacy within their YPAR projects. Specifically, using critical literacy theory as a guide, I intended to study the ways in which students developed their ability to disrupt the status quo, examine texts – both bound and unbound - from multiple perspectives, and explore sociopolitical issues through the implementation of the projects. I also looked for ways in which they made meaning of social justice in the context of critical literacy.

**Artifacts.** To understand their experiences with their YPAR projects, I also collected student researcher artifacts. To begin with, I collected student journals on a weekly basis. As we read scholarly articles concerning the theoretical foundations of problem-posing, critical literacy, and YPAR, I had the students reflect on these readings in their journals. Specifically, the students reflected on the ways in which they experienced banking education and how they could ensure we implemented problem-posing and used critical literacy during our work together. I also prompted the students to use their journals to practice using their critical literacy skills. At the outset of our work, the students used their journals to record their efforts to problematize their favorite pieces of popular culture (shows, movies, music, etc.). As we began to read the summer reading texts, the student researchers used their journals to answer text-dependent questions that helped them explore and make sense of *1984* and *Jasmine*. I also gave the students journal prompts to help them implement their critical literacy skills when tackling the summer reading texts. Before each weekly session, I asked the students to email me their journal responses that they wrote throughout the course of the week.
I also collected any artifacts that students produced concerning their weekly discussions. For example, when the students were implementing their critical literacy skills and discussing the summer reading texts, I collected the poster-sized paper that they used to facilitate their discussion and record their thoughts. Furthermore, I also had access to the Google docs that they collaborated on when devising their research question, crafting interview questions, and coding their interview and observation data.

**Researcher Stance and Validity**

Because I facilitated my students’ YPAR project(s), I assumed the role of “participant as observer” (Merriam, 2009, p. 124). By assuming this particular stance, I recognized that I had an active role in the students’ research and activities throughout the project. As I facilitated my students’ projects, I helped to advance the work of the group as a whole by lending my insights and experience with qualitative research. However, my role as observer was also acknowledged by the members of the group throughout our time working together on these projects (Merriam, 2009). I made it clear to these student researchers that I intended to observe their experiences with their qualitative research projects.

With my role as “participant as observer,” I recognized the importance of engaging in reflexivity. Through reflexivity, I critically reflected on and maintained transparency concerning the ways in which my biases and background shaped my observations during this study. Specifically, I did this by taking into account my biases as I wrote my field notes. My background was reflected as I took note of the ways in which it shaped my field notes and observations throughout the course of the study.
By maintaining transparency regarding my “assumptions, experiences, worldview, and theoretical orientation to the study at hand,” I strive to help my audience to “better understand how” I “might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). While I brought a critical theory lens to this study, I recognize that I am still developing as a critical pedagogue. Early on in my academic and teaching career, I did not give much thought to the ways in which my white, male privilege shaped my career, biases, and worldview. Growing up in a quiet suburb roughly twenty miles north of New York City, I am the son of a public high school teacher. Teaching English at the public high school and middle school from which my sisters and I would graduate, my father provided us with a modest yet comfortable middle-class upbringing. Because we were not as wealthy as some of my suburban peers, I was slow to realize that I was still the beneficiary of tremendous privilege throughout my education and career. As a young man, I was inclined to ascribe much of my academic success to my natural talents and diligence. Without a developed critical consciousness, I could not comprehend the ways in which being a son of a teacher within my school district paved my way to success both in high school and college. For example, when I struggled to make progress on the math portion of the SAT, my father could utilize his social capital within the school district to procure a tutor for me. In making use of this social capital, I learned how to game the standardized tests. In doing so, I was able to raise my abysmal math scores to gain acceptance to many of the colleges to which I applied.

Furthermore, while I cannot point to any definitive proof, I am certain that my father’s social capital and my identity as a white male also kept me out of trouble during high school. When my friends and I would run afoul of school rules or regulations, I
could count on teachers or administrators seeing these transgressions as “boys being boys.” After all, these same teachers had worked alongside my father for years, and they knew that I came from a “good” family. Whether we were intentionally tripping each other during gym unit on country line dancing, sneaking off campus as undergraduates, or sabotaging the lab experiments of other groups, my friends and I played pranks and engaged in all sorts of disruptive behavior. However, we emerged from such scrapes with authority figures without any serious damage to our academic reputations due to our white privilege. Looking back on our racially and socio-economically diverse school, I know that our students of color were not afforded the same benefit of the doubt. Instead, students of color are more likely to face suspensions and expulsions than their white counterparts for similar behavior.

Additionally, when I arrived at Fordham University in the fall of 1999 as an undergraduate, I had the benefit of matriculating at a college where the Angiello name was well-known. After all, my father and uncles graduated from Fordham as native sons of the Bronx when the university was still primarily a commuter school. Decades later, my sister attended Fordham and graduated as valedictorian the year before I was to arrive as a freshman. With my sister’s reputation preceding me, my freshman advisor scolded me for not living up to the lofty expectations she had set when I had a smattering of Bs and Cs on my mid-semester progress report. This dressing down certainly had the desired effect as I rose to these expectations by the end of the semester. Clearly, as an undergrad, I was the beneficiary of privilege as my advisor, knowing my family name well, went out of his way to challenge me and keep me on the right path.
Early in my teaching career, as an English as a Second Language teacher in a suburb close to my hometown, I would start to understand the ways in which my privilege shaped my life. After all, in teaching low-income Dominican-American English Language Learners, I could clearly see the ways in which talented and committed students were derailed in their educations by circumstances beyond their control. However, while my critical consciousness began to take shape during my days as an ESL teacher, it would not fully blossom until I matriculated at Loyola.

When I first started at STHS, I did not have a deep knowledge of critical theory, critical literacy or critical pedagogy. While I recognized the need to bring diverse perspectives and voices into our canonical American literature curriculum, I thought a complete overhaul of our curriculum was the answer. With this goal in mind, I enrolled in Loyola’s curriculum and instruction Ed.D. program. As the English Department Facilitator, STHS’s term for the department chair, I entered this doctoral program in order to develop the skills needed to rewrite our canon-heavy curriculum. As I progressed in my studies, I eventually came to embrace critical pedagogy and learned to heed Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) warning concerning the importance of canonical texts. Rather than dismantle our entire curriculum, I gradually learned to devise and implement the critical pedagogies necessary for interrogating the canonical works that my students encounter in the classroom. As I embraced critical theory and worked to develop critical pedagogies in my classroom and the department as a whole, my critical consciousness blossomed.

Through my multicultural education and critical literacy classes, I came to understand the myriad ways that I am beneficiary of white, male privilege in each facet of
my education and career. Now, I employ my critical consciousness and critical theory to shape my pedagogy. Likewise, I understand that this theoretical orientation will influence my reading of the data. Like the prominent critical theorists who have influenced me, I am inclined to see the imbalance of power that societal elites enjoy. For example, through my experiences in the classroom and graduate school, I recognize the ways in which schools, traditional curriculum, and pedagogical strategies maintain the status quo, keeping low-income students, students of color, and other marginalized groups oppressed. As a doctoral student and critical pedagogue, I have striven to uncover these imbalances in power, disrupt the status quo, and ultimately help to liberate my students from such oppressive conditions.

With my developing knowledge of my privilege, critical theory, and commitment to critical pedagogies, I utilized reflexivity to ensure the validity of my study. As a white male from middle class background and a burgeoning critical pedagogue, I maintained transparency and critically reflected on all aspects of my identity throughout the course of the study. Through a “critical self-reflection” that aims to account for the ways that my “assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientations, and relationship to the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229) may influence my interpretations, reflexivity will help assure readers regarding validity. I also increased validity and diminished my own biases by using member checks of my interpretations. When I collected data and forged interpretations, I presented this information “to the people from whom they were derived.” In doing so, I asked the participants if the data and resulting interpretations are “plausible” (p. 229). Finally, I also triangulated my findings to ensure validity and reduce the risk that my own biases influenced the study. “To confirm” my “emerging findings”
through triangulation (p. 229), I used multiple sources of data, including focus group data, my field notes and personal observations, my journal, and the artifacts that the students produced.

**Data Analysis**

After I collected my focus group data, individual interview data, field note observations derived from our weekly sessions, and artifacts, I began my data analysis with a round of open coding. With this initial phase of coding, I jotted notes in the margins next to pieces of data that were relevant to my research questions. However, in making my way through this data, I also remained open to other themes that emerged during my initial reading (Merriam, 2009). After all, as a qualitative researcher, I did not use “pre-established categories” or ignore categories that emerged “because they do not fit with” my “initial ‘focus’” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 23). I looked for repeated patterns of behavior and talk that characterized the group under investigation (Eisenhart, 2001), with particular focus on the tenets of critical literacy as outlined in my research questions. With this specific focus during my round of open coding, I sought evidence that the student researchers challenged the status quo, grappled with sociopolitical issues, examined multiple perspective, or took action (see Table 3). Aside from these predetermined codes, I generated a handful of other codes related to the consequences of teaching critical literacy within the context of a YPAR project. With my openness to these unanticipated themes, I found the following themes: resisting traditional pedagogy, curricula, and the canon through critical literacy, positive academic outcomes, increased confidence and engagement, and exploring the complexities of norms, expectations, and the status quo (see Table 4).
After this round of open coding, I moved to a round of focused coding, using both the analytic categories directly related to my research questions and the additional themes that emerged frequently during the open coding stage. These analytic categories included incidents of disrupting the status quo, maintaining the status quo, examining texts – both bound and unbound – from multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action for justice. These analytic categories were based on my theoretical framework of critical literacy. During the focused coding, I also looked for ways in which students used their critical literacy approach to resist traditional pedagogy, curricula, and the canon, developed confidence, deepened engagement with assigned literature, experienced other academic outcomes, and explored the nuances of norms, expectations, and the status quo, as these were prominent themes that emerged during the open coding stage.

Table 3

Pre-established Codes and Examples from the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-established Codes concerning critical literacy</th>
<th>Example from data</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disrupting the status quo</td>
<td>“As we were working with Jasmine, and we were looking more into our culture, I think I ignored a lot of what we were talking about. The restrictions we have. The responsibilities we have. The expectations as a woman. I think I really didn’t take it into consideration. I knew it was there, but it was just the way of life. But I think the fact that it hit personally, I started realizing more at home, or realizing it culturally, or in my neighborhood…when we did interviews and I saw people, or as I read the interviews and saw the way that there are ways they are thinking. Like, they were raised a certain way. Or like the older people that we interviewed, they have more...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of a, uh, culturally influenced way of thinking, so they thought it was ok.” - Liz

**Socio political issues**

“Oh, it was ‘The Knight’s Tale.’ The first book that we read in Canterbury Tales. Emily [one of the characters in the text] is just seen as an object to these two guys. They just want to marry her because of her looks. She doesn’t even get to speak. Only to the gods saying she doesn’t want to be wedded. And she doesn’t even receive that. She has no say in anything that is going on in her life.” - Isabel

**Multiple perspectives**

“Where I come from….I don’t really hear police sirens that much. So when I hear them I feel safe. I don’t feel in danger. Now from the interviewer that I interviewed…now I know his perspective and that cops are not always a good sign of safety. They can be corrupt. And he has a reason to believe that they can be corrupt. So…you know…it surprised me how ignorant I can be. When I don’t look at the bigger picture and when I don’t try to look at other people’s perspectives. So now I know that there are two sides to the story. There is more than one perspective. I shouldn’t just hold on mine. I should always hear from others.” – Alejandro

**Taking Action**

“Although women we are impacted by a lot of it, I think men are impacted by it too. So I think I started noticing it (*unintelligible*), so my little brother was crying and I think my dad told him, ‘you aren’t supposed to cry…man up!’ And he’s, like, three! ‘Dad, you gotta like…he’s a little kid first of all. Don’t tell him that. Cause then he’s going to have issues in the future. If he really feels some way, he’s not going to feel comfortable crying because he’s a man!’ There’s no reason to take that restriction and put that on his head. And make him think it’s not ok to cry. It is ok. And I’m always like telling them it doesn’t matter if he cries.” - Liz
### Unanticipated Codes that Emerged and Examples from Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes the emerged during open coding</th>
<th>Examples from data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using critical literacy and YPAR skills to resist traditional pedagogy, curricula, and the canon.</td>
<td>“I guess now, when I read a book, it’s not just I’m reading a book, but I want to see what the author is trying to say. And cause usually it’s I’m going to read the book to do my homework, but now it’s like I actually want to see what the author is trying to say within his book. And not just answer the normal questions that the teachers gives us, but take something out of it.” - Evelyn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive academic outcomes</td>
<td>“I feel like if I wouldn’t have done this project, then I probably would have been lost in Spanish. Cause I wouldn’t have had that mindset of how to critique [texts]...And not just question it but like attack it…I’m not trying to raise my hand just to get participation points, but I’m raising my hand because I truly feel confident in my answer. Even though it’s a class I do not feel confident in.” - Yesenia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased confidence, enthusiasm, and engagement</td>
<td>“I think at first I was questioning how people our age would be able to do such...like at first, you made it seem like a big project. Which it is. But it seemed not possible to me for my age. Just like interviewing people, and analyzing, and taking it seriously. And in the end it happened. Because I feel like you let us go with like, you know, directions and how we should do it. And also explaining why we should do it that way. So...yeah I’m just surprised that we are almost done with it, and I’m proud of the information that we got from the other people.” - Alejandro</td>
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Exploring the complexity of norms, expectations, and the status quo

“It has helped me open my eyes. These are problems that need to come out. And it’s like, especially with the interviews…knowing this is my culture. I can even see this in my own household and family. Like it’s not just these people that I don’t know. Because I didn’t know Monica or anyone that Liz or Yesenia interviewed, it’s just I see this in my own home. You get me. And it has helped me see not only in my own life but also relate to social issues going on in the world around us, especially in the government.” - Isabel

With this YPAR project, I aimed to answer Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) call for more qualitative research demonstrating the possibilities of this methodology. To my knowledge, there are no empirical studies demonstrating the effects of YPAR within an English literature class. As such, I hoped to explore the possibilities and challenges of implementing YPAR in this context. Specifically, I was intent on understanding the ways in which YPAR promotes the critical literacy skills of my traditionally marginalized Latinx students. In doing so, I hoped to add to our understanding of the possibilities of YPAR and encourage others to implement such research within English classrooms.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

By using the student researchers’ senior year AP British Literature summer reading assignments (*1984* and *Jasmine*) as a jumping off point for our Youth Participatory Action Research, I set out to explore the intersection of YPAR and critical literacy. With a critical theory and critical literacy theory lens, I sought to study the ways in which YPAR can be implemented within the context of an English literature unit in order to promote critical literacy amongst my Latinx students at St. Toribio College Prep. With this in mind, I posed the following research questions:

- How do traditionally marginalized Latinx students incorporate tenets of critical literacy in their literature discussion and activities?
- How do traditionally marginalized Latinx students interact with tenets of critical literacy as a YPAR project is implemented within the context of an English literature unit?
- How do these students make meaning of social action and their own efforts toward social change in the context of critical literacy?

At the outset of our work together, the student researchers and I read and discussed different texts, including the Lewison et al. (2002) journal article that outlined four basic tenets of critical literacy. To scaffold the tenets of critical literacy, we started by implementing our developing critical literacy mindset with accessible popular culture,
like children’s shows and books and moved into using this lens on summer reading texts. While applying their critical lenses to their summer reading texts, the student researchers organically divided themselves into two separate research groups. Through their interest in Jasmine’s experience with patriarchal culture in India and the U.S., three of our female student researchers used their critical lenses and developing qualitative research skills to craft a project surrounding gender norms and expectations in their Latinx communities. The remaining five researchers used their critical lenses, research skills, and acute interest in the authoritarian tactics of 1984’s Big Brother to create a YPAR project centered on the effects of surveillance on urban communities of color. Finally, following these experiences, the student researchers’ work with critical literacy and their two YPAR projects gave them opportunities to implement their critical lenses as their senior year kicked off.

