

Youth ADAPT NC: A Participatory Action Research Project With Hispanic Youth Aimed at Enhancing Career Opportunities

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) involves community members as co-researchers throughout the research process and takes collective action on the knowledge produced. This article covers an application of PAR in a study about job access for Hispanic immigrant youth in Charlotte, North Carolina, an emerging immigrant gateway. I offer practical and detailed advice on structuring PAR projects and working with youth groups and community partners, with the hope of helping others implement similar projects in research, educational, and practice settings. Both process and outcomes can be beneficial for participants and researchers, and advance scientific knowledge and social change.

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR) is an epistemology rather than a set of predetermined methods (Kendon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). A reaction to traditional ways of doing research, action approaches are non-linear, with cycles of action and reflection built into the research process (Lewin, 1946). Participatory approaches emphasize conducting research *with* rather than *about* marginalized communities (Hall, 2005) by breaking down the traditional roles of the researcher as the all-knowing expert and research subjects as passive recipients (Pain, 2004). PAR sees youth as capable of making valuable contributions to scientific knowledge and their communities (e.g. Holloway & Valentine, 2004; Cahill, 2010). The broader goal is positive social change and equity.

PAR literature is heavily focused on the research process because of its critical and reflective nature and the importance of the process in achieving PAR objectives such as knowledge co-production (Smith, Bratini, Chambers, Jensen, & Romero, 2010; Levin, 2012; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). Still, there is room for providing nuanced details about our successes and challenges, e.g., about logistics, communication, budgets, and confidentiality, to assist with replicability. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the tangible and intangible outcomes of PAR. In this paper, I present the process and outcomes of a PAR project titled Youth ADAPT NC, offering practical details and recommendations. In terms of the process, I reflect upon the steps: designing the study; identifying a community partner; acquiring

resources and providing compensation; planning the sessions; executing the project; assessing outcomes and conducting evaluation; and disseminating findings. In addition to discussing the website and seminar that were produced as part of this study, I reflect on the outcomes the PAR project had for youth participants and myself in terms of collective and individual learning. Field notes, reflection notes after every PAR meeting, video recordings of the PAR meetings, observation notes taken by a research assistant, and a focus group and survey with PAR participants provided data for this article. Materials are framed to be applicable to working with other groups in research, educational, and practice settings.

This project responds to the question “How do Hispanic youth propose to improve job access for themselves and their peers?” A PAR approach lends itself well here because only the youth themselves can answer this question. The study was informed by previous work I have done with Hispanic youth and a series of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 36 Hispanic youth 16–21 years of age in 2014.¹ All 36 interview participants were invited to a gathering in December 2014 to discuss preliminary interview results and receive more information about the project. They also received a phone call in early

¹There were 21 female participants and 15 male. Average age was 17.6 years. Average time in the U.S. and Charlotte was 13.0 and 10.7 years, respectively. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) youth totaled 24, with 7 permanent residents, 1 U.S. citizen, 1 Temporary Protected Status (TPS), 1 with a U.S. visa, and 2 with no visa. Countries of birth were Mexico (25), Peru (4), Colombia (3), El Salvador (1), Cuba (1), Argentina (1), and Ecuador (1).

January 2015 inviting them to participate in the project. Fifteen participants (nine female) signed up for the PAR project, 13 of whom completed the full project. Participants initially signed up because they wanted to learn more about research, were interested in the topic, and/or wanted to help and promote the Hispanic community. All but one were still in school (various high schools, two- and four-year colleges) and they lived in different neighborhoods. We met 11 times for two hours on Wednesday evenings 5:30–7:30 p.m., from mid-January to mid-April, 2015 (see Table 1). All meetings took place at the Latin American Coalition, a Latin American advocacy and social

services organization in Charlotte whose mission is “full and equal participation of all people in the civic, economic and cultural life of North Carolina through education, celebration and advocacy” (see <http://www.latinamericancoalition.org/Who-We-Are/our-mission>).

Outcomes: Youth ADAPT NC Website and Seminar

PAR outcomes can be in written, visual, and/or oral form. For example, Hansen, Horii, & Un (2014) developed the Youth Friendly Health Services project in which Vancouver youth engaged in community mapping to help make

Table 1. Overview of PAR Meetings and Project Phases²

Phase	Meeting Number	Tasks/Activities
a. Preparations	N/A	Literature review. Read work by other PAR scholars Broadly define research topic/questions Obtain IRB approval Establish partnership and memorandum of understanding with local partner Put together a flexible timeline and schedule Participants (and parents, for minors) sign consent forms
b. Developing trust, communication and logistics	1	Ice breaker activities What is PAR? Background and examples Goals of this project, plus clarify role of participants and what data will be collected and how data will be used How will we communicate between meetings?
	2	Review material from first meeting Team building activities (related to project) Brainstorming research question/issue of focus (in small groups)
c. Design the project	3	Topic: Discuss project ideas (in small groups); project planning
	4	Personality/leadership activity Project planning Budget Group/project name and logo Dividing tasks
d. Executing the project	5	Discuss progress and upcoming tasks Leadership training
	6–9	Discuss progress and upcoming tasks Time to work on project (in pairs, groups)
	8	Participants practice how to talk about their involvements in this project in interviews (e.g., for college, jobs) Visit from local media
	9-10	Prepare for seminar and website launch
	11	Youth seminar and website launch
e. Evaluating process and outcomes	12	Evaluation focus group Individual participant surveys Recognition and celebration of accomplishments

²These phases are similar to the “five-cycle process (listen, plan, do, study, and act)” (Bucciari & Molleson, 2015, p. 244) but add “evaluation.”

health clinics and services more youth friendly. The youth researchers decided to use the mapping results to create a health service evaluation survey. They found that this “survey tool simply did not represent the emotional and lived dimensions of those experiences” (p. 367), so the team decided to also create a zine, a self-published small booklet, with a photo-essay of photos and quotes expressing their impressions of the health clinics, and a set of health clinic ratings. Another example is *Makes Me Mad: Stereotypes of Young Urban Women of Color*, a PAR study facilitated by Cahill (2007a). Cahill partnered with six women aged 16–22 living in the Lower East Side in New York City (who called themselves the “Fed Up Honeys”). The participants decided they wanted to focus the research on the misrepresentations of young people of color. Research products that were developed included a website, a sticker campaign, and a report. The idea of technology created by “[r]eal youth, speaking to real youth” is similar to a PAR project in which homeless youth developed and launched a cell phone app (Buccieri & Molleson, 2015, p. 249).

