“IN THE SHOES THAT I’M IN NOW” AN INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY ARCHIVING FRAMEWORK CENTERING CRITICAL YOUTH PARTICIPATORY-ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

The transformation of Black communities and the erasure of their history has resulted in a gap in intergenerational connections and knowledge among the youths (15–24) and older adults (55+). This article describes the multi-faceted process behind an intergenerational critical Youth-centered Participatory Action Research (cYPAR) project. The West Philadelphia High School – Youth Archivists project started in 2019 and has grown to amplify participatory heritage and community archival research alongside West Philadelphia community youth and elders. This research highlights the systemic marginalization of urban communities with highly minoritized populations by shedding light on the impact of gentrification on their educational institutions and on the disproportionate effects on the cultural-historical knowledge among Black youths and older adults. By centering the voices of youth, this study preserves the local history of the West Philadelphia High School and community and empowers youths and elders to assert their narratives and advocate for self-determination. Guided by a critical theoretical framework, this project explores identity, gentrification, and community legacy themes. Additionally, it offers a transformative model for a university-school-community partnership that fosters a sustainable participatory heritage program to preserve the legacy of a predominantly Black high school with a long history of over 100 years.

Introduction

"Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." African Proverb

The critical engagement of youths and their unique perspectives is essential to preserving the past, the impact of the present, and the hope for the future. However, too often, their voices and experiences are excluded from issues of community concern (Brewster, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2012). Barnes et al. (2009) presented a university outreach and engagement model that illustrated university and community institutions as fully engaged partners (Figure 1). The model included PreK-12 schools as community institutions; however, we argue that there is a distinction between community institutions and PreK-12 schools (Figure 2). Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that PreK-12 schools are unique institutions directly connected to the youths. They are microsystems that are parallel with family, peers, neighborhoods, and cultural and religious institutions. A partnership between institutions, including universities, schools, and communities, is distinctively different from a traditional partnership between a university and a community because it extends the dialog, funding, opportunities, and resources to engage and invest in youth development to benefit current and future generations (Kimiecik et al., 2023). Recent research has highlighted how community members are delighted to serve as storytellers and mentors to the youth—especially students at local neighborhood schools—ultimately transforming the outreach and engagement model to an interconnected university-school-community partnership (Brewster, 2019; Kimiecik et al., 2023).

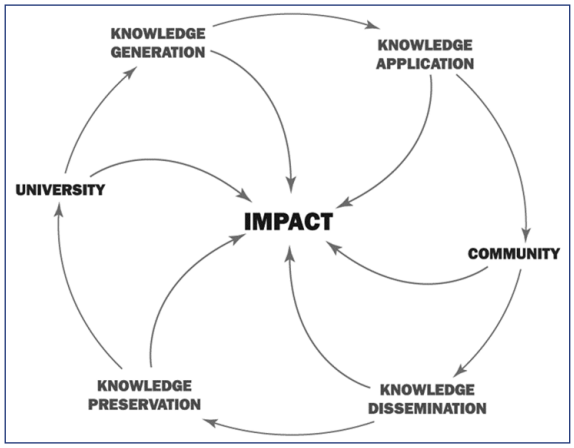

Figure 1 Barnes et al. (2009) model for University-Community Outreach and Engagement.

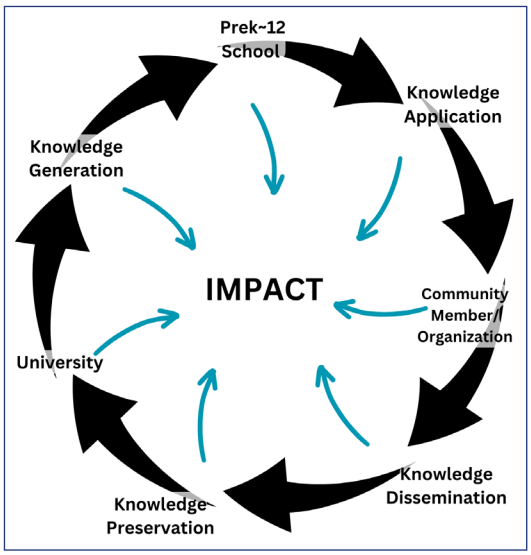

Figure 2 Adaptation of Barnes et al. (2009) University Outreach and Engagement model.

This multifaceted university-school-community partnership is behind an intergenerational critical youth-centered participatory action research (cYPAR) project. The project aims to amplify participatory heritage and community archival research alongside youths and community partners. In conversation with older adults of the community, members of Drexel University's research lab—the Justice-oriented Youth (JoY) Education Lab—adapted the Barnes et al. (2009) model by distinctively including their expertise,

voices, and impact on the historical preservation efforts of a predominantly Black community are enhanced, combatting the effects of gentrification and legacy erasure (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; McCullough et al., 2022). This paper expands Barnes and colleagues' (2009) model of engagement and outreach and examines the authentic sustainability of a participatory heritage research project aimed at preserving the legacy of a historically Black high school in northeastern Pennsylvania (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Barnes et al., 2009).

Project Background and Context

Prior to the 1960s, West Philadelphia High School reflected its surrounding neighborhood demographic, which was a predominately white working-class community (McCullough et al., 2022). After Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, the demographic shifted as Black working-class families gained greater access to schools. For a while, the population was integrated, with approximately 72% of the population being White and nearly 20% being Black; however, shortly after, the community experienced "white flight," as many white residents fled to the suburbs outside the northern and western areas of the city (McCullough et al., 2022). By the 1960s, over 50% of the population was Black, and by the 1980s that figure had risen to 80% (McCullough et al., 2022; Rothrock, 2017). As the decades passed and public funding continued to decrease, the high-achieving Black school status and the city's upkeep of the building began to decline. Despite these racial and economic changes, one thing remained the same: the hard-working and family-driven values of the West Philadelphia community (McCullough et al., 2022).