In the following sections, I share how the students used this critical literacy lens on a range of texts, as well as in their YPAR projects. Then, I will detail the ways in which the student researchers’ use of a critical literacy mindset and implementation of their YPAR projects prompted them to take action. Finally, I demonstrate the ways in which the student researchers continued to apply their critical lenses during their senior year as their YPAR projects drew to a close.

**Developing a Critical Literacy Lens**

The following section details the student researchers’ efforts to refine their critical literacy approach during our work together throughout the course of the summer. To start, the student researchers first applied their critical lenses to a variety of popular culture texts. Next, they proceeded to apply these lenses to their AP British literature
summer reading. With their developing ability to problematize assigned texts, the student researchers went on to make connections between the sociopolitical issues that emerged during their reading and their own lived experiences.

**Critical Literacy and Popular Culture: Learning Together**

As students read the works of Freire and Macedo (1987), they understood that using a critical literacy lens was not restricted to traditional texts, but rather that we can read the entire world around us. To emphasize this idea and to provide the student researchers with a fun and accessible way in which to practice implementing their critical literacy skills, I shared a handful of pieces of popular culture. To document this process, I recorded the following data in my field notes:

After reading, discussing, and reflecting on Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys, I gave the students the chance to practice using the 4 pillars of critical literacy: disrupting the commonplace, examining multiple viewpoints, examining sociopolitical issues, taking action. We practiced with a low-pressure, accessible, fun example that I’m deeply familiar with due to Beatriz’s [my daughter] devotion: Peppa Pig. The vignette we watched was about the school play taking place at Peppa’s school. In this particular vignette, Peppa’s class was staging a production of *Little Red Riding Hood* and all of the different animals were assigned a role in the play.

After watching this particular episode, I recorded the variety of ways in which the students embraced the four aspects of critical literacy throughout the discussion. In my field notes, I noted:
The students disrupted the commonplace by asking why the male hunter has to save the females (granny and Little Red Riding Hood)…they noted that even though Pedro, playing the role of the hunter, was pretty weak and timid himself, yet emerged as the hero of the story. They asked, “Why couldn’t she free herself?” We noted how these depictions of females and gender roles perpetuate harmful norms and inequality.

In addition to exploring gender roles and norms during this discussion, the students also used their developing critical literacy skills to broach issues surrounding race and representation. In my field notes, I noted:

Jonathan made an interesting observation, claiming that Danny the Dog was typecast as the Big Bad Wolf. Jonathan said this is like when Mexicans are typecast as landscapers, gangsters, and narcos. We built on Jonathan’s main point by discussing the ways in which pop culture can perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Even though this is a funny example (a cartoon dog being typecast as the Big Bad Wolf because dogs are seen as aggressive, violent, etc.), we noted that such typecasting and perpetuating stereotypes can have very harmful implications for marginalized groups.

Here, the student researchers were able to analyze this text for larger issues of systemic oppression and marginalization. As Jonathan discussed harmful racial stereotypes and the group explored gender stereotypes that centered the male perspective as the “hero,” the student researchers recognized the prevalence of such issues of oppression and marginalization in our culture. They understood that such issues are pervasive as they even emerge in seemingly innocuous children’s cartoons.
Finally, the student researchers also used a critical lens to study some of the positive aspects of the show. During our guided discussion, they pointed out that the show actually disrupted the status quo by portraying a variety of family structures. In my field notes, I wrote:

The students pointed out that one thing the show does well is to show different family structures and portray these various family structures as normal. Peppa has a mainstream family structure (mom, dad, brother), but Danny dog is shown rehearsing his lines with Grandad Dog and mom. Rebecca rabbit rehearses lines with just mom. So there are a variety of family structures and each is normalized.

After watching *Peppa Pig*, we problematized a *Babar* book from my daughter Beatriz’s library. In this particular *Babar* text, the elephants decide to transform a defunct train station into a museum to house all the art that the King and Queen had collected on their voyages across the world. When discussing this text, I took note of the ways in which the students disrupted the status quo when it came to privileges exploited by societal elites. For example, they disrupted such exploitation by questioning Babar’s ownership of all this art that was to be housed in the new museum. While Jesus stated that Babar and his family “rescued” much of the art, other group members pushed back on the idea, pointing out that the elephants seemed to be hording a vast collection of priceless art in their basement. In using their emerging critical literacy skills, they noted that the text was positioning us to view the hording of art by elites as an acceptable norm. They also discussed the question of “What culture is worthy of display?” This question was broached as the student researchers noted that Western artists were heavily represented in this text while artists from other cultures were excluded. With students leading the way,
we had a productive discussion concerning the controversy over the ownership and provenance of art in elite homes and Western museums, as well as perspectives that are traditionally amplified or silenced.

As they applied their developing critical literacy skills to *Peppa Pig* and *Babar*, I was encouraged by their ability to problematize these texts as a group. As the student researchers successfully built off each other’s ideas during these discussions, they then began to apply a critical lens on a piece of popular culture of their own choosing.

**Practice Applying Critical Literacy Skills to Popular Culture on Their Own**

The following week, the students began to apply independently their critical literacy skills by discussing their favorite shows. For example, when applying a critical lens to his favorite shows and movies, Jesus, an avid consumer of films and fledgling filmmaker himself, “looked for one of the cleanest kids shows I could think of” to see if he could problematize even PG-rated content. In this pursuit, he settled on an episode of the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* where the male protagonists, two sea creatures, adopt a sea scallop and attempt to raise it. While watching this episode, Jesus disrupted the status quo in a variety of ways. To begin with, through his interrogation of this episode, which he submitted by recording his commentary through a voiceover that played over the episode, Jesus took note of the ways in which the episode reinforced gender norms. For example, Jesus discussed that at the outset of the episode, *SpongeBob* told *Patrick* that he could not be the sea scallop’s mother because he does not look the part. *SpongeBob*’s comment is followed by a view of *Patrick* where his stomach hangs low over pants and hair sprouts from various parts of his body. When analyzing this scene through his video submission for this assignment, Jesus said,
This show sets an example of what a mom should look like. Not by giving an image [of the ideal mom] but by showing what they shouldn't look like. So if a mom happened to fall into the category of this aesthetic that Patrick represents, then they are not presentable to appear as a mom.

Furthermore, Jesus continued to disrupt the status quo by exploring the ways in which this piece of popular culture reinforced heteronormativity. Jesus pushed back against this heteronormativity by problematizing the confused stares that SpongeBob and Patrick received from onlookers when they took their adopted sea scallop for a walk in a stroller.

Through his analysis of the episode, Jesus stated,

You see Spongebob and Patrick walking down the street with their baby sea scallop. Now next to them we see a 'normal' couple. Now we see the 'normal' couple give Spongebob and Patrick a strange look, implying that it is an anomaly that two males are the parents of a child. I'm not sure when they episode was made, but it is certainly implying that there is a certain way parents should look or what they should be regarding their gender.

By skillfully disrupting the status quo through his analysis of heteronormativity within this cartoon, Jesus demonstrated the ability to uncover disparities in power and privilege in popular culture. Clearly, Jesus emerged from this viewing of one of his favorite television shows disturbed by the ways in which the experiences of heterosexual couples are privileged while otherizing those who do not conform.

Like Jesus, Liz looked to more children’s content to practice viewing texts with a critical literacy lens. While watching Trolls with her family, her three-year-old brother’s favorite movie, Liz provided a gendered reading of this text and disrupted the status quo
when it came to gender norms. In her journal response concerning this children’s film, Liz noted,

Poppy, the main female character, is pink, giggly and sunshine and rainbows. They [the filmmakers] make her character seem dumb as she goes to Branch, the main male character, and asks for help because he has all the knowledge on the Bergens [the creatures who are antagonistic to the Trolls]. Also, when it comes to the love interest of Bridget and Christopher, Christopher seems to be the only thing that makes Bridget happy.

By disrupting the ways in which this text reinforces gender expectations, Liz pointed out that Poppy and Bridget regretfully depend on the men in their lives for guidance and happiness. With this gendered reading, Liz refused to view this film as light children’s fare. Instead, she was intent on disrupting the status quo and challenging the ways in which problematic female characters reinforced harmful gender stereotypes concerning the ways in which women are expected to comport themselves within heterosexual, romantic relationships.

Yesenia and Isabel’s journals also reflected a developing ability to use the language and tools of critical literacy to disrupt the status quo when it came to gender roles and expectations in pop culture. Like Liz, Isabel found evidence that the female characters in the movies she watched depended on the men in their lives. For example, while watching Suicide Squad, Isabel noted that “Harley Quinn,” a feared villain in her own right, nonetheless “depended on the Joker (a male).” With this observation, Isabel built on this idea by noting ample evidence of the objectification of female characters. In her journal, Isabel wrote that this movie “portrays the women as sexual and not as strong
individuals as the males were portrayed.” Similarly, Yesenia also challenged the ways in which her favorite shows reinforced gender norms. When watching some Japanese anime, Yesenia noticed that Yuki, one of the male protagonists, was burdened with “expectations” as he “needed to be strong and not sensitive” on his quest. In watching this show with a critical lens, Yesenia noticed that this male protagonist achieved his goals when he successfully found this strength and shed his sensitivity.

As student researchers explored the discourse and tools associated with critical literacy in our time together, they experienced success in using these skills on their own. By turning their critical lenses on some of their favorite pieces of pop culture, the student researchers problematized their favorite shows and movies with regard to gender norms and expectations and heteronormativity. With this exploration, they noted the ways in which ostensibly innocent children’s content can promote male dominance and the privileging of heterosexual relationships at the expense of others. This scaffolding and independent practice laid the groundwork for the students’ use of critical literacy in tackling their summer reading texts.

**Summer Reading and Critical Literacy**

With their exploration of heteronormativity and harmful gender expectations, the student researchers proved adept at disrupting the status quo and examining sociopolitical issues in the pop culture that they routinely encountered following the discussions surrounding aspects of critical literacy. With this practice under their belt, I invited them to continue to hone their critical literacy skills by applying Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluy’s four tenets to their summer reading.
Critical literacy and *1984*. As the students read *1984*, they keyed in primarily on the sociopolitical issues raised by author George Orwell. In this dystopian novel, the protagonist, Winston, rebels against the oppressive regime of Oceania, which seeks to control its citizens through surveillance, fear, and the rewriting of history. During their discussion of this text, I recorded field notes as to how the student researchers insightfully made connections between the text and the actions of current governments at the local, state, and federal levels. In my field notes following *1984* discussions, I stated that with these connections, the student researchers were keen to examine “sociopolitical issues surrounding state surveillance and the government’s efforts to control sex, language, and the rewriting of history in order to shape a narrative to serve the ends of the powers that be.” During our focus group conducted mid-way through the project, Evelyn spoke toward the connections that she made between the text and such current events through a critical literacy perspective. She stated,

> I really like researching freedom of speech and freedom of expression. So reading *1984* that just reinforced how important it is, especially now that there are discussions that need to happen. Like something like *1984* would be my worst nightmare where it happens and I’m just looking at it through the lens of what if it was right now. I could not live if I was there in that moment.

In reflecting on ways that current governments may have operated in an Orwellian way, Evelyn continued,

> Recently in the news, there has been a lot of talk about removing Confederate statues, and one was forcibly removed. And I don’t know…taking down something that was part of history, just destroying it…I don’t know. I love history
and even if it is something that represents something bad, it was part of the history. You don’t need to tear it down. And looking at *1984* how they just changed their history. It is so easy to change it and they don’t have any records, so nobody knows what’s true. I’m not saying it’s up to that extent right now. But there’s other ways they can go through that.

Orwell’s text resonated with Evelyn as she incorporated her critical literacy skills to connect Big Brother’s actions with contemporary issues. She grew frustrated when she recognized that the recent effort to tear down Confederate statues reminded her of Big Brother’s attempts to rewrite history to serve the interests of the totalitarian government. With this frustration, Evelyn saw the need to push back against attempts by the government or other entities to shape narratives. Ultimately, Evelyn deepened her understanding of both the text and this current debate as she grappled with larger societal issues of representation, racism, the rewriting of history, and the struggle to control narratives and strengthened her resolve challenge such efforts.

Liz also spoke to the ways in which her use of a critical lens prompted her to make connections between *1984* and the current political climate. In reflecting on the connections she made while reading the text during our mid-project focus group, she noted

[President Trump] wants everything to be like his way. Like one race, one way. Everything is done, like all that stuff. And there’s a lot of people, which in the book is not the same, there’s a lot of people now fighting against that and trying to change that. So I really like the character Winston because you see him kind of doing what we are doing. Like he’s kind of like questioning what’s going on. And
that’s what a lot of people should be doing right now. And I feel like a lot of people are doing that. He did a lot of questioning and doubting “is this the right way” or “what’s going on? Are they treating us some way?” There’s just a lot going on in his head and there is not a lot of people that he can relate to.

By reading for issues surrounding power and privilege, Liz demonstrated a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which the government exploits its authority to maintain the status quo. Liz clearly sensed the ways in which the protagonist, Winston, effectively challenged the status quo and these attempts at abuses of power through his independent thinking. In reflecting on the connections between 1984’s Big Brother and President Trump’s own tendency toward authoritarianism, Liz asserted the need for people today to challenge the government’s abuse of power in ways similar to Winston. With these insights, she recognized that the abuse of power by elites and the powers that be to maintain societal control is not isolated to a particular time or place, but rather is a pervasive and enduring issue with which we must contend. With this recognition, Liz used her ability to explore sociopolitical issues and disrupt the status quo to highlight the need for action against the current administration.

**Critical literacy and Jasmine.** When reading *Jasmine*, a novel about an Indian woman who is forced to reinvent herself multiples times when attempting to acclimate to her new life in the United States, the student researchers keenly broached sociopolitical issues, disrupted the status quo, and considered multiple perspectives. To leverage their critical literacy skills and jumpstart our literary discussions concerning this text, I asked the students to take part in a “graffiti walk” (where each student receives a marker and the chance to add thoughts to the large poster paper posted in the room) to brainstorm
observations and questions. By engaging in this brainstorming activity, the student researchers brought their critical literacy skills to bear, problematizing issues surrounding gender, immigration, assimilation, and the American dream.

In studying Jasmine’s migration from India to Florida, New York, and eventually the Mid-West, the student researchers were keen on examining the sociopolitical issues surrounding assimilation and the American Dream. During the graffiti walk, one student researcher noted on the poster that this novel demonstrates the ways in which newcomers are forced to assimilate as “America requires people to kill themselves to be there.” Building on this idea, another student researcher asked, “How much of an immigrant’s culture do they need to give up to live the American Dream?” on the poster paper. With these comments, the student researchers began to problematize popular narratives concerning assimilation and the American Dream. As they explored these sociopolitical issues in the text, the student researchers questioned the notion – reinforced by countless television shows, movies, and books - that the American Dream is accessible to all who possess grit, gumption, and the necessary work ethic. The student researchers found, instead, that Jasmine’s attempts to make her way in the U.S. were problematic in many ways. In her reflection on this text, Isabel, for example, noted that after Jasmine arrives in the U.S. and

…is Americanized, she feels like this big part of her has to be silent…you see this when she is talking to others. As in, she is not telling her boyfriend’s mother, Mrs. Ripplemeyer, “this is what happened [to Jasmine in her experiences as a migrant].” She is silencing that kind of thing.
With this comment, Isabel asserted that Jasmine needed to be very selective with what she revealed about her culture and past experiences in order to assimilate and successfully make her way in her adopted homeland. Ultimately, the student researchers understood the ways in which Jasmine needed to deprive herself of a voice and deny her past to accommodate those around her and achieve some semblance of the American Dream. As the children of immigrants, this silencing of marginalized voices resonated with the student researchers. In reflecting on their parents’ experiences navigating life in the U.S., some of the student researchers made poignant connections between Jasmine and their families, recognizing that the silencing of voices and the painful accommodations that must be made in the U.S. were widespread and not restricted to a time, place, or a particular culture.