After a series of activities and discussions about the interview data and research topics, the 15 participants of my study identified the lack of job-related information as one of the key common challenges they face to successfully transitioning from school to work. This included creating a résumé, preparing for an interview, navigating higher education, and identifying mentors along the way. Participants chose to develop a website and a seminar for immigrant youth with job-related information.

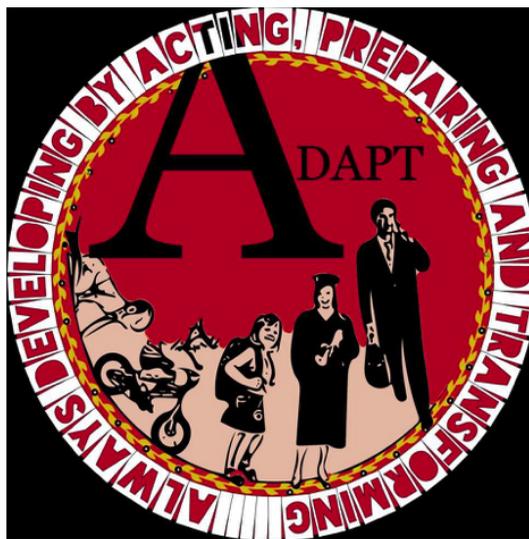
Participants conducted short surveys with their peers at school to identify what immigrant youth wish to learn about. Participants worked in pairs to create part of the content for the website, researching secondary sources and interviewing professionals. Youth also took responsibility for recruiting guest speakers and reaching out to local businesses for food sponsorships for the professional development seminar. I offered help and support by reminding youth of tasks they signed up for, writing a sponsorship letter, communicating with local media, scheduling meeting spaces, providing feedback on their website content, purchasing supplies, and providing additional information and resources when needed.

For the group/project name, participants brainstormed options together and individually. They decided on “Youth ADAPT NC.” The acronym ADAPT stands for “always developing by acting,

preparing, and transforming” and was chosen because it reflects the professional development focus of the project as well as the ambition and assertiveness of the youth. The word “adapt” itself was deemed appropriate because it expresses the adaptability immigrant youth have in the labor market and in society in general, living with their native culture and language within the mainstream culture and English of the U.S. South. “Youth” and “NC” were added to specify our participant and target group and geographic location. Once the project name was chosen, the domain name for our website followed accordingly (see www.youthadaptnc.com), and we created a logo (Figure 1).

The professional development seminar took place at a local public library. About 40 people attended. Each youth brought food to share and a local restaurant donated chips, salsa, and empanadas. The schedule included introductions of youth participants and a brief overview of the project, a panel discussion, the website launch and networking. Panelists were a MeckEd³ career pathways advisor of a local high school, the general manager of Norsan Media, the largest Hispanic media conglomerate in the U.S. Southeast, and an education outreach coordinator from Charlotte Works.⁴ The guest speakers (a Latina, a Latino, and

Figure 1. “YouthAdaptNC” Logo



³ “MeckEd is an independent, nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure that all children in Mecklenburg County have access to an excellent public education that results in the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to lead productive, successful lives” (<http://www.mecked.org/>).

⁴ Charlotte Works is a local organization that connects available workforce talent with employers relocating and expanding in the Charlotte area (<http://www.charlotteworks.com/>).

a Caucasian female) were invited through contacts the youth and I had in the community. The first part of the discussion consisted of predetermined questions for the panel, followed by questions from the audience. Two PAR participants moderated the event and I kept track of time. In preparation, we devised a list of questions to ask our panelist, including:

- What was your first job and what did you learn from it?
- What do you wish you had known when you were in high school or college about preparing yourself for the labor market?
- When you are hiring someone, what kinds of skills are you looking for that set a candidate apart from the rest?
- What are other employers looking for?

Questions from the audience were related to higher education, résumé writing, and dealing with challenges and conflict in the workplace. PAR participants wore their Youth ADAPT NC T-shirts we had designed and proudly showed the website to the crowd. Attendees commented on how professional the website looked and how well it was presented. Prizes were raffled off at the end and all attendees received a folder with additional job preparedness information from Charlotte Works. The event was featured in a Hispanic newspaper (online and in paper form) the following week.

Preparations

In preparation for the PAR project, I read work by other PAR scholars (e.g. Kinson et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2003; Sutherland & Cheng, 2009; Cahill, 2004, 2007b, 2007c; Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007; DeLyser & Sui, 2013; Mason, 2015; Wang, 1999), who recommend involving the group in deciding on the form of the project; acknowledging my positionality; not making any unrealistic promises; practicing honesty, integrity, compassion, and respect; and being flexible to changes or unexpected turns. In addition, I engaged in a week-long Critical Participatory Action Research Summer Institute at the City University of New York (CUNY), which further taught me PAR theory and practice. Applying this learning meant that the preparations I could do were limited because of the central role of the participants. In other words, the information and training taught me what to expect but it cannot be fully operationalized until you are working on a specific project. As such, these recommendations became guiding

principles that I used to develop the agenda and curriculum each week, with each meeting building on the content and participant feedback from the previous one.

