Designing Equitable Systems Through Youth Partnership

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Introduction and Purpose

You could bring in an adult to do a two-day evaluation of a school and come up with some conclusion. But if you [consult] a student who actually attends the school, that student deals with the school every day, so [they] are the expert at knowing what their peers need.

—12th grader (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 13).

This brief is intended to demonstrate the opportunities and value of integrating youth partnership throughout WestEd's **Systemic Equity Review (SER)** process and other equity-focused initiatives. It aims to support state, district, and local educators and leaders as they consider and plan to carry out these equity initiatives. It highlights opportunities for student engagement and provides young individuals with the agency to share their own stories. By so doing, we will introduce the foundational values of **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)** and demonstrate how these values support the enactment of culturally responsive approaches and the achievement of the goals of culturally responsive education. Additionally, this brief provides resources and examples of key areas within the SER process of collaborating with youth.
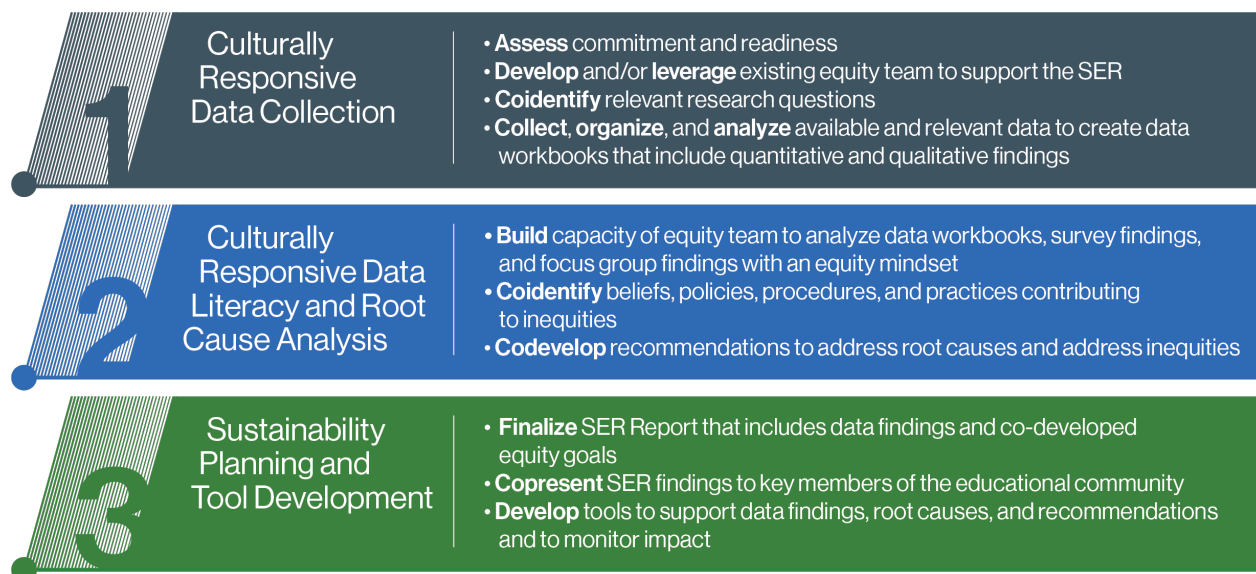
What Is a Systemic Equity Review?

A common approach to *equity reviews* or *equity audits* involves external reviewers assessing schools, districts, or communities through an impartial and objective evaluation of students, staff, and family experiences and outcomes. The aim is to identify any disparities or inequities within educational organizations. This approach typically emphasizes quantitative student outcomes, including test scores, attendance rates, and course passage rates. Moreover, audits may involve reviews of key policies related to instructional practices, curricular content, and disciplinary practices.

What is often absent from these data is the inclusion of experiences, stories, and realities of those intimately familiar with the history and context of that educational community—students, families, school staff, and community partners (Safir & Dugan, 2021). Additionally, many of these reviews lack a culturally responsive approach and lens throughout the process. In contrast, the WestEd Systemic Equity Review approach is conducted in partnership with leaders, educators, and families working in, and served *by*, an educational organization; thus, it centers the voices of those most impacted by inequitable beliefs, policies, and practices (Hernández et al., 2023).