Additionally, the student researchers explored the intersection of Jasmine’s race and gender. One student researcher started by noting on the poster board that the protagonist had to be “a different Jasmine for each husband” and that in both of her worlds “a woman must have a man in order to be fulfilled, happy.” Another student built off this idea, stating that her first husband, Prakash, “tries to modernize Jasmine” but she is too steeped in patriarchal culture as she resists his efforts and “tried to follow traditional Indian culture.” Using these comments as a jumping off point, the student researchers launched into a discussion that examined the ways in which the protagonist struggled with experiences of being the “other,” the fetishization of women of color, objectification, and violence in her effort to acclimate to her life in the U.S. During their discussions, they examined the ways in which gender roles and expectations shaped Jasmine’s life in India and the U.S. In doing so, they took notes of the ways in which she
fell victim to violence, fetishization, and objectification due to patriarchal practices both in India and across the United States.

In reflecting on her gendered reading of the text, Liz spoke toward the connections that she made between the text and contemporary issues surrounding gender roles and expectations that serve to marginalize young women. During our mid-project focus group, she noted that reading *Jasmine* in this way prompted her to see everything with the critical literacy lens… I was like “oh it’s there. It seems familiar.” Like I’ve seen it around in my day-to-day life. But now I see it and it’s there. When I was reading *Jasmine*, I noticed a lot of patriarchy. And that was something like, maybe it’s because I’m a woman like I noticed it but then I also saw the culture side of it… I put the book down and I was like, “Wait. This happens to us a lot too.” So it opened me to a lot more. Like… social justice. A lot more than what I’m used to. Like I saw it around other cultures and myself.

By applying her critical literacy skills to this particular text, Liz described a profound connection between the protagonist’s experiences and her own. In doing so, she understood both the text and her own experiences with patriarchal norms on a deeper level. In recognizing the familiarity of Jasmine’s experiences and connecting them to her own, Liz understood that the marginalization of women is not restricted to a particular culture, region, or time period. With her critical lens, she understood that these are, instead, pervasive systemic issues that must be challenged in a variety of contexts.

Furthermore, the student researchers’ exploration of sociopolitical issues and disruption of the status quo also helped Liz to make connection between the protagonist’s experiences as a migrant and those in Liz’s own family. In reflecting on Jasmine’s pursuit
of the American Dream, Liz and I had the following exchange during our mid-project focus group:

Liz - That quote that got to me was that you kill yourself to become the Dream. I’ve been babysitting a lot because my parents have been working a lot and I see that. And they are like working and working and working and like they don’t really know much about English but they struggle through it. No one really knows the struggle they are going through or how much they are working. Because no one really asks. But the other day I started asking them the other day and they were like “oh yeah it’s hard. People come in. They are like talking English and I’m trying to talk to them, but they don’t really understand me.” So it’s like I notice that a lot more.

Angiello – What do your parents do?

Liz – My dad’s a mechanic.

Angiello – So your dad feels that at work?

Liz – uh huh. He gets a lot of clients…a lot of them are not Spanish speaking. So it’s like…he learned English, but he’s not fully there. So sometimes he’ll call me and say “I’m trying to do this with this one guy. Help me out. What do I say so that it sounds right? Like so I don’t get played, with like money-wise.” And stuff like that.

Once again, the application of critical literacy skills prompted Liz to arrive at profound insights concerning her own family’s experiences, particularly her parents’ experience as immigrants. Like the protagonist, Liz took note of the ways in which her parents had to “kill themselves” by struggling mightily or sacrificing parts of their identities to chase the
American Dream. With her ability to disrupt the status quo and problematize overly sanguine narratives concerning the American Dream, Liz successfully connected her own family experiences with that of the narrator and ultimately understood the harrowing pursuit of the American Dream on a deeper level.

After discussing the tenets of critical literacy and practicing with pieces of popular culture, the student researchers experienced success applying their developing critical literacy skills within the context of our summer reading literary discussions. By utilizing their critical approach, the student researchers drew connections between their lived experiences and the summer texts and ultimately problematized – among other issues – patriarchal norms, governmental efforts to shape narratives or rewrite history, assimilation, trauma, and the American Dream. In doing so, the student researchers understood that their own or their family’s experiences with norms, assimilation, and trauma, and other issues are part of systemic efforts toward marginalization. With their connections between the books and their own lives, they sensed that such marginalization transcends the experiences of one particular group or time period. They recognized the evidence of such marginalization in their own experiences, the literature, and beyond.

**Forging YPAR Projects through a Critical Approach to Summer Reading**

The student researchers used their critical approach to *Jasmine* and *1984* to help give shape to their YPAR projects. While using the summer reading texts as inspiration for their projects, the group of eight students organically cleaved into two separate groups. The four male students (Jesus, Jonathan, Andy, and Alejandro) and one female (Evelyn) gravitated toward issues concerning surveillance while the other three female students (Isabel, Yesenia, and Liz) expressed an interest in exploring traditional gender
norms and expectations. The following section will detail the ways in which the two groups applied their critical literacy lenses to each phase of the research process, from the creation of their research questions to the coding of their data. Furthermore, this section will also explore the ways in which the students’ projects prompted them to explore their own experiences with societal norms, expectations, and the status quo as their critical approach intersected with their research interests throughout the course of the summer.

The Gender Norms Group

As the student researchers applied their developing critical literacy skills to their summer reading texts, our ensuing literary discussions concerning the patriarchal cultures in India and the U.S. in *Jasmine* resonated with the young women in the gender norms research group. When discussing the protagonist’s experiences as a woman in these cultures as well as her experiences as an undocumented immigrant, Liz commented “wait…this happens to us a lot too!” Through these insights, the young women made connections between Jasmine’s struggles and their own experiences with patriarchal culture. Because they were interested in studying “the patriarchy,” they first had to narrow down the topic, and eventually the student researchers zeroed in on more specific research topics. During this discussion, I noted in my field observations that the student researchers “were interested in Jasmine’s dependence on men and wanted to explore this in their culture. This led them to talk about the symbolism of quinceaneras.” Because we ran low on time during this particular session, the student researchers moved this discussion from our weekly in-person meeting to the Google document created for remote collaboration and proceeded to highlight a variety of specific issues that were ripe for investigation. In doing so, they demonstrated the ability to explore sociopolitical
issues as it pertains to gender issues. For example, while generating possible research topics on the Google document, Liz noted that in their community, “it is expected that a woman/girl has/needs a man to be stable in the future.” In response, Isabel noted that “this often causes the LGBT community to not be accepted with some Latino families – the idea of needing a man in order to be happy.” On the Google document, Liz also noted that “a woman can be kept from expressing her ideas or opinions” while Isabel added that “daughters are treated way different then how sons are treated…they [the females in Latinx families] are seen as weaker or not able to do the same activities as a man.” With these comments, the group explored various issues and concerns that stemmed from cultural perspectives surrounding gender.

By problematizing the different expectations for males and females in their experiences, the female student researchers in this group also demonstrated the ability to challenge the status quo as it pertains to gender. While they questioned these norms as a group, they eventually keyed in on the topic for their YPAR study. On the Google document, Liz stated that “the purpose of our study is to study how the patriarchal society affects a woman’s life in our culture through our traditions and norms.” Specifically, the group was intent on exploring these sociopolitical issues and challenging the status quo by studying the ways in which Latinx traditions (i.e., quinceaneras) and norms (i.e., traditional family roles) impact the women in their communities.

As their discussion concerning their potential research topic evolved, I noted that the female student researchers in this group were deeply engaged with the subject matter. In my field notes, I recorded
All the girls seem to have their run-ins with misogyny or marginalization. They feel this topic on a visceral level. It seems like each week they have some new story to tell. Liz at work. Yesenia at this networking event. They can’t wait to share stories about this stuff. They seem really engaged and can really connect with the issues.

As they connected with the research topic, our research sessions provided the female student researchers in this group the opportunity to process and reflect on some of their experiences with marginalization or misogyny. For example, I wrote about an exchange that I had with Yesenia concerning a frustrating experience she had at a networking event. I noted,

I had an interesting discussion with Yesenia. She was having hard time articulating her thoughts concerning the research question, trying to work through them. She finally said, ‘let me tell you what I mean through a story.’ She went on to tell a story about how she was at a networking event where she was talking to a real estate broker and a male friend of hers, who wants to be an attorney, barged in on the conversation. The real estate broker responded to him, saying “We need more Latino males in real estate…” Yesenia got upset because she is actually more interested in this particular field [then the male friend who interrupted the conversation] but didn’t draw as much of a response from the broker as the male friend. She thought it was gendered bias on the broker’s part.

While I agreed that this could reflect a bias on the broker’s part, we used this anecdote as an occasion to expand upon some of the other gendered readings of this situation. For example, we discussed that society has conditioned males
to take charge and barge right into a conversation like that whereas she [Yesenia] has been socialized to be more demure. We talked about how that could be another explanation as to why he drew more of a reaction from the broker. The friend was assertive and the guy responded to that. She was more DL, polite, etc. and he [the broker] didn’t respond.

Through this discussion of Yesenia’s experience with the real estate broker, I took note of the ways in which the YPAR process encouraged the student researchers to refine their critical literacy skills, particularly with regard to problematizing the power imbalances that they experience as young women and the ways in which they are conditioned to carry themselves to conform with marginalizing norms and expectations. While each of the girls in the group shared experiences with marginalization, our research project opened the space to reflect on the complexity of such experiences where power imbalances were apparent and enforced norms were harmful.

With their research topic solidified and their enthusiasm for exploring these issues, the gender norm group set about devising research questions and planning their interviews. They needed support crafting more open-ended questions, but, as they refined their qualitative research skills and carried out their YPAR projects, their burgeoning critical literacy skills started to manifest themselves in other places, particularly in their own homes and the classroom.

**The Surveillance Group**

With their interest in Big Brother’s attempt to invade the private lives of the citizens of Oceania in order to maintain fear, obedience, and loyalty throughout *1984*, Jesus, Jonathan, Andy, Alejandro, and Evelyn were intent on using their critical literacy
approach and YPAR project to study surveillance. I observed in my field notes that, as a group, these student researchers were very much attuned to current events, particularly with regard to technology. For example, this group had quite a bit to teach me concerning the nuances regarding the debate over net neutrality, which was in the news as the Trump administration moved to alter Obama era policy. Therefore, with these interests, this group generated a litany of topics concerning the intersection of surveillance and technology. Following one of our sessions, I observed in my field notes that this group had “brainstormed a bunch of possible research topics, including government surveillance, school surveillance, Edward Snowden, the NSA collection of phone records, and net neutrality.” Because we were interested in studying these issues as they pertain to local communities, the student researchers eventually settled on studying the ways in which contemporary governmental and police surveillance affect urban communities of color.

As they zeroed in on this topic, the surveillance group collaborated to devise the research question, “What effects do increased police presence and increased surveillance have on urban communities of color?” This research question then led to a series of sub-questions:

- How does surveillance in schools affect students and education?
- How does an increased police presence and surveillance affect police and community relations in urban communities of color?
- How does an increased police presence and surveillance affect crime in urban communities of color?
With the research question and sub-questions finalized, the surveillance group and I discussed ways to study these questions. They decided that they would conduct a series of interviews with a variety of stakeholders. Specifically, they decided to interview a cross-section of civilians from their neighborhoods and police officers while I told them that I would try to leverage our school president’s connections in the community to secure an interview with the local alderman (unfortunately, these efforts fell short and the student researchers did not get the opportunity to interview the alderman for his perspective on surveillance in the community). With their stakeholders in mind, the student researchers proceeded to generate interview questions drawing from a text we read together during our weekly meetings (Merriam, 2009) that focused on conducting interviews. In my field notes, I recorded that,

The group tweaked the interview questions on the white board together. The surveillance group initially had a bunch of yes/no questions. For example, they had questions like ‘Do you feel safe in your community? Have you seen an increase in surveillance in your community? Etc.’ We talked through this [why we want to avoid yes/no questions] and got at some more open-ended questions. As they tweaked and finalized the interview questions for both the civilians and police officers (see Appendix C for list of questions), the student researchers set about refining their interviewing skills. Again, using Merriam’s text on qualitative research, we discussed interview techniques and strategies and set up a series of practice interviews in a low-pressure setting. These low-pressure interviews (with St. Toribio alumni who volunteered to attend one of our weekly sessions) helped the student researchers refine their interviewing skills and helped empower them to enter the field as researchers.
To further develop their critical literacy skills and thinking on sociopolitical issues surrounding surveillance, particularly with regard to police surveillance in urban communities of color, the group read articles with opposing viewpoints – from conservative *Chicago Tribune* columnist John Kass and University of Chicago sociologist Eve Ewing - concerning the violence in Chicago neighborhoods on the South and West sides. The student researchers interrogated these articles with their critical lenses and proceeded to incorporate them into their interview protocol. Following Merriam’s (2009) recommendation to use hypothetical or devil’s advocate questions to understand a research participant’s thoughts on a topic, the student researchers posed the following question:

Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass has proposed that police block off exits and entrances to certain Chicago neighborhoods that are affected by violence to monitor and control who enters and exits the neighborhood. What is your reaction to such a proposal?

In addition to their desire to enhance their understanding of this sociopolitical issue through these articles, this group sought to examine multiple perspectives when it came to surveillance. They employed this tenet of critical literacy by seeking to interview not just friends, classmates, or neighbors but police officers as well. In my field notes, I observed that the surveillance group showed good initiative in setting up an interview with Dan [a Chicago Police Department officer who supervises after-school events at St. Toribio]. This interview [with Dan] actually turned out great in that they then got
interviews with two other cops. During Field Day, they were all there ready to
collect these interviews with these two other cops.

By leveraging their connection with Dan, the surveillance group effectively utilized
snowball sampling (Merriam, 2009) to gain other perspectives on surveillance from CPD
officers. In doing so, they demonstrated their commitment to interrogating multiple
viewpoints concerning their research topic. The student researchers knew that their
understanding of their research topic would be flawed or incomplete without this effort to
seek out a range of stakeholders and varied voices. They used this commitment to
examining multiple perspectives and their qualitative research skills to shape their
projects concerning police and government surveillance in their communities.

Using Critical Literacy while Collecting Data and Coding

While students brought their critical literacy skills to bear during the initial phases
of the research process (identifying a research topic, crafting research questions and
interview questions), this trend continued as they collected and eventually coded their
data. To prepare the student researchers to code their own data, I asked them to read and
discuss Merriam’s (2009) chapter on coding and prompted them to practice this research
skill using Studs Terkel’s (1974) iconic text, Working. By reading this piece of oral
history, filled with interviews concerning the experiences of white collar, blue collar, sex,
hourly, and other sorts of workers, the student researchers conducted a round of open
coding, leaving themselves open to any themes that emerged from the various interview
subjects who discussed their thoughts on their work lives with Terkel. Following this
practice, the student researchers felt better prepared to utilize open coding when it came
to the data that they had collected. Huddled over dozens of pages of interview transcripts,
the student researchers jotted notes in the margins, taking note of the data relevant to their research questions while remaining open to other themes that emerged. In doing this during the coding process, student researchers also embraced the tenet of multiple perspectives and explored the complexity of norms and expectations at play in their own lives and communities. In this way, the YPAR process and the tenets of critical literacy intersected to provide them with a more profound understanding of the sociopolitical issues under investigation. This intersection played out during the study as the YPAR process ultimately gave the students the space and opportunity to leverage their critical literacy approach within their experience with their assigned summer literature.

By demonstrating this intersection between YPAR and critical literacy in the following section, I will present the ways in which the female student researchers in the gender norms group used their research data to explore the nuances of their own experiences with gender norms and expectations and cultural norms. Similarly, the surveillance group also turned their critical lens on their own lives and experiences when working through their data. In doing so, they embraced the importance of examining multiple perspectives concerning surveillance issues in their neighborhoods.

**The gender norms group explores the complexity of their experiences.** After settling on a topic and refining their interview questions, the student researchers in the gender norms group found that the YPAR process gave them the space to explore the complexity of their own experiences with gender, family, and cultural norms, which was particularly evident during the student researchers’ rounds of coding.

