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Using critical media literacy and youth-led research to promote the sociopolitical development of Black youth: Strategies from "Our Voices"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the utility of youth participatory action research (YPAR) and critical media literacy as strategies to promote the sociopolitical development (SPD) of Black youth. We use the case example of Our Voices, an afterschool program implemented with Black high school students in which participants analyzed the representation of Black characters in television and developed action to resist historical stereotypes. We situate Our Voices in SPD theory to demonstrate how approaches from YPAR and critical media literacy can be used to promote Black youth's analysis of racial issues, agency in making social change, and sociopolitical action. We also highlight the utility of YPAR and critical media literacy programs as opportunity structures for youth to receive resources and mentorship as they engage as advocates in their community. We conclude with lessons learned from the implementation of Our Voices and with recommendations for research and practice with Black youth.

On July 22, 2018, three young Black women, Nia Wilson and her sisters Letifah and Tashiya, were violently assaulted in a Bay Area Rapid Transit train station by John Lee Cowell, a white male with a history of violence. Nia, who was 18 years old, was murdered during the attack (Félix, 2018). National outrage ensued when a local news station reporting the story used Nia's image that appeared to show her holding a gun, later verified to be a phone case (King, 2018). Despite being the victim of an unprovoked, heinous crime, the media portrayed Nia in a manner that villainized her and perpetuated stereotypes of Black people as violent. The negative media portrayal of Nia Wilson is by no means an anomaly. The misrepresentation of Black people in media is rooted in what Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images" (Collins, 2000). These historical, stereotypical conceptualizations of Black people (e.g., Black women as oversexualized Jezebels and Black men as violent brutes) have long been used as a basis to justify racial and gender oppression. As with Nia's story, in today's society, we find that images in media perpetuate and contribute to the narrative of Black young people as violent, dangerous, and problems (Akom et al., 2008; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Welch, 2007). Thus, for Black youth, the media can be a potent tool in shaping their perceptions about who they can be and how they contribute to the world.

Critical media literacy and youth participatory action research are pedagogical approaches that can empower young people to critique and challenge controlling images in media, develop critical questions to research their perspectives and ideas, and use research for action. Critical media literacy includes the ability to deconstruct and challenge dominant narratives in the media by using critical inquiry and analysis to link media to broader social issues (Kellner & Share, 2005). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) involves young people's engagement in the research process to ask research questions about social justice issues and use research findings to take social justice action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Ozer, 2016). Critical media literacy and YPAR both have the potential to contribute to young people's sociopolitical development (SPD), the process of developing an awareness of one's social status, the ability to analyze inequitable systems, and the capacity to transform systems through sociopolitical action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts et al., 1999; Watts et al., 2003).

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This paper discusses approaches to promote Black youth's SPD through a case example of Our Voices, a media-based youth participatory action project in which youth conducted a content analysis of television to examine the representation of Black characters. We argue that Black youth's SPD can be enhanced through YPAR and critical media literacy approaches that can help build young people's ability to decipher the hegemonic narratives in media and develop their skills and confidence to promote racial justice. Drawing from critical media literacy theories and youth participatory approaches, we describe strategies used in Our Voices to promote youth's SPD. First, we describe the guiding theories that informed the development and implementation of Our Voices. Secondly, we describe the pedagogical approaches we used in our intervention to promote different aspects of SPD. Finally, we present lessons learned from the implementation of Our Voices and offer recommendations for future research and practice.

Theories and perspectives shaping "Our Voices"

Sociopolitical development

Black youth's development is significantly shaped by their ability to navigate social, political, and economic forces that promote racial oppression (Anyiwo et al., 2018a; García Coll et al., 1996; Watts et al., 2011; Watts et al., 1999). Scholars have described the process of SPD as an "antidote" for the oppression of Black people that promotes their ability to maintain a positive sense of identity and effectively heal from and resist racism (Ginwright, 2010; Hope & Spencer, 2017; Watts et al., 1999). SPD theory draws from Freire's critical consciousness theory (Freire, 2000), as it is rooted in unpacking the process by which marginalized groups develop a critical awareness of the causes of oppression and become active in behaviors that transform oppressive structures. SPD is theorized to consist of several components, including critical social analysis, critical agency, and critical sociopolitical action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Critical social analysis describes the cognitive process of analyzing the cultural, economic, and political factors that shape inequity (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts et al., 2003). Critical agency describes one's belief in their ability and their group's ability to make and sustain political and social change (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Critical sociopolitical action describes behaviors geared toward addressing social inequality and promoting structural change, for example, engaging in political protest, civic practices, or organizing for social change (Anyiwo et al., 2020; Diemer et al., 2015).

Scholars describe SPD as an ecological and transactional process shaped by the interaction between youth and their social context. For Our Voices, we drew upon the work of Watts and Flanagan (2007) that provided a model for the processes that shape youth's participation in sociopolitical action. Youth's worldview, which includes their ideological beliefs and critical social analysis, is conceptualized to be directly related to their engagement in sociopolitical action. However, Watts and Flanagan (2007) identify two moderating factors critical in promoting youth's engagement in action. The first is youth's sense of agency, and the second is opportunity structures, which Watts and Flanagan (2007) described as having meaningful opportunities to engage in change. Opportunity structures involve physical spaces as well as social capital. Having access to organizations, roles, responsibilities, and mentors can be crucial in facilitating adolescents' engagement in social change (Ginwright, 2005, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Little empirical work has examined opportunity structures as a moderator between worldview and sociopolitical action. Further, although agency is often associated with action, there are inconsistencies in whether it moderates or mediates the associations between worldview and action (Bañales et al., 2020; Diemer & Rapa, 2016; Pérez-Gualdrón & Helms, 2017). Empirical work assessing the process of progression in SPD is still emerging (Diemer et al., 2016). Watts and Flanagan's model is presented in a relatively linear fashion; however, SPD facets are likely bidirectional and mutually inform each other (Diemer et al., 2016). Nevertheless, for brevity and clarity, we propose an adapted model of Watts and Flanagan (2007) that presents our theorized intervention effects (i.e., the effects of critical media literacy practices and youth participatory action on youth's SPD) while recognizing that the relations across these variables are likely more complex (see Figure 1).