Securing a trusted and conveniently located meeting space, preparing Institutional Review Board (IRB) materials, and applying for funding must be done in advance. In my case, a memorandum of understanding with a long-standing community partner outlined the use of their youth room for the duration of the project. For the IRB, I put together a tentative outline of the project, initial handouts for the participants, a rough agenda for the first couple of meetings, a participant observation guide, consent forms, an evaluation survey, and an evaluation focus group guide⁵. I also set tentative meeting dates and prepared a short workshop about PAR and examples of other PAR projects. Though this initial plan constantly evolved throughout the project, it helped guide the project and provide structure for participants to understand what to expect.

This PAR project was part of a larger dissertation study funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) Geography and Spatial Sciences Program Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement (GSS-DDRI) Award (\$10,316), a Society of Women Geographers Pruitt Dissertation Fellowship (\$12,000), and two UNC Charlotte Chancellor's Diversity Challenge Fund mini-grants (\$1,000 each). Though it is challenging to create a budget for an undefined project, I recommend budgeting for equipment (audio/video recorders, transcription and qualitative analysis software), research assistants, travel (conferences, training, mileage), participant compensation, and project materials (more in the *Resources and Compensation* section).

Operationalization

Trust and Transparency

The first meeting is arguably the most important because it sets the stage for the entire project. Developing trust within the group and with the researcher is pivotal (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005). This involves getting-to-know-you activities, emphasizing confidentiality, and modeling respect, active listening, and collaboration. When creating safe spaces, the layout of the meeting space and the associations youth have with that space matter (Nygreen, Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). In this project, we were fortunate

⁵All materials were submitted to and approved by the university's IRB and are available upon request.

to meet in an existing youth space at the Latin American Coalition facility, filled with colorful activist posters, art, and supplies. Tables were pushed together in the middle, with chairs lined around it, creating a communal environment.

It is important to be clear about the overall goals and purpose of the research and remind participants throughout the project. Though participants set their own goals for their project, there are also the overarching goals of the research, and participants should understand the PAR philosophy and how their efforts are part of the research. For many, this will be the first time they are part of a participatory process and/or a research study; therefore, doing a short workshop about ‘What is research? What is PAR?’ is an appropriate starting point, acknowledging that the ideas behind PAR might challenge what youth think research is and who researchers or “experts” are (Amsden & VanWynsberghe, 2005). This advice is echoed by Cahill (2007a), who asserts that taking the time to develop research proficiency among all participants gives participants confidence and “helps to equalize the power relationship between the facilitator and participants (and between participants with varying levels of experience) in the PAR process” (p. 301).

In addition to framing the project⁶, which provides a structure for participants to apply their creativity, it is essential to explain what will happen with the information collected or the project outcomes. Participants themselves decided they wanted to have a workshop launching their website, be featured by local radio and newspaper, and have stickers with our logo and website, but I also informed them how I would be using the video recordings of our meetings and how I would use the de-identified data gathered for presentations, my dissertation paper, and manuscripts.

Offering transparency and clarity should continue throughout the project. One way to do

that is to prepare an agenda for each meeting and go over it with the participants so they know what to expect. At the end, have them reflect on what was accomplished, what went well, and what needs to be done for next meeting. Beyond the basic structure and continuous support, researchers should provide plenty of leeway for participants to design and execute their own ideas. This can be challenging because committees, funders, and IRBs may want more specifics. Explaining the concept of PAR and demonstrating preparedness to facilitate the research process will typically reassure others (in academia) that the project is valuable, theoretically driven, and rigorous.

Communication

An important topic to discuss at the first meeting is best ways to stay in touch. In this project, I set up a private Facebook group, and the youth chose to also use individual and group text messages, and GroupMe, a phone app. Though I typically avoid providing personal contact information such as a cell phone number, let alone becoming Facebook friends with research participants, I do not know if it would have been possible to keep people engaged and share information any other way. Because of our tight timeline, it was essential that participants were reminded of, and assisted with, their tasks to ensure that we were making progress. Personal disclosure, if used appropriately, can break down boundaries between the researcher and participants. Using multiple forms of communication that youth use daily was their preferred communication strategy. Occasionally, I used email to send documents and communicate longer, non-pressing messages. Three participants did not use Facebook so I called and texted them instead. Communicating with all participants individually, rather than using only group messages, can help people see their individual engagement is valued. Though communicating on various platforms takes some time, I believe it was essential to the success of this short, intensive project.

Overall, Groupme and a private Facebook group or group Facebook messages were effective means of communication. However, there were times when I would ask a question and not receive many or any responses. Making group decisions and getting feedback is best done in person. If a response is only needed from a few people, sending them individual text messages or phone calls is the best way to get an answer outside meetings. Additionally, though many youth nowadays will have their own smart phone with Internet and

⁶ Participants were asked to develop a project that addresses the following question: How do you propose to improve the process of moving into the labor market for yourself and your peers? Guiding questions were: (a) Topic—What is the main career-related challenge faced by Hispanic immigrant youth that we want to address? Or maybe it is a strength you share that we want to highlight or raise awareness about. (b) Audience—Who are we trying to convince, educate, or reach out to? (c) Method—In what ways do we want to get the information across? E.g., written text (report, handbook, essays, poetry), oral presentations, video, photography. Will the information be delivered in person, on the website, via social media? (d) Execution—How can we get this done within the allotted timeframe and available resources?

unlimited text and calls, researchers should be mindful that not all youth are allowed or able to afford this and measures should be taken to also keep those participants informed (e.g. via email, mail, phone calls to home, or whatever is suitable and preferred by the participant). On several occasions, lack of transportation was a problem but we were typically able to resolve that through carpooling.