To begin with, when collecting and coding their interview data, Liz found that her YPAR project granted her the space to leverage her critical literacy approach and explore
the complexity of gender norms and expectations at play within her family. During her final one-on-one interview, Liz pointed to two research participants in particular who prompted her to turn her critical literacy lens on her own experiences with these norms and expectations. During the interviews that they granted to the YPAR student researchers, Monica and Erika, two Latinas in their 20s and early 30s, espoused the idea that they were empowered, independent women. However, as Liz coded these interviews, she sensed that the situation was far more nuanced. For example, Liz noted that these two participants certainly demonstrated ways in which they “could live alone and do things on [their] own.” However, in coding this data, Liz also sensed that these two participants may have “depended on the men in their lives, or like the way [their] family viewed things” in certain ways as well. In looking at this data, Liz came away with a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which gender norms and expectations played out in the lives of the research participants as she sensed that the women in her study strove to assert independence in their relationships yet struggled to do so in certain regards.

By arriving at this understanding concerning her research participants’ experiences, Liz took this opportunity to reflect on the nuances of the gender norms and expectations in her own life. During our final one-on-one interview, she noted that by conducting these interviews and coding the data concerning gender norms and expectations, Liz found the space to reflect on the nuances of

…the restrictions we have. The responsibilities we have. The expectations we have as a woman…but I think the fact that it hit personally [during the coding process], I started realizing more at home, or realizing it culturally, or in my neighborhood…I started thinking on it.
With this realization, Liz explored the complexity of her own experiences with gender, cultural, and family norms and expectations. For example, as noted earlier in this chapter, Liz drew the parallel between the protagonist in *Jasmine* and her parents as she found that they all had to “kill” themselves in their struggle for the American Dream. By making this connection between Jasmine and her parents during our mid-project focus group, Liz clearly appreciated the tremendous sacrifices that her parents made to provide for her and her brothers. After all, Liz spoke admiringly of the ways in which her parents worked tirelessly to make the Dream a reality for their family.

However, with the space to explore the nuances of gender norms and expectations during this YPAR project, Liz considered her other perspectives on the sacrifices her parents had to make for the family. As her parents worked arduously to provide for their children, Liz knew that it fell to her step up to help care for her younger brothers. In reflecting on this situation during our final one-on-one interview, Liz discussed the ways in which these responsibilities might impact her college aspirations. She was concerned that the support she provided her parents might preclude her from leaving home for her top-choice in schools. In voicing this concern, Liz stated,

I think going into college, a lot too, like, I’m looking into opening [my parents’] eyes. Like where I want to go is forty miles away. It’s not even that far, but my mom is like still, ‘oh what if we need you here?’ Or ‘what if you need to do something here at home?’

I’m like ‘Mom…it’s ok. I’ll come back.’

Liz’s reflection on the tension between her responsibilities at home and her college aspirations helped her understand the complexity of her experiences with gender, family,
and cultural norms and expectations. Throughout the YPAR process, Liz found the space to explore fully the nuances of her experiences with the American Dream. While she appreciated and admired the sacrifices that her parents made to provide for their family, she also expressed the ways in which the responsibilities that she took on as a result had the potential to restrict her academically.

Liz also explored the complexity of gender, family, and cultural norms and expectations when it came to the lessons that her younger brothers gleaned from her parents. During our final one-on-one interview, she noted that her data collection and coding provided her the opportunity to reflect on the ways that her brothers were influenced by gender norms and expectations. Liz said “Although, we, as women, are impacted by a lot of it, I think men are impacted by it too.” She continued to explain that she noticed the ways in which males are influenced by gender norms and expectations when her youngest brother was chastised for crying. However, while Liz took exception with her father instructing her little brother “man up,” this incident also provided her the opportunity to reflect further on the complexities of such gendered expectations. By asking her father about these expectations that he placed upon his son, Liz learned a great deal about her father’s experiences growing-up. In relaying her father’s explanation, Liz stated,

He brought up his past. So my grandpa passed away when my father was pretty young, so my dad took on that role. Like being the dad. And he’s like, ‘well I didn’t grow up with anything, so I kind of took on that strong. So he has to do it too.’ My dad, he is pretty tough when it comes to that. And I feel like it is because his father died young. So I feel like that’s what he uses…I don’t want to say, like,
as an excuse, but that’s what he takes on. Like he didn’t have that fatherly role. My grandpa was always like ‘you can’t cry.’ So it’s kind of like that ongoing past of culturally passing that restraint on. Like you have to be strong and you have to be strong for the family. You have to do this for the family. But I don’t think that’s always true.

Liz embraced multiple perspectives when it came to exploring both those gendered expectations and her father’s own personal experiences of growing up without his father. By reflecting on these multiple perspectives, Liz came away from her YPAR project with a more complex understanding of the ways in which gender, family, and cultural norms manifested themselves within her own family. With the examination of these nuanced multiple perspectives, Liz recognized both the harm of gendered expectations but also the deeply personal experiences that drove her father to enforce such notions on his sons. Liz’s exploration of these nuances came by virtue of the intersection of her YPAR experience and critical literacy approach. When her YPAR project on gender norms grew from her interest in the summer reading, Liz seized the opportunity to study the ways in which the impact of gender norms and expectations impact women in her Latinx community. She ultimately made the most of this opportunity by leveraging her critical literacy approach during the coding process and arriving at her nuanced research conclusions, ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of herself, her family, community, and the text at hand.

In her final one-on-one interview, Isabel astutely captured the overarching sentiments of the student researchers in the gender norms group. As she too reflected on
the ways in which this project prompted her to bring a critical lens to her own lived experience, Isabel noted

[This work was] super interesting. It has helped me open my eyes. These are problems that need to come out. And it’s like, especially with the [YPAR] interviews…knowing this is my culture. I can even see this in my own household and family. Like it’s not just these people that I don’t know. Because I didn’t know Monica or anyone that Liz or Yesenia interviewed, it’s just I see this in my own home. You get me? And it has helped me see not only in my own life but also relate to social issues going on in the world around us.

While they – at various points throughout the project – expressed tremendous pride in and admiration for various aspects of their family and cultural backgrounds, Liz, Yesenia, and Isabel, nonetheless, problematized their experiences with gender norms and expectations. When the data collection and coding process of this YPAR project gave them the opportunity to critically reflect on their own lived experiences, these student researchers interrogated multiple perspectives concerning these norms. In doing so, they arrived at nuanced understandings of the ways in which these norms and expectations played out in both their lives and the lives of those women whom they interviewed for their YPAR project. These student researchers found the space to gain these nuanced understandings due to the intersection of their YPAR study and the development of their critical literacy approach. As their summer reading inspired their exploration of the impact of gender norms and expectations on women in their Latinx communities, the student researchers seized the opportunity during the data collection and coding process to problematize their understanding of these impacts. Equipped with their critical
approach and the opportunity to dive into dozens of pages of interview data, the student researchers emerged from their YPAR project with an enhanced understanding of their research interests.

**Embracing multiple perspectives in the surveillance group.** Like their counterparts in the gender norms group, the members of the surveillance group recognized the importance of embracing multiple perspectives when it comes to their lived experiences during their data collection and coding. For example, the importance of interrogating multiple perspectives was illuminated for Alejandro as he conducted his interviews concerning the effects of police surveillance on urban communities of color. In talking to a variety of stakeholders, he realized how much his own background and upbringing shaped his perspective on this topic. Alejandro noted that in his neighborhood,

> I don’t really hear police sirens that much. So when I hear them I feel safe. I don’t feel in danger. Now from the guy that I interviewed, Victor, now I know his perspective and that cops are not always a good sign of safety. They can be corrupt. And he has a reason to believe that they can be corrupt. So…you know…it surprised me how ignorant I can be when I don’t look at the bigger picture and when I don’t try to look at other people’s perspectives.

In talking to his interview participant and coding this data, Victor, a teenager from a Chicago neighborhood with a very complicated relationship with the Chicago Police Department, Alejandro learned that the same sirens that don’t bother him can inspire suspicion or fear in others. With this insight, Alejandro was better prepared to embrace multiple perspectives. He resolved to remember “that there are two sides to the story.”
There is more than one perspective. I shouldn’t just hold on to mine. I should always hear from others.” Ultimately, this exchange with Victor highlighted for Alejandro the importance of applying a critical lens not just in the classroom but in his own experiences as well.

Similarly, Evelyn was “pretty shocked at what” her interviewees “had to say” because of the varied perspectives that their data produced. When interviewing various stakeholders concerning surveillance in urban communities, Evelyn stated,

They [the interviewees] had different opinions on surveillance. So I realized it is not as easy as it seems. Like it’s not ‘oh there should be a lot of cameras’ or ‘no, there shouldn’t be a lot of cameras because people feel unsafe.’ But it’s harder to find that middle ground. So I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out the best solution.

These multiple perspectives were particularly vexing for Evelyn, for she assumed that the stakeholders from her community would hold a uniform point of view. However, through the coding of her group’s data, she “became more aware. I learned that it’s not just black or white…I had my own notion of what I believe about surveillance, and [the police officers interviewed] probably think this because they are officers.” But by going out into the field, collecting this data from different stakeholders, and then coding it, Evelyn was forced to contend with the plethora of views concerning this thorny justice issue. Through their exploration of the nuances and multiple perspectives on police surveillance, Alejandro, Evelyn, and the other members of this research group recognized that there is no consensus when it comes to the relationship between the police and the student researchers’ communities. The views that they encountered ranged from complete
distrust of the police or apathy concerning this relationship to unwavering support for those officers who serve their neighborhoods. With these disparate perspectives, the surveillance group recognized the need to explore such nuanced views to arrive at a more complete understanding of the issues affecting their communities. Once again, the YPAR process and critical literacy intersected to help facilitate such nuanced views. By seeking out a range of stakeholders during the interview process, the student researchers were presented with the opportunity to capitalize on their critical mindset—specifically their exploration of multiple perspectives—and deepen their understanding of this complex topic.

Ultimately, the student researchers drew interesting research conclusions in the wake of their coding. With several film buffs and aspiring filmmakers taking part in this project, the student researchers intended to disseminate their findings by creating documentaries. The documentaries, unfortunately, never came to fruition as the student researchers could not find time to meet due to the pressures brought on by their AP classes, the college application process, and extracurricular activities throughout the fall semester of their senior year. Despite these difficulties, the YPAR experience, coding process, and research conclusions proved valuable to the student researchers as they came away with a more nuanced grasp of their topics. Learning about critical literacy and conducting a YPAR project prompted the student researchers to turn a critical lens inward and apply these skills to their own experiences. In doing so, the members of the gender norms group understood the nuances of their experiences with societal or cultural norms and expectations while members of the surveillance group embraced the
importance of examining multiple perspectives throughout the data collection and coding process.

Social Action in the Wake of YPAR

While the student researchers did not have the opportunity to take action by sharing their research findings through their planned documentaries, they did find other ways to take action following their summer experiences with their YPAR projects. The student researchers found the space to take action in response to some of the issues they explored throughout the course of the project at home, in school, and in their communities. The following section will detail the ways in which social action manifested itself following their YPAR experiences and development of their critical literacy mindset.

The Gender Norms Group Takes Action

After finding the space to explore the nuances of their own experiences with gender, family, and cultural norms and expectations, the student researchers in the gender norms group turned this reflection into action. Specifically, they took action by prompting those closest to them – including friends and family members - to recognize and grapple with problematic norms and expectations.

Implementing ways to take action was a significant step for Liz. Before she engaged in the YPAR work, Liz stated that she did not actively resist some of the gender norms and expectations she experienced. In our initial focus group, she noted, “I wouldn’t consider myself a feminist” and “I’m not marching in the streets for” gender equity, a reference to the Women’s March that had recently taken place following President Trump’s inauguration. However, in the wake of her YPAR project, Liz became
more active in her resistance to problematic gender norms and expectations. In our final interview, Liz spoke to the ways in which she resists the prevailing norms and expectations at home. In doing so, she often attempts to resist in defense of her little brother. During this final interview, Liz described her response to the previously described efforts on the part of her father to prompt Liz’s three-year old brother to “man up.” She explained,

My little brother was crying and my dad told him ‘you aren’t supposed to cry…man up!’ And he’s, like, three! So I’m like ‘Dad…he’s a little kid first of all. Don’t tell him that. Cause then he’s going to have issues in the future.’ If he really feels some way, he’s not going to feel comfortable crying because ‘he’s a man!’ There’s no reason to take that restriction and put that on his head. And make him think it’s not ok to cry. It is ok. And I’m always like telling them it doesn’t matter if he cries.

This exchange grew from Liz’s ability and willingness to apply her critical lens to her own experiences with gender, family, and cultural norms and expectations. Here, she discussed her resolve to protect her little brother from the notion that males must project strength and not display emotion. As she disrupted the status quo in her literature assignments and the YPAR process, particularly during her coding of the interview data, she then proceeded to take action to ensure that her little brother was not adversely affected by her father’s admonitions.

Like Liz, Isabel also started to take more action at home in response to the gendered roles and expectations that she explored when she turned a critical lens on her own experiences following her summer reading and YPAR experience. Isabel resolved to
challenge the gender and family roles that were handed down to her. As noted earlier, for example, Isabel asserted that she would refuse to serve her male cousins at family parties and that “they can get up and do their own thing” from now on. Furthermore, Isabel became intent on challenging what she saw as harmful narratives that appear in the pop culture that her family consumes. For example, she intended to problematize the Lifetime network and Hallmark Channel movies and romantic comedies that her mother is a big fan of in order to open up a dialogue within her family concerning gender roles and expectations. In recounting an instance in which she watched one such movie at home, she emphatically told her mother, “Ma! You do know he (the male lead) is controlling this environment for her and” the female protagonist “is going back” to him anyway. While her mom implored her “not to ruin the movies,” Isabel is resolved to foster these conversations in order to challenge the ways in which gender norms can serve to restrict the women in their household.

While Liz and Isabel sought to take action and challenge the status quo within their own homes, Yesenia took this resistance to school. Throughout the project, Yesenia spoke to me about her problematic relationship with Alex, a close friend of hers, who frequently espoused dismissive notions concerning women in education and the workplace. Because she held Alex and his intellect in high regard, these notions had a profound effect on Yesenia. However, after her experience with YPAR and finding the space to develop tools and discourse around disrupting the status quo, she started to challenge Alex’s notions. During our final interview, she relayed to me a discussion that she had recently had with Alex concerning the gender pay gap that pervades society. The exchange went as follows:
Yesenia: We (Yesenia and Alex) were discussing the argument about how men and women aren’t equally paid. At first I didn’t see the other side. The “Why” part. Why are women paid less than men. I used to think it because of the STEM fields because I saw how…Alex was telling me…because he’s very against that theory (concerning pay equity), I guess. Which I was like…oh what? He was telling me how it’s because most women aren’t in STEM, and STEM fields are the jobs that earn the most money now. Even tough STEM jobs prefer women over men. And I found that kind of interesting because I didn’t really see that viewpoint. But…

Angiello: So his argument is that there is a pay gap because…inequality in pay is because…

Yesenia: because women and men have different jobs, and one his arguments is that STEM jobs earn the most money. And how women aren’t really in STEM fields. And I was like…wait, that doesn’t make sense! Because there have been studies done where they ask the wages of people in the same job and the same occupation of men and women. And you see the difference in how women are paid less than men.

Prior to her YPAR experience, Yesenia often found herself under the sway of Alex and his dismissive ideas regarding gender issues due, in large part, to the esteem in which she held her friend. However, she started to challenge Alex by poking holes in his logic and citing research she read during her YPAR work to refute his premise concerning the gender pay gap. Yesenia pushed back on her friend’s notions concerning the gender pay gap after building confidence and abilities during the coding process of her YPAR
project. By embracing multiple perspectives and exploring the nuances of the impact of
gender expectations on Latinx women while coding, Yesenia was better equipped to
delve into this complex, gendered issue. With this confidence and her ability to explore
the nuances of this issue, Yesenia strongly resisted marginalization and produced a
compelling counter-narrative.