Critical media literacy as a mechanism for SPD

Drawing on critical media literacy theory, we argue that Black youth's ability to analyze complex messages in the media is essential to their worldview, which informs their sociopolitical action. The media operate as invisible, unconscious socializing agents that communicate the ideologies, values, and social norms of a society and the broader world (Kellner & Share, 2005). The media often reinforce social hierarchies by

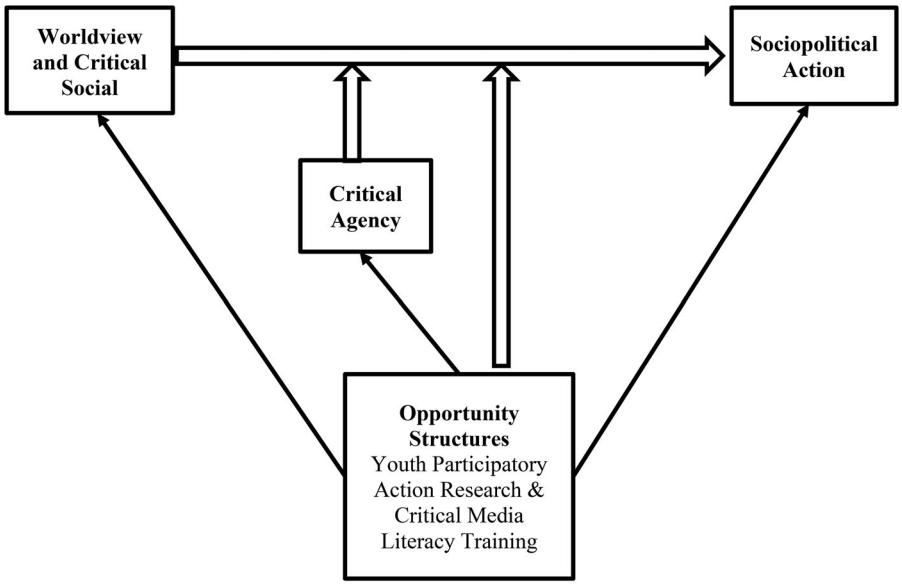

Figure 1. The proposed impact of Critical Media Literacy and YPAR on indicators of SPD (Adapted from Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

privileging the voices, experiences, and ideologies of dominant groups and marginalizing the voices and experiences of subordinate groups. Black adolescents are likely to be significantly influenced by representations of Black people on television, as they watch about five hours of television each day (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2010). Indeed, studies have found links between Black youth's television usage, their constructions of Black womanhood and manhood (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Goodwill et al., 2018), and endorsement of racial and gender stereotypes (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Jerald et al., 2017).

Marginalized youth's ability to critically analyze media is essential to developing their worldview and their behaviors as agents of social change. (Morrell, 2002). Critical media literacy includes identifying and deconstructing dominant narratives that perpetuate controlling, stereotypical images and the ability to decipher multiple messages in media (Kellner & Share, 2005; Morrell, 2002). Through critical media literacy programs, youth are provided with a context to engage in critical dialogue about media content, which builds their capacity for critical social analysis. The identification and critical analysis of controlling images in media can reduce the extent to which youth internalize negative, stereotypical media portrayals, such as images that reinforce the perceived criminality of Black people. For example, Goodwill and colleagues (2018) found that Black college youth drew from images in the media to inform their perceptions of how racism shaped the marginalization of Black masculinity. Youth's ability to analyze and contest stereotypical images in media may extend to their ability to identify systems of oppression outside of media that shape the privilege and marginality of groups (i.e., their critical social analysis) (Watts et al., 2002). Hence, media literacy has been used to promote Black boys' critical analysis (Watts et al., 2002).

In addition to enhancing youth's critical analysis, media literacy may also enhance youth's critical agency by giving them spaces that develop their confidence and cultivate a sense of responsibility for sociopolitical action (McLaren, 1998). Indeed, studies have found links between youth involvement in critical media literacy programs and their motivation to engage in action (i.e., critical agency). For example, in a sample of 400 high school students, Martens and Hobbs (2015) found that youth who participated in media literacy programs were more likely to have a higher interest in sociopolitical action (e.g., participating in a protest or voting in an election) than youth who did not participate. Thus, critical analysis of media may be associated with youth's interest in influencing sociopolitical systems. Media literacy can also provide a straightforward approach for young people to engage in sociopolitical action; youth can create media to disrupt narratives, raise awareness about issues, and organize the community for change (Coryat, 2008; Costanza-Chock et al., 2017).

Youth participatory action research

Ozer (2016) describes YPAR as "an approach to scientific inquiry and social change grounded in principles of equity that engages young people in identifying problems relevant to their own lives, conducting

research to understand the problems, and advocating for changes based on research evidence" (p. 190). A core epistemological assumption of YPAR is the belief that youth are critical, not only as participants in research but also as active contributors to the creation of knowledge about the processes and contexts that facilitate their positive development (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ozer, 2016). Kornbluh and colleagues (2015) identified four stages of YPAR research: problem identification, data collection, data analysis, and action. In the problem identification stage, youth identify an issue that they find to be interesting and significant. In the data collection and analysis stages, youth conduct research on the problem, and in the action stage, they use the findings of their research to inform sociopolitical action.

At its core, YPAR is an opportunity structure for SPD that allows youth to actively resist systematic oppression by critically analyzing social issues and using their research to inform social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2016). In order to identify the social issues to address via research, youth must think critically about their sociopolitical context and consider what issues may be salient to them (Kornbluh et al., 2015). Through critical dialogue with their peers and group facilitators, youth's ideas and beliefs are empowered and challenged, which allows them to engage in the dynamic process of strengthening their critical social analysis (Freire, 2000; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). While conducting research, youth can develop a historical perspective of sociopolitical barriers that influence inequity today, shaping their collective strategies of resistance against barriers and behaviors to promote social justice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). In their participation in YPAR, youth also cultivate their agency by developing research skills that can support them in evaluating the structural factors that produce challenges in their neighborhoods and schools. With the support of adult allies, YPAR provides youth with guidance on translating their knowledge into concrete sociopolitical action.

