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Preventing Bullying and Improving School Climate Through Integrating Youth Participatory Action Research Into School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: An Illustration Using a Multiple Case Study Approach

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Abstract

Bullying is a persistent problem in schools today, with developmental and socioemotional consequences. Multi-tiered interventions, such as School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS), have been

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developed to decrease bullying by improving school climate. However, effects of SW-PBIS are stronger in elementary school than middle and high school, and effects are weaker for marginalized student groups. Aligning SW-PBIS with adolescent developmental needs and promoting systems change through youth participatory action research (YPAR) may improve the developmental fit of SW-PBIS for middle and high school students and strengthen its equity impact. In YPAR, youth conduct research on areas that are important to them and take data-driven action to improve their lives. In this paper, we utilize a qualitative instrumental multiple case study approach to identify similarities between YPAR and SW-PBIS and the value added of YPAR to SW-PBIS implementation. The two cases are from school districts chosen for their unique implementation of YPAR with SW-PBIS in middle and high schools. We used a general inductive approach to analyze field notes, documents, and interviews with school and district staff. We found that YPAR enhanced SW-PBIS implementation at the middle and high school level through alignment with adolescent developmental needs. Youth participatory action research also promoted equity through youth-led or youth–adult partnered assessment and data-driven decision-making, providing YPAR with the opportunity to improve the challenges SW-PBIS faces in decreasing disproportionality in academic outcomes for marginalized students. We provided examples to integrate YPAR with SW-PBIS at Tiers One through three.

Keywords
bullying, school climate, youth participatory action research, equity, youth-led

Bullying is a common problem in schools, with negative developmental and social-emotional consequences (Bayer et al., 2018). School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS), a Three-Tiered, school climate intervention (Bradshaw et al., 2012), has been shown to decrease bullying at the elementary school level (Waasdorp et al., 2012). However, results on its effects are mixed at the middle and high school levels (Bradshaw et al., 2015). We posit that one reason for inconsistency in SW-PBIS outcomes at the middle and high school levels is developmental fit.

Youth engagement is important during adolescence due to increased needs for autonomy and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Eccles et al., 1996). However, youth-serving settings (e.g., schools) often provide less autonomy as youth need more (Eccles et al., 1996). Further, programs created for youth, such as SW-PBIS, are often driven by adults without youth input (Lindquist-Grant & Abraczinskas, 2020). Thus, programming may not be relevant to students' perspectives and needs. To improve the success of SW-PBIS in middle and high school, we propose an approach aligned with youth'

developmental levels whereby students take a meaningful role in both norm-setting and data-driven decision-making.

One way to improve SW-PBIS's fit with adolescence is to increase student autonomy and relatedness through youth participatory action research (YPAR). The YPAR approach entails power-sharing in a youth–adult research partnership (Ozer, 2017; Wong et al., 2010). YPAR promotes critical reflection with youth and adults around systems-level factors that create and maintain oppression (e.g., bullying) and can improve peer-to-peer and teacher–student relatedness via perspective taking and constructive dialogue. This process equips youth who experience marginalization with the tools to navigate and challenge unjust social factors that impact their lives (Kennedy et al., 2020). This process can also decrease bullying through enhancing school climate domains like school connectedness and belonging.

The goal of this qualitative multiple case study paper is to illustrate synergies between YPAR and SW-PBIS and how YPAR can address challenges in SW-PBIS implementation at the middle and high school levels to decrease bullying and improve school climate. First, we provide background on bullying, SW-PBIS, and YPAR. We then share our multiple case study approach in which we utilized data from two California school districts to illustrate the value added (i.e., the why) of YPAR integrated with SW-PBIS, and how YPAR can be integrated across the SW-PBIS tiers. Last we discuss the findings and provide future direction for research and practice.

Bullying and School Climate

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, 20% of students in the United States reported experiencing bullying during school hours (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). In recent years, the dire mental, academic, and social consequences of bullying have come to light (Bayer et al., 2018). Negative developmental consequences have led researchers to increase attempts to reduce bullying and promote school safety through program implementation and changes to school climate (Wang et al., 2013).