About WestEd's Systemic Equity Review

WestEd's SER is grounded in culturally responsive and sustaining values and processes. This approach centers the experiences and expertise of leaders, families, and teachers within an educational organization at its core, fostering genuine partnership, cocreation of knowledge, and in-depth analysis. At the heart of WestEd's SER process is identifying and rectifying causes of systemic educational inequities. Our approach unfolds in three essential phases: Culturally Responsive Data Collection, Culturally Responsive Data Literacy and Root Cause Analysis, and Sustainability Planning and Tool Development (Lopez et al., n.d.).

Figure 1. Three Phases of WestEd's Systemic Equity Review Process

1 — Culturally Responsive Data Collection
- **Assess** commitment and readiness
- **Develop** and/or **leverage** existing equity team to support the SER
- **Coidentify** relevant research questions
- **Collect**, **organize**, and **analyze** available and relevant data to create data workbooks that include quantitative and qualitative findings

2 — Culturally Responsive Data Literacy and Root Cause Analysis
- **Build** capacity of equity team to analyze data workbooks, survey findings, and focus group findings with an equity mindset
- **Coidentify** beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices contributing to inequities
- **Codevelop** recommendations to address root causes and address inequities

3 — Sustainability Planning and Tool Development
- **Finalize** SER Report that includes data findings and co-developed equity goals
- **Copresent** SER findings to key members of the educational community
- **Develop** tools to support data findings, root causes, and recommendations and to monitor impact

The SER is a powerful framework dedicated to redistributing power; valuing diverse experiences; and leveraging expertise through genuine partnership, co-construction of knowledge, and analysis. Within this framework, there is a unique opportunity to engage students in the SER process by incorporating essential elements of YPAR. This integration not only enhances the credibility of the SER but also empowers students to become proactive change agents with the power to influence their own realities.

An Invitation to the Table: Advancing Democratized Decision-Making and Partnership With Youth

What Is Youth Participatory Action Research?

YPAR is a method of scholarly inquiry named for its central actors (youth), processes (participatory), and purpose (action) (Mirra et al., 2016). It is a mode of inquiry that "provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify those problems" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). The current educational model often operates in ways that do not acknowledge, listen to, value, or act upon the voices of students, leaving them disempowered to change their current circumstances. Classrooms heavily rely on oppressive "banking methods" (Freire, 1970) whereby students are expected to remain silent and passive recipients of knowledge. Within this oppressive system, students are discouraged from critically questioning their social reality in consequential and critical ways. Therefore, when schools do not provide opportunities for students to be heard, it perpetuates the strategy of an oppressive system.

Students should be encouraged to engage in critical thinking and empowered to contribute in meaningful, liberatory ways to decision-making processes that directly influence their social realities. YPAR provides students with an opportunity to connect their experiences, commitment to social justice, and capacity to act as change agents, contributing to the creation of a more just future (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2016).

The views of educational leaders and practitioners, as well as researchers and consultants, are often given power and platforms to influence decision-making relative to the policies and practices enacted in schools. Because those views are often based on an outsider's perspectives and life experiences, decision-making can be based on inaccurate or biased belief systems.

Outsiders, those positioned outside of classroom spaces who may not be members of the community or demographic groups of the students, often lack the full immersion needed to comprehensively understand students' experiences. Additionally, they may not represent the racial or ethnic demographics to which students belong. Consequently, the ability of outsiders to thoroughly comprehend and make the most informed decisions can be significantly obscured. Historically and persistently, these decisions contribute to the exclusion of marginalized students, exacerbating educational inequity. This results in the continuation of disparate educational opportunities, varied educational outcomes, and compromised sentiments of belonging.

YPAR democratizes interests by inviting students to engage in ways that divest a few of power and vest the voices and hands of many with it (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). The inclusion of youth voices and partnerships in a collaborative process, such as an SER, enhances its capacity to strategically address inequities. This approach interrupts the monopoly of power and influence, simultaneously elevating the experiences of the students most impacted by systemic inequity.