The Surveillance Group Takes Action

Like the students in the gender-norms group, the student researchers in the
surveillance group also resolved to take more action after they turned their critical lens on
their own lives and experiences. However, while their counterparts in the other research
group sought to disrupt the status quo and take action in their family and personal
relationships, the members of the surveillance group had broader audiences in mind when
they engaged in these two aspects of critical literacy. For example, on the heels of our
YPAR project, Jesus created a movie for the St. Toribio student film festival that
encouraged viewers to challenge – among other things – authority, religious
indoctrination, and the status quo in general. In this film (which was subsequently banned
from the STHS student film festival for excessive violence and goriness), Jesus tells the
story of members of a satanic cult who seek bloody revenge against interlopers who
interrupted one of their ceremonies. During our final interview, Jesus explained his intent
in making this film:

Jesus: I wanted to make a gory movie just cause gore is a way you could show
one of your messages through the film. So we have the gore and then one of the
underlying messages is that…so the cult, they are influenced a lot by their religion
and it influences their actions a lot. And it goes against their common sense. And
they kind of like, their religion, and whatever it may be for you, definitely
influences your actions and how you interpret certain things. So I wanted to have
that be part of the film.

Angiello: So are you kind of saying that they are…

Jesus: They are brainwashed by their religion and how they…they just fear, I
guess.

Angiello: So they just carry out these actions without questioning?

Jesus: Yeah…so it’s about having too much involvement. Or getting too deep into
something without questioning exactly what you are doing.

At the beginning of our project, Jesus became deeply frustrated when we discussed
Freire’s (1970) concepts of banking education and problem-posing. He told the group,
“Now I’m mad” as we reflected on Shor’s (1993) scholarly article on banking education
and the times in which they experienced this type of teaching in their academic careers.
With its message about questioning authority and the dangers of failing to assess
critically what is being taught, Jesus’s film is, in a way, a response to his disdain for
banking education. Through his art, he is taking actions in the hope of encouraging others
to resist.

Similarly, the discussions on critical literacy, banking education, and problem-
posing also continued to resonate with Andy long after our YPAR project ended. As he
created his final piece for his art class at the end of the first semester of his senior year,
Andy wanted to prompt his audience to reflect on the importance of challenging the
status quo. During his final interview, he described this art piece by saying,
We were making a mural and…what I thought about was having a city that was snow white. And the people are the same color and they have blindfolds on. So they are basically blending in and they are following everything with the status quo. And the only person who doesn’t have a blindfold is all colorful and they have markers and all that. They are the ones breaking the status quo.

He then went on to connect the importance of breaking the status quo with resisting banking education by saying

   So breaking the status quo, we wanted to show that once you think for yourself.
   And we connected it back to the students who are being deposited and fed information without knowing what it is. Once you get an aspect of what you are being taught and what you know then you have no limitations.

After his experience with his YPAR project, Andy chose to take action by teaching others about the ill-effects of banking education. Andy recognized the systemic nature of the marginalization he experienced when, in the initial stages of our YPAR project, he and his research partners reflected on the various ways in which they had experienced banking education over the course of their academic careers. In response to this recognition, he, like Jesus, used art to prompt others to challenge authority and refuse to mindlessly absorb the ideas passed down by banking educators. In doing so, he found a creative way to take action and continue to apply the tenets of critical literacy after our project had ended.

   Like his fellow surveillance group members, Alejandro also sought to take action in a very public way following our project. During his final interview, he noted that prior to this YPAR experience, he tended to refrain from engaging with peers regarding social
justice issues, particularly when it came to online forums. In speaking toward this attitude, Alejandro noted, “I’d be like whatever, I’ll let them argue.” However, Alejandro reconsidered this attitude and sought to voice his perspective in the wake of his YPAR experience. After all, his experience with data collection and coding taught him the importance of seeking out and amplifying multiple perspectives to gain a more complete understanding of a complex topic like police surveillance in urban communities of color. This shift in attitude was on display when Alejandro discussed his efforts to speak out against a favorite artist of his who had been accused of sexual misconduct. He said,

Voicing my opinion shows that there are more people that care about it.
Especially me as a guy, most of the people there were girls exposing him saying it’s not ok to keep idolizing him. I guess me being a guy helps people realize it's not only girls against him. Guys can do it too. You shouldn’t be ashamed or afraid to speak. You shouldn’t go with the popular opinion. You should…know what…do what’s right for everyone else.

Alejandro sought to use his voice to speak out against the artist in question, a transition in Alejandro as he refused to remain apathetic about the status quo. Just as he embraced and interrogated multiple perspectives when it came to stances on surveillance of urban communities, Alejandro opened to differing perspectives in this situation and chose to take action.

Whether it was within the home, personal relationships, or a public forum, the student researchers emerged from their YPAR experience looking to take action in a variety of ways. Such actions came to fruition through the intersection of YPAR and their critical literacy approach. For the student researchers in the gender norms group, the data
collection and coding process provided them with the space and opportunity to use their
critical approach when exploring the impact that gendered norms and expectations had on
their participants. Through the exploration of multiple perspectives during the coding
process, these student researchers turned their lens inward, reflected on their own
experiences with norms and expectations, and ultimately looked for ways to push back
against the ways in which such norms harmed them. Similarly, the student researchers in
the surveillance group were frustrated with the status quo. For these student researchers,
disrupting the status quo and engaging with multiple perspectives during the data
collection and coding process led to further disruptions to the norm, particularly when it
came to their experiences with banking education. In both groups, the actions taken were
similar in that they came on the heels of the researchers’ efforts to disrupt the status quo
or embrace multiple perspectives in their own lives. As they crafted their research
questions, interviewed stakeholders, and coded the data, the student researchers found
themselves turning their critical lens on their own experiences and taking action.

**Beyond the YPAR Projects: Continuing a Critical Approach into Senior Year**

The critical literacy mindset that the student researchers developed throughout
their summer work on their YPAR projects impacted their academic approach during
their final year of high school. In this section, I will detail the ways in which the student
researchers applied their critical lenses to their assigned texts. Furthermore, I will explore
how they used this mindset to challenge the traditional curricula and pedagogy that they
encountered, particularly when it came to their literature classes. In doing so, I will
present the ways that they disrupted the status quo when it came to traditional curricula
and pedagogy that they encountered.
Using Critical Lenses to Disrupt Assigned Canonical Texts.

The student researchers were eager to apply critical lenses to their classes as their senior year got underway. In particular, they examined sociopolitical issues and problematized texts by seeking to understand the author’s agenda or looking for the voices that were silenced.

To begin with, the student researchers sought out sociopolitical issues that lurked in their assigned texts. For example, in her final one-on-one interview, Yesenia noted how sociopolitical issues seemed to “jump out” at her as she made her way through texts. She spoke to this idea when assessing her approach to literature throughout the first semester of her AP British literature class. During her final interview, she stated, “I realized that…in *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf* and stuff…what jumped out at me is how women are treated throughout these books and how women are always so oppressed in these books.” With her mind set on exploring sociopolitical issues, particularly regarding gender issues, she set out to problematize the centuries old canonical texts assigned to her and “expose how women are treated.” Isabel echoed this sentiment during her final interview as she expounded on the gender issues that she explored through her reading of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. With her gendered reading of this text, Isabel noted that female voice and agency were “shut down,” particularly in “The Knight’s Tale.” She commented about a character, Emily, and stated,

Emily is just seen as an object to these two guys. They just want to marry her because of her looks. [She speaks] only to the Gods, saying she doesn’t want to be wedded. And she doesn’t even receive that. She has no say in anything going on in her life.
With her application of her critical lens, Isabel continued to interrogate this senior year text and realize that “they are objectifying this person or they are putting this person in a stereotypical box or something.” After the opportunity to discuss tools and language surrounding critical literacy, some of the student researchers, particularly those who took part in the *Jasmine*-inspired research group that studied contemporary gender norms and expectations, continued to read centuries-old texts independently with these issues in mind and challenge the status quo concerning these societies, long after our summer sessions had ended. By exploring these issues in their summer reading, their YPAR data, and then their senior year texts, the student researchers understood the systemic nature of such instances of marginalization. The silencing of female voices, objectification, and the enforcing of harmful gender roles in both canonical texts and YPAR interview data demonstrated to the students that the marginalization that women experience is not restricted to a particular time or culture. Such marginalization needs to be challenged consistently, across time and space.

With this understanding in mind, the group’s ability to apply their critical literacy mindset was not restricted to their British Lit class. Instead, they consistently sought to problematize gender norms in their AP Spanish class as well. For example, just as Isabel noted that Chaucer presented female characters who were robbed of agency and voice, Andy and Evelyn noted during their final one-on-one interviews that they picked up on a similar idea in various texts for their AP Spanish classes. During his time in this class, Andy realized that “Spanish is basically the same…even though it’s [the literature] a different country, all those problems are still evident. Like socio-economic and gender stuff.” To illustrate his point, Andy stated,
In some of the poems we are reading, like a Muslim king, one of the stories, the customs that were there was about being more powerful than the women and controlling them. So I gained perspective from that author. And then we also have a poet, Sor. Juana [Ines De La Cruz], who is a woman, and we get her perspective on how she is dealing with the men. And she is basically calling them out on what they are doing and how she is infuriated. Although it’s a different language and country, it’s still all the basic same problems.

With this discovery, Andy realized that he could apply his critical literacy skills beyond the English classroom and challenge the norms of texts in all of his classes.

Similarly, Evelyn critically read the literature in her Spanish class. For example, in her Spanish AP class, she sensed that female characters in the play she was reading were robbed of agency and voice as the male characters dominated the dialogue. During our final one-on-one interview, she told me that while reading this particular play, she asked herself “why does it say a lado every time the girl speaks?” As she continued to read, she realized that

I could see his [the author’s] opinions on women and how he gave a lot of the lines to the guys and the women were silenced…since it was a play it would say, every time a woman would say something, it would say a lado, which meant the girl was not on stage in the play. And I was like… [this is] something that I noticed that my classmates didn’t notice, and [they] just thought that it was just a side piece. There just to be there. But noticing that by what the writer says, writes, or doesn’t write…I see women didn’t speak and I could see what his intention
was. Which was that a lot of women back then shouldn’t be able to speak. Or don’t have anything to say.

By reflecting on these lines that were delivered \textit{a lado}, or to the side, Evelyn started to explore the author’s bias with regard to female voice. In doing so, she challenged the gender norms espoused by this piece of literature.

Clearly, the student researchers did not restrict their use of critical literacy to their English classes as they confidently applied this approach to other classes in the St. Toribio senior year curriculum. With a heightened sensitivity with regard to an author’s bias, the student researchers consistently found ways in which certain voices and perspectives were privileged over others. With this mindset, they questioned the ways in which marginalized characters were robbed of voice and agency. Furthermore, because these issues emerged in their Spanish texts, the student researchers received another reminder of the systemic nature of marginalization under investigation. Whether it was English or Spanish canonical texts or the research data that they had collected over the course of their YPAR projects, the student researchers recognized that the silencing of female voices, male dominance and privilege, and the enforcing of harmful gender roles are pervasive issues, regardless of time, place, or culture.

As the student researchers explored these issues concerning social class and gender within their British Literature and Spanish texts, they became intent on determining the author’s bias or agenda when producing a text. As they were introduced to the tools and language surrounding critical literacy, they clearly embraced the idea that no texts are neutral, and that to grasp a text fully readers must key in on the ways in which they are being positioned by the author. For example, as they explored the gender
issues in *The Canterbury Tales*, Alejandro determined that Chaucer was critiquing the lack of female agency and voice in his medieval society. He stated:

I noticed that Chaucer is trying to say that women should also have a part in society and not always be submissive to men. But rather have equal power. Not just in a relationship but in the bigger picture. In society, government, jobs.

Similarly, when reflecting on Chaucer’s agenda, Liz noticed that the author was not just concerned with critiquing the role of women in his society. Instead, she argued that Chaucer also sought to critique the class system in 14th century English society. According to Liz, Chaucer “makes people who aren’t noble have gentility,” a quality that Chaucer’s medieval audience thought was restricted to the most elite in society. With their reading of Chaucer’s *Tales*, both Alejandro and Liz continued to apply the critical literacy skills to their senior year classes, particularly when it came to discerning the ways in which authors seek to position readers. The author’s agenda was also foremost on Isabel’s mind when reading a letter from Hernando Cortez to the King of Spain in her AP Spanish class. When reflecting on the author’s agenda with regard to this letter, Isabel stated,

In the letter that Cortez wrote to Carlos Quinto, the King at the time, he was saying this is all what the natives do. They are so savage. They destroy. They praise multiple gods. They are all sinning. They are sinners, they are savage-like. And he’s doing this all in this letter. And he’s making it seem as if he is helping them. Even though he killed so many of them, and he writes that he created a massacre. And it’s like…you don’t hear those native’s voices. You only hear
Cortez’s and Cortez’s only. And that’s what the King read. And that’s what made it ok.

By taking note of this one-sided characterization of the native inhabitants, Isabel simultaneously explored the author’s agenda and pointed to the lack of multiple perspectives in this piece. With the application of her critical literacy mindset, she realized that Cortez is pushing his agenda as he tries to justify the massacre of these native peoples. Furthermore, by seeking to examine multiple perspectives, Isabel knew that absent from this letter was voices of the native people that Cortez sought to subjugate. Isabel noted that “you never hear those two sides back to back” as the native voice is effectively silenced.

**Using Critical Lenses to Disrupt Traditional Pedagogy and Curricula**

Beyond their assigned texts, the student researchers also applied their critical lenses to their literature class’ curricula and pedagogy. Rather than just “play the game of school” and work for academic credit, the student researchers proceeded to use their critical lenses to go beyond the assignments and challenge the ways in which traditional curricula and pedagogy can serve to maintain the status quo. In doing so, they engaged with and enjoyed the assigned texts, effectively deepening their understanding and driving classroom discussions.

Yesenia, in particular, used her critical literacy tools to resist traditional pedagogy implemented in literature classes. This resistance demonstrated the extent to which Yesenia evolved in her approach to literature over the course of her YPAR experience. For example, during our first focus group, Yesenia shared her approach to assigned literature prior to her participation in this project. She indicated that she was content to
complete assignments merely to gain academic credit. To this end, she stated, “I read the question, the question for the prompt [referring to the comprehension or discussion questions assigned by her literature teachers]. That’s about it.” When asked to explain this approach to her texts, she noted, “I’m like ‘oh he [the teacher] is giving us this question to write about. It’s probably…it’s gonna be in the book.” To illustrate this point, Yesenia noted that prior to this YPAR project she had a preference for units on mythology and Ancient Greek texts, like *The Odyssey*, in her literature classes. In reflecting on this preference, Yesenia stated,

I like reading mythology more because we were given instructions. [The teacher tells students] “Oh…look out for this and look out for that. And this means that.” I didn’t personally understand other books and trying to read between the lines [without the specific instructions regarding themes].

Before her YPAR experience, Yesenia appreciated curricular units centered on mythology and Ancient Greek texts because her teachers instructed her to look for specific themes that would emerge from the reading. Furthermore, the teachers seemed to supply students with interpretations of such texts. With these rigid instructions from her teachers and the provided interpretations, she could simply finish the assignment at hand and gain the academic credit she sought without having to interrogate the text. Yesenia indicated that she did not feel compelled to apply any critical literacy skills or engage with the text in any meaningful way. Instead, with this traditional pedagogy that discouraged critical engagement, Yesenia simply sought to read in order to satisfy the requirements of the assignment.
As her senior year commenced, Yesenia demonstrated the ability to resist this type of pedagogy which serves to maintain the status quo by discouraging critical engagement. She did this by applying the critical lens she refined over the summer to the literature discussions and assignments, especially in her AP Spanish class. In this particular class, Yesenia expressed a lack of confidence when it came to literary discussions or assignments. For example, during our final one-on-one interview, Yesenia insisted, “I’m really bad at Spanish. Like really bad!” In building on this idea, she continued when [the teacher] explains it in modern Spanish, I’m able to understand it better…But sometimes I read it. But I just read it once. And I’m like, ‘I’m just gonna give up,’ you know, and come back the next day in the hopes that she doesn’t check our homework [to see] if it’s completely right, cause I just write stuff that I think is right.