School climate refers to the quality of personal interactions and school norms (National School Climate Center, 2021). School climate encompasses students' relationships with peers/teachers, perceptions of physical safety, emotional safety and connectedness, and school rules (Thapa et al., 2013). School climate plays a significant role in bullying perpetration. Positive school climate has been shown to reduce bullying in and out of school (Thapa et al., 2013). School norms that discourage bullying and encourage bystander intervention have resulted in lower rates of in-school bullying (Toomey et al., 2012).

Empirical research has demonstrated significant differences in student perceptions of school climate, with marginalized groups reporting more negative school climate perceptions than peers across race (e.g., Black–White gap; Konold et al., 2017), gender and LGBT (Toomey et al., 2012), and ability status (Sanders et al., 2018). These differences are particularly important given that marginalized groups are often the targets of bullying (Konold et al., 2017). Thus, reducing in-school bullying requires not only attention to the school climate overall but also attention to the distinct experiences of marginalized students.

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports

School climate interventions can reduce bullying while also addressing varying intensities of student needs (Bradshaw et al., 2012). A key example, and the focus of this paper, is School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS; Bradshaw et al., 2012). SW-PBIS is a non-curricular, Three-Tiered, whole school system to establish positive norms and behavioral supports to help students succeed socioemotionally and academically (Horner et al., 2020). SW-PBIS is implemented widely (i.e., over 25,000 schools, all 50 states; Center on PBIS, 2021). In it, staff, teachers, administrators, and behavior specialists form school teams. While school staff set positive norms and rewards for student behavior at the elementary school level, students are increasingly involved in norm settings at the middle and high school levels (Martinez & Winneker, 2018). Training is conducted to build school capacity to collect, manage, and report SW-PBIS implementation and relevant student outcome data (e.g., suspension and attendance). School staff then use the data to assess student response to Tier One programming and to select Tier Two and three targeted supports to meet unresponsive students' needs (Bradshaw et al., 2012).

Tier One involves universal programming (i.e., for all students). The first tier is meant to meet approximately 80% of students' needs through the creation of a culture where students expect, prompt, and reinforce each other's prosocial behavior. The SW-PBIS team creates a shared vision for behavioral expectations as well as reward and consequence systems. The team shares this vision with all students and staff. The team conducts universal screening and participates in a cycle of data collection and reflection to determine students' response to intervention (Horner et al., 2020). Tier Two targets students requiring higher levels of support (5–15% of students) than Tier One. Here, the school offers evidence-based programming, mostly in a group format. A SW-PBIS team selects interventions, identifies students in need, and monitors fidelity. Finally, Tier Three involves students in need of intensive, individualized assessment and support from specialists (3–5% of students; Horner et al., 2020).

SW-PBIS has been studied widely, most often with elementary schools, which have also shown the strongest positive effects. For example, evidence from trials of elementary schools randomized to SW-PBIS showed improvement in key student, teacher, and school level outcomes, including decreases in suspensions, bullying, and peer rejection and increases in academic achievement and school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Waasdorp et al., 2012). SW-PBIS outcomes have not been as strongly positive for marginalized students (McIntosh et al., 2018). McIntosh et al. (2018) found that schools implementing SW-PBIS with fidelity still struggled with disproportionality in disciplinary practices. Culturally responsive school-based interventions were developed to address these concerns, and have, to some extent (Hall et al., 2016). However, more work is needed in order for marginalized students to benefit fully from SW-PBIS. High-fidelity SW-PBIS implementation in middle and high schools has been associated with positive outcomes (e.g., reductions in office referrals and suspensions; Pas et al., 2019); although, findings in elementary school implementation are more consistent. One potential explanation for inconsistency in effectiveness at the secondary school level is that these settings are more complex than elementary schools (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

Developmental Fit

In addition to increased complexity (e.g., more staff/students; decentralized administration; Flannery & Kato, 2018), the mismatch between SW-PBIS processes and students' developmental needs may be a contributing factor to the mixed findings for SW-PBIS at the middle and high school level. A recent matrix frames different levels of youth engagement (i.e., consultants, collaborators, partners, and leaders; Richards-Schuster & Plachta Elliott; 2019). Traditional educational settings often situate students at the lowest end of the collaboration continuum, not even as consultants, but as passive recipients of knowledge and services (Anderson, 2020). This presumes that students do not have insight and agency to obtain information and to act to improve their school climate. Creating opportunities for youth to participate in decisions that impact their lives can align with the increased need for autonomy in adolescence (Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020; Suleiman et al., 2021). Thus, we propose youth–adult partnered or youth-led approaches to data-based decision-making in SW-PBIS to meet this developmental need.