Key Principles of Youth Participatory Action Research

In the following section, we present the key principles of YPAR to underscore the significance of engaging and partnering with students and youth. YPAR, as outlined by Cammarota & Fine (2008), Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008), Kirshner (2010), Rodríguez & Brown (2009), and Valenzuela (2016), encompasses the following attributes:

- **is critical in nature**: YPAR belongs to a critical research tradition that places power, oppression, and resistance at the center of a problem-posing, inquiry-based, research process.
- **takes an inquiry stance**: It examines real-world connections through exploration, including asking, investigating, creating, discussing, and reflecting.
- **is situated in the lives of young people**: YPAR is relevant to youth, grounding itself in their experiences.
- **draws on the unique knowledge and expertise of young individuals**: YPAR situates them as experts in the contexts of their own lives.
- **features robust youth participation in every aspect of the process**: YPAR engages youth in all parts/processes as equal and valued contributing partners.
- **is action oriented**: YPAR raises awareness about issues of injustice and creates social change.

The key principles and methodology of YPAR align with Gloria Ladson Billings' (1995a, 1995b) theoretical model of Culturally Relevant Education (CRE). This model helps students uphold

their cultural identities while developing critical perspectives that challenge societal inequities. CRE, as described by Ladson-Billings, has three main components:

- **Focus on students' learning and academic success**: Students acquire academic skills necessary for educational success.

- **Develop students' cultural competence**: Assist students in developing positive ethnic and social identities and their ability to connect across cultural and identity-based differences.

- **Support students' critical consciousness**: Enhance their ability to recognize and critique societal inequities.

All three components must be incorporated to be considered culturally relevant to education, and YPAR supports the attainment of these goals (New York State Education Department [NYSED], n.d.). Consequently, integrating YPAR into the SER process through genuine youth partnership aligns with the principles and goals of CRE (Freire, 1970).

Our Approach to Student Voice and Partnership

It's important to do research [on our own] so it's not only other people who are telling our story. We are the ones living through this current education crisis.

—12th grader (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 13)

Grounding ourselves in the foundational values of the SER and integrating key principles of YPAR, we provide strategies for districts to center student voice and partnership when conducting equity audits and SERs.

While the foundational SER approach endeavors to center youth voice through the inclusion of student focus groups and empathy interviews (Safir & Dugan, 2021), it is often still the adults (educators, leaders, and family members) who are centered and conduct the review. For example, adults are in control of forming the equity team, identifying the problem or focus of the review, selecting data sources, crafting instruments and research questions, analyzing data, and identifying action steps to address root causes of inequities. However, by authentically incorporating youth partnership through YPAR, the SER process enables educational institutions to capture a deeper, richer understanding of the context and more accurately design ways to address educational inequity (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Preparation for Youth Partnership

In preparation for partnering with others to conduct equity reviews and audits, it is crucial for youth to develop the foundational relationships, trust, and knowledge of equity and cultural responsiveness necessary to support the work. This phase is integral for several reasons: It allows students to develop trusting relationships with peers, explore equity concepts and frameworks, develop a critical understanding of historic and present oppressive systems, and refine their equity mindsets to be equipped to critique their current systems and problem-solve equitable solutions. As students prepare to collaborate in YPAR through the SER process, they are empowered with a sense of collectiveness and strong foundational knowledge, thus positioning them to be *perceived* and *valued* as equal collaborators throughout the SER process and other equity-focused initiatives. These relationships, skills, and levels of awareness are needed prior to engaging in the research and review process and collaboration with school leadership.

Once the YPAR team and school leadership come together as a unified team, establishing community agreements is imperative for the team and for the psychological safety of all, especially the students.

Table 1. Example of Ways Student Partnership Can Be Embedded Within the SER Process

SER phases	Goals of SER with youth partnership	Sample activities and actions for integration of YPAR

Phase 1: **Culturally Responsive Data Collection**	• **Assess** commitment and readiness of unified team (YPAR and school-level leaders), district partners, and community members
	• **Leverage** other existing equity teams, aligned coursework, or other student groups to form the SER team(s)
	• **Coidentify** relevant and responsive research questions
	• **Build** capacity of the youth-led or unified equity team to collect and organize available and relevant data with an equity but critical lens, mindset, and ideology to help investigate social realities
		• Conduct student-led community issue/asset mapping
		• Have students lead in identification/creation of
		    o research questions
		    o data sources and types
		    o data collection instruments
		    o methods of organizing data for analysis
		• Partner with adults to retrieve, collect, and gather data. Students may want to engage with the collection of youth-specific data as a measure of interest and rapport in gathering the most authentic responses/data from their peers (e.g., surveys, peer interviews, polls, artifacts)