Overview of Our Voices

Our Voices was an afterschool YPAR project that used critical media literacy practices to engage high school students as they examined and contested the representation of Black characters in the media. Although sometimes engaged as independent theoretical concepts and frameworks, we use the Watts and Flanagan (2007) model of SPD, in this case, to elucidate how critical media literacy and pedagogical approaches in YPAR can be used in tandem to promote the SPD of Black youth (see Figure 1). We begin with an overview of Our Voices. We then explore the specific approaches in YPAR and critical media literacy that we used in Our Voices to contribute to our participants' SPD.

Program description

Our Voices was implemented at Basquiat Academy—a pseudonym for an art school in a large Midwestern city. Basquiat Academy is a predominately Black (99%) middle and high school, composed of a student population largely from relatively low-income homes (i.e., 81% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch). Basquiat Academy has an educational mission focused on hands-on learning that removes boundaries between school and the community, making it an ideal context to implement a social justice program like Our Voices. The first author developed the program with feedback from school staff, administration, and students. The program was facilitated by two Black women doctoral students (the first and third author). The program included fourteen high school students (eight identified as male and six identified as female): one freshman, three sophomores, three juniors, and seven seniors.

Our Voices integrated approaches from psychology, social work, African American studies, and media studies to shine a light on how stereotypes about Black people are perpetuated in the media. As a part of this program, students received research training and conducted a research study to examine how Black characters are portrayed on television. Our Voices' primary objective was to use YPAR to develop the SPD, critical media literacy, and academic self-efficacy of high school participants. We aimed to arm participants with research skills (i.e., in data collection, video coding, data synthesis, dissemination of findings) to use in their future academic training, career pursuits, and civic engagement activities.

Our Voices had a three-stage, programmatic structure. Stage one was the research and SPD stage in which students participated in workshops that oriented them to the sociopolitical implications of media representations for Black people and methods of studying media. At the end of the stage, students identified questions to examine for their research project. Stage two focused on project development and analysis. Students conducted a content analysis, a method of systematically analyzing and coding

messages in media (Berelson, 1952). Their content analysis focused on representations of Black characters on television programs. The final stage focused on community engagement and data dissemination. Participants in our program used their research findings to develop a workshop for their peers at Basquiat and conducted a research presentation and roundtable discussion at a university.

Pedagogical approaches for sociopolitical development

Here, we describe the pedagogical approaches we employed from YPAR and critical media literacy to cultivate youth's SPD. First, we describe how research skill development and critical media analysis can support youth's worldview/critical analysis and agency. Then, we describe how YPAR and critical media literacy operated as opportunity structures for youth to engage in critical media analysis and sociopolitical action. Importantly, research skill development and critical media analysis often happened concurrently through the process of Our Voices since youth applied a research method (e.g., content analysis) to engage in critical analysis of media. Although we describe research skill development and critical media analysis somewhat separately in this section, the two are inherently connected and mutually inform each other in our program.

Research skill development

As a YPAR program, strengthening our youth's research knowledge and skills was a critical component of Our Voices. In our initial session, we introduced students to the scientific process and different research methodology (i.e., quantitative and qualitative methods) that could be used to examine issues in their schools and communities. In the following session, we adapted a workshop from the Black Youth Project curriculum[1] to challenge our participants to explore identity and apply their newly developed knowledge on research methods. The Black Youth Project was a research study that examined the internal and external factors that shape the sociopolitical action, decision-making, and behavior of Black youth (Cohen, 2005). The project included a research-informed curriculum developed by educators, activists, artists, and scholars. In our program, we adapted a lesson from the media literacy section created by Daniel Morales-Doyle and Woody Lajeune to teach youth to critically analyze content in hip-hop. The selected workshop examined how young people conceptualize their identities and the role of media in shaping identity. Students were asked to anonymously reflect on their race, gender, and the intersection of these identities on a notecard. We added questions to the original prompt that challenged youth to think about how people outside of their race and gender perceived them. In groups, students examined commonalities in their peers' responses, coded them into themes, and then calculated the percentages of responses that fit each theme. Each group was instructed to display their research findings graphically.

Through this workshop, we engaged Our Voices students as both research participants and researchers to investigate the features of their identity. Agency includes the youth's confidence in their knowledge and skills as an agent of social change (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). We aimed to strengthen youth's agency by highlighting how they could apply research to examining issues relevant to their lived experiences. In developing their research skills, youth were also given a context to explore and unpack their racial and gender identity, which can contribute to the development of their worldview. Youth's worldview includes awareness of their social status, beliefs about society, and meaning-making regarding societal factors that shape inequity and injustice (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts et al., 2003). In their reflection on their beliefs about what it means to be Black, youth identified a common theme that reflected pride in their group's sociopolitical legacy shaped by the accomplishments of their ancestors. This theme is illustrated by a quote from one youth that said being Black meant "to be a powerful figure and have African blood." Youth also identified stereotypical beliefs that people outside of their group may have; for example, a participant said people perceive Black people as "ghetto, uneducated, and irresponsible." Thus, youth reflected on their own and their peers' conceptualizations of Black identity and the social structures that shape how people outside of their group perceived them.

Having spaces to explore their identity can be beneficial for adolescents who are actively building their self-concept and learning how to define themselves.

For example, Janae explained,

> "…I wasn't really one to be Afrocentric. I wasn't really about any race or even my own… I've noticed how much it's really important to me. I didn't really think much of it. I was just like I am African American, and I am also Latina. And that's just it. It really didn't matter to me. And now doing the

[1]Please see www.blackyouthproject.com for more information about the research project and curriculum.