Roles and Responsibilities

One of the activities I recommend doing at the first meeting is putting together a group agreement, a series of guidelines on how participants feel they should interact for this to be a good experience for everyone involved. First, everyone wrote down a few things they wanted to add and then we opened it up to the group to see what everyone came up with. One participant volunteered to be the scribe and write down the guidelines upon which everyone agreed. This included being honest, being respectful of others' opinions, listening to each other/not talking at the same time, using appropriate language/being aware of language use, being timely, helping each other, and coming with a positive attitude. At the end of the activity, everyone signed the document and received an electronic copy. We revisited this agreement halfway through the project and at the end to evaluate ourselves and offer improvements.

Scheduling difficulties are not uncommon in PAR (Alvarez & Gutierrez, 2001). Think about what to do if participants are late to or miss meetings—because this is inevitable—and involve participants in the process of setting attendance guidelines and practices. The group decided at the beginning of the project that participants could not miss more than two gatherings. If someone missed a meeting, I encouraged another participant to fill them in. Even when participants understand the importance of being at all meetings, realistically other (more important) events come up, people fall ill, or transportation falls through. Other things may happen that are outside the researcher's control; for instance, we had to reschedule one meeting due to snow making it unsafe for people to be out on the roads. The next week it snowed again. To avoid getting further behind on the schedule, I set up a conference call. Though it was not the same as an in-person meeting, we were still able to discuss ideas and not fall behind schedule further. Moreover, it maintained the continuity of communicating regularly, which is important in keeping participants engaged.

The meetings were a mix of small group, individual, paired, and large group activities and discussions. These different forms of interaction give those who are less likely to speak up in a larger group setting the opportunity to have their voice heard and be fully engaged. Power dynamics also became apparent within the group during the PAR project, as in all group work. In this case, the older participants were often more likely to contribute than the younger participants. I managed this by providing opportunities for youth to work in pairs and smaller groups and asking for their input in large-group sessions. Having youth of different ages also provided an opportunity for older youth to be leaders and younger youth to learn from their college-aged peers. I found it helpful to read about how groups transition through the following development stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965; Jacobs, Maon, Harvill, & Schimmel, 2011). This taught me what to expect from the group over time and plan activities intentionally⁷. For instance, in the beginning, when the group is 'forming', participants are shy and soft-spoken. Disagreement can be anticipated once participants get more comfortable with one another ("storming"). Once team members establish how they will collaborate (norming), they can form productive relationships (performing).

As the researcher, I facilitated all meetings and answered any questions participants had. In longer, less structured PAR projects, there may be opportunities for participants to take on various additional roles, such as facilitating meetings, taking notes, providing snacks, and sending reminder messages to the group. However, due to limited time, I focused on providing other roles to participants, including designing the project logo, designing the website, and writing specific sections for the website. Though topics are predetermined, there was flexibility for participants to choose the project and decide on the details. As Cahill (2007a) states: "[W]hile the project was undefined, it was not unstructured. However, precisely because it was collaborative I could not plan and structure the process ahead of schedule and the research evolved in a slightly messy, organic way" (p. 101). My PAR project developed in a similar fashion.

⁷To me, this also underlines the value of reading outside your discipline; the stages are from psychology and counseling and I am a geographer. Likewise, working with community groups has shaped my university teaching (and vice versa) because I am more aware of group dynamics and comfortable employing more interactive and engaging instructional methods (see Brydon-Miller, et al., 2003; Henning, Stone, & Kelly, 2009).

Over the course of the study, I used grant funding to employ three Hispanic Research Assistants (RAs); the first was a UNC Charlotte undergraduate (senior) Latina, immigrant activist, and teacher-in-training; the second was a UNC Charlotte sophomore Latino social worker in-training; and the third was a former participant of the PAR project. They assisted with transcriptions, observation notes, project planning, data analysis (I spent ample time discussing the different themes that emerged from the data with them), and posterboard design for community dissemination of results. The RAs, in turn, learned more about the topic (Hispanic immigrant youth labor market access and experiences) and conducting PAR. Not only has mentoring undergraduate students been a rewarding experience for my RAs and me, the conversations with my RAs and their other contributions enriched my study by providing an extra layer of input and Hispanic youth participation. Creating this additional Hispanic youth participation and training is in line with the PAR model.

Leadership Development

It quickly became apparent how important it was to offer participants opportunities to develop themselves as well as develop the project they designed. During the third meeting, participants filled out a valuing diversity personality quiz⁸ that had them reflect on who they are and how they interact with others. Answers are categorized according to four main personality types or leadership styles. The activity prefaced a reflection about personal and group strengths, and leveraging diverse styles within the group. It also helps frame conversations if tensions or conflicts emerge. In our group, the lack of conflict could also be explained using the personality styles: most of the participants were listeners and thinkers, who are less likely to be very vocal and disagree with one another. For me, this information was also helpful because it encouraged me to ask more directly what participants wanted to do, rather than assuming they would voice it themselves. These types of activities can bring groups of people closer together, foster new understandings and appreciation for differences, and make individuals more comfortable with their own personality and leadership style.