SER phases	Goals of SER with youth partnership	Sample activities and actions for integration of YPAR
Phase 2: **Culturally Responsive Data Collection and Root Cause Analysis**	• **Build** capacity of the youth-led or unified equity team to analyze data (including data workbooks) with an equity mindset • **Coidentify** beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices contributing to inequities • **Codevelop** recommendations to address root causes and address inequities	• Cultivate and leverage a shared understanding among youth of educational in/equity, historical and current systems of oppression, and current implications • Have students lead in analysis of data (quantitative, qualitative, policy review, etc.) • Coidentify root causes (beliefs, policies, procedures, and practices) contributing to inequities • Codevelop recommendations to address root causes and inequities
Phase 3: **Sustainability Planning and Tool Development**	• **Build** capacity of YPAR team to finalize data report that includes data findings and codeveloped equity goals • **Copresent** SER findings and recommendations to key members of the educational community • **Coorganize** further action in accordance with recommendations (e.g., policy revisions, coled professional learning) • **Explore** and **plan** the next steps	• Coidentify key findings (e.g., disparities in outcomes and experience, root causes, and recommendations) from the SER to present • Coidentify which groups of the educational community to share findings with and in what settings (e.g., district leadership meetings, social media, presentations to family/community associations) • Copresent findings through various channels (e.g., school board meetings, morning announcements, school newspaper, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat) • Coidentify key action steps and approaches for acting on recommendations contained in the report • Coorganize for further action: Identify actions to address beliefs (e.g., professional learning), policies (e.g., review and edit code of conduct), and practices (e.g., activity/strategy planning to support student–family–school partnerships)

Table 2. Resources to Support the Integration of YPAR Into SER

These resources provide lesson plans, guides, resources, and examples of the strategies and activities mentioned in Table 1.

Resource title, author(s), and link	Description
Malone, H., Rizkalla, D., & Bartlett, E. (2021). *Interrogating, interrupting and eradicating educational disproportionality through youth voice & action: A guide for youth–adult partnership in pursuit of educational equity.* NYU Steinhardt News.	This resource describes the process, actions, and outcomes of a youth action research project conducted with New York City students to understand, describe, and address disproportionality in school discipline within their schools and district.
University of California, Berkeley. (n.d.). **YPAR HUB**. https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/home	This is a resource and curriculum hub for conducting YPAR, complete with lesson plans, guides, handouts, and tools to support all phases of YPAR.
Maine Youth Action Network. (n.d.). *Youth Participatory Action Research*. https://www.myan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/YPAR-handbook_6.12.20.pdf	This is a description of the processes involved in YPAR and includes an overview of each phase, examples of student work, and links to additional materials and resources related to each YPAR phase.
Goldwasser, M. (2004). *A guide to facilitating action research for youth*. Research for Action. https://www.researchforaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Goldwasser_M_Guide_to_Facilitating_Action_Research_for_Youth.pdf	This is a guide to facilitating YPAR and provides insights and overviews of key considerations for adults when they are facilitating YPAR. It includes activities and lesson ideas for each phase of YPAR.
Institute for Community Research. (2014). *Youth Participatory Action Research curriculum*. Public Health Division, Oregon Health Authority. https://www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/HealthyPeopleFamilies/Youth/Documents/CurriculumYPAR2014.pdf	This is a complete and comprehensive YPAR curriculum guide with in-depth lesson plans; handouts; and tools for identifying, collecting, and analyzing data.

In alignment with the foundational values of the SER, achieving systemic equity requires mindfulness in centering race and identifying and addressing power, privilege, and bias-based beliefs. Students, whether members of a youth-based or unified team, will center and demonstrate their commitment to change educational policies and educational practices by recognizing and addressing flaws in the *system* while maintaining the belief that students and families are not flawed (Lopez et al., n.d.).

Young people's knowledge and experiences make them experts in their contexts. Therefore, we elevate young people's voices and partnership as vital **interest holders** in the SER process who

bring critical funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and perspectives often invisible *to* or made invisible *by* those who wield the power to shift policies and practices within educational systems. Students' voices and partnership contribute to the SER process by offering valuable insights that yield more precise, culturally responsive, data-driven decision-making and data-informed action. We seek to empower students to participate in the process and build their capacity as change agents in systems and ways that are meaningful to them.