> program and meeting all these other people and seeing how they feel… I was like, 'I feel that way too.' This is something really important to me, actually."

The process of exploring her identity, both individually and in community with her peers, helped Janae become more connected to her African American and Latina identities and recognize that she is passionate about her racial and cultural identity. Advances in racial identity development exploration can both serve to strengthen youth's social analysis and sociopolitical action (Anyiwo et al., 2018) and support their wellbeing (Seaton et al., 2006).

The initial training sessions focused on raising participants' social awareness about the issues impacting Black people and developing their foundational research skills, which could strengthen youth's agency in their knowledge of social issues and their ability to address issues through research. Youth applied their newfound knowledge to the problem identification stage of YPAR, where they explored their social context and identified "real-world issues" that they found to be relevant and important to their lived experience (Kornbluh et al., 2015; Ozer, 2016). In line with YPAR, we were intentional about ensuring that we forefronted and amplified youth voices across their research projects. Often this intentionality meant focusing on the research process and ensuring that young people were engaged in each step, had opportunities to build their knowledge, skills, and agency, and had ownership over how their research could be used to promote action. First, our youth individually developed a list of ideas. Then, we had a group discussion and selected questions that we thought best fit the themes that the students developed. Finally, students anonymously voted on the questions that they wanted the group to explore. The two top questions were selected.

Youth in the program identified the communal, interactive nature of Our Voices as an asset. For example, when reflecting on the research question development process, Kareem describes, "The thing I really enjoyed was just when we were starting off, we would get in groups, you know, write ideas on the board, about social issues and whatnot, and then we'd discuss them as a group … We all [gave] our opinions without feeling judgmental or feeling like we were being judged. It just felt like a safe environment."

In the problem identification stage, our participants were provided with a context to deeply analyze issues on the representation of Black people on television. Identifying questions gave participants a context to cultivate their critical analysis and worldview by examining how cultural and structural racism may contribute to the representation of Black people on television. Our students examined two topics. The first research question compared representations of Black characters on Black-oriented television networks (i.e., BET) to mainstream television networks (i.e., ABC). Our students' construction of this question reflects their critical media literacy and worldview/critical social analysis skills. They were able to identify how mainstream networks may produce content that reflects and sustains society's social ideologies and hierarchies. They recognized that representation about Black people might differ on mainstream networks compared to Black-oriented television networks, which may contain content that reflects counter-narratives. The second question examined whether there are differences in representations of Black characters based on their skin tones. Colorism, which is a form of social stratification based on skin tone, has historically been influential in the lived experiences of Black people in America (Hunter, 2007, 2016). Because of the belief that lighter-skinned Black Americans have features and attributes that are closer to the White ideal, lighter-skinned Black Americans often receive more social advantages (e.g., higher income, job, and education attainment) in comparison to their darker-skinned peers (Hunter, 2007; Ryabov, 2013). These narratives of light skin being privileged over dark skin are widely upheld in mainstream media (Hunter, 2007, 2016; Ryabov, 2013). Youth in our study were able to identify colorism as an issue reflected in television that could be impactful to viewers. Indeed, in individual meetings where youth were asked to reflect on their identities, colorism emerged as a significant theme that shaped their constructions of self. Thus, the youth drew from their lived experiences to inform their research questions.

Youth also received research training and critical feedback on their research questions from prominent Black faculty members and graduate students. We took a field trip to a leading research-intensive university where Our Voices students participated in workshops and were introduced to various methods for examining sociocultural factors that shape Black youth's social identities and beliefs. Youth received training on strategies to conduct content analyses of television, which was core to their ability to complete their YPAR project. Further, they engaged in a workshop with a Black faculty member who had expertise in youth empowerment, in which they received

feedback on their research questions and learned strategies for translating research into action.

The field trip aimed to support our youth's agency in several ways. First, we treated our youth as junior scholars and provided them with training from top scholars in the field who supported them in developing tangible skills that they could use to examine the sociopolitical issues in their communities. Secondly, youth were intentionally exposed to Black scholars who looked like them and used research to contest and build narratives about Black people in education and psychological scholarship. Through this exposure to prominent Black scholars, we sought to strengthen youth's collective agency, which includes the beliefs that one's community can galvanize to promote social change (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Many participants identified this field trip as transformative and as their favorite part of the program. For example, Kareem explained, "when we got there … I felt for once important … I felt like I was among these geniuses … - they took the time to talk to us, teach us a few things, and we just had like this really great conversation." Kareem went further to say, "the thing I really loved was they had questions for us to answer. You know, they weren't just going with us like 'oh yeah, I agree with you' … they were challenging us like, 'why do you think that way?" Through his experiences interacting with prominent Black faculty members, Kareem describes feeling "important." He and his peers were challenged intellectually and simultaneously affirmed by Black faculty members and students who provided feedback to the youth as they worked through their final research questions. After completing their research projects, they returned to the same university and presented the findings of their work to an audience of doctoral students and community members.

Several participants identified research training as an exciting component to the program that enhanced their skills and increased their confidence generally and sociopolitically. For example, although Jen described already being a pretty confident person, she discussed presenting in front of a large, diverse crowd of people as something that "affected" and helped her. Janae described applying the skills she learned in Our Voices in her academics but explained that "I didn't just gain things that I could use for school. I gained something that I could use mentally. That's amazing to gain that from a school program." Marquan, a student with a passion for media and creative arts, felt that Our Voices helped him move beyond the discussion of social issues to action. He explained,

> "I REALLY enjoyed the Our Voices program. Mostly because of the topic on race because that's something that I find really important. And that's something that me and my friends personally have conversations about … we would talk about how African Americans are shown on television … so with the Our Voices program, when it came to doing research regarding that … it was MORE than a conversation. Now we were actually getting data, and assessing that data. It was like amazing for me."