West Philadelphia High School (WPHS), the first Philadelphia secondary school constructed west of the Schuylkill River, has long been a source of community pride (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). In 2011, the original building that continues to hold great significance and memories for the students it once served, was sold to be transformed into luxury lofts. The school's community relocated some artifacts from the original building, but others were unceremoniously destroyed (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). This loss of tangible history highlighted the pressing need for increased attention to and recognition of African Americans' history, cultural capital, and community wealth from the wider society—in this case, from the developers (Yosso, 2005). The original building housed 5,500 students at its peak, and the new smaller building, has the capacity to support under 1,000 students. The new WPHS building was designed and constructed with the architect Emanuel Kelly a beloved graduate from the original school. Still, these ongoing social and spatial changes underscore the necessity of the intergenerational participatory heritage project. It is critical to preserve the artifacts and the lived experiences of all those associated with West Philadelphia High School—the place "Where Every Student Thrives!".

The West Philadelphia High School Youth Archivists: Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of WPHS is a participatory heritage project that has flourished through a university-school-community partnership (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Hancock et al., 2021). In 2018, Ms. Allen, an alumna of WPHS, and the mother of Dr. Ayana Allen-Handy, a Professor at Drexel University, had long encouraged her daughter to attend one of the WPHS Alumni Association meetings. Once she attended, Dr. Allen-Handy encountered other alumni regaling stories that only existed in their memories and were in danger of going unpreserved for future generations. Ms.

Allen's offhand comment that the group should try to collect and somehow save their stories to share with others sparked an idea among the group, and Dr. Allen-Handy offered to leverage university resources to support the alumni in the process. In 2019, the alumni connected Dr. Allen-Handy with a Career & Technical Education (CTE) teacher at WPHS, Mrs. Marie Wilkins-Walker, and together they launched a youth archivist afterschool program. This youth-centered project has significantly contributed to WPHS students' understanding of their school and community's rich history. Only intended to be a one-year project, it is now entering its sixth year and has grown in impact and involvement during this time. A handful of dedicated West Philadelphia alumni formally joined the research team in 2022 as paid community researchers, enriching the project with their perspectives and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). By 2023, the project had included over ten WPHS youths; Jahyonna Brown, a founding project member who is now a Drexel undergraduate student; six graduate students; and four older adult West Philadelphia High School alums, all of whom have come together to sustain a community archive that is both collective and creative, and rooted in joy.

Our intergenerational classroom moves from the JoY Lab on the university campus to the teacher's makerspace classroom, and other special event locations. Both the lab and makerspace offer scanners, computers, and assistive technologies used to digitize artifacts (memorabilia, newsletters, and yearbooks) that date back to 1912; as well as collecting and analyzing oral histories of WPHS alums conducted by WPHS students and team members. The artifacts and oral histories are being gathered for placement in a public-facing digital community archive on Omeka, a web-based platform in which the items are shared (Omeka.net, 2025). From building digital literacy, interviewing, and archival skills to finding a place and belonging together at the university, the learning in this amorphous classroom is multifaceted, providing multiple avenues of engagement.

The current study is part of a larger community-led participatory project. Previous findings have shown how students have interviewed older adults and have invited them to share their historical perspectives on critical issues to foster intergenerational and interdisciplinary collaboration (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). Youths and older adults involved in activist groups can help eliminate discrimination and promote an inclusive social justice framework to evoke change (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). All these efforts can contribute to making school communities in which individuals develop respect for people of all ages and linguistic backgrounds. The present study focuses on the youth and how their involvement in an intergenerational cultural heritage project contributes to bridging together a predominately White university and predominantly African American community contending with the impact of gentrification and residential displacement (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL., 2018; McCullough et al., 2022).

Intergenerational University-School-Community Archiving Traditional Archives (And Where They Are Lacking)

Archives are valuable records of interest to specific communities, researchers, and institutional legacies. Archivists themselves are "professional[s] with expertise in the management of records of enduring value" (Society of American Archivists, n.d.). What has been valued historically was "almost exclusively the private purview of

monarchs, the church, interested aristocrats, or... private enthusiasts" (Cook, 2011, p. 604). Today, the archival field has worked to be more diverse and inclusive—no longer appealing solely to the scholarly and wealthy elites (Cook, 2011). However, the ethics in archives still struggle to reflect diversity and inclusion in representation as well as the archival work of capturing historically marginalized people's history accurately, if at all.

According to the most recent 2022 survey results, 84% of archivists in the US are White, 5% are Hispanic, 5% are African American, 4% are Asian American, and the rest are Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022, p. 205). Previous research reported that archivists are highly educated, with 86% holding an advanced degree and 27% holding two or more (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022, p. 39). In graduate archival programs, student archivists are taught to determine value, organize, and describe materials. Graduate programs often teach the "dominant Western archival theory," which "relies on and reinforces" White supremacy and adjacent values amongst patriarchal and heteronormative ones (Caswell, 2021, p. 35). These often follow majoritarian or master narratives (Goessling, 2018).

While diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) practices and projects were trending, in abundance, receiving federal funding, and rather unrestricted in their pursuit of racial, social, gender, and environmental justice during the Biden-Harris administration, such efforts are now under severe threat due to the hostile, aggressive policies and actions of the second Trump administration. Despite the purging of cultural histories, specifically Black history from national records, during turbulent times across higher education and American institutions such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), this project remains an example of how DEIA in the archives can be implemented as a form of resilience and resistance.