After developing a more critical approach to literature in the wake of the YPAR project, Yesenia showed signs of newfound confidence and the ability to resist traditional pedagogy. With these attributes, she engaged with her texts in a more profound way and did not merely rely on interpretations supplied by teachers. For example, during our final interview, Yesenia discussed a breakthrough that she experienced when using her critical lens in this AP Spanish class. She stated that she had noticed that she is “able to understand the parts where it talks about women.” Yesenia went on to explain that by applying her critical lens and reading for gendered issues helped her to make more sense of the dense medieval texts that were assigned. She stated that she was able to
“understand it [the text] even though I completely don’t know what going on most of the time” by applying this gendered lens. She continued

I feel like if I wouldn’t have done this project, then I probably would have been lost in Spanish. Cause I wouldn’t have had that mindset of how to critique certain [texts]. And not just question it but like attack it. If that makes sense. I don’t know…it [critical literacy and her gendered lens] helps me a lot in Spanish because I don’t know what’s going on in that class, but when [the teacher] asks us a question about a line, and I sit there and think about, really think about it, then I’m like “oh, I kind of know.” If that makes sense. I’m not trying to raise my hand just to get participation points, but I’m raising my hand because I truly feel confident in my answer. Even though it’s a class I do not feel confident in.

In discussing this confidence, Yesenia went on to say

I really liked this [YPAR project] because I feel like I’m more prepared with regard to how to attack literature because I’m really bad at writing and reading and stuff. Like, I don’t know if you remember this, but last year I really struggled with how to phrase my words in writing. And I still do. When I talk, I’m not sure how to phrase what I’m trying to say. But I feel like it’s become a little bit easier because I feel more confident a bit with what I’m trying to say. Most of the time.

Even though she starts this exchange by stating that she is “bad at Spanish” and continues to insist that she is “bad at writing and reading and stuff,” it is clear that she is experiencing more success in navigating these rigorous texts than she is giving herself credit for. By refining her critical literacy skills throughout the summer, Yesenia developed an approach to make more sense of the difficult texts assigned in this literature
class. With this new approach to tackling texts, Yesenia felt the confidence to jump in and make contributions in a class that traditionally frustrated and intimidated her. In doing so, she didn’t need to rely on traditional pedagogical approaches that supplied her with interpretations. Instead, she could engage with a greater range of literature as she developed her ability to delve deep into texts on her own, specifically when it came to disrupting the status quo and exploring sociopolitical issues surrounding gender.

Like Yesenia, Andy also pointed out that using the tools he developed during the YPAR project allowed him to go beyond simply satisfying the requirements of an assignment for class. This notion emerged in his final one-on-one interview as he reflected on the ways in which he engaged with Jasmine and 1984 during our summer meetings. After discussing these texts in class when St. Toribio students returned to class in the fall, Andy noticed,

Everyone who wasn’t in the group [his British literature classmates who didn’t take part in the YPAR project], they were reading 1984 and Jasmine, and they were just reading them so they could understand and write their essays. But like going to the [YPAR] group [over the summer], we got more in depth and I liked how we used our critical literacy to figure out the tones and the themes. And we basically related it to society now.

In reflecting on our YPAR discussion sessions, Andy noted that “it didn’t feel like ‘teacher-student.’ It was more like everyone had their own ideas and you had your own ideas too. It was just discuss and bounce off each other.” Andy noted that as we stripped away the traditional power dynamics in the classroom throughout the course of the YPAR project and dove into the summer reading with critical lenses, the students were
able to engage with texts and share their readings of the texts in ways not possible under traditional pedagogy.

Jonathan also contrasted our approach to the texts using critical literacy pedagogy with more traditional forms of pedagogy. In his final one-one-one interview, he noted, “We weren’t taught to think that way [using critical literacy skills] at first. Going back to grade school, we were just taught to read the book and see…the moral of the story. But in this project, we were taught to think differently. And that’s a good thing. Because then we can get a lot more out of the story and see other things they are trying to say. And develop our own ideas from it. Being in this project taught us the way we should have been taught to think in grade school. But we weren’t.”

To highlight this shift in his approach to texts, Jonathan pointed out the importance of “thinking about what the author is trying to convey. When they were writing this, what were they thinking? How were they trying to influence? How did their environment influence them to writing this way?” With these critical questions, Jonathan found that he could resist the banking pedagogy that he was accustomed to and delve into texts independently. While Jonathan indicated that he was frustrated with the types of traditional pedagogy that prompted limited engagement with the text, he clearly enjoyed generating his own ideas in response to a text through his critical lens and the interrogation of biases inherent in each text.

The author’s agenda or bias was also very much on Evelyn’s mind when tackling texts following our project. Rather than read to play the game of school, go through the motions, and complete her assignment, Evelyn found herself using her critical lens to
deepen her engagement with the text at hand. During our final one-on-one interview, she reflected,

[I] guess now, when I read a book, it’s not just I’m reading a book, but I want to see what the author is trying to say. And cause usually it’s I’m going to read the book to do my homework, but now it’s like I actually want to see what the author is trying to say within his book. And not just answer the normal questions that the teachers gives us, but take something out of it. Whether it’s the Spanish book or I think it was Don Juan. Or whether it’s in English we are reading a bunch of poems. Yeah and just looking more into not just for class but for myself too. To analyze the books more and know what they are trying to say.

With her interest in the author’s agenda, Evelyn aimed to get more out of her reading through her critical literacy perspective and the exploration of the author’s agenda. Essentially, by interrogating texts for any bias on the part of the author, Evelyn wrested control of her academic reading. She indicates that probing for the biases in a text were to satisfy her own intellectual curiosity rather than merely read to satisfy the demands of an assignment or prepare for a test.

For her part, Liz experienced a newfound confidence when she realized that she could use her critical literacy lens to go beyond a given assignment, deepen her engagement with a text, and make strong contributions to the class discussions. For example, during her final one-on-one interview, Liz relayed an anecdote that that took place her AP English class’ reading of *The Canterbury Tales*. As the teacher led a discussion of this text, Liz excitedly thought to herself “Oh! That’s what he [Chaucer] is doing! He’s disrupting the status quo…I see it!” With this insight, Liz proceeded to tell
the class “Chaucer is not with the [Medieval class] system. He’s not thinking like them.” Liz was clearly excited and proud that she was able to provide this insight concerning the author’s agenda in writing this text and confidently drive the discussions using her critical literacy skill. In doing so, Liz, like her fellow student researchers, was not just participating to accrue points, complete assignments, or play the game of school. Rather she used her critical literacy skills to deepen engagement and understanding while deriving pleasure from the text.

As our work on our YPAR projects came to a close, the student researchers were intent on continuing to develop their critical literacy approach. Through our interviews, the student researchers demonstrated a willingness and ability to challenge the status quo, read for the author’s agenda, and explore multiple perspectives when it came to the assigned reading in their reading for their AP British literature and Spanish classes. However, beyond the texts themselves, the student researchers also disrupted the status quo when it came to the traditional pedagogy that they experienced in literature classes. They applied their critical literacy skills in order to resist this pedagogy, drive their learning through problem-posing, and stimulate growth, enjoyment, and engagement with their texts.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

At the outset of our Youth Participatory Action Research project, the eight student researchers and I knew we had rigorous academic work ahead of us. After all, we intended to delve into challenging summer reading texts (Jasmine by Bharati Mukherjee and 1984 by George Orwell) assigned for their AP British Literature class and use these texts as jumping off points for our Youth Participatory Action Research. However, before we dove into these heady texts, the student researchers first got their toes wet by tackling some lighter fare. After reading about and discussing four tenets of critical literacy in Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys’ “Taking on Critical Literacy: The Journey of Newcomers and Novices” (2002) during our initial sessions, the students practiced applying this critical approach to a variety of texts. The student researchers quickly embraced the idea that everything is a text as we took a critical look at a range of media, including popular culture shows, books, and even a bilingual candy wrapper. After problematizing these texts, the students then set out to apply these tenets of critical literacy to other texts that they encountered outside of our research sessions. In doing so, SpongeBob SquarePants, Trolls, Japanese anime and advertisements on Chicago Transit Authority trains all came under intense critical scrutiny.

Their application of these tenets was so thorough that one research participant, Yesenia, complained that she could no longer enjoy her favorite television shows. She
griped, “Oh gosh! Am I going to be like this for the rest of my life?” While Yesenia bemoaned the fact that she could no longer sit back and enjoy her favorite shows without problematizing or thinking critically about them, I happily noted that this was a huge breakthrough in her journey to being a more critical reader. Yesenia’s comment early in the summer was indicative of the way in which the group threw themselves into our work with critical literacy and YPAR. With this commitment to the work, the student researchers leveraged their critical literacy skills and YPAR work in a variety of ways during the project and beyond. This nexus of critical literacy and YPAR was at the heart of this study.

Summary of Study

Yesenia and her fellow student researchers found that their YPAR project gave them the space and opportunity to enthusiastically and consistently apply their critical literacy skills both inside and outside of the classroom. After we practiced reading children’s books, television shows, and other parts of popular culture, the students used their critical literacy skills when tackling their summer reading texts assigned by their AP British Literature teachers. By examining multiple perspectives and exploring various sociopolitical issues within these texts, the student researchers proceeded to use their critical literacy mindset to shape their YPAR project. They also applied a critical literacy lens when collecting and coding their data in these projects. Ultimately, through their coding of the data, the student researchers found the space to turn their critical lens on their own experiences. In doing so, they had the opportunity to explore the complexity of and push back against the status quo when it came to certain issues in their own lives. However, in developing their agency in this context over the summer, the student
researchers also continued to exert their agency and use their critical literacy approach as their senior year commenced. For example, the students resisted the traditional pedagogy and curricula that they encountered. By using their critical literacy skills to challenge such pedagogy and canonical texts, the student researchers did not just read to gain academic credit or satisfy the demands of an assignment. Instead, the student researchers read to deepen their engagement with the content and, in doing so, demonstrated that they were “explicitly aware of issues of power, oppression, and transformation” in their classrooms and the assigned texts. As such, when faced with oppressive pedagogy or canonical texts, the student researchers used their critical approach to engage in “authentic dialogue about inequity and advocacy for justice” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 51). These empowered students drove discussions and engagement in their senior classes, experienced academic success, an increase in confidence, and a deeper appreciation for the literature under discussion in their classes.

**Discussion of Findings**

By undertaking this project with eight student researchers, I sought to study the intersection of critical literacy and YPAR within the context of an English literature unit. Specifically, I sought to understand how these Latinx students interacted with the tenets of critical literacy as they implemented a YPAR project in the wake of completing their summer reading assignments for their AP British literature class. In studying these interactions, I found that the student researchers leveraged their critical literacy and qualitative research skills to disrupt traditional pedagogy, curricula, and canon within their classrooms at STHS, explored the nuances of norms, expectations, and the status quo within their own lived experiences and communities, and eventually took action in
response to this exploration. With these critical forays into the curricula and pedagogy, the canon, and their own lived experiences, I found that the student researchers experienced greater understanding of and appreciation for the rigorous texts assigned in their literature classes.

**Lack of Critical Praxis at STHS**

Staying true to its mission as a school, St. Toribio aims to provide the traditionally marginalized Latinx immigrant population on the South and Southwest Sides of Chicago as well as the nearby suburbs with an affordable and rigorous college preparatory education. However, in pursuing this progressive mission, STHS often “makes the mistake of attempting to replicate the schooling ideology of the middle-class, foregrounding a ‘college-going culture’” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 10). In the school’s efforts to get traditionally marginalized Latinx students to adopt this middle-class college-going culture, STHS too often provides curricula and pedagogy that is not centered on or informed by the conditions of urban communities and the experiences of traditionally marginalized students (Akom, 2009, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Instead, STHS maintains a culture which emphasizes the need to earn grades and perform well on standardized tests to compete in this middle-class college-going culture. When embracing this school culture, many STHS students appear to take on a “conformist” approach to education where they buy into traditional schooling as a means toward individual accomplishments, both academic and financial (Fordham, 1996; Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

With our promotion of this middle-class college-going culture, St. Toribio teachers do not routinely implement curricula that prompts students to engage in the
process of critical praxis (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; Mirra et al., 2016). While traditional curricula and pedagogies deliver what Freire (1970) refers to as the banking method of education and maintains the status quo by preserving power dynamics in the classroom, critical praxis dismantles traditional relationships within the classroom as students emerge as collaborators with their teachers. In doing so, this praxis prompts students to assert their agency in the pursuit of social change (Akom, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, Irizarry, 2011A; McIntyre, 2000; Mirra et al., 2016).

Rather than engaging in critical praxis, students at STHS encounter traditional curricula and pedagogy where they are not consistently prompted to drive their own learning and collaborate to generate knowledge through problem-posing. Instead of knowledge generation with Freirean problem-posing, these students experience the traditional power dynamics in the classroom where their teachers expect them to complete assignments handed down to them, garner points on assignments, exams, and discussions, and essentially play the game of school. All this is done to earn the grades and standardized tests scores needed to compete in the middle-class college-going culture.

**Providing the Space to Develop Confidence and Capacity for Change through YPAR**

Through this YPAR project implemented in the context of their work on their AP British literature class’ summer reading, these St. Toribio student researchers had the space to engage in critical praxis. By attempting to dismantle the power dynamics of the classroom and work collaboratively to identify, research, and address the social problems
under investigation, the student researchers exerted the type of agency that is often robbed of them within traditional STHS classes. Rather than merely strive to compete in this college-going culture, the student researchers instead engaged in a project that featured the three hallmarks of critical pedagogy: academic, social, and identity development (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). By developing in this way, the student researchers found the space and developed the ability “to act powerfully upon the world as informed and affirmed agents” (p. 126). After all, with such pedagogy, the student researchers arrived at a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. In the wake of our project, they understood the nuances and “true workings of their social contexts” and saw themselves as “intelligent and capable” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 7). For example, this belief in their abilities as capable agents of change manifested itself when the student researchers began turning their critical lenses on their own experiences while collecting and coding data.

**Capacity for change and acting upon the world outside of the classroom.** As intelligent and capable agents of change, the student researchers understood that they possessed the power to defy adversity in their own lives and challenge societal oppression (Romero et al., 2008). Their YPAR projects helped the student researchers understand that they have the agency to enact change (Akom, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008, Irizarry, 2011A) at home, in their personal relationships, or in their communities. In this way, the student researchers discovered that they could transform not just themselves through YPAR but “the social context in which they are situated” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 6) as well. Essentially, they emerged from their projects with the
knowledge that YPAR research has the ability to help produce dual transformations in the form of individual and social change.

On their way to exerting this agency with regard to social change, the student researchers began by exploring the complexity of the norms, expectations, and status quo within their own experiences. The data collection and coding aspects of the YPAR process were integral in helping the students turn their critical lenses inward in this way. While students brought their developing critical literacy skills to bear during their reading of the British literature texts and the initial phases of the research process (identifying a research topic, crafting research questions and interview questions), the intersection of the YPAR process and their critical approach was most pronounced during the data collection and coding processes. As the collection and coding processes gave the student researchers the space and opportunity to leverage their critical lenses, the student researchers reached profound insights about their own experiences with the status quo as well as norms and expectations as women and as young people of color. When conducting and coding the interviews concerning surveillance and gender roles, the student researchers reflected on the complexities of the cultural and societal norms, expectations, and the status quo that they had experienced.

On the one hand, the female student researchers who used the themes in *Jasmine* as the jumping off point for their research explored the nuances of their own experiences with gendered norms and expectations. By gathering a variety of perspectives from different stakeholders during data collection and delving into such nuances while coding, they were able to examine multiple perspectives on complex issues involving double standards, family roles, and restrictions that they faced. On the other hand, like their
counterparts in the gender norms group, the student researchers in the surveillance group found the space to explore the nuances of the thorny and complicated relationship between police and the urban communities of color in which they serve through the various stakeholders that they interviewed during the data collection process. Like student researchers in previous YPAR projects, the STHS seniors entered this study “with some hypotheses about their communities and why certain conditions exist that lead them to particular questions” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 60). However, despite these initial hypotheses or assumption, the surveillance group combined a critical literacy approach with their data collection and coding in order grapple with multiple perspectives that they had not anticipated. By prompting them to challenge their own assumptions, their data helped the student researchers to see their communities and the police in a more nuanced light.