Critical agency is often conceptualized as an intermediate factor that allows youth's awareness about social inequity to translate into action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Jen and Janae describe gaining confidence in conducting and presenting research that applied beyond their academic growth. A key aspect of agency includes confidence in one's abilities. Thus, through the process of the program, these participants gain confidence in skills that can aid in their future advocacy. Marquan had an awareness of media stereotypes before Our Voices and often had dialogue with his peers. However, participating in the program equipped him with models on how to move beyond the conversation and engage in action to analyze the representation of Black people on television.

Critical media analysis

Black students are often taught using Eurocentric curricula that negate their sociocultural and political history (Daneshzadeh, 2017). The process of media literacy can facilitate Black youth's ability to make meaning of and resist content that reinforces controlling images and social marginalization of Black people (Daneshzadeh, 2017). Throughout the initial workshops, we challenged youth to think critically about the implications of representation in the media and engaged them as active contributors to the educational space by validating their perspectives and honoring the expertise of their experiences (Kellner & Share, 2005).

We used the training sessions to develop youths' ability to critically analyze images in media, connect media representations to the historical marginalization of Black people, and consider the implications of media representations for the treatment of Black Americans in contemporary society. We gave students an overview of the characteristics and origins of historical gendered-racial stereotypes about Black people (e.g., Jezebel, Brute, and Mammy) and discussed how stereotypes continue to shape representations of Black people in the media. We were intentional about connecting historical racial-gendered controlling images to current events and news programming and

highlighting how stereotypical depictions are used as justifications for the maltreatment of Black people in society. For example, during our program, White police officer Darren Wilson was charged for the much-publicized, murder of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager. Despite several witnesses' testimonies that Michael Brown was unarmed and had his hands up during the shooting, Darren Wilson claimed that Michael behaved violently and made stereotypical references to Michael's physical stature (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). A few days before our meeting, the grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, decided not to press charges against Darren Wilson. We used our session to discuss how historical stereotypes perpetuated in media, such as the idea that Black men are brutes (e.g., primitive and volatile) (Hall, 2001), may have shaped how the media portrayed Michael Brown and how Darren Wilson treated him. Youth also described their own experiences of harassment from the police, which they identified as a byproduct of being stereotyped.

During the session, we learned that administrators prevented teachers from discussing the case with their students due to concerns that some members of the teaching staff at Basquiat may not be fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to unpack a racially contentious incident with students. Thus, Our Voices provided Black students an opportunity to engage with adults from a similar cultural and racial background and have a critical dialogue about the sociopolitical realities that impact their communities. Students could discuss their feelings about the case and describe their own experiences of being stereotyped and mistreated by law enforcement. Our discussion of the misrepresentation and marginalization of Black people in the media was an entree for youth to broadly analyze the trickle-down effect of how biased media representations impacted how they and other Black people are treated in America.

Developing skills in analyzing media and receiving research training provided the youth with an infrastructure to examine their research questions about the representation of Black people on television. With guidance and support from adult allies (e.g., the program facilitators), Our Voices students conducted a content analysis of television programs. We spent a few practice sessions with our students watching television programs and discussing themes that emerged to determine what characteristics and features they wanted to examine in the content analysis. We also gave the students sample coding sheets from previous content analyses to guide their decision about what to code. We spent a session finalizing themes that students wanted to examine (e.g., SES, popularity, relationship status, personality attributes) and discussing how to operationalize those themes. We used the students' themes to develop a formal coding sheet that they used for analysis. Once the coding system was established, youth coded episodes of two television programs across several sessions.

In our post-program interviews, many students described that participating in Our Voices influenced how they analyzed television images. For example, Stanley felt that participating in Our Voices helped him identify stereotypes in the media more clearly. He explained, "It's helped me identify more kinds of stereotypes that have always been there, but I haven't been able to exactly pinpoint … I've always been able to say, this certain character does this that and that, but I haven't been able to say, the exact name of that character's type." Similarly, Joseph stated, "I think that I have learned a lot. It's definitely changed my mind about the way I look at TV shows and the way I think about the social issue of how Black people are portrayed in media in general." Janae discussed that she started to apply her new skills in coding when watching television. She explained, "before when I watch TV, I didn't really think so much about why the characters were the way that they are or why they created them that way. Now, whenever I watch TV, I'm like, oh, I'm coding!" While youth in our program had some awareness of stereotypes and media images before participating in the program, through their participation, they were exposed to information that aided them in naming those stereotypes and linking representations in the media to historically controlling images of Black people. Youth applied these critical media analysis skills in their engagement in program activities and in their leisure time after the program was completed.

Opportunity structure for critical dialogue & action

In many regards, youth are marginalized in their ability to actively engage in our political system. Youth, particularly youth of color, are often viewed in a manner that victimizes them and negates their capacity to overcome or contest the social forces that impact them (e.g., racism, poverty) (Akom et al., 2008; Checkoway et al., 2003). Further, due to age restrictions and adult bias, youth are often precluded from voting or holding office. Thus, Watts and Flanagan (2007) argue that youth's ability to engage in

sociopolitical action is highly influenced by the extent to which they have meaningful opportunities and spaces to participate in activism, known as opportunity structures. The value of opportunity structures far surpass providing the physical space to participate in the action. It also includes mentorship and social support from adult allies that can cultivate youth's agency and provide guidance as they engage in action (Richards-Schuster & Dobbie, 2011; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Zeldin et al., 2013). As a YPAR program, Our Voices operated as an opportunity structure and "youth civic space" that provided youth a context to have critical dialogues about social issues that affect them and participate in sociopolitical action with mentorship and support from adults in their schools and communities (Richards-Schuster & Dobbie, 2011).

A core value in YPAR and critical media literacy is the belief that youth have the capacity to make meaningful, authentic contributions to educational contexts and research (Akom et al., 2008; Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2014; Kellner & Share, 2005; Ozer, 2016). This approach requires that adults respect young people's voice in the process and the expertise that youth bring from their own lived experiences. Both methods, YPAR and critical media literacy frameworks, emphasize the importance of participatory methods in which youth and adult allies share and navigate power and ownership over all aspects of the process. In order to form authentic youth-adult partnerships, adults must be reflective of their roles, power, and voice (Zeldin et al., 2013). In Our Voices, we critically reflected on the role of adults in the program and worked in intentional ways to promote youths' voices and agency as we engaged in critical dialogue with youth and supported them through the implementation of their action projects.

