

REIMAGINING RESEARCH

Tiffany DeJaynes, Column Editor

The authors describe how youth participatory action research fostered opportunities for youth and elders to engage in community-centered activism and reshape personal and collective identities.

In the Shadow of Stone Mountain: Youth Participatory Action Research to Expand English Language Arts

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“For those that may not know, Stone Mountain is a prominent monument in Georgia that glorifies the Confederacy. It was created during a time when our country was founded on principles of white supremacy and oppression,” Indigo (all names are youth-selected pseudonyms), 17, spoke into the sound system at the hot June-teenth event. Looking out at the hundreds of gathered community members, she continued to explain how she saw these founding principles in her everyday life. Gathering

volume and speed, she continued: “However, we cannot move forward as a city until we face the issues of racism and oppression. We cannot move forward until we acknowledge the disrespect and suffering that people of color have faced for centuries. We cannot move forward until we recognize this country was founded on stolen land and stolen labor.” At the peak of her crescendo, she made a lengthy pause, then dove into her topic: “That’s why I want to talk about Shermantown. Sherman-town is a small neighborhood in Stone Mountain that was founded by formerly enslaved persons.”

THE EXPANSIVENESS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Indigo’s speech, filled with rhetorical and literary devices, exemplified how the expansive nature of English and the arts goes beyond the reductive formulas often taught in classrooms, igniting real, impassioned expression for authentic audiences. Composing in English goes beyond persuasion, information, and entertainment; it includes activism (Johnson & Smagorinsky, 2018),

joy (Muhammad, 2023), identity-building (Gilligan, 2019), and community belonging (Hernandez et al., 2020). Georgia’s newest English language arts standards embrace multimodal and multi-genre composing, recognizing diverse formats like graphic novels (Griffith, 2019), podcasts (Evans et al., 2021), and script writing (Flemming, 2021).

IN THE SHADOW OF STONE MOUNTAIN: YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

We, Leah and Sally, have engaged in youth participatory action research (YPAR) for 2 years in Shermantown, a historically Black community beneath Stone Mountain Park, the location of the world’s largest Confederate monument. YPAR provides space to understand the past, celebrate the present, and shape potential futures centered on youth visions. This study involved 14 youth researchers, ages 12 through 19, with diverse schooling experiences: they represented eight schools and homeschooling; their grade point averages ranged from 1.9 to



FIGURE 1
Raquel shares her collage (closeup on left) with several community members (right; the image is intentionally blurred)

4.0; and they were brought together by their geographic connection to the community.

Youth participatory action research is based on the belief that youth are knowers, civic actors, and capable of tackling complex issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). As Indigo expressed in an interview, “You didn’t infantilize me. . . . I’ve been through things.”

The youth researchers worked with community elders to build shared knowledge. The intergenerational dialogue took place across walking history tours, visits to museums, cookouts, and informational conversations on porches and in local businesses. Key community issues were collaboratively identified in these conversations and, as Indigo suggested, by cataloging social media comments and algorithmic search rankings as data points.

YOUTH SPOTLIGHTS

Our YPAR experiences have deepened our understanding of composing in English language arts.

Here, we highlight two youth researchers, Raquel and Bando, to illustrate how YPAR can shape pedagogies.

RAQUEL

Raquel, a 15-year-old Black female, joined the research reluctantly, encouraged by a friend and her grandmother. Initially shy, she avoided leading conversations. However, when introduced to photography, she found her voice. Raquel used her camera to capture the history of Sherman town, layering her photos against historical documents. Through her photography, she visualized the divisions within the community’s history, shaping her analysis.

At a community teach-in, Raquel presented her collage, contrasting the past and present while sharing her vision for Sherman town’s future. Once reserved, she now confidently articulated her insights to an audience, demonstrating the transformative power of visual composition (Figure 1).

BANDO

Unlike Raquel, Bando, a 16-year-old Black female, was an eager returning researcher. Initially, she struggled to find a new angle for her third project, but she soon began using her art to analyze data. Bando created a poster of Stone Mountain’s monument, placing a question mark over the Confederate leaders, accompanied by quotes from interviews (Figure 2). She explored the tension between the

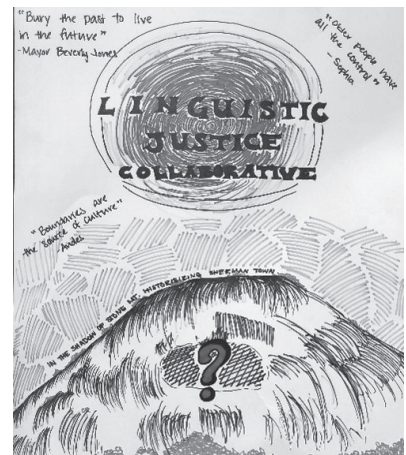


FIGURE 2
Bando’s analysis of the Stone Mountain monument



FIGURE 3

Bando's reimagining of the back of Stone Mountain as a memorial to the Black women who sustained the local Black community

mayor's advice to "bury the past" and Indigo's call for youth-led activism to remove the statue. Bando reimagined the monument as honoring three local Black women, and she sold her artwork to a community member, proving her message resonated (Figure 3).

At a Juneteenth festival, Bando set up a face-painting booth, turning residents into representations of Black history, survival, and joy. Her designs reflected diverse aspects of Black history, from enslaved people building communities to the Black Panthers and Juneteenth colors (Figure 4). One design, inspired by Deniece Williams's song "Black Butterfly," highlighted her creative



FIGURE 4

Bando's ideas for face-painting, drawn from Black history, media, and art

process and emotional connection to her work.

CONCLUSION

Youth participatory action research invites multigenerational, community-based collaboration that results in tangible action and change. It aligns deeply with the purposes of English language arts and has become a valuable space for us, as educators, to expand the modalities, literacies, and purposes for composing by centering youth knowledge in innovative ways: Raquel's use of modern photography and primary documents to evoke emotion, Bando's imagery to educate on Black histories, and Indigo's speech, rooted in personal, authentic purposes.

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We invite English educators to explore YPAR (e.g., UC Berkeley's YPAR Hub at <https://yparhub.berkeley.edu>) and its school-based form, SchYPAR (e.g., <https://schypar.org>), to support learners like Raquel, Bando, and Indigo in deepening their literacies, identities, and community belonging. For Indigo, that meant finishing her speech to a cheering crowd, declaring, "Shermantown is a testament to the power of freedom and the importance of fighting for change. As you listen today, I want

to remind you we are still fighting for the same rights. We are still fighting for freedom from oppression, racism, and injustice. We are still fighting for a country where everyone has an equal opportunity, regardless of their race." **EJ**

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