Recently, SW-PBIS researchers have recognized the value of youth voice for programmatic buy-in (e.g., motivating rewards, acceptance of policy changes) and multi-level outcomes (e.g., socioemotional development and school climate; Bradshaw et al., 2014; Mager & Nowak, 2012). Relying solely on adult perspectives creates blind spots in understanding student body needs and programming that fits their interests (Martinez & Winneker, 2018). SW-PBIS

practitioners have also increased efforts to include students in SW-PBIS planning and implementation (Martinez & Winneker, 2018). For example, students have been involved in increasing the visibility of SW-PBIS, developing reward structures (e.g., peer recognition for positive behavior), conducting surveys to assess SW-PBIS relevant outcomes, and generating suspension alternatives (Martinez & Winneker, 2018).

Despite these advancements, authentic youth engagement in SW-PBIS data-driven decision-making is rare, even at the high school level (Martinez & Winneker, 2018), when the need for autonomy is paramount. Adult-driven assessment processes (e.g., adult-led surveys and focus groups) risk misinterpreting students' data/responses and missing student concerns, which can result in adult-selected interventions that are misaligned with student needs (Yonezawa & Jones, 2007), leading to low engagement (Yeager et al., 2018) and increasing disparities. We propose that a youth-partnered or youth-led approach to data-driven decision-making in YPAR can strengthen the fit of SW-PBIS with students' lived experiences, especially marginalized students, to promote equity.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth participatory action research is a form of community-based participatory research, in which youth and adults are active co-collaborators in a power-sharing research partnership (Ozer, 2017; Wong et al., 2010). Youth identify problems within settings that impact their lives and conduct research with peers and adults to address those challenges (Ozer, 2017). The research cycle includes (a) problem identification, (b) data collection, (c) data analysis, and (d) social action (Ozer, 2015). First, youth define the root causes of problems and form research questions (Ozer, 2015). Next, youth select and/or design research tools (e.g., surveys and interview protocol), create a data collection plan, and collect data (Ozer et al., 2008). Then, data analysis and action planning are done in partnership with adults or are completely youth-led. Finally, youth present their results to stakeholders and advocate for multilevel systems change (Kirshner, 2015).

Youth participatory action research is most commonly implemented within school settings (Anyon et al., 2018; Ozer & Douglas, 2013). It aligns with school initiatives (e.g., socioemotional learning; Ozer et al., 2021) and policies (e.g., Common Core; Kornbluh et al., 2015). Youth participatory action research has been positively linked with school- and SW-PBIS–relevant outcomes, such as academic achievement, attendance, and school belonging (Anyon et al., 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Voight & Velez, 2018). The main focus of YPAR, however, is systems change. As a result of YPAR, the developmental responsiveness and equity of school systems can be improved through interpersonal and systems-level change. For example,

adults reported exposure to new ideas and perspectives and stronger and more reciprocal relationships with youth as a result of YPAR (Kennedy et al., 2019; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). At the systems level, YPAR has impacted change in programs, policies, practices, and services to better meet youth' needs, especially youth who have experienced marginalization (Kennedy et al., 2019). For example, Kornbluh and colleagues (2015) highlighted how YPAR processes resulted in a push to integrate information on diversity and experiences with microaggressions into teacher professional development. Thus, YPAR has the potential to improve school equity through multi-level changes that can better serve marginalized students.

Purpose of Paper

Youth participatory action research has the potential to address gaps in middle/high school implementation of SW-PBIS through alignment with adolescent developmental needs. Youth participatory action research may also improve disproportionality in outcomes for marginalized students through its focus on systems change to eliminate oppressive practices and policies. Yet, the integration of YPAR with SW-PBIS is absent from the literature. The purpose of this paper is to begin to fill this gap in the literature by illustrating the synergies between SW-PBIS and YPAR and the value added of the integration of YPAR with SW-PBIS. We used a multiple case study design to highlight two sites that uniquely implemented YPAR with SW-PBIS, Stockton and Hemet. In our approach, we draw on the authors' involvement in long-standing research partnerships, including the experience of the fourth and fifth authors who are staff in the districts. The case examples also illustrate how YPAR can enhance student supports at Tiers One, Two, and Three of the SW-PBIS framework.