Youth Participatory Action Research Outcomes in Alignment With Culturally Responsive Education

YPAR outcomes, when integrated with students' participation in the SER, align seamlessly with the three components of CRE: student learning, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Through active engagement as valued and contributing members of the SER process, students can **envision themselves as both scholars conducting research and activists capable of creating change** in the world. This involvement concurrently strengthens their identity development and critical consciousness (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Yang, 2009).

Student Learning

Gloria Ladson-Billings conceptualizes student academic learning as the intellectual growth of students, their moral development, and their capacity for problem-solving and reasoning. When students collaborate as experts to identify problems and develop solutions, they simultaneously enhance their abilities in **literacy**, **numeracy**, **research**, and **presentation**. This involves reading complex texts, analyzing data, and presenting findings to authentic audiences who have the power to change policies and practices (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Moreover, empirical research demonstrates positive academic outcomes resulting from such collaborative efforts, including **increased literacy and math skills**, **improved test scores**, and **higher high school graduation rates** (Cabrera et al., 2014; Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Van Sluys, 2010; Yang, 2009). Through their collaboration in the SER process, students gain experiential knowledge about the applied nature of research, engaging and promoting learning and action beyond traditional conceptualizations of research or research projects.

Cultural Competence

Ladson-Billings conceptualizes cultural competence as a skill that supports students in affirming and appreciating their culture of origin while developing fluency in at least one other culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Through their participation in the SER process, **students directly connect to their lives**, **experiences**, **and cultures while engaging others' perspectives and consequently connecting to their lives**, **experiences**, **and cultures**. Each student brings their

own understanding of the world and their context to the collective learning while gaining an appreciation for others' perspectives. Youth partnership fosters **increased awareness of students' own cultural beliefs and values**, **offering opportunities to appreciate different cultures and perspectives** (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). This, in turn, facilitates progress toward more policies, practices, and beliefs that are more equitable.

Students interact with peers and leadership to develop strategies that account for the interests of all and promote equitable school-level decision-making and processes. The SER partnership is an exercise in cultural competence.

Critical Consciousness

Lastly, critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) is conceptualized as the ability to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems, especially those that result in societal inequity (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Engagement as a partner in the SER process can **foster the development of youth's sociopolitical lenses and activist identities**. Research demonstrates its potential to **increase motivation and engagement** because the topics are relevant to young people's lives, and the process is empowering, as students can take actions that have a positive impact (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Additionally, students may experience a sense of empowerment through the **production and dissemination of their research reports (or through other means of communicating the information) and presentation methods designed to raise awareness about social issues and advocate changes** to interest holders. These interest holders include fellow students, school-level administrators, community members, and policymakers (Cammarota, 2016; Fox & Fine, 2013; Mirra et al., 2015, 2016).

Conclusion

In the realm of education, the experiences, stories, and realities of those most intimately familiar with the history and context of that educational community—students, families, school staff, and community partners—are often missing from the data (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Embedding youth in partnership within the SER (or other equity-related initiatives) while integrating principles of YPAR with culturally relevant and sustaining education (Paris, 2012) enhances its power to drive change. Students, as *insiders*, are embedded within the system and are thus most impacted by (in)equity, making them exceptionally qualified to identify it. Consequently, incorporating youth voices, perspectives, and insights into understanding the context, solving problems, and designing solutions is a responsive and equitable practice. This not only increases the validity and reliability of information but also ensures that solutions to inequities are most relevant to a particular context (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Their invaluable firsthand knowledge and life experience can inform equity reviews and challenge and shape traditional understandings of inequity, thereby strengthening the SER's or other equity initiatives' ability to strategically address systemic inequity in responsive and sustainable ways.

Therefore, youth partnership offers adults and school leaders the opportunity to learn from students and center their experiences when creating equitable change while offering students the opportunity to tell their own stories. This process disrupts ascribed and internalized power dynamics, challenging the authority of external reviewers, leadership, interest holders, and other "outsiders" who exist beyond the sphere of students' classrooms and experiences.

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