The determination of value—what calls for preservation and attention—is highly subjective. Even if included or prioritized, the archives of non-White communities are often "misrepresented, marginalized, and oppressed" (Caswell, 2021, p. 14). MacNeil and Eastwood (2017) contend that archives are "much mediated by the purposes of the viewer and limited by the circumstances in which archives are formed and communicated through time" (p. 21). Those with access to the archives and the privilege to shape them are only sometimes aware of their positionality or actively seek to challenge or question the presence of racial inequality in the field or in collections.

There is therefore a solid case to be made for the power of community archives, – where the intent and practice "challenges [and] even transforms" that of traditional archives (Poole, 2020, p. 661). However, just 1% of archivists are officially employed by community archivist and just 1 in 5 respondents "agree that the archives profession is inclusive" of them (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022, pp. 19, 56). Community archives and their archivists (with or without a degree) must be legitimized to ensure a comprehensive and accurate reflection of American history. Caswell (2021) reflected on her participation in co-founding SAADA, the South Asian American Digital Archive, which "stewards the largest digital collection of records documenting South Asian American history in the world" (p. 7). She remembers being "frequently dismissed" in the creation of this community archive by many other professionals for a variety of reasons, one being that this form of archive is illegitimate until "ultimately donated to mainstream institutions (based on racist paternalism that assumes communities of color are not capable of stewarding their materials)" (Caswell, 2021, p. 8). Caswell (2021) notes the gradual acceptance of community archives in contemporary times. While there are strides to be made in other settings around who

gets to participate in creating and maintaining the archive, the West Philadelphia High Preservation Project is a remarkable exception due to its intergenerational, inclusive, horizontal leadership approach.

Justice-oriented University-School-Community Partnerships

Social justice is a process (and a goal) of fighting for equality, equity, and civil democracy across social groups, – especially populations that have been historically marginalized, underrepresented, and undervalued (Adams et al., 2018). Beaulieu et al. (2018) further assert that social justice should be centered on a moral obligation to develop complementary university-school-community relationships. University-school-community partnerships differ from traditional university-community partnerships because they provide opportunities for schools to draw on resources from both entities to foster engagement, enrich student learning, and increase collaborative leadership efforts to support youth development (Kimiecik et al., 2023). The university-school-community partnership is sustained with intention. Authentic partnerships can foster relationships across institutions so universities can merge their role as scholarly institutions and as members of the surrounding community (Barker, 2004; Beaulieu et al., 2018). As many universities continue to expand their grounds in urban Black communities, only specific demographics reap the benefits of gentrification.

Participatory heritage is an innovative multidisciplinary and intergenerational archival method that involves communities identifying and (re)defining their heritage (Phillips & Stein, 2013; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Uricchio, 2009). Studies have shown that participatory heritage projects increase social and self-empowerment for older participants, create intergenerational ties, and foster positive relationships between communities and institutions (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Li, 2016; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007). Participatory *digital* heritage has also been demonstrated broadly to increase participants' digital and computational skills through cross-sector collaborations (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) challenges positivistic notions of researcher objectivity, instead considering youth as producers of knowledge whose lived experiences and perspectives provide valuable insight for examining issues that matter to them (Caraballo et al., 2017; Richards-Schuster et al., 2021; Malorni et al., 2022; Warren & Marciano, 2018; Watson et al., 2020).

Critical Youth Participatory Action Research and Intergenerational Connection

Critical YPAR (cYPAR) design research reframes imperial notions and models of social research by removing traditional hierarchies and by uplifting the knowledge that youths hold that emanates from their own lived experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Furthermore, cYPAR is a multidimensional method that explicitly focuses on reducing inequalities and leveraging the youth's expertise, serving as a pathway for critical consciousness and civic action (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018; Ozer, 2016; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). This dynamic process involves youth-generated-and-executed problem identification, research and plan development, collection and

analysis of evidence, reflection on the findings, sharing results, and actions taken to address the problem (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL 2018; Allen-Handy et al., 2021).

Fostering critical and creative thinking for global unison in a 21st-century education ecosystem requires diverse and interdisciplinary perspectives. According to Newman (1995), intergenerational programs are:

> grounded in the notion that there is a special synergy between the old and the young, that caring for each other is both natural and appropriate, and that there are shared needs that can be met by making connections between these generations. (p. 2).

While members of different generations have always come together, the academic literature on the intergenerational field first emerged in the 1970s as communities came together in a political response to target generational isolation and to address issues impacting members of different generations (Chapman & Neal, 1990). Previous research suggests that during the 1970s and 1980s, there was an increase in public and private corporations that fostered spaces for youths and older adults to come together in community centers, libraries, and schools. The intergenerational field has continued to expand into the 21st century, fostering critical and creative thinking and diverse and intersectional perspectives through diverse programming in educational spaces that reduce ageism (Jarrott et al., 2022).

Although previous research has found that age is a category used to label individuals and reinforce social inequalities, research methods, including YPAR, have been found to mitigate the discriminatory effects of ageism in educational settings by amplifying the voices of the youth (Johnson et al., 2014). The efforts to bridge together generations as an educational tool have expanded over the last fifty years, although the impact has yet to be recognized and is under-documented (Branquinho et al., 2020). There are many reasons for this gap in the literature, including recognizing indigenous methods that center intergenerational familial engagement (Jarrott et al., 2022; Lewis-Grant et al., 2022). Existing norms of ageism are also a barrier to intergenerational programs, particularly within the Western world, that influence societal structures that prevent collaboration at meaningful levels in education. As universities, communities, and schools unite in partnership, intergenerational classrooms reflect an agenda to build youths' capacity—particularly in communities that have experienced racism and colonization—to respond to demands for education systems to reflect local histories and contexts (Branquinho et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is rooted in the transformative power of the SJYD (Social Justice Youth Development) framework, a creation of esteemed scholars Cammarota and Ginwright (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). Their profound research and expertise in youth development and social justice have birthed a framework that holds the potential to revolutionize youth development. SJYD fosters the praxis of integrating critical consciousness and social action, empowering youth to comprehend and initiate changes in their social environments (Murray & Milner, 2015).