During one of the meetings, an established entrepreneur facilitated a leadership workshop with the group in which youth took an assessment identifying their strengths, weaknesses, passions, and values for their life and career. Using stories and examples, she also provided examples of difficulties she faced as a professional in corporate America, being a first-generation university graduate, a woman, and Hispanic. As a pioneer in the business world and someone who is a very involved in the Charlotte business and non-profit community, in addition to having a family, she exemplified the idea that we have multiple identities. This inspired the participants. Sharing her experiences as a woman, as Hispanic, coming from a working class, immigrant family from Puerto Rico, helped participants envision a form of leadership that was attainable to them. This experience reflected the importance of mentorship and for youth to see examples from people “like them,” as emerged from the interviews. The assessment the youth took, building on the Valuing Diversity activity, enhanced their self-awareness and confidence.

Networking and Other Exposures

Another memorable moment was when we attended an event at a local Latin American art gallery together. We were invited by the above-mentioned guest speaker because her company was organizing it. The event was themed “Women in Publishing” featuring four accomplished female publishers in the Charlotte metro area. More broadly, it was an opportunity to hear about the publishers’ careers and professional development, learning how to succeed in today’s demanding marketplace no matter the industry, and work-life balance. The youth benefited from hearing honest reflections about non-linear career paths, persevering even when things get difficult, and balancing career goals with other aspects of life. Furthermore, being surrounded by female and Hispanic professionals (in addition to male, white, and black professionals), art pieces by various Hispanic artists, and a young Latino singer entertaining the crowd with his songs sent a clear message to the youth that Hispanics can be successful in many fields. Interview results from this study showed how important this is as young Latinos come of age, shape their dreams, and enter the labor market. In addition, the group was asked to stand, be introduced, and receive applause at the event. The recognition as young leaders made them feel valued and that their efforts mattered. This experience brought the group closer together and

⁸An example is available at <http://www.riversidelocalschools.com/Downloads/Animal%20profiles.pdf>.

re-energized the project. For many, it was their first professional event, including a reception with hors d'oeuvres, and a coffee and dessert networking session. In that sense, it was a turning point. It was unexpected because it was not in the original PAR plan, but the opportunity emerged through our outside contact who saw the work that we were doing and wanted to highlight it. We debriefed the event a week later. Some youth mentioned they felt a bit uncomfortable because it was a new setting with unfamiliar (and older) people; however, getting this experience outside their comfort zone made them grow. They were pleasantly surprised with how their presence was valued and felt special that they were mentioned in front of all the attendees. As for the panelists, one participant commented how great it was to see three successful leaders with all very different personalities and backgrounds. It reminded him of the discussion we had about valuing different leadership styles. Another participant added to that, explaining that it was refreshing to hear that successful career women can still make time for family and other activities.

In addition, participants had the opportunity to speak about the project and their involvements to a journalist from a Spanish newspaper and on the local Spanish radio station. Such exposures and recognition built participants' confidence and gave them new energy to continue and complete the project.

Resources and Compensation

I highly recommend pursuing funding, either through national or external awards or local and university-based avenues. In my case, I used project funds for participant gift cards (\$100 each), T-shirts and stickers with the Youth ADAPT NC logo, office supplies (flip charts, notebooks, pens, etc.), and two leadership events that participants attended. That said, it is possible to complete a successful PAR project without funding. If this is the case, the following questions should be considered: (a) Is there free space to meet that participants can access and trust? (b) What kind of non-monetary compensation can be offered to participants that will make it worth their time, e.g., build certain skills, educational or volunteer credits, expand professional networks? (c) Is there access to office supplies and resources to send, copy, and/or print materials? (d) If needed, are audio and/or video recorders available (your own device or borrowed)? (e) Are participants willing to share responsibilities for refreshments at

meetings or can these be obtained via sponsorships from local businesses (grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries)? Providing food at the youth meetings has multiple purposes: (1) Sharing food brings people closer together and reduces stress and group conflict. (2) Given people's busy schedules, we had to meet during the late afternoon/early evening, around dinner time so food was necessary to keep people focused. (3) Participants may come from households where financial resources are limited and there is not always enough money for food. As such, providing food with participants helps their parents/caretakers. (4) People are more likely to participate in events where food is served. My national funding could not be used for food but a smaller university grant allowed me to purchase food for each meeting and get reimbursed.

In terms of planning the budget, there are often restrictions on what can be purchased using grant money and which vendors can be used based on funder and university guidelines. Going through the university system and approved vendors means it can take weeks to obtain the requested product (e.g., gift cards). As such, plan the budget and request purchases early on.

Closure

Evaluating the Process and Outcomes

After the seminar, we met one final time to evaluate the PAR project (process and outcomes), and celebrate the group and their accomplishments. All participants were present. The evaluation process was two-fold: First, all participants filled out a short anonymous survey (Table 2). Second, we had a semi-structured focus group allowing participants to elaborate on why they chose certain responses (Table 3).

Ongoing critical reflexivity about the research process—in addition to the outcomes—is central to participatory studies. This cyclical reflexive process engages participants as well as the researcher(s) and should therefore be built into the research timeline throughout the duration of the project. Throughout the PAR project, I made an effort to receive feedback from participants about the process and their experience. This was scheduled during meetings, often at the start or at the end, with the whole group, but also took place informally on the side, during breaks, and before and after meetings, often one-on-one. The final evaluation session helped formalize the feedback process and sparked reflections from the perspective of looking back at the process.

Table 2. Effects of Project on Participants (N=13)

Through my participation in this project, I...	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Learned more about research			1	7	5
Learned more about myself			1	7	5
Developed skills that will help me in the future				3	10
Improved my ability to work with others			2	4	7
Improved my ability to communicate my ideas and opinions			1	6	6
Gained confidence in myself			2	4	7
Made new friends/connections				4	9
Feel more prepared for future jobs			1	4	8
Helped other youth improve their job-related skills			1	3	9
Overall, I...					
Enjoyed being part of project				1	12
Think we worked well as a team				2	11
Feel like my voice was heard and valued				2	11
Think the facilitator communicated well with us				1	12
Think the facilitator was helpful				1	12

Another essential component of closure is celebrating accomplishments. This is particularly important for projects that revolve around large social issues that are not suddenly “fixed” and where the impacts are not felt directly. Working on issues of equality means celebrating the small wins and building moments of joy into the long-term fight to re-energize each other and keep the movement going. In this case, it meant recognizing each participant with a gift and a certificate of completion, and inviting the group to provide positive feedback to one another.