Method

Site Selection

We draw from data collected as part of a larger study designed to understand the use of YPAR evidence in the school districts in five states. Three of the school districts are in California. Additional details about the study sites are published elsewhere (Ozer et al., 2020). Stockton and Hemet were chosen for this paper because they were special cases of YPAR integrated with SW-PBIS exemplified in the Peer Leaders Uniting Students (PLUS) program. The other sites only included YPAR and were therefore excluded from this study. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California. Berkeley.

Context

In 2013, California—home to 12% of the U.S. population, with a high proportion of immigrant and English Language Learners—mandated family and community stakeholder input into the Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control and Accountability Plans legislation. However, California districts are not required to utilize specific student voice mechanisms. Approaches to stakeholder involvement are decided by each district.

Stockton School District. Stockton is a city of approximately 300,000 in the largely agricultural Central Valley of California. As of 2020, the school district had 11 high schools and enrolled 33,943 students. The majority of students identified as Latinx (68%). Of the remainder of the students, 13% identified as Asian, 10% identified as Black, and 5% identified as White. There was a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (83%), and 22% of students were English Language Learners.

Hemet School District. Hemet school district serves a very large geographical area that spans 704 square miles and includes rural, suburban, and small urban settings. In 2020, 20,894 students attended schools in the district, and there were seven high schools. Similar to Stockton, the majority of students identified as Latinx (64%). The remainder of the students identified as White (20%) and Black (9%). The district served a higher number of students experiencing poverty; 89% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Of the students in the district, 12% were English language learners.

Program Implementation

Similarities in YPAR and SW-PBIS Across Sites. PLUS is an example of school-wide programming implemented in Stockton and Hemet that integrates YPAR with SW-PBIS. PLUS is funded by state policy around stakeholder engagement (i.e., Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control and Accountability Plans legislation; Cohen et al., 2020). In line with SW-PBIS, students rated by teachers as being influential with peers are selected to be PLUS leaders in restorative problem solving and campus norm setting. PLUS leaders are trained in communication, conflict resolution, self-awareness skills, and specific topics (e.g., bullying). There is a PLUS team at the district level and at each middle and high school, with at least one PLUS adult advisor for each team. The PLUS teams also report to, or have a representative on, the SW-PBIS team. In a unique enhancement to SW-PBIS, PLUS leaders partner with PLUS advisors in a YPAR process involving survey design, data analysis, and solution generation. PLUS teams implement a survey (i.e., Direction Survey) between once a month and a few times a year

to assess student issues (e.g., school climate). The survey provides immediate results that students examine with a PLUS advisor. Students identify disparities in the data to address at the school level. Following data analysis, in a series of youth-led activities that create connection and community amongst students ("a forum"), PLUS leaders discuss the issues and brainstorm solutions to address the disparities in small groups with a subset of the school population. They then work on solutions with their peers and/or advocate to relevant stakeholders who hold the power to make changes.

PLUS and SW-PBIS in Stockton. Though PLUS in both Stockton and Hemet are allocated funding through the Local Control Funding Formula and Local Control Accountability Plans legislation, Stockton is unique from Hemet in that a centralized PLUS coordinator is funded at the district level (the 4th author), acting as a liaison between district leadership and schools. The PLUS district-level coordinator is on the district leadership SW-PBIS team and trains PLUS advisors to train students and run activities at the school sites. Staff in Stockton work through SW-PBIS frameworks to promote healthy interactions and reduce negative interactions (e.g., bullying). SW-PBIS teams rely on PLUS leaders to set norms that bullying is unacceptable. PLUS school climate and forum data also informs actions (e.g., staff professional development and celebration when data improves).

Stockton has implemented PLUS for a decade. In the 2011 to 2012 academic year, PLUS began in high schools, with a roll out to K-8 schools the following year. PLUS is now in 49 K-8 and high schools. PLUS is implemented as a college preparatory elective class in high schools and often as a club in K-8 schools. There are PLUS classes in 22 schools with about 30 students per class; the remaining 27 schools implement it as a club. In 2019 to 2020, almost 1,300 PLUS leaders led 225 PLUS forums with 6,500 total student participants; 37,801 students responded to 106 Direction Surveys.