As promoted by the SJYD framework, critical consciousness and social action provide young people with tools to understand and change the underlying causes of social and historical processes that perpetuate daily problems. For instance, youths in a community grappling with racial discrimination used these tools to organize peaceful protests and awareness campaigns, challenging the status quo. This praxis is intimately tied to how young people respond to oppressive forces in their communities. The capacity of the youth to respond to pressing social and community issues transforms both youth and the environments in which they live (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

The SJYD praxis encompasses three levels of awareness: self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness. Self-awareness can be nurtured through activities that encourage identity exploration in relation to one's race, class, gender, and sexuality. Social awareness can be honed through projects that require students to critically analyze issues in their community (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). Global awareness can be cultivated through discussions and reflections on global issues and the struggles of oppressed people worldwide. These levels of awareness, when effectively implemented, can embolden youth to comprehend and challenge inequalities at various levels (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Allen-Handy and Thomas-EL (2018) discovered that the impact of cYPAR was the youths' "Sense of Be(coming)" researchers and the development of a passion and dedication toward knowledge generation, preservation, application, and dissemination (p. 15). This includes an analysis of historical forms of oppression, such as capitalism and colonialism, White supremacy, and patriarchy, as well as fostering youth's capacity to demonstrate "connectedness with others, empathy with suffering, and resistance to oppression" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 90). More specifically, critical civic youth praxis includes consciousness building to inspire youths toward social justice-oriented change and activism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). This project-based research study was developed with the hallmarks of SJYD in mind, and critical civic praxis was infused throughout the program.

Methodology

Research Design

This project employed a qualitative cYPAR, a dynamic process in which the goal is to form public spaces where both participants and researchers can work to decentralize traditional research (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). This project utilized participatory heritage methodologies, an inclusive approach to community-based preservation of artifacts so that the artifacts that our youths and older adults deem most important can be included in social and collective histories (Roued-Cunliffe & Copeland, 2017). The research questions that guided our work are:

Research Question 1: What has been the experience of youth who participate in Critical YPAR?
Sub Question 1: How has participating in a Critical YPAR impacted the youth's future?

Research Question 2: How has participating in Critical YPAR impacted youth relationships with their community?

Research Question 3: How has interviewing members of the alumni and investigating archival material impacted the youth's knowledge of the history of the school?

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a standard procedure in which a researcher shares facts of a study so that potential participants can decide whether to participate or not (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 52). Before the interview, the participant was contacted via email and provided with the facts and purpose of the study, along with a standard informed consent form. Each interviewee reviewed, signed, and returned the consent form before the interview. All researchers attained CITI certification and IRB approval was obtained.

Study Participants

The use of a qualitative cYPAR allowed for purposeful sampling of participants, which included four youth researchers from West Philadelphia High School in a predominately Black urban northeastern community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Participants were recruited through an already established partnership with the West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association. The youth researchers, current or recent graduates of WPHS within the last five years, were recruited by the older adult co-researchers, who are also members of the school's Alumni Assocation through the support of teacher who has become an integral part to sustaining university and community connections within the school. The selection of the youth researchers was based on two criteria: 1) current or recent graduate of WPHS; and 2) funding, which determined how many youths the project could financially support. Two of the youth researchers and co-authors– Jahyonna and Qudia– participated in a two-year in-school afterschool program when they were students. Jasmine and Ishmael were recent WPHS graduates participating in a summer internship with the project before starting their first year of college. All the youth and older adult participants were "trained" in participatory heritage archival skills and qualitative research methods. Our style of training the youths (and the collective) relies on self-motivation, curiosity, and experiential learning, where we learn together as the project progresses.

Our epistemological stance is rooted in the leadership of our youth and community researchers in the design and execution of the research project. Their expertise, based on their lived experiences and their community's cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), is the guiding force of our approach. Each group capitalizes on its strengths in this university-school-community partnership to advance project efforts. Notably, graduate students are significant in leading research efforts and integrating theories and frameworks into weekly programming and instructional pedagogy. They demystify these concepts and demonstrate how we put these words into action. The older adults

contribute to drafting research, interview questions, and curriculum for the youth. The constant collaboration and inclusion across all decision-making fronts foster a horizontal workflow in which everyone experiences an equal distribution of power and is encouraged to assume the diverse roles this project demands: archivists, researchers, students, teachers, and leaders.

Further, youth and community researchers can create knowledge that leads to their own empowerment and toward social justice for their communities (Ozer, 2016). From this perspective, our community researchers maintain agency over what and how we collect, analyze, and disseminate findings. They actively shape or are incorporated into shaping the project and its direction. As for the youths, their unique interests guide the project as the project also exists to empower them to be critical, to challenge them, and to strengthen skills that will benefit them after high school. This project environment feels safe for exploration, open for conversation, and reciprocal in knowledge and skill exchange. Table 1 describes the youth participants of the study.