Disseminating Findings

In addition to presentations (e.g., at the Association of American Geographers and Race, Ethnicity and Place conferences) and this article, the PAR project was used to inform the chapter “Participatory Research with Latinos in a New Immigrant Gateway” (Smith, Schuch, & Urquieta de Hernandez, 2016) in the book *Race, Ethnicity, and Place in a Changing America*.

Non-academic or community dissemination is a core part of the participatory process. As Van Blerk and Ansell (2007) point out, feedback

is an obligation to participants and dissemination is a potential agent of social change. On April 20, 2016, youth co-researchers and I presented findings at the Latin American Coalition. Findings were summarized by me and designed into seven posters by one of the research participants, who was hired as a part-time assistant through a UNC Charlotte Chancellor’s Diversity Grant. Another participant and I also presented the posters at the Levine Museum of the New South on April 26, 2016. The posters were also turned into a report that was distributed locally to participants and their families, community organizations, local media, UNC Charlotte, and other interested stakeholders via email⁹.

Sustainability

One of the most significant challenges of engaged research is what happens to the project and the participants after the study (or funding) ends (Duran & Wallerstein, 2003). Youth ADAPT

⁹Also available on the Youth ADAPT NC website and Facebook page.

Table 3. Project Questions and Participant Responses

<p>Question 1. How do you feel, if at all, about what this project has taught you about research?</p> <p>Response Examples. "It's about working with organization and not spontaneity." "It was cool to apply the things I was learning in my psychology classes and it helped me understand research more."</p> <p>Question 2. In what ways, if at all, did the project help you learn about yourself?</p> <p>Response Examples. "It helped me learn about the different leadership styles and helped me understand what kind of leader I am and want to be." "I realized that besides the fact that everyone has different leadership styles, a leader gets things done. I did not write about myself before and it helped me realize what I want for myself." "It helped us see our perspectives and to notice what you do and do not agree on." "Having to write the journals was something I never put myself to do. I do feel more confident in myself."</p> <p>Question 3. Do you think this project helped you prepare for the job market? In what ways?</p> <p>Response Examples. "I learned more about discipline in turning things that are necessary to advance the project. Overall, I really learned about doing research for all the website sections." "I think that I looked over my résumé and had the opportunity to touch it up. Sometimes I don't know how to present it. A lot of the things that we were talking about on the night of the seminar are really applied and I got experience when I was with my manager. It helped me realize this is what I am looking for and this is what I need. I got to understand how people are hired." "It helped in learning how to make connections and make a follow up."</p> <p>Question 4. Do you think that this research project helped you improve communication skills?</p> <p>Response Examples. "I think I improved my writing through the journals and website." "I think that it improved me to open up my ideas in a positive way." "I am not a person that really talks a lot and so I think that this has helped me to talk and explain myself better."</p> <p>Question 5. Do you think your ability to work with others has improved, working with other people you may or may not have worked with before.</p> <p>Response Examples. "I usually don't like to work with other people because I like to get things done quickly by myself. I like thinking in my own way. But I liked working with others on this project." "I've worked with some groups before but every time I do it is really different. I really enjoyed it."</p> <p>Question 6. What kind of challenges did we encounter?</p> <p>Response Examples. "A lot of time that we meet, life happens and you realize people are doing other things. You need that organization as a whole and you need everyone here on time. That gets really hard!" "I remember trying to decide what our product was actually going to be." "I think our challenge was focus. Just like [name] said, we were trying to tackle every single issue and take into account everyone's opinions." "I think it was more like the time because when we</p>	<p>started, it was only a small group of people and some people wouldn't show up. I know I did not show up for like two weeks and when I did, I felt a little lost." "We also have insecurities about the things that we talk about, such as networking. It's easy to say to one person to go talk to another person but you realize that it's about insecurities that we have ourselves."</p> <p>Question 7. How were we able to overcome these challenges? What made you stay engaged?</p> <p>Response Examples. "...the day that we were doing those assessments we worked great with each other." "It's kind of like till you realize how much we can actually do. After the second seminar we were getting to know each other. We need to ask ourselves, are we actually going to be able to do it? Well, it happened and it was great. The seminar made us realize how legitimate the project was going to be. It definitely felt like a good accomplishment." "I think communicating went well because, you know, we all had to start somewhere." "It was nice to know that, yeah, it would have been easier to quit, but you realize how important it is to continue especially when you have already done. It was a long commitment." "Saying that you are part of a group such as this one sounds really good. Even doing the website. It really felt really good." "I remember when we were first coming here you gave us a really happy and thrilling reason to keep coming." "It makes me think on how much research we need in our community." "I don't do anything at home. I just stay at home and it really feels really good to do something with a lot of people. I am really glad I came to it."</p> <p>Question 8. What do say about the group size?</p> <p>Response Examples. "I think it was a good size. I think it is really hard to get work done with large groups and you don't really get to make great friends. It was a comfortable size."</p> <p>Question 9. What was your favorite part or moment of the project?</p> <p>Response Examples. "I really liked it when I went to the radio station." "Honestly, doing some of the radio work was a good experience that everyone should have. You get to build a connection there as well." "I don't know. I had a lot of moments. I enjoyed it." "There were a lot of moments that I liked. The most was the event because you could see that people were interested. It was hard to network but I did it. I got to see how you do it." "The Women in Publishing event was perfect because we got the project for free. I got a glance of what a project should look like." "I have three. I like it when we were brainstorming the idea because of how productive we were. The leadership event and our event. When we did the coding, I enjoyed doing it though it wasn't an assignment." "Mine was the art gallery. It was the first time I set a goal. I could only see older people." "I liked the Women in Publishing event because we got a model of how an event is supposed to be." "...when the guest speaker came and she talked to me. And it was nice to experience that I did it [this project] with other people."</p>
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NC no longer meets, but I regularly share events and ongoing opportunities for community involvement with participants. Eighteen months after launching the website, it had received 5,230 visitors from all across the United States and several other countries. The website will remain active at least until April 2018. Even though the group is no longer active, youth participants still carry their skills and experiences gained from the project (as expressed in the evaluation focus group) into their lives. Participants can use this experience on their résumé, for job and college applications, and in future endeavors. I have also served as a reference for several participants because I can speak directly to their abilities, personality, and accomplishments. In a sense, it is akin to taking a course and knowing that the course will end but also that it is an investment into becoming more confident and capable at reaching larger goals as a result of that temporally limited involvement. It would be interesting to follow up with participants five years post-PAR to see what stuck with them and the potential lasting impact of their partaking.