In reflecting on such matters, the student researchers engaged in a key component of any critical pedagogy. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) noted that critical pedagogy must begin by “creating the conditions for suffering communities to hold structural and material inequities up to the light of inquiry” (p. 10). Essentially, through this project, I found that these YPAR interviews and the research projects as a whole afforded the student researchers the opportunity to turn a critical lens on their own lives and experiences to explore the nuances of their experiences with societal, cultural, and family expectations and norms and the status quo. In doing so, they held up certain “structural and material inequities” up for thorough investigation through a pedagogy that departed radically from the traditional teaching that they routinely encountered at STHS.
As the student researchers saw their lives reflected in their YPAR interview data, they proceeded to explore the nuances of their own experiences with norms, expectations, the status quo, and complex justice issues. In the wake of this exploration, the students found the space to take action in a variety of ways in response to their findings. This desire to exert agency following their research is consistent with Freire’s praxis where students are prompted to engage in inquiry, reflection, and social action predicated on (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) changing the world.

In particular, they sought to exert their agency within their homes, families, personal relationships, and communities. Like YPAR researchers in past empirical studies, the student researchers in our YPAR project reflected on broad social issues but recognized the need to exert their agency and affect positive social change in the Freirean tradition within their homes, schools, and communities (Cahill et al., 2008). For example, while Liz explored multiple perspectives and came to understand her father’s intentions behind telling her younger brothers to “man up,” she nonetheless pushed back against this approach and tried to help her father see the ways in which these lessons could have a harmful impact on the boys. Similarly, following her YPAR experience, Yesenia found the confidence and understood the necessity of pushing back against her friend Alex’s tendency to dismiss the importance of gender equality in school and the workplace. Also, like Liz, Isabel expressed tremendous pride in her family and background. But this pride didn’t prevent her from problematizing some of the family tradition and norms that she reflected on while coding data. In response to this reflection, Isabel vowed to encourage family members to question such gender norms, roles, and expectations. Finally, Andy and Jesus both created pieces art – a mural and movie respectively – that were intended to
educate their St. Toribio peers concerning relevant justice issues, the importance of questioning authority, and critiquing accepted norms or beliefs.

While critical literacy and Freirean praxis encourage us to transform the world through positive social change, the student researchers grappled with broad social issues, but began to take action by sharing their findings and problematizing issues that emerged in their homes, relationships, and school.

**Capacity for change and acting upon the world inside of the classroom.**

Beyond the agency that they exerted at home, in their personal relationships, or in their communities, the student researchers also demonstrated the capacity to leverage their critical literacy approach and YPAR experience to take action within the classroom. In doing so, they recognized that the marginalization that they experienced was not restricted to a particular time, place, or cultural setting. Instead, their experiences with marginalization were pervasive, even extending to the classroom where they encountered well-intentioned teachers and administrators. With this recognition, they strove to resist the pervasive marginalization as it manifested itself in traditional pedagogy and curricula.

The seeds for this resistance were planted early on in our work together. Because YPAR prompted the student researchers to become co-collaborators with me throughout the study, they seized the opportunity to disrupt traditional literature activities in the classroom and the banking education they had read about at the outset. Throughout the summer months of the YPAR project, they asserted their agency and the relished space they were provided by YPAR’s emphasis on collaboration to drive their learning. By asserting this agency, the student researchers collaborated to lead our literary discussions of the summer reading. During their final interviews, the student researchers spoke of
how refreshing and enjoyable our discussions were in that that they felt like equal partners with me in the literary activities at hand. With the ability to drive the discussions, the student researchers took the group in directions that were of interest and relevance to them. Richer, more engaging discussions were the result. As we plunged deeply into these texts with the students at the helm, they experienced a profound depth of understanding concerning the texts, particularly when presented with the opportunity to make connections between the texts and their lived experiences or the YPAR topics under investigation. The student researchers spoke to this idea when they discussed the confidence and enthusiasm that they felt when school was back in session in the fall.

Fresh off of their YPAR experience, where they honed their critical lenses, were encouraged to disrupt traditional power dynamics in the classroom, and collaborated on discussion activities, the student researchers noted that they were better prepared to interrogate the texts once their senior year classes kicked off. With this preparation, they were eager to dig into these texts with their classmates and AP teachers. Clearly, through this excitement, joy, and confidence, the collaborative nature of the YPAR project and the critical literacy instruction were leveraged to produce deeper engagement with and appreciation for the assigned summer reading texts. However, this confidence, enthusiasm, and engagement extended into the school year as they proceeded to use their critical lenses to problematize canonical texts and traditional pedagogy that they encountered during their senior year.

Using critical literacy and YPAR to problematize the canon. Following their YPAR experience – where they relished the opportunity to collaborate to drive discussions in directions they found of interest and relevance to them and their lived
experiences - the student researchers understood that they could independently apply their critical approach even after the project ended. During their final one-on-one interviews, they noted that their critical approach yielded tremendous benefits when dealing with other challenging canonical texts, particularly in their Spanish and English classes. Tackling these texts in such a way is important as the Western canon has the power to disempower traditionally marginalized students if it is not examined critically (Akom, 2009; Boyd, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kumashiro, 2004; McLaren, 2015). In fact, Akom (2009) asserted that a failure to employ critical pedagogies when dealing with the canon or other aspects of a “Eurocentric education system” ensures that students of color “remain mentally incarcerated” (p. 54). This incarceration can come when the canon serves to privilege the dominant culture’s narratives and values, dismiss the voices and experiences of traditionally marginalized groups, and ultimately reinforce the established social order (Akom, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; McLaren, 2015). The application of a critical, social-justice oriented approach can help student resist the potentially oppressive nature of the canon (Boyd, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kumashiro, 2004).

During our final one-on-one interviews, I found that the student researchers were able to problematize the canon in this critical, social-justice oriented way and experienced a variety of benefits in doing so. When reflecting on their independent use of their critical lenses in their senior year classes, the student researchers were excited to learn that this approach could provide tremendous insights during discussions of such daunting, remote, and revered texts. For example, Liz reported a feeling of palpable excitement when she got the opportunity to deepen the class discussion by sharing with
her classmates the notion that Chaucer intended to disrupt the status quo by critiquing the
Medieval social hierarchy in *The Canterbury Tales* while Yesenia couldn’t wait to relay
that she had used her gendered lens to help drive discussions in her AP Spanish class, a
subject that typically frustrated and intimidated her. With such contributions concerning
the status quo, sociopolitical issues, silenced voices, or the author’s agenda, the student
researchers found that they could apply their critical lenses in order to question “the aura
of immutability or ultimate authority” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 53) of
revered canonical writers and make such texts less daunting or remote. As their
confidence escalated with their critical approach and the space to drive discussions
through the collaborative nature of YPAR, the student researchers ultimately found that
their enjoyment of and engagement with these challenging texts increased as well. Here
we see the benefits of combining YPAR and critical literacy within the context of an
English literature unit as the students leveraged these skills to enrich their discussions and
enhance their experiences with such texts.

With this in mind, this YPAR project provides literature teachers with a viable
strategy for dealing with curricular mandates concerning the canon or preparing for
standardized exams, like AP tests, without giving into the potentially oppressive aspects
of the canon. This project found that reading canonical literature with a critical literacy
mindset and using this approach as a jumping off point for YPAR projects presents
teachers with an opportunity to delve into the canon in a way that is empowering to
students. After all, this approach allows teachers to satisfy the demands of AP preparation
or their mandated curricula while doing so in a way that empowers students by prompting
them to collaborate on the direction of their literary discussions, critique the canon and its
authors, read for issues of power and oppression, problem-pose, and generate their own knowledge in pursuit of justice regarding issues relevant to their communities.

**Problematizing traditional pedagogy.** With their critical assessment of canonical texts, the student researchers showed the confidence to jump in and make contributions, especially in their AP Spanish class, a particularly rigorous course in STHS’ dual-language program that is notorious for frustrating and intimidating our seniors. In doing so, they were also able to resist the traditional pedagogical approaches to literature that robbed them of the opportunity to engage with the text in a meaningful way. In this way, they recognized and resisted the marginalization that persists in the classroom despite the progressive mission of the school. Rather than dutifully complete assignments, accrue points, prepare for standardized tests, and stay on the college-going track, they prompted their own deeper engagement with the text and made tremendous contributions to the class discussions through the exploration of sociopolitical issues, multiple perspectives, and disruption of the status quo within the text. With their YPAR experience and critical approach, the student researchers found that they no longer required specific instructions or interpretations from teachers. They could now engage with a greater range of literature as they developed the ability to delve deep into the text on their own, specifically when it came to disrupting the status quo, exploring sociopolitical issues, the author’s agenda, and the silencing of voices. In doing so, the student researchers ultimately experienced how YPAR and critical pedagogies can lead to a personal transformation (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). After all, by resisting the traditional pedagogy embodied by preparation for standardized tests and the college-going track, the student researchers positioned themselves as actors who sought to use their academics to explore issues of power,
privilege, and marginalization (Akom, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Irizarry, 2011A) during discussion and through their written assignments. In transforming themselves and their approach, the student researchers ultimately deepened their engagement within these classes, produced their own knowledge, and arrived at profound understandings. Furthermore, with such engagement, they refused to remain silenced by well-intentioned yet harmful curricula and pedagogy that conspired to rob them of the opportunity to generate knowledge or problematize the texts. Armed with their critical lenses and their recognition that their marginalization is not restricted to their home or culture, the student researchers entered senior year brimming with confidence in their abilities as students, researchers, and engaged citizens.

With the engagement and knowledge production that emerged when student researchers resisted such traditional curricula and pedagogy, the student researchers demonstrated the tremendous possibilities for combining critical literacy instruction and YPAR work in the context of an English literature classroom. The critical approach born out of this YPAR project has the potential to provide students and literature teachers alike a liberating path forward when faced with a school culture and curriculum that stifles engagement and knowledge production while promoting an adherence to a conformist (Fordham, 1996; Cammarota & Fine, 2008), middle-class college-going culture (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Such findings are important for the field. There is a clear gap in the research in the field as, with scant research on YPAR in literature classes, there is little empirical evidence as to the potential possibilities and obstacles to such pedagogy in this setting. However, this YPAR research shows that there are tremendous benefits for bringing this
research into the literature classroom. If the canon has the potential to alienate and oppress, yet the education system we have dictates – through curricular mandates, standardized tests, or entry level college literature courses – that we teach it nonetheless, this intersection of YPAR and critical literacy offers a way for teachers and students to resist the potentially harmful effects of the canon and traditional curricula. The student researchers in this study found that their resistance to traditional pedagogy and texts stemmed largely from their developing critical lenses and the collaborative nature of YPAR as students worked together to drive discussions. Instead of being alienated and disengaging from the content and the courses, this intersection of YPAR and critical literacy offers an approach that helps students empower themselves in the face of such curricula.

**Implications**

This study had implications for a variety of educators and administrators. To begin with, I will discuss the implications that this study possesses for literature teachers, particularly those who must adhere to a canon-heavy curriculum. In this same vain, this study will prove to be instructive for administrators who make curricular decisions, particularly when it comes to mandates involving the canon. Beyond literature teachers and administrators, this study maintains implications for critical pedagogues and Jesuit educators in general.

**Implications for Literature Teachers**

Teaching the canon often comes from school or district mandates while the design of AP tests also function to limit the diversification of literary voices in the curricula. While there is a push in the field to rectify this situation and diversify the canon (Banks,
2010; Boyd, 2017; Kumashiro, 2004), literature teachers and critical pedagogues, in the meantime, recognize that our students must “demonstrate knowledge of canonical literature to pass Advanced Placement exams or to succeed in college-level coursework in the discipline” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 50). However, this YPAR project offers literature teachers an approach that resists the potentially oppressive nature of canonical texts. This project found that by leveraging their critical literacy mindset with insights gleaned from their qualitative research helped the students delve deeply into the canon. For example, the intersection of critical literacy and data collection and coding produced deeper engagement with the texts and the issues under investigation as they played out in the lives of the student researchers. As the data collection and coding process helped the students to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the justice topics under investigation, the student researchers came out of the YPAR project equipped to critique the canon and its authors, read for issues of power and oppression, problem-posing, and generate their own knowledge when dealing with assigned texts. In facilitating this approach, where the application of critical literacy intersects with the data collection and coding in a YPAR project, teachers can satisfy the demands of AP test preparation or their mandated curriculum while students empower themselves.

Furthermore, literature teachers can prompt a deeper engagement with and appreciation for the assigned literature when they help students develop YPAR projects and acquire critical literacy skills. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) found that “students, in becoming participatory action researchers, are more likely to want to read complex and relevant texts” and “are more likely to exert energy” (p. 128) in the pursuit of their research topics. With this in mind, when literature teachers use their assigned
texts as jumping off points for research into justice issues relevant to the community, they help students become more invested in the reading. Our YPAR project at St. Toribio bears this out as the student researcher reported that they engaged with their senior year texts in a deeper way when using their YPAR research and critical literacy skills. Following the YPAR project, the student researchers spoke to their desire to go beyond what was asked of them in the assignment to comb the text for the author’s agenda, silenced voices, and other issues surrounding power and oppression. Ultimately, literature teachers hoping to increase engagement with texts can look to combine YPAR and critical literacy to produce students invested in their learning and the reading.

**Implications for Administrators and Curricula Decision-Makers**

As discussed previously, the canon has the power to alienate and disempower students (Akom, 2009; Boyd, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kumashiro, 2004; McLaren, 2015). The ill-effects of the canon were very much apparent to the student researchers. In fact, with the use of their critical lenses in each phase of the YPAR project and beyond, they recognized that the marginalization that they experienced prevailed in many aspects of their lives, not just in a particular cultural setting. As they understood that their marginalization extended to the traditional pedagogy and assigned texts in their college prep high school, the student researchers resolved to resist. This study demonstrates that when using a critical approach to problematize these aspects of their schooling, students can grapple with canonical texts in such a way that they connect with them, see their relevance, and even enjoy them.

However, despite such connections to the canon, the diversification of voices in the field is critical. As critical pedagogues, we know that challenging oppression as it
plays out in the literature classroom also requires the diversification of voices. To this end, Cochran-Smith (2010) argued that justice-oriented educators seek to provide access to knowledge, yet they are careful to problematize the types of knowledge valued in the classroom. By broaching such questions and embracing the importance of disrupting traditional notions as to the knowledge that is valued in a curriculum, administrators and curricula decision-makers can start to bring more voices and perspectives into the classroom. In doing so, they provide students with a greater opportunity to see their experiences reflected in the curricula and offer texts that “present students with alternatives to the predominant or commonsensical ways of thinking that have traditionally framed or hindered the ways they make sense of their lives” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. 61). As our schools continue to experience an inevitable shift in demographics (Irizarry, 2011B), curriculum decision-makers, who range from teachers and administrators to college professors and standardized test creators, must consider ways to reflect this growing diversity in the classroom and revamp reading lists and curricula by including more authors of color, authors from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and author representing traditionally marginalized groups.

**Implications for Critical Pedagogues and Jesuit Educators**

Beyond literature teachers and administrators, this study maintains implications for critical pedagogues as well. Critical pedagogues recognize that our education systems must produce students who are civic-minded and engaged citizens (Teitelbaum, 2011; Mirra et al., 2016). With their college readiness standards and teaching toward high-stakes tests, contemporary schools do not place an emphasis on forging civic-minded citizens who engage with social issues (Mirra et al., 2016). In response to the current
climate in education, this YPAR project promoted sound critical pedagogy as the student researchers demonstrated an increase in civic engagement. After studying issues surrounding surveillance and gender norms, the student researchers spoke to an increased desire to engage with issues as this project helped to amplify their voices and develop their social consciousness (Romero et al., 2008). Whether they were resisting gender norms within their own homes or school communities or exploring the complicated relationship between the police and urban communities of color, the student-researchers problem-posed and produced their own knowledge to increase civic engagement, shape their learning, and not succumb to the current standards and testing trends that narrow curricula in our schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010; King, 2013). Leveraging YPAR and critical literacy in the classroom and curriculum gives critical pedagogues an opportunity to resist the prevailing trends in the current educational climate, go beyond the assigned literature, and foster civic engagement.