Table 1
Participants

Authors	Age Then	Age (as of 2024)	Race	Gender	Project Role	Profession Now	Years in Program
Jahyonna Brown	17	23	Black/AA	Female	WPHS Student & Youth Researcher	Undergraduate Student & Youth Researcher	2019- present
Jasmine Atwell	17	18	Black/AA	Female	2023 WPHS Graduate & Summer Intern	University Student	Summer 2023
Ishmael Burrell	17	18	Black/AA	Male	2023 WPHS Graduate & Summer Intern	University Student	Summer 2023
Qudia Ervin	16	22	Black/AA	Male	2021 WPHS Graduate & Youth Researcher	Retailer Team Lead	2019–2021

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which ranged in duration from 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted virtually using Zoom's technological software. The older adults were paired with and interviewed each youth regarding their experience at WPHS and with the project. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using Zoom technologies. The interviews were conducted over a two-week period. The interview questions were drafted from a study from the previous year, reviewed and adapted by the older adults, Jahyonna, and graduate researchers. Ten interview questions were constructed to investigate the research questions (see Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Before embarking on the analysis, we meticulously reviewed the transcript data for accuracy and potential misinformation. In this endeavor, we leveraged the power of Otter.ai, an artificial intelligence (AI) tool that

streamlined and expedited the editing of transcripts. The process was collaborative, with a community researcher and a graduate assistant researcher working in tandem. One would control the playback of the recording, while the other would edit the auto-generated Zoom transcription. Introducing Otter.ai revolutionized our transcription process, making it more efficient and less cumbersome. We were mindful to ensure that the AI system did not strip away the cultural and linguistic nuances of speech, a crucial aspect of our research. Given that the participants were not just subjects but also co-authors, we worked closely with them for member-checking.

A deductive approach was used to analyze the data from the transcripts. The deduction starts with theory, which informs the model, which informs the data, and then the themes (Cohen et al., 2007). A thematic coding analysis was conducted in stages: open, axial, and selective coding methods. Open coding involves organizing raw data into categories (sentences, words, phrases) (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The open codes from first-cycle coding were grouped, critically identifying patterns or connections to categories and codes from the individual or collective experience (Charmaz, 2014; Cohen et al., 2007). Themes are the outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, not something that is coded (Saldaña, 2013).

The first two rounds of thematic analysis were conducted by the older adults of the research team over two in-person coding sessions. Facilitated by graduate researchers, the older participating in the data analysis –coding process – by hand using highlighters, pencils, and pens to familiarize themselves and distinguish the stages of coding. This allowed for the connection of an unfamiliar skill of thematic coding with familiar knowledge of notetaking. Our initial coding identified words, phrases, or paragraphs that held significance to the researchers across the different interviews (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This process led us to discover eighty-nine initial codes during the first round. During axial coding, we identified 20 categories that emerged from word and phrase patterns (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2013). In the final stage of selective coding, we triangulated all data collection methods to determine areas for further analysis. This process revealed convergent or divergent themes or inconsistencies between findings (Cox & Hassard, 2007). The last round of analysis was conducted by Jahyonna and two graduate researchers who found three themes, which are discussed further in the findings section.

Positionality Statement

As individuals and as a collective, the research team of twelve members was cognizant of how their identities, backgrounds, ages, and lived experiences informed how they engaged with this research study. We come to this work as highly educated, English speaking, cisgendered men and women and are committed to democratizing research through educational pursuits. Prior to joining this cYPAR study, we have been involved with community-oriented programs and sought to respect the differences of individual experiences. We believe strongly in constructing meaning and knowledge from participants' own discourse. We enter this space from a value on collaborative research and our experience with this research group has confirmed the value of applying diverse interpretive frames in analyzing the interview data.

The following section includes a reflection from Jahyonna, our undergraduate youth researcher. Jahyonna carries a notable perspective because she had been involved with the project since its inception and has since

grown into a young adult and a researcher as an undergraduate student within the university ecosystem. Often shy, she does not want to be formally interviewed but instead opted to write a reflection on her experience. With this reflection, she hopes it helps to highlight her development of critical self-consciousness over time.

Undergraduate Youth Researcher Reflection

It has been five years since I was recruited to work on the project. Beforehand, I had no idea what preservation was, who oversaw preservation, or how preservation impacted me. I was recruited at 17 when I was a junior at WPHS. My computer science teacher at the time thought I had much to add to the project as I was an outspoken youth who was great with computers. The following summer I was hired as a youth researcher. The project lead, a graduate student, and I spent the summer traveling around Philadelphia looking at some of its archives, museums, and libraries learning how to build and care for an archive as well as the history of Philadelphia west of the Schuylkill River. Initially, my role on the team was creating interview protocols and conducting interviews but as the years went by, I was promoted to Research Data Analyst then Research Assistant as I was officially a Drexel University student. I did a lot of new things. I worked on an equal level with people four times my age, I learned the ins and outs of an archive, I developed research questions and interviewed people, and I even contributed to multiple academic papers. This was all new for a high schooler. I grew self-confidence, a sense of security, and an assurance in my abilities. With guidance from the older adult community archivist, I found unity and developed a voice for myself surrounded by people who I can relate to and look up to. I now understand the importance of representation and why having a say in how your history and culture is preserved is crucial in the continuance of a community.

Findings

This study examined the impact of the *Preserving History for the Persistent Legacy of Our School* project on Black urban youths who had engaged in the project over its five years. The data analysis presented the following three themes related to our research questions: Development of Self, Connection and Respect for Community; and "Truth and Wisdom," which are explained further below.

Theme 1: Development of Self

The theme that emerged from the analysis for the first research question was Development of Self. Within this theme, the students expressed the internal and external process of development whether to be a part of the project prior to starting and during the project. We begin with the students' initial thoughts about their experience in the project. In the following quote, Jasmine highlights how she initially was not interested in the project until she heard a friend might participate:

> So, doing this project over the summer, it was like a bit interesting, because at first, I didn't know nothing much about it until my friend [Ishmael] did the interview, and I was listening in. So, I was like, okay, seems cool to work like with the Alumni, and look at yearbooks.