Given the common struggle to make participatory research outcomes sustainable, we should think critically about why this is the case and what can be changed. Working with community partners who are able to continue the work may be one way to attain this. Within academia, recognizing participatory research and its outcomes more can incentivize faculty to take on longer-term projects, knowing it will count toward their tenure.

Reflections

Confidentiality

The PAR project raised questions about navigating confidentiality and protecting participants' identity. After a few meetings, I added a disclosure statement (approved by the university's IRB), because I felt uncomfortable between what the original consent form stated about confidentiality and the level of disclosure participants were prepared to give. PAR projects are often very public in their nature and participants may choose to disclose themselves (name, images of themselves) in the product (e.g., website, video) and its promotion (in local media, online, etc.). Consequently, it was important to clarify and document—for my own ease, the integrity of the research, and the protection and understanding of participants—that the video and audio recordings of the meetings, the journal entries, and mental maps were part of the research and were kept confidential and secure. Participants were not obliged to disclose their

identity in any of the products or promotional materials related to this project. This was all part of the outreach process (not the research) and was therefore optional. Any involvement participants chose to have after the last PAR meeting (e.g., managing the website, assisting with community presentations) was also optional. This should be clarified in a disclosure statement, especially when working with minors and when the PAR project may publicly share personal information.

Positionality

Power relationships cannot and arguably in some cases should not be completely broken down in the research process. There was an inherent unequal power structure between the youth and me because I was older, white, and a graduate student. However, this power dynamic was diminished because I was not that much older than they (I was 26 and turned 27 during the data collection phase), I was still a student, and I am also not a U.S. citizen (I was on an F-1 international student visa for nine years and, though the process has been smooth for the most part, I can relate to a sense of not belonging, not being able to apply for certain jobs and scholarships, and the uncertainty about being able to stay in the U.S.). This positionality is important to recognize. For instance, Nygreen et al. (2006) highlight that, in one project, one of the authors, Kwon, may have been more easily accepted by her youth participants because of a shared ethnicity; however, "in many youth projects ..., the adult allies do not share the youth's racial, class, or gender backgrounds" (p. 114) and "[w]e must take into account both our formal, institutionalized relationship with youth, as well as the perceptions that youth have of the adult on the basis of this relationship" (p. 115).

Furthermore, the positionalities of the researcher and research subjects are not static; our subjects impact how we view the world and construct knowledge and vice versa. "Researchers, like 'other' participants, negotiate their roles and participation over the course of the project" (Yoshihama & Carr, 2002, p. 100). We are all actors and agents in the construction of situated knowledge and simultaneously learners and teachers (Dowling, 2010; Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997; Sould & Edmonson, 2001). In meetings, I clarified I was speaking from my perspective and experiences, not as an all-knowing authority. I presented my relationship with the participants as a two-way learning process. As we developed more of a relationship (the youth and I, and the youth among

one another), we were able to work more closely together. I therefore believe that, by openly listening and valuing participants' inputs, the initial power structures and discomforts are likely to fade quickly.

Working With (Millennial) Youth

Executing this project also taught me about working with youth, specifically working with Millennial youth. For example, Millennials are "racially diverse, economically stressed, and politically liberal," "confident, connected, open to change," "digital natives" who are "upbeat about the nation's future" (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Their lives have been "shaped by technology" and they "value community, family and creativity in their work" (White House Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). They are meaning seekers, eager to have a positive impact on society. These are traits the group demonstrated that are characteristic of their generation and the age in which they grew up. Thus, at the same time as my group's personalities and lives are shaped by being an immigrant and being Hispanic in the U.S. South, they are also products of a new generation of Americans coming of age in the 21st Century. I believe this is important to take into consideration when working with young people. As learners, they need to be engaged, not simply "talked at" or given a task. Wilson and Gerber (2008, p. 29) recommend four pedagogical adaptations to the Millennial personality: "enhanced clarity of both course structure and assignments; student participation in course design; pre-planned measures to reduce stress; and rigorous attention to the ethics of learning." This translates into participatory research settings, too. Even if the topic is serious, finding ways to incorporate fun can help keep people engaged. If participants feel connected to the group and find social value in meetings (in addition to being involved with a broader positive movement), they are more likely to continue the project.