Critical pedagogues will also appreciate the ways in which the student researchers took a more active role in their educations by resisting the traditional pedagogy and curricula that go hand-in-hand with the current standards, testing, and accountability movements in today’s educational climates. The resistance to such curricula that the students demonstrated by using their critical lenses while reading and engaging in discussions hold implications for those critical pedagogues who are saddled with traditional curricula through school and district mandates or for those who feel pressure to teach to a specific test. Rather than “sit passively waiting to be told what to do,” these student researchers took “ownership over their education by consistently voicing their concerns, thoughts, and opinions in the classroom” (Romero et al, 2008, p. 136). By
taking ownership over their learning and resisting traditional curricula and pedagogy, standards, and high-stakes testing, the student researchers showed us that this type of project provides liberating path forward in the face of such restrictions or stifling curricula.

Since the critical pedagogue’s goal is consistent with the mission of Jesuit schools, Jesuit educators and administrators should also take note of the implications of this study. With their interest in *cura personalis*, Latin for care for the whole person, Jesuit educators do not just prepare their students for college or economic success. Instead, they strive to mold men and women for others who are committed to fighting for justice. In fact, this commitment to fighting for justice is one of the “Graduate at Graduation” principles, a list of qualities that all Jesuit high schools strive to instill in their students before they graduate (Emerson, 2014). As student researchers, problem-pose, produce knowledge, and grapple with issues relevant to their lived experiences and communities, YPAR presents Jesuit educators with a unique opportunity to bring a commitment to justice into the classroom and advance the school’s mission. When the student researchers in this particular study had the opportunity to shape their own research projects and explore surveillance and gender issues in their communities, they were deeply engaged and felt compelled to take action in response to the justice issues that they explored throughout the course of their interviews and coding.

**Limitations**

As critical pedagogues have made greater use of YPAR projects over the past decade, they have done so in various settings, including electives (Voight & Velez, 2018; Ozer et al., 2011; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Irizarry, 2011A), social studies classes (Rubin et
al., 2017), a “law class” with a “colloquium structure” (Stovall & Delgado, 2009), and extracurricular programs that take place in different settings on Saturdays, after school, or during summer vacation (Burke & Hadley, 2018; Bertrand et al., 2017; Kohfeldt et al., 2011; McHugh & Kowalski, 2010; Bautista et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2013). However, with all these YPAR studies, there are few – if any at all – empirical studies exploring the possibilities for implementing a YPAR study in literature classes. With this in mind, this study set out to explore the intersection of critical literacy and YPAR within an English literature unit. In this pursuit, when we tackled the AP British literature summer reading assignments at the center of this project, I strove to collaborate with the researchers on student-centered and student-driven discussion strategies. However, while we implemented such strategies to produce rich literary discussions, this project differed from a typical English class in a variety of ways. First, our study took place over the summer in a relaxed setting (our sessions took place not in a STHS classroom but in a teacher-workroom outfitted with cushy swivel chairs, recliners, and couches). With our weekly meetings and intimate nine person discussions taking place in this comfortable setting, our work played out in an atmosphere that was a far cry from the typical STHS classroom experience. Beyond the setting, student researchers in the YPAR project were also free from pressures and expectations that come along with their rigorous STHS college prep curriculum. As noted earlier, STHS seniors face a litany of pressures throughout the final year of high school, including preparation for AP tests and trying to navigate the college application process. Similarly, Rubin et al. (2017) spoke to the difficulties that can arise when YPAR projects are implemented in core academic classes, rather than through clubs, electives, or extracurricular activities. In their study of YPAR
projects playing out in a handful of social studies classrooms, they noted that the features of a typical high school - like “discrete daily assignments, the need to assess at particular intervals, regimented time demarcation, assessment” – hindered the pursuit of “an interest-driven and context-based YPAR experience” (p. 182).

However, these school year pressures and restrictions were not a concern for me and the student researchers when conducting the bulk of our YPAR work during our weekly summer meetings. In fact, this limitation in our study was made abundantly clear to me when the student researchers were unable to finish the films that were to disseminate their research findings once the summer ended and the stress of their senior kicked in. With these factors in mind, we could not fully replicate the English class experience that takes place during the course of the academic year. As such, the conclusions we can draw concerning the intersection of YPAR and critical literacy within an English literature unit are limited by the time, place, and other mitigating factors.

Furthermore, even though our project took place in this intimate and relaxed setting over the summer, I also found it difficult to completely dismantle the power dynamics inherent in the traditional classroom. While the student researchers and I sought equal footing as collaborators on this journey, the power dynamics of the traditional student-teacher relationship proved to be harder to shed than anticipated. At times, despite my best intentions, I could not resist the English teacher’s urge to revise, tweak, or otherwise put my stamp on some of the work produced by the student researchers. For example, my editorial eye is evident in the research questions the students ultimately settled on when shaping their projects. In these moments where the traditional power dynamics of the classroom were preserved, the guiding principles of
YPAR and the full possibilities of the project were undermined. Going forward, I – and teachers who implement YPAR projects in collaboration with student researchers – need to constantly assess my own behaviors and practices when working on YPAR projects in the classroom. As someone who was steeped in traditional pedagogy throughout my own education, I recognize that the traditional teacher’s role as an authoritative decision maker has been ingrained over time and takes work to dismantle. After all, all too often “the way that a teacher teaches can be traced directly back to the way the teacher has been taught” (Emdin, 2016). As such, to reach equal footing with my collaborating students in future projects, I will seek to routinely evaluate my behaviors to ensure that I am not falling back into those deeply ingrained pedagogies. By being cognizant of such behaviors or practices, I can better serve as a collaborator with my students, rather than an all-knowing teacher in the traditional mold.

This need to constantly assess behaviors and check my ability to break down traditional power dynamics within future projects is especially salient given my positionality as a white male teacher. My positionality as white and male serves to add additional layers of power and privilege on top of the traditional classroom relationships. As Emdin (2016) explained, “the power dynamics, personal histories, and cultural clashes stemming from whiteness and all it encompasses” can “work against young people of color in traditional urban classrooms” (p. 16). Emdin’s reality pedagogy echoes the principles of YPAR in that it calls for disrupting the typical “student/teacher roles so that everyone within the classroom can gain the opportunity to experience teaching and learning from the other’s perspective” (p. 87). Instead of preserving my power and privilege as a white male teacher – even in a tacit or subconscious manner – I must
continue to refine my ability to use YPAR as means to helping my students see beyond
the traditional power dynamics in the classroom and assert their own authority and
expertise as insiders and qualitative researchers.

For their part, my STHS students, who attend a school with a progressive mission
that is nonetheless characterized by traditional pedagogy, need support in dismantling this
power structure as well and recognizing the expertise they possess. They have a tendency
to preserve such relationships as they have been conditioned to work to please the teacher
and earn the grades they seek in pursuit of the middle-class college going culture
referenced earlier. This tendency on their part was on display as, at times, the student
researchers looked for my approval or sought to rely on me to make the ultimate decision
on certain issues.

**Future Research**

With the limitations concerning the time and place of this particular YPAR
project, future researchers should continue to explore the possibilities of implementing
YPAR in a literature class during the academic year. As a critical pedagogue and English
teacher, I am excited by the findings of this project, and I hope that we can continue to
explore the use of YPAR in literature classes, particularly when it comes to advancing
critical literacy. As our schools continue to contend with the ramifications of standards-
based curricula, high-stakes testing, and the accountability movement, there is a “need for
more research on the nexus of YPAR and literacies” in the face of these educational
trends that “oppressively narrow curriculum and literacies in our schools” (King, 2013, p.
315). Implementing similar projects, particularly during the academic year, can help us
come to a greater understanding of the challenges and possibilities concerning YPAR in
literature classes and the ways in which such projects can advance student literacies and other positive academic outcomes as well as positive identity development.

In particular, teachers and researchers should look to explore the challenges and possibilities of implementing this pedagogy in literature classes serving different student populations. St. Toribio’s is unique in that the school was founded specifically to serve the Latinx immigrant population on Chicago’s Southwest side. As we continue to carry out this specific mission through our dual-langue program and college prep curriculum, our student body remains comprised exclusively of Latinx students. With this in mind, the research I have embarked on in this study can be advanced by looking at the ways that other student bodies interact at the nexus of YPAR and critical literacy.

**Concluding Remarks**

At the beginning of this journey, I set out to explore the intersection of critical literacy and Youth Participatory Action Research project within the context of an English literature curriculum. The resulting YPAR projects that took shape over the course of the summer proved that there are tremendous possibilities in store when YPAR and critical literacy meet in such a context. Through the course of this project, the St. Toribio student researchers gained “knowledge for resistance and transformation” as they developed “their own sense of efficacy in the world” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 10). This efficacy on the part of the students manifested itself in a variety of ways, both in the classroom and beyond. The transformation that they experienced as students came when they problematized not just texts but the manner in which they were educated. The efficacy that they developed also gave them the confidence to explore complex social issues and eventually take action.
However, while I hoped to witness this transformation in my students when taking on this project with them, I was not prepared for a transformation of my own. By embarking on this journey with my students, I came to the realization that allowing students the space to problem-pose, take more ownership over their learning, and ultimately dismantle power dynamics in the classroom was far more difficult than I had anticipated. After all, the traditional classroom relationships and my views with regard to my role as teacher were deeply entrenched, and I recognize that I failed to fully root out such deeply ingrained habits and thinking. From elevating student voices to resisting the role of savior and allowing them the space to drive inquiry, taking on this pedagogy required a drastic shift in my mindset. Failure to fully disrupt such habits and thinking is especially important and potentially harmful given my privilege as a straight, white male. With these obstacles in mind, I emerge from this project with a humility and a deep understanding that the work of the critical pedagogue requires a vigilant and constant appraisal of my own mindset, behaviors, and practices as a teacher. McLaren (2015) and Emdin (2016) both speak to the importance of this vigilance. For example, as a white male teacher like myself, McLaren’s (2015) emphasized that “unlearning white privilege is an ongoing project that can never be abandoned” (p. 27). On the other hand, Emdin (2016) reinforced this idea and encouraged white teachers to “unpack their privileges and excavate the institutional, societal, and personal histories they bring with them” (p. 15) to the classroom.

Clearly, such an undertaking and shift in mindset is not without challenges, but as I glimpsed with my student collaborators in this project, the work is rewarding. But more importantly, the work of dismantling these power dynamics and delivering pedagogy and
curricula that is empowering is necessary if we are make good on our commitment to provide systemic change for our traditionally marginalized students, particularly those in urban communities, like my students at St. Toribio.
APPENDIX A

SCHOLARLY TEXTS USED WITH STUDENT RESEARCHERS


APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS POSED DURING FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS
Focus group -

1. Before this project, what did you notice or think about when reading texts for English class?

2. During your experience with YPAR, how has your approach to text changed?

3. What do you notice or thinking when reading texts after participating in this project?

4. How would you define social justice and social action as you experience this YPAR project?

5. How has your definition of social justice and social action changed throughout this experience?

Individual interview -

1. How has participating in this project shaped you as a reader?

2. How has participating in the YPAR project shaped your understanding of the thematic issue/tension/inequity issue(s) that we explored within the English literature texts?

3. How has the YPAR project shaped your ability to disrupt the status quo?

4. How has YPAR shaped your ability to examine sociopolitical issues?

5. How has YPAR shaped your ability to examine multiple perspectives?

6. How has YPAR shaped your ability to take action for justice?

7. How have you been impacted by working to develop these critical literacy skills?
APPENDIX C

QUESTIONS GENERATED BY SURVEILLANCE GROUP
For police officers -

1. Can you describe your typical day at work?

2. During your time as a police officer and throughout your experiences, how has surveillance changed in the community you police?

3. During your time as a police officer, how has the police presence changed in Pilsen, other Southside neighborhoods?

4. In your experiences as a police officer, what effect does surveillance have on an urban community?

5. What is STHS had the same type of school security and surveillance that local public schools have? What do you think would be the pros and cons if that were the reality?

6. President Trump has said that he might send in federal troops to police areas of Chicago. What is your reaction to that possibility? What effect do you think that would have on these communities?

7. Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass has proposed that police block off exits and entrances to certain Chicago neighborhoods that are affected by violence to monitor and control who enters and exits the neighborhood. What is your reaction to such a proposal?

For civilians –

1. Demographic data – Age? Racial/ethnic identification?

2. What neighborhoods did you grow up in and how long have you lived there?

3. How do feel about your neighborhood?

4. What have been your experiences been with police in your neighborhood?
5. What have been your experiences been with surveillance in your neighborhood?

6. How do you feel about the police presence and surveillance in your neighborhood?

7. What effect do you think police presence and surveillance has on your neighborhood?

8. What effect do you think police presence and surveillance measures have on students in schools?

9. Hypothetically, if there was an increased police presence and/or more surveillance in your neighborhood, how would you feel about that? What effect do you think that increased presence would have on your neighborhood?

10. President Trump has said that he might send in federal troops to police areas of Chicago. What is your reaction to that possibility? What effect do you think that would have on these communities?

11. Chicago Tribune columnist John Kass has proposed that police block off exits and entrances to certain Chicago neighborhoods that are affected by violence to monitor and control who enters and exits the neighborhood. What is your reaction to such a proposal?
APPENDIX D

QUESTIONS GENERATED BY GENDER NORMS GROUP
1. Can you please introduce yourself? What's your name?/Se puede introducir? Que es tu nombre?

2. How old are you?/Cuántos años tienes?

3. What does a typical day for you look like at home?/Como se ve un día típico en casa?

4. What responsibilities do you hold at home?/Cuáles responsabilidades tiene en casa?

5. Who lives in your household (age, relationship to you)?/Quién vive contigo en la casa?

6. What responsibilities do they (everyone in the home) hold? Occupations?/Qué responsabilidades tienen las personas en tu casa? Qué ocupaciones tienen?

7. How do you feel about your role/responsibilities at home?/Cómo te sientes de tu papel/responsabilidades en la casa?

8. How do you feel about the division of the roles in the home?/Cómo te sientes sobre la división de los papeles en la casa?

9. Hypothetically if there was a family get together, who is doing what? (what are the females and males doing?) / Hipotéticamente en una reunión de familia quien está haciendo que? (Que está haciendo la mujer? El hombre?)

10. Some in our community say that Latinas should be restricted to a housewife type of role. What would you say about that? / Algunos dirían que Latinas son restringidas a un rol como una ama de casa/sirvienta; usted qué diría de eso?

11. How has your roles/expectations/relationships affected your education? Your career opportunities? / ¿Cómo ha afectado su educación sus roles / expectativas / relaciones? ¿Sus oportunidades de carrera?
REFERENCE LIST


OMSA Heritage Series: Junot Diaz (video file). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-r8HKvkpsE


Angiello graduated from Fordham University with a BA in English literature and entered Fordham’s Graduate School of Education to obtain a masters in TESOL. After teaching ESL and earning tenure in the North Rockland Central School District, he moved to Chicago to pursue an MA in history at DePaul University. While pursuing this degree, he taught ESL at a variety of schools, including Harold Washington College and Richard J. Daley College. In 2011, Angiello took a faculty position at St. Toribio Jesuit High School (a pseudonym), teaching English literature. Angiello received Loyola University Chicago’s Mission Grant, afforded to teachers at local Jesuit high schools, to enter the Graduate School of Education’s Ed.D. program in curriculum and instruction. At Loyola, Angiello focused his research on critical pedagogies and critical literacy. This dissertation on Youth Participatory Action Research stemmed from that research. Angiello continues to use this research to help his students at St. Toribio apply their critical lenses to their texts and the world around them, generate their own knowledge through problem-posing, and empower themselves as engaged citizens. As a nine-year veteran at St. Toribio, he has taken on a variety of positions, including English department facilitator, instructional coach, and varsity basketball coach.
The Dissertation submitted by Thomas Angiello has been read and approved by the following committee:

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