Her path into the project illuminates compelling aspects of the project, such as oral histories and the power of connection amongst peers. Ishmael shared a similar sentiment; however, he more deeply appreciated the connection with the older adults:

> My experience on this project was very interesting. Like it was a very fun experience to do, especially because it was something new to me. It wasn't like something I'm doing on a regular basis. Cause, I was around new people, you know people I never met before, but outside of that it was very fun, very educating, and...so, yeah... it was very educating and fun.

Ishmael appreciated the newness of the project as it pertained to relationships, whereas Qudia ruminated on the activities he participated in:

> I was a part of the project from, I believe 2017 or 2018, that's the year I started in, and then I finished in 2021 when I graduated... I did a couple of a range of different things... Yeah, so my experiences were, I scanned in some of the art into the website, also some of the yearbooks I worked on that. Also, I worked on a website – getting some of the pictures just from around the neighborhood and such.

During and after the project, all youths experienced some change in their identity and their perception in their ability to be change agents in their school and community. Jasmine shared: "When it comes to working with others, its become more easier for me. A little bit, especially communication and utilizing our resources." She continues to share how the experience changed her identity as a researcher: "It was interesting, like, I didn't know much about like scanning until when we were scanning the yearbooks. It was like so easy and simple."

Similarly, Ishmael had not thought about preserving history or his part in sustaining a legacy:

> Not really, but I don't want to say fully, yes. It's like a kind of a yes and a no kind of thing. But it's definitely like an interesting topic to speak on for me. But, no, not at all. I thought I was going about my way, honestly... So, I'm glad I did it. Anyway, I'm glad I even got to see what I saw.

Though Ishmael struggled to express how the project impacted his identity as an archivist and preservationist, he acknowledges the importance of the work and who exactly is involved. It was clear that the youths' experience in cYPAR made them more aware of their role in the community as well as of its history.

With the first research question, the research team sought to explore how participating in the project had impacted youths months and years later. For example, it has been three years since Qudia worked on the project. In his reflection, he describes how the project impacted him:

> The project impacted me very well. It changed my perspective on different things, letting me know the history of school, even history of just my neighborhood, letting me know different kinds of things, all. Everywhere, honestly. Helped me change, in multiple ways, especially my mindset.

The project made Qudia more aware of WPHS and its surroundings in a more nuanced way. As for his mindset, he is likely referring to his social and skill development. He was recently promoted to a manager at a retail corporation, and he shared how the cYPAR project impacted the development of his social skills, thus preparing him for the role he is now in: "It was my first really big project that I worked on, so it also taught me a couple of skills like communication, and kind of being a leader for my peers, things like that." One of the older adults, Ms. Allen, reflected after her interview with Qudia that she remembered how quiet he was initially, and how he matured throughout his participation in the project.

Just five months after their summer cYPAR internship, Ishmael and Jasmine – recent WPHS graduates – expressed the impact of the experience in preparation for college. Ishmael stated: "I feel like it just prepared me in a lot of ways for college. You know, informed me how to manage my money, and prepare me [for] how my classes are gonna be set up." Jasmine recalled: "It was interesting, so that's what I like. I like the whole activities we did over, like some Thursday and Mondays too. Like some of the activities, like helping us get ready for college, stuff, and exposing us to other paths, and other programs to our school like dual degree."

In their quotes, Ishmael and Jasmine are referring to the college and life preparations sessions facilitated by the undergraduate and graduate research assistants who shared their wisdom and truths about their college and life experiences with them.

Ishmael, who had just completed his first semester of college, shared how his experience with archiving technology had prepared him for one of his courses:

> I was new to this type of computer work and college work. She [the professor] brought it up, she asked me 'have I ever had experience anything like that?' I was like 'yeah.' I've scanned yearbooks through a computer…I just explained everything with her…it definitely advanced me and my major.

Akin to Qudia with the communication and leadership skills that helped to advance his future career, Ishmael experienced similar benefits with the technology skills gained through his participation in the project. Ultimately, this project propelled students into their future careers primarily through social and skill development.

Theme 2: Connection and Respect for Community

As a part of the project, the youth researchers participated in interviews to collect oral histories from alumni of the high school for future publishing to the community archival website. The students, partnered with one of the older adults, were encouraged to take the lead in interviews and to ask questions. This was a new experience for each of the youths. From the interviews and from experience with the alumni throughout the project, the students seemed to gain a deeper sense of 'Connection and Respect for Community'. The youths' connection to their community was greatly enhanced by the project, particularly by the intergenerational connection that revolved around WPHS. The students were asked how their relationships to older adults changed from the project, but the students expressed no discrimination against, nor discomfort working with older adults. Mrs. Rana, when asking Jasmine, re-phrased the question this way: "Do you feel as though when you see old people, you'd be like, 'Oh! That old lady! Get out the way!'?" To which Jasmine responded that she had never felt like that before. For Qudia, his respect for older adults was affected when he saw "that's kind of where history comes from... they've been ***in the shoes that I'm in now***. So, I get to respect them even more." Ishmael echoes this, stating that:

> It was very interesting, seeing how far West Philadelphia has come from like, the yearbooks... It was amazing to get to know how different and how much has changed from my generation, from their generation. So, I feel like, no matter how old the person is, you can always relate, and you know, see from their perspective, especially with just, just a picture alone.

This quote clarifies that even as decades pass, current students can connect with WPHS students of the past. Jasmine learned about the change from the original WPHS building located on 48th and Walnut, to the new WPHS building located on 49th and Chestnut: "It was just like learning more about the high school I went to." In addition to better understanding the history of West, Qudia added, "even history of just my neighborhood, letting me know different kinds of things, all... everywhere, honestly." Qudia's reflection on his own personal transformation throughout the project evolved, especially regarding the larger network he realized he was part of:

> Before the project, I didn't think too much of it, being a teenager, but then, even as I joined the project, it was just kind of something. But, as I got more into it, it's like, ok! I'm kind of being a part of something that's actually bigger...