Critical Dialogue. Engaging in dynamic, horizontal dialogue is core to critical social analysis development and the process of social transformation (Freire, 2000; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Through dialogue, participants work collectively to identify and analyze the conditions that shape their lived experiences. Dialogue engages youth both as experts and learners, which builds their capacity as knowledge seekers, educators, and activists (Freire, 2000). Through the dialogue in Our Voices, we saw growth in youth's ability to understand themselves as racial beings and strengthen their awareness of their racial worldview.

Developing an affirmed identity and connection to one's cultural heritage and sociopolitical legacy is an essential aspect of Black youth's worldview development, particularly because racism has been used as a tool for social stratification that has marginalized Black people politically and culturally (Watts et al., 1999; Watts et al., 2003). Indeed, recent theory suggests that youth's exploration of their racial identity is inherent to advancing their SPD (Anyiwo et al., 2018). Thus, during the program's onset, we were intentional about providing youth the space to examine their identities and the sociopolitical conditions that have shaped Black peoples' realities.

We met with youth one on one to create space for them to explore their identity in an intimate setting before engaging with their peers. Through these individual meetings, youth were engaged as experts of their experiences and asked to discuss the features of their racial identity and the factors that shaped their self-perceptions. For example, some youth describe struggle as a defining aspect of their Black identity. Jennifer explained, "I feel like sometimes other races have it easier.... a lot of people say it is hard for us... that's why I feel like I might want to be another race. Only because I feel like it'll be a little easier." Michael expressed similar sentiments. He explained, "... [race] plays a lot into, I guess how society looks at you because a lot of people say– like when you're African American, you have all these things kinda going against you." Jennifer and Michael both describe their recognition of barriers against Black people that present challenges to getting ahead in life. This perception is a defining attribute of their beliefs of what it means to be Black. Jennifer goes further to discuss that sometimes the weight of the barriers that she faces as a Black person makes her wish that she was another race to not have to deal with such barriers. Other youth highlighted the role of stereotypes in shaping the perceptions and beliefs about Black people and the role of skin complexion in how they were treated and perceived. These individual meetings served as both reflection periods for the youth and as an assessment tool (or feedback loop) for the adults to help ascertain their social awareness and understanding of racial self-concepts. We then used that feedback to inform how we shaped the curriculum.

Since struggle was a defining attribute of many youth's racial identities, we intentionally emphasized content in our workshops reflecting Black people's sociopolitical legacy of resistance and advocacy for social change. Our workshops sought to contribute to the youth's worldview and agency by increasing their knowledge of the sociopolitical issues that face their community and strategies to address these issues via research. Black youth's awareness of their legacy of

sociopolitical resistance contributes to their ability to resist oppressive forces (Watts et al., 2003). Therefore, we were also intentional about specifically highlighting Black youth's legacy as agents of sociopolitical change. For example, as a part of one workshop, we highlighted the instrumental role Black youth have played during social justice movements, both historically (e.g., Civil Rights movement) and contemporarily, in resisting racism while transforming their schools and communities. Our workshops operated as a mechanism for *racial socialization,* messaging that informs how Black youth understand their racial group and cope with racism (Anderson and Stevenson, 2019; Hughes et al., 2016). Racial socialization has been conceptualized as a process that shapes Black youth's critical analysis and facilitates their sociopolitical action (Anyiwo et al., 2018). Furthermore, we aimed to promote youth's individual and collective agency by demonstrating how Black youth have been impactful in advocating for change and how collectively, Black resistance movements across generations have shifted policy.

In general, having space for youth to have critical dialogue about race was important for identity and critical analysis development. Working with a school provided us with an opportunity to engage with various people who were actively involved in our students' lives and invested in their wellbeing. Several teachers and staff members attended some of Our Voices' meetings and contributed to our discussions about media representations and stereotypes. Many participants identified the significance of conversations as being an impactful attribute of the program. For example, Stanley stated, "I really like this program because it was interesting and it hit a topic that I didn't know about, but I really wanted to learn about … I enjoyed those like ah-hah moments … because generally with my friends we do talk about this stuff … but we also don't talk about it as deeply as that." Ms. Jackson, a school staff member who worked closely with the program, also highlighted the importance and significance of having space for dialogue for the youth in the program. When asked about the most successful aspect of Our Voices, she stated, "I think the conversations were the most successful. Just having that dialogue about media and its cultural inferences and influences, I thought it was very eye-opening for the students. It was conversations that they would not normally have been engaged in."

Our Voices provided a unique context for youth in their schools to engage in conversations about issues pertinent to their identity and lived experiences, which could serve to cultivate their SPD. Critical dialogue may also have a lasting impact on youth. In the academic school year following our program, Ms. Jackson noticed changes in some of our participants' confidence both socially and politically. She explained, "a few of the girls … were really kind of wallflowers and then came into the program [Our Voices] … they've been a bit more outspoken in their class as juniors and … they're also a lot more engaged." Furthermore, when reflecting on a conversation she had with a participant who graduated, she described his confidence in discussing politics and whom he was voting for in the upcoming election. Ms. Jackson explained, "being bold enough to ask those questions, to participate in those conversations, I think definitely was a side effect of participating in a program like Our Voices."