PLUS and SW-PBIS in Hemet. Hemet began implementing PLUS 15 years ago in 1 to 2 high schools. Since then, it has expanded into all of the district's middle and high schools. At each of the four comprehensive high schools, a continuation high school, and four comprehensive middle schools, PLUS is run as a course. At the district's three K-8 schools, it is run by a counselor as a club. PLUS is a Tier One strategy within the district's SW-PBIS plan and a source of referrals to Tier Two. At Tier Two, PLUS leaders identify students who share challenges with them and inform school staff if there is a need for follow-up to counseling or other services.

In addition to PLUS teams at each school, there is a district PLUS team with representatives from each high school. Starting in 2017 to 2018 and each

subsequent year, the District PLUS Team has worked on a specific project. In April 2019, the team presented to the Hemet Governing Board how the PLUS program supported SW-PBIS at each of the campuses. The Board was so impressed that it significantly increased Local Control Accountability Plan funding for the PLUS program in the 2019 to 2020 school year (and each year since) and indicated to district administration that PLUS plays a central role in incorporating student voice to meet the district's overarching goals.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with school and district staff from Hemet and Stockton. To be eligible for participation in interviews, individuals needed to be YPAR/PLUS program implementers or school/district leadership in Hemet and Stockton. Potential participants were identified by district leadership and the developer of the PLUS program. Once identified, the first and second authors emailed potential participants to share information about the study, inquire about interest in participating, and to schedule an interview if interested. Snowball sampling was also used by asking participants at the end of the interview if there was anyone else that we should contact about the topic. The first and second authors emailed additional participants identified in snowball sampling using the process above.

Interviews (N = 16) were conducted between July 2020 and November 2020 by the first and second authors with 14 school staff, including 5th to 12th grade teachers, counselors, and school and district leadership in Hemet (n = 8) and Stockton (n = 8). Two of the interviews were second interviews with the same person. A semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions was used to explore participants' role in the district and YPAR, examples of YPAR implementation, how sites used research evidence and evidence-based practices, and how sites utilized evidence generated from YPAR to inform policies and practices. Each interview began with introductions, a description of the purpose of the study and interview, opportunity for questions, and verbal consent. Interviews were conducted by phone and ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in duration. All interviews were audio recorded with a handheld device and transcribed verbatim.

Documents and notes were also systematically reviewed as part of this study. The first author reviewed PLUS program reports from sites and presentations about PLUS provided by school sites and the program developer. The first author also observed and took field notes about topics covered, youth engagement, and actions taken as a result of youth input at virtual events conducted by the districts related to SW-PBIS and YPAR. Notes from conversations with the PLUS creator, the fourth and fifth authors, and other district leadership that occurred between 2018 and 2020 were also included. Follow-up clarification questions based on these notes

were asked as needed. Finally, the fourth and fifth authors work in the districts and provided written or verbal examples of PLUS/YPAR and how its implementation fits with SW-PBIS.

Data Analysis

We employed an instrumental multiple case study approach to provide an in-depth examination of an uncommon and complex phenomenon (i.e., how two districts used YPAR to inform the practices and strengthen the implementation of SW-PBIS), rather than an intrinsic approach focused on individual cases (Bamberg, 2020). Case studies are different than the narrative approach, which broadly examines recurring themes captured across several interviews or examples of a phenomenon. Given the rarity of the use of YPAR in SW-PBIS, the case study approach provided a detailed understanding of the integration of YPAR in SW-PBIS to inform future implementation (i.e., replication) and study of this phenomenon (Njie & Asimiran, 2014).

The verbatim interview transcripts (n = 16) were the primary data sources used in the analysis. Notes from conversations, online observations, and document reviews were consulted for background information on the PLUS program and examples as needed. The analysis used a general inductive approach proposed by Thomas (2006), a systematic method of analyzing qualitative data when theory development is not the research objective. The case study interview transcripts were read to identify segments of text related to our objectives of identifying synergies between YPAR and SW-PBIS and the value added of YPAR to fill gaps in SW-PBIS implementation to reduce bullying and improve school climate. Once identified, text segments were labeled to create categories. Overlap and redundancy in categories were removed to condense them into the most prominent themes that were aligned with our study objectives. The themes were further organized into narratives to facilitate documentation and comparison.