The project benefits and thrives under its active alumni association, as well as the university-school-community partnership. Qudia's initial involvement began in 2018, and in 2024 he continued to have pride in the project. He stated, "even now, I get to be a part of this in having my name published on a website or being a part of something like that. So, it's something that I am proud of."

The appreciation of youth from the older adults demonstrates the warmth of the West Philadelphia High School community. For instance, Ms. Nettles ended her interview with Ishmael by stating, "And remember we are proud of you." In Jasmine's interview, Mr. Ray ended the interview, "We're glad you're growing and blossomed in school. Keep up the good work and keep in touch with us." Mrs. Goldsmith-Carter followed up by asking her to, "Please keep in touch and let me know whether you do public health," as that was the field that Mrs. Goldsmith-Carter worked in. The project connected WPHS students of the past and present. The youth's respect for adults allowed them to easily transition to preservation activities and relationship building.

Theme 3: "Truth and Wisdom" through Intergenerational Connections

In response to the third research question, the participants' engagement in interviewing, archival analysis, and interacting with the alumni has shown to have strengthened their connection to one another and to the WPHS community more broadly. As the youths reflected on this question, the theme that emerged from the analysis was "Truth and Wisdom" through intergenerational connections.

For the youths, it was their first-time conducting interviews for academic research purposes. Each of the students found that the interviews increased their communication skills. As Ishmael shared:

> I'll say that doing my first interview showed me how to really approach someone, even if they're – we are on Zoom – and showed me how to approach someone the proper way and help us work professionally and get to know people professionally and how to get to know someone's background professionally.

Ms. Allen appreciated hearing how Qudia developed into a confident, communicative leader. As he stated:

> It helped me with communication. It helped me become out of my shoes a little more because I used to be a lot more quiet. So, it let me kind of shelter skills like leadership, being able to actually hold conversations, being able to put a foot forward if one other falls behind...stuff like that.

In this quote, Qudia expresses how the project environment was a safe and brave space to allow him to "shelter" or safely develop his social skills. Beyond developing interview and communication skills, Ishmael observed the "interesting" changes in time across generations in the same school. He noticed the growth of community members and found that "no matter how old the person is, you can always relate. See from their perspective." The older adults are different, in his eyes, from the current generation because they bring "more truth and wisdom to what a lot of young people won't show you." Qudia experienced a serendipitous personal connection with Ms. Allen, when they realized they attended the same elementary school. Qudia reflects, "I can see the people that were in my shoes before. They all write the history of my school, or just in general."

Jasmine's observations from archival material pertained more to the school's changes from "then to now" in the environment and culture, and differences between the new and old. She championed the scanning process and took ownership over the work: "I didn't know much about, like scanning until when we were scanning the yearbooks. It was like so easy and simple." She continues and elaborates: "I like learned more about like West Philly High, and how it changes from then to now, looking to clubs outside the building and changed to the new West and the old West. It was just like learning more about the high school I went to." Jasmine formed an intergenerational connection not only with her fellow researchers, but the artifacts and the history and legacy they held. It was clear that the interviews and interactions with the artifacts had left a lasting impact on all the youths. They were now seeing their community through a different lens and had deepened their respect for elders who have once been in their shoes, walked the same streets, and held the history of their school and community.

Discussion

Urban schools with high minoritized populations are systematically and historically marginalized regarding access, resources, and opportunities (Larsen & Hansen, 2008; Lukes & Cleveland, 2021). Gentrification in urban educational communities can be observed in significant demographic changes in a school's population due to displacement and replacement of residents (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022). The literature on gentrification and schools has also shown how school closures disproportionately impact Black students, whose communities are most vulnerable to closures with significant economic impacts on the local neighborhood (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). Despite the centrality of a school's reputation to community identity, making it a primary indicator of gentrification, there have been few studies that highlight this relationship to date, with some of those focused on contexts such as the city of West Philadelphia (Bailey-Fakhoury et al., 2022; Makris & Brown, 2020; Rothrock, 2017). The transformation of Black communities and the erasure of their history has resulted in a gap in intergenerational connections and knowledge among youths (15–24) and older adults (55+), particularly as it relates to civic action movements for social justice.

The analysis and findings of this study are rooted in the cYPAR literature and framework, which centers on empowering youth to critically engage with their communities and affect social change (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018; Allen-Handy et al., 2021). Through thematic data analysis, three prominent themes emerged: Development of Self; Connection and Respect for Community; and "Truth and Wisdom" through intergenerational connections. These themes underscore how participation in cYPAR impacts youths' self-development and fosters a sense of belonging and respect for their communities. It also cultivates a deeper understanding of the "truth and wisdom" generated, applied, disseminated, and preserved across generations between the youths and older adults.

With a near five-decade gap between the youths and the older adult researchers, their experiences within the community differ drastically. This study extends the Outreach and Engagement Model of Barnes et al. (2009) by including youths as distinct and collaborative partners within the university-community model with equal voice and impact. The youths' story of WPHS begins in 2014 in its new building with no connection to the old building held in the memories of older adults. However, the generations are connected by a common thread,

a community of pride, and a name withstanding the test of time. Through this intergenerational project, university, and community members—familiar with the past 100 years of WPHS—now received a glimpse into its present that could only be told by those attending that school today. As older adults aim to recover and preserve the past 100 years, the youth will impact the story of the future by actively engaging in the generation, application, dissemination, and preservation of new knowledge and legacy of WPHS.