Action. Sociopolitical action is in the infrastructure of YPAR. Through the process of YPAR, youth engage in social justice work by contributing to knowledge about school, community, or societal issues and by applying their research to impact real change (Kornbluh et al., 2015; Ozer, 2016). Furthermore, critical media literacy involves action through the disruption of stereotypical images (Coryat, 2008). Our Voices also provided youth with a specific context to translate their research on media images into action. Critical media literacy can include the development of counter-hegemonic media that challenges stereotypical, controlling images and serves to empower the voices and narratives of marginalized groups (Kellner & Share, 2007). The youth discussed multiple forms of action given their learning, their work, and their school context. Youth in our study initially expressed interest in developing counter-hegemonic media through a film project. However, due to time and resource constraints, they were unable to move forward with that plan. We worked together with our students to determine an alternative action plan, which included an "each one, teach one" approach to translating their research and experiences in our program into action.

We worked with the youth to use what they learned through the program to create skits aimed at raising consciousness about identity and critical media literacy. Scholars have identified teaching others about racism and liberation as a core strategy by which Black activists resist against anti-Black racism (Mosley et al., 2021). Our students engaged in liberatory teaching across two settings: their school and on a public university campus. The program facilitators worked with Basquiat high school administrators to organize an assembly with 9th-grade students. During this

assembly, Our Voices students presented a skit highlighting controlling images of Black people in media and conducted a critical media literacy workshop with their peers that discussed the social implications of stereotypes about Black people in media. Additionally, the students presented their research to an audience of over 20 Black doctoral students and other members at a large public University. After their presentation, the students participated in a roundtable discussion connecting their research to racial politics in America, representations in the media, the complexities of Black identity, and the challenges experienced by Black adolescents. For example, in the context of our conversation, we discussed media representations of Black youth in Baltimore, Maryland, who engaged in a community uprising shortly after 22-year-old Freddie Gray was killed in the custody of the police. Our students provided insight and expertise as Black youth on how they interpret and make meaning of the sociopolitical conditions that impact Black people as reflected in the media and their communities.

Our privileges and access as adults provided us the capacity to support our students in translating their research into action. We were able to work with school staff to develop an assembly for students to conduct their educational workshop with 9th-grade students.

School staff members also provided us with contacts for transportation for field trips. The program facilitators created a public forum, booked a room, and invited guests for youth to present their research and engage in critical dialogue about the interconnections between their identities, engagement in media, and their sociopolitical experiences.

Taken together, youth's engagement in Our Voices operated to support various aspects of their SPD. They developed their worldview and critical social analysis through workshops focused on identifying how social structures, such as the mass media, create and reinforce racial stratification. Through their participation in workshops and research, youth developed their sense of agency by increasing their knowledge about the structural implications of media images and their skills in using research as a social justice tool. Finally, youth were provided an opportunity structure to translate their research into sociopolitical action with adult allies' support.

Lessons learned and future directions

This paper sought to elucidate how pedagogical approaches from critical media literacy and youth participatory action research can work in tandem to facilitate Black youth's SPD. From the perpetuation of stereotypes in television programs (Behm-Morawitz & Ortiz, 2013; Mastro, 2015) to the villainization of Black victims of violence in the news (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), Black youth encounter media images that reflect and reinforce their marginalization in America. The Our Voices program represents a case that is grounded in the stance that Black youth's healthy development is shaped not only by their ability to survive or be resilient in the context of racism but also their ability to resist the social systems that create inequality and engage in behaviors to promote social justice (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Ginwright, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012; Watts et al., 2003). In exploring this case through the framework of Watts and Flanagan (2007), we highlight the utility of media and youth-led research in promoting youth's SPD by strengthening their ability to critically analyze the themes in media that reinforce racial, social hierarchies and dominant narratives and their ability to disrupt and create new narratives about Black youth. This section offers a set of lessons and observations from the development and implementation of Our Voices that may offer guidance for future practice and research focused on supporting Black youth's SPD.

Critical media as a tool for youth engagement

Our Voices confirmed the saliency of media (television, in particular) to the development of adolescents. Media plays a significant role in adolescents' lives both as a mechanism for entertainment and as a strategy for youth to nurture their identities and ideological beliefs (Steele & Brown, 1995). Youth draw from the media to shape social relationships and to inform their worldview. In our case example, media served as a vehicle for both initial recruitment and as a tool for deeper critical engagement. For example, during our recruitment process, various youth at Basquiat Academy showed great interest in participating in the program, primarily because it involved examining television. Over time we came to realize that youth who may not have inherently been interested in a program focused on social issues ended up actively participating in Our Voices, in part, due to its emphasis on popular culture. Thus, the program could attract students for whom critical media literacy, youth participatory research, and civic action were new practices.

The use of media as a core focus in the program also facilitated more in-depth critical discussions

about the media content that the youth consumed in their leisure. For example, our analysis of salient media content and images allowed us to seamlessly engage youth in an in-depth discussion of social issues from police violence to negative stereotypes. While the long-term impact of this is not yet known, initial analysis of post-program evaluation data suggests the analysis of media was one of the highlights of the program for youth. Youth reported that the program contributed to them deeply analyzing television in their leisure and identifying content that reinforces hegemonic narratives.

While Our Voices focused on television, there are multiple media platforms from which youth can be exposed to sociopolitical themes. Youth can be exposed to various messages in media that serve to either reinforce or combat social hierarchies. For example, movies like Marvel's *Black Panther*, which represents a liberatory narrative of African heritage, can serve to counter racist and sexist online images, like the caricatures of Serena Williams following the 2018 United States Open (O'Kane, 2018; Tynes et al., 2008; White, 2018). Critical media literacy practices can be utilized to help young people examine sociopolitical themes, explore media messages, and develop their own narratives to counteract or disrupt negative stereotypes (Coryat, 2008). Programs that explore participatory research and SPD should consider the use of media, including television, film, video, radio, and social media, as a platform for young people to critically analyze structures of oppression and promote sociopolitical change (Coryat, 2008; Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2014; Watts et al., 1999). Due to time constraints, we were limited in our ability to provide youth with training on and support for creating media content. However, youth-created media can be a powerful mechanism for them to challenge and control social narratives about themselves and provide social commentary about issues impacting their community (Coryat, 2008).