Results

Synergies Between YPAR and SW-PBIS

We first identified similarities between YPAR and SW-PBIS in the data, informed by theory and implementation literature related to the two approaches and reflections surrounding the case study sites. The following synergies emerged from the data: flexible implementation within school structures, participation of students from a variety of backgrounds and achievement levels, prosocial norm setting, multi-level impacts, regular assessment and data-driven decision-making, relationships between youth and adults, and the goal to decrease disproportionality in outcomes for

marginalized students. These synergies can be seen in more detail in Table 1, including quotes. Next, we expand on the key synergies in which YPAR can fill gaps in SW-PBIS implementation related to developmental needs and the promotion of equity. We specifically provide evidence for why YPAR should be integrated with SW-PBIS; the integrated approach can address gaps in SW-PBIS implementation and outcomes.

Power-Sharing Partnership Aligned with Adolescent Developmental Needs

One synergy that emerged from the case studies was that these approaches influenced student outcomes through youth–adult relationships. In SW-PBIS, teachers model prosocial norms and set rewards and consequences for student behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2012). Adults on the SW-PBIS team also select tiered student interventions based on assessment data. Teachers are seen as role models and leaders in these efforts; however, when teachers control these decisions in SW-PBIS implementation, a traditional power-over structure between youth and adults is upheld. In contrast, YPAR can enhance SW-PBIS because it uses a power-with structure, in which youth and adult perspectives are equally valued and complementary (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). To illustrate, a Hemet K-8 PLUS advisor shared her approach to developing survey questions to address student needs: "The kids made their own questions. We put in three questions that the district wanted us to address. And then the kids designed the rest."

The power-with structure in YPAR aligns with adolescent developmental needs more so than the SW-PBIS model. In adolescence, the need for autonomy and relatedness with peers and adults is paramount (Deci & Ryan, 2008). In YPAR, adults authentically engage youth in an autonomy-promoting, power-sharing partnership (Suleiman et al., 2021), in which students' lived experiences are prioritized in planning and decision-making, which can fulfill this need. To illustrate, in the Hemet case, the PLUS district student team organized a yearly district-wide mini-conference. In the past year, 350 students, PLUS advisors, and community-based agency staff attended. Hemet also involved students in numerous decision-making bodies to contribute to action planning to improve school climate:

> "Our district is moving towards more collaborative, student input, kids on committees, on boards…as opposed to telling them what to do. That's what kids want… taking charge of their behavior and school climate, what they can do to fix it"

(K-8 PLUS advisor). Further, all PLUS advisors across both sites shared strategies that they used to partner with youth in change efforts. For example, a

Hemet K-8 PLUS advisor viewed herself as a "liaison between administrators and students." A PLUS advisor in Stockton described herself as "a coach and cheerleader. What do you want to do to change…this campus for the betterment of everyone? Let me guide you that way."

Our exploration of interviews, archival documents, and field notes showed that through improved relationships between students and teachers, power-sharing youth–adult partnerships in Hemet and Stockton contributed to reduced bullying and improved school climate. One example of this relational process that emerged from the Hemet case study was opportunities for students and school staff to interact and learn about commonalities in their lived experiences. For example, in a K-8 school, students decided to include teachers in get-to-know-you activities in the first half of forums: "We did activities where you…throw up a question. What would you do if you could travel anywhere? The kids and adults were talking like friends do, that never happens" (PLUS advisor). Teachers' attendance at forums also led to increased understanding around areas of student–teacher disagreement:

> "They [teachers] did not agree with what kids were saying...the survey data says that kids don't have a safe person on campus to talk to. They [teachers] wanted to…say, everybody has somebody, when you're in the room and they're telling you they don't, it's harder to discount. It was eye opening to them; things they thought were not a big deal were a bigger deal to kids"

(Hemet K-8 PLUS advisor).

Youth–Adult Partnered Research-Action Cycle to Improve Educational Equity

A second synergy between YPAR and SW-PBIS that emerged from the case studies was a cyclical process of assessment and data-driven decision-making. In SW-PBIS, schools regularly collect and use data to assess and address disproportionality in marginalized student outcomes (e.g., suspensions and office referrals; Sandomierski et al., 2018). Further, SW-PBIS teams conduct universal and individualized assessments to determine students' need and response to intervention (Bradshaw et al., 2012). Adult SW-PBIS teams conduct focus groups and surveys to gain student perspectives (Martinez & Winneker, 2018). In contrast, the case sites used a youth–adult partnered approach. For example, in Hemet, students, supported by school staff, regularly polled the student body around school climate needs by administering the Direction Survey via phone, email, and lunchtime booths.