This project contributes to the Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) framework by fostering the development of critical consciousness, which was formed through the youths' reflections. For example, Ishmael and Jasmine shared how they could now see themselves as a part of history, the legacy-making process, and the importance of such efforts. Through activities promoting self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness, the youths engaged in identity exploration, critical analysis of community issues, and reflection on the struggles for justice from the local perspective to a global context. Self-awareness was fostered through activities that encouraged identity exploration about the youths' intersectionality and cultural capital (Allen-Handy et al., 2021). The findings demonstrated how the youths developed self-awareness regarding their identity and abilities as researchers. For example, Qudia expressed how the project helped him gain confidence by enhancing his communication and leadership skills to empower him to become a leader for his peers at work.

The impact of cYPAR on the youth's development of social awareness was notable as it facilitated critical analysis of community issues (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). Through discussions and reflection on local issues in a global context, and the struggles of oppressed stories worldwide, global awareness can be effectively cultivated (Allen-Handy & Thomas-EL, 2018). By connecting the project to the broader narrative of history and its impact on communities, the youths could identify their significance in social and global historical contexts and their role in accurately reflecting the stories of diverse communities.

This project could be enhanced by discussing how history is created and preserved in a traditional archive setting (i.e., corporate, governmental, historical, institutional) compared with this project's intergenerational and collaborative university-school-community partnership setting. The participant's demographics differ drastically from that of the average archivist, and they are empowered with ownership of their story when they otherwise would not be. Beyond the skills and connections that the participants developed, they better understood how their archive disrupts a primarily White and highly educated field. Such instruction about the archival field lends to the SJYD framework relating to self and social awareness and critical consciousness development. This focus on social and racial imbalances in archiving may propel the youths in the long term toward social action even more so than exhibited in these interviews.

This research highlights the systemic marginalization faced by urban schools and communities with high minoritized populations, shedding light on the impact of gentrification on educational communities and the disproportionate effects on Black youths and older adults. By centering the voices of youth in intergenerational cultural heritage cYPAR projects, this study not only preserves local history but also empowers communities to assert their narratives and to advocate for self-determination. Through collaborative efforts between school youths, local community members, and university stakeholders, this research exemplifies the transformative potential of cYPAR in addressing systemic inequalities and fostering collective action for social change.

Conclusion

The significance of this intergenerational cultural heritage cYPAR project will continue to benefit the university, school, and community context for generations to come. Schools, communities, and universities each play a pivotal role in preserving the local community's history. This cYPAR project sought to bridge individuals whose identities are intersected by age, race, and educational contexts. The value of this study lies in its impact on historic preservation to save history for future generations, and to support community self-determination while amplifying the voices of youths through engaged youth participatory action research.

This branch of participatory action research fostered collaboration between alumni from the West Philadelphia High community, the university, and from surrounding community stakeholders. The research has been designed in the cYPAR format within an intergenerational perspective, such that youth members from the local high school work together with adults from the community to formulate and execute problem identification; to research, and plan development; to collect and analyze evidence; to reflect on the findings and share results; and to take action to address the problem (Allen-Handy et al., 2021).

Multigenerational programming has educational and social benefits, including increased connectivity and self-awareness to dismantle barriers in the US education system (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). cYPAR methodologies' role in facilitating equity-focused partnerships and engagements across communities, schools, and institutions is highly understated yet remains critical to developing frameworks for conducting educational experiences that address the complex social issues in today's politically polarized society. This study reveals a rich insight into the authenticity, respect, and wisdom that may arise when engaging youth as co-collaborators in the research process by expanding the framework of Barnes et al. (2009) to distinguish between community institutions and PreK-12 schools as equal contributors in participatory action research.

This study is not without limitations. One of our internal goals was to interview all fifteen youths connected to the project; between inception and 2024; however, due to scheduling conflicts, not all youth perspectives were obtained. However, with seven youths' co-authors, Allen-Handy et al. (2021) preserves their voices, experiences, and the impact of this project. Another collective goal is to build a robust Omeka site. The ongoing process of scanning is often paired with conversation, where one yearbook page might spark a memory for an older adult, or a question by the youth. The yearbook could have been scanned entirely by one person and therefore without conversation. However, these opportunities for rich and reflective conversations presented by having two people scan the content connected members across space and time, which is as important as the tangible process of archiving.

Future studies could incorporate a larger pool of voices into the research. These voices could include older adults from the community and the parents of the students to incorporate their experience at WPHS and within the greater community. Many students and alumni come from generations that have attended West Philly High, including Qudia and Ms. Nettles. Also, research is one means of dissemination. To make the research even more accessible to the public, we are looking forward to launching an online museum, which we intend to debut at a community-wide event.

Possible future research could provide additional insights surrounding the potential for critical capacity-building across diverse identities at the intersection of communities, institutions, and universities. Gentrification is a nationwide issue putting at risk the preservation of the legacy of vibrant communities. It would be worthwhile to partner with other urban schools, universities, and/or alumni groups to share our findings and to inspire other preservation projects. The deep sense of agency, purpose, and pride that members of this project feel reveal its power to us. That is, the power of an intergenerational youth and community driven critical participatory action research project centered around the preservation of a social and cultural pillar: West Philadelphia High School.

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West Philadelphia High School Alumni Association

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Community Researcher
West Philadelphia High School CTE Teacher

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Youth

1. How are you?
    a. How's college going? (if applicable)
2. What was your experience with this project?
3. Do you feel that you've learned anything from this project?
4. Has this project changed your perception of older adults?
5. In what ways did the intergenerational dynamic influence your experience working in a team on this project?
6. Has this project helped you foster a better understanding of older adults?
7. What were your thoughts on history preservation before joining the West Philadelphia High School Preservation project?
8. Has your perception of who writes history changed?
9. How has your experience collaborating with the team as a youth archivist influenced your perception of your abilities?
10. Have you implemented any practices you learned while participating in the project (in life, school, work)?
11. Overall, how has this project impacted or influenced you?