Opportunity structures and school partnership

The "Our Voices" program represents one model of how YPAR and critical media literacy strategies can enhance SPD among Black youth. Drawing from Watts and Flanagan (2007) model of SPD, we recognize the importance and significance of opportunity structures as a critical element of SPD. Young people need opportunities to gain skills, engage in action, and develop their agency. However, far too often, youth of color have limited access to programs that foster their civic identity and autonomy as agents of change (Richards-Schuster & Dobbie, 2011). Our Voices collaborated with a school to create an easily accessible space for youth to actively explore and analyze issues salient to their identity and lived experiences with support from adult allies. Collaborating with a school allowed us to reach a broader scope of students since many young people cannot participate in community-based programs (Kornbluh et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2006).

Through our work, we saw the potential for critical media literacy and YPAR's impact on the teachers and advisors in the school, the school itself, and the stakeholders for whom the young people shared their ideas. Youth and teachers who attended the workshop held by Our Voices students were highly engaged in discussing the implications of media stereotypes. Teachers also actively participated in some of the Our Voices sessions, offering their perspectives and learning from the perspective of the youth. Furthermore, our youth led a dynamic roundtable conversation at a public university about the implications of media representation in the treatment of Black youth and families informed by the findings of their work.

Overall, we learned that in addition to the impact of participation on young people, the youth's engagement with their social context might also impact their school culture. For example, Ms. Jackson mentioned that the school developed a media team, and students had started a club similar to Our Voices. She explained,

> We have this other club that's doing multimedia …. it's kids who want to be animation artists and graphic novelists, in the movies, and internet stars … I thought it was pretty cool because seeing Our Voices on the list of clubs and activities kind of opened their eyes to some other possibilities … they were pretty excited that you know, 'Oh, we can do more. We can explore more avenues.'"

In addition to inspiring other programs, Our Voices may have had other impacts on the school community. For example, the 9th-grade lead teacher expressed that our participants' workshop on stereotypes was transformative for 9th-grade student participants. While we were unable to capture these impacts in the Our Voices case study, we believe that future practice and research should move beyond solely examining youth participants to capturing the broader focus on youth's schools and communities.

While a partnership with a school provided immense support and resources for implementing Our Voices, we would be remiss in not acknowledging the challenges of critical media and YPAR work in a school context. The challenges of working with

schools include bureaucracy, scheduling, and navigating power (Ozer et al., 2013). On a tangible level, conducting YPAR, particularly media-based YPAR, in an afterschool context comes with time limitations, which can restrict the level of rigor and power that youth have in shaping their projects. For Our Voices, we only had 2 hours weekly after school to work with youth. The youth who participated often faced competing demands with other obligations, such as sports or tutoring, that impacted their attendance. Due to these factors, we had to limit the scope of their project to case analyses and take the lead in analyzing their data. This impacted the level of youth leadership in certain aspects of the work.

Future scholarship should grapple with the roles of schools in YPAR and critical media-based projects. YPAR projects based in schools or classrooms may provide more resources and time for youth to conduct larger projects, but they also raise questions about the extent to which youth have power and voice in their work (Ozer et al., 2013). Furthermore, the guidelines of the school and the ideologies of administrators may restrict the scope of programming. For example, schools may be resistant to youth examining politically sensitive topics or issues about school climate or school policies (Kornbluh et al., 2015). During Our Voices, school administrators initially expressed concern that youth's examinations of racial stereotypes may contribute to contention between them and teachers with different racial backgrounds. Future research should focus on schools as opportunity structures and examine how researchers can navigate challenges to build partnerships with schools to promote SPD.

Participatory approaches as a social justice approach to developmental science

The field of YPAR has grown in the last 15 years, and increasingly, YPAR is viewed as a contribution to young people's development (Ozer, 2016). Our case study of Our Voices adds to this body of knowledge by directly mapping processes in critical media literacy and YPAR to youth's SPD. However, we also argue that youth participatory approaches such as YPAR and critical media literacy promote a social justice approach to developmental science that can improve scholars' understanding about how to engage and support the sociopolitical development of young people and foster their beliefs in their capacity to create change (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Ozer, 2016). Historically, developmental scientists have examined approaches to "save" Black and other marginalized youth from the adverse effects of media, poverty, and racism on their educational attainment, behavioral outcomes, and psychological wellbeing (Akom et al., 2008; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). However, participatory approaches such as YPAR, critical media literacy, and youth sociopolitical action operate with the core value that youth are competent and valuable in their ability to actively contribute to the development of meaningful scholarship, construction of media, and the transformation of social structures (Johnston-Goodstar et al., 2014; Ozer, 2016; Checkoway et al., 2003). In other words, Black youth should be actively engaged in questions, decisions, and actions that have implications for their lives.

Participatory approaches center youth voices in providing insight into what they identify as salient issues and how they understand and process these issues, informing how scholars identify research questions and interpret their data (Ozer, 2016). For example, through Our Voices, we were able to see in vivo how Black youth interpret racial content in media and draw connections between their experiences of racial discrimination and broader systems of oppression. Furthermore, the questions that youth identified through their YPAR projects provided insight into the types of issues they may consider when watching media. Our observations through Our Voices allowed us to use the literature and youth's authentic experiences and perspectives to inform research questions to examine in future research. In doing so, we acknowledge youth's perspectives on their lived experiences and ideas about research as sources of valid scholarly evidence that inform research.

Conclusion

In closing, Our Voices demonstrates how critical media literacy and YPAR can be used as tools to promote Black youth's sociopolitical development. Programs like Our Voices can operate as an opportunity structure for youth to engage in critical dialogue around the issues impacting their community and provide mentorship and tangible resources for youth to engage in sociopolitical action. Examining the pedagogical approaches used in Our Voices provides concrete strategies for YPAR and critical media literacy praxis that scholars, practitioners, and families can use to promote the positive development of Black youth. Overall, this case illustrates the utility of participatory approaches, such as critical media literacy and YPAR, as tools for social justice that allow youth to develop an awareness of and the ability to

transform social structures that have implications for their psychological wellbeing and developmental trajectory.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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