Across both sites, we identified that YPAR can enhance SW-PBIS via a shift from adult-led to youth-led or youth–adult partnered cycles of assessment and data-driven decision-making. For example, the Stockton district-

level PLUS coordinator highlighted how the YPAR process can strengthen SW-PBIS objectives: "PLUS is a perfect fit [for SW-PBIS teams] because everything [in SW-PBIS] is supposed to be data-driven and related to student needs." Student-led assessment started at the beginning of the research process through having "ongoing conversations about the questions and whether we're getting what they want, not what we want" (Stockton district-level PLUS coordinator). Critical questions were also posed to youth about the assessment findings "What did people mean?" Why do you think this is happening?" (Hemet K-8 PLUS advisor).

Based on the assessment results, in YPAR paired with SW-PBIS, students led in data-driven decision-making to design primary prevention programming to align with their interests and advocated for systems change to meet their needs. For example, a Stockton K-8 PLUS advisor shared that students identified bullying as an issue and created presentations for classes, which was "very powerful because they took it upon themselves to say these are the things that our school needs." The youth–adult partnered SW-PBIS team collaborated to understand mismatches in student needs and available resources and codesigned policies, practices, and programming aligned with student perspectives and interests. The Hemet district-level health education program specialist shared her perspective on youth autonomy and leadership for change: "In systems, we often look at students as consumers of services but they are resources in and of themselves."

Involving youth with lived experience in data-driven decision-making may also contribute to reducing disproportionality in marginalized youth outcomes that remain despite SW-PBIS implementation. Disproportionality can be impacted through identifying disparities in the data and advocating for and creating systems-level change for marginalized students, who have the lived experience of facing systemic oppression and inequity in schools (Anderson, 2020). Through our analysis, across both cases, we identified changes resulting from YPAR that can be particularly transformative for youth from marginalized backgrounds.

In Stockton, the district-level PLUS coordinator shared how results generated from student-led research have identified areas in which students felt that they were treated differently because of their identities. Presentation of the findings led to changes in systems and policies that promote equitable educational practices: "Data that the students collect…have pushed efforts towards building more equitable systems… implicit bias and racial/ethnic sensitivity training." These actions can improve school climate, as marginalized students can experience increased school connectedness and mattering if they have fewer negative interactions with staff. A Hemet K-8 PLUS advisor highlighted the positive impact of prioritizing students' needs and perspectives: "Kids have seen when issues come up, the adults have addressed it or at least given ear to it…in the past… things were just shut down… it gave

them the validation that every voice matters." Prioritizing marginalized students' perspectives in data-driven decision-making and action can also lead to improvements in systems-level barriers impacting their success, improving disproportionality in academic outcomes, a SW-PBIS goal. In addition to adult-generated solutions, students can take action as issues arise in the broader societal context, such as monthly student-led forums online about "race, diversity, equity, policing, safety, and distance learning. That is something that came out of students reaching out to their advisors" (Stockton district-level PLUS coordinator).

From our case examples, we identified synergies between SW-PBIS and YPAR and how the integration of YPAR with SW-PBIS can enhance the implementation of SW-PBIS (Table 1). Specifically, the integration of SW-PBIS and YPAR can meet the adolescent developmental needs of relatedness and autonomy through a power-sharing youth–adult partnership. Further, youth-led or youth–adult partnered systematic assessment and data-driven action can improve disproportionality in outcomes of marginalized students. Now that we have established the why, we illustrate, from our cases, specific examples of how YPAR can be integrated with SW-PBIS. We share examples of YPAR integrated with the SW-PBIS tiers of support at Tier One (universal prevention), Tier Two (targeted support), and Tier Three (intensive services) that emerged as we analyzed and recorded novel findings across data sources and sites.