At times, during PAR meetings, there seemed to be a lack of excitement from participants, demonstrated by their body language. Participants may not have been aware of this but it could be observed on the video recordings. From my previous work with high school and college students, I have learned that a disengaged appearance does not always indicate that the individual is not paying attention. Moreover, a lack of energy may not always be triggered by the meeting but rather by the time of day (early evening) and participants being tired from school,

work, and other activities they are involved with (mental maps and journals indicated most youth participants were busy and dealt with stress). This also ties back to working with youth and particularly Millennials because, growing up in the digital age, they are used to multi-tasking and receiving many stimuli. They learn best by being engaged, using their creativity, and understanding the purpose and meaning of their work. This encouraged me to spend less time talking, switch gears often, and schedule more time on activities that directly engage participants, such as working in pairs on the website content.

Collective and Individual Learning

This PAR project offered multiple opportunities for learning and growth for the researcher, the participants, and others involved (research assistants and the community partner). In the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the assets they, and other Hispanic immigrant youth, bring to the workforce. Throughout the PAR process, participants demonstrated and developed the assets they bring to the labor market and their potential as future leaders. Staying true to the PAR approach, youth participants were involved in all steps of the project and, through their participation, developed skills and gained experiences that will help them in the future. For instance, they networked, spoke with media representatives, designed a logo and website, and practiced writing, oral presentation, and teamwork. Halfway through the program, when asked what they had learned so far, participants expressed that they learned more about themselves and what kind of leader they are, that the world is constantly changing and they have to continue to adapt, and that there are different leadership styles. Others reflected on specific skills they wanted to develop, such as oral self-expression, collaborating with others, and web design. In our evaluation meeting, youth reflected on their journey of becoming more comfortable with each other, gaining confidence in themselves, and learning new knowledge about research and this subject matter along the way. They were challenged to work together as a team and come to consensus, as well as take responsibility for their individual tasks. They were exposed to new environments and recognized by local leaders. Incorporating exercises that ask participants to share, for instance, recent accomplishments, or something they learned so far, can bring the group closer together and help everyone learn more about each other's lives and interests. At one of our sessions, we did a paired

role-play in which participants practiced how they would describe their involvement with this project to future employers. Participants shared what they came up with, as well as what parts had been difficult to articulate. Participants found it helpful to practice this and hear each other's input. Based on this activity, I typed up a two-page document summarizing the study and points youth mentioned so they have this for future reference for résumés, interviews, and scholarship applications. Though empowerment is a process and one that requires sustained efforts, I believe this project mirrors the "key dimensions of critical youth empowerment" as defined by Jennings and colleagues (2006, p. 32): "(1) a welcoming, safe environment, (2) meaningful participation and engagement, (3) equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, (4) engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation in sociopolitical processes to affect change, and (6) integrated individual- and community-level empowerment."

I also learned the value of balancing process and outcomes, and enjoying the process. At times, I was tempted to encourage participants to stay focused on the tasks and remind them that the project needed to be finished. However, they (indirectly) reminded me that process is as important as the final outcome—in fact, that what is learned through the process is an outcome of the project. We included conversations and activities that promoted engagement, interpersonal connections, and "soft skills." Looking back, these were an essential part of the success of our project. Balancing process and outcomes involves seeing participants as full people with full lives, often balancing many responsibilities, and therefore being understanding and encouraging at all times. This includes recognizing that not everyone will be able to make it to every meeting or complete tasks at home. I used short activities to check in with participants. One of the activities involved going around the room at the end of the meeting and having each person summarize how they felt in one or two words. Another activity we often started the meetings with goes as follows: On a flipchart paper, draw a horizontal line across the middle. This is the "average" line. Ask every participant to draw a face (their face) on the paper, with their mood in relation to the "average" line. For example, if someone is feeling happy, they might draw a smiley face far above the line, closer to the top of the paper. If on the other hand someone is feeling stressed or sad, they may draw a stressed or sad face under the line. Ask participants to

elaborate on why they are feeling that way, if they wish to share. This exercise, and similar ones, helped us see each other as three-dimensional people. This lesson is shared by Nygreen and colleagues (2006) who expressed "the importance of prioritizing relationship-building throughout these projects" (p. 119).

Conclusions

This article described and analyzed a PAR project part of a study about Hispanic immigrant youth labor market access. The purpose of youth involvement was to give them a platform to collect and construct knowledge through reflections and discussions, culminating in a tangible group outcome. The PAR group developed and executed a project (Youth ADAPT NC website and seminar) to improve their and their peers' job opportunities. The process and outcomes discussed in this paper shine light on new ways to approach the issue of economic opportunities of immigrant youth. We need to start seeing people as part of the solution rather than the problem. In this case, it means giving immigrant youth a voice in decisions that may affect their future.

The quality and reliability of the research outcomes were enhanced through the participation of Hispanic youth. The project demonstrated the high need for job-related information for immigrant youth. Youth propose such information to be disseminated via online sources, social media, and local workshops/seminars. Connecting Hispanic youth to career-related information and resources is particularly needed in emerging immigrant gateway areas where the infrastructure for immigrants and multiple generations of Hispanics are not as strongly established.

For those new to PAR, it is worth recognizing that, while participants do a lot of the work, the process does not simply happen; it is a carefully and intentionally designed project that requires continuous re-assessing, planning, and behind-the-scenes work on the researcher's end. Exposing youth participants to professional development opportunities; receiving attention from community and business leaders and the media; and building in time for activities that are fun or bring immediate gratification for participants are components that contributed to the positive outcomes of this PAR project. Though the rewards—for the research, the researcher, and the participants—outweigh the challenges, researchers must inform and prepare themselves prior to diving into participatory and action research. Challenges and unforeseen

circumstances will always emerge but their impacts can be reduced by appropriate planning, communication, and continuous reflections.

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