Tier One: Preventing Bullying Through a Day of Unity

Case examples across sites illustrated that youth-led data-driven decision-making can identify broad student body needs, leading to the creation of Tier One programming. We provide one site specific example below, shared by the Stockton district-level PLUS coordinator. Students created a universal bullying prevention initiative, Unity Day, in which "all students wear orange, get lessons on anti-bullying, and learn what unity means." Students selected Unity Day after identifying high levels of bullying during their assessment of the Direction Survey data: "Students looked into different days… we put it in place district-wide because students wanted it…it's even a staple now." Sustained implementation of Unity Day has produced district-wide impact: "When PLUS started [based on the data] bullying was much higher than it is now (see Table 2)… I'm assuming we've done our job." This example illustrates how students, inspired by their engagement in data analysis, identified programmatic solutions to address school climate.

Table 1.

Theoretical and Implementation Synergies Between SW-PBIS and YPAR in Schools.

	SW-PBIS from literature	YPAR from literature	YPAR example from qualitative case data
Flexibly implemented in schools	SW-PBIS is a Three-Tiered, whole school approach to improve prosocial behavior and norms, to improve school climate (Horner et al., 2020)	YPAR is most commonly implemented in schools, in elective classes and afterschool programming (Anyon et al., 2018)	*At the high school level there is a three credit elective Leadership AB course.* Stockton PLUS coordinator *In K-8 schools, PLUS is implemented in clubs during free periods, lunch, and after school.* Hemet K-8 counselor
Assessment	School-wide data on academic outcomes is collected; Students unresponsive to Tier One intervention receive interventions at Tiers Two and Three, and are monitored regularly (Bradshaw et al., 2012)	Students conduct research to identify student needs (Ozer, 2015)	*We have a set of Chromebooks that are open when students come into the forum. We provide the link so they could use their phone. They take them when they come in…* Hemet PLUS teacher
Data-driven decision-making	SW-PBIS teams use data to determine if school-wide programming is working and to determine those students who need additional support; their progress is monitored (Horner et al., 2020)	Students conduct action cycles based on their research findings and advocate for change to stakeholders to meet their needs (Ozer, 2015)	*They gather both quantitative data in the form of a school-wide culture survey…and they gather qualitative data in focus group discussions on an issue that PLUS is going to investigate* .Stockton PLUS teacher
Multi-level impact	SW-PBIS has been shown to impact attendance, school discipline, bullying, academic, and school climate outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Waasdorp et al., 2012)	YPAR has impacted intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and systems-level outcomes (Anyon et al., 2018; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2020)	*I was at the post office getting a passport. I saw a picture of a student and I go, "Oh is that [name]?" And then the mom goes, "Oh, are you helping with my kids?" And she's like, "Oh my gosh, you have no idea. She always talks about you and how that leadership has helped her now, because I guess she's gonna, she's wrapping up things to be a nurse."* Stockton PLUS teacher

(continued)

Table 1.

(continued)

	SW-PBIS from literature	YPAR from literature	YPAR example from qualitative case data
Relationships between youth and adults[a]	In the traditional model, adults set behavioral norms and rewards for prosocial behavior (Martinez & Winneker, 2018)	Youth and adults collaborate in a power-sharing partnership (Wong et al., 2010); youth are viewed as capable of informing decisions to impact policies and practices (Cammarota & Fine, 2008)	*We circle the 2 or 3 big ahas from each group and then set about creating an action plan. What do we need to do now that we've learned this? I like to invite the administrator in case we want to go into an action mode.* Hemet K-8 counselor
Focus beyond high-achieving students	Students who are influential with their peers are chosen as norm setters (Martinez & Winneker, 2018)	Youth who are most marginalized are involved in the YPAR teams (Kornbluh et al., 2015)	*it's definitely not a group of my, um, all 4.0 kind of kids, it's kids that other kids will follow, you know, because my prima ballerina, that's all the group, you know, she's got her people, but other people are just going to roll their eyes at her. So, you're going to make sure that everybody looks at PLUS and sees somebody that they'll connect to. it'll make an impact for doing that."* Hemet K-8 counselor
Prosocial norm setting	Adults, and in some cases, youth, help set and inform students of prosocial norms and suggest rewards for positive behavior (Martinez & Winneker, 2018)	Youth work together in partnership with adults to solve systemic level equity challenges (Kirshner, 2015)	*we had a situation where a special ed student was having a meltdown… one of my more popular PLUS students went up to the student, helped calm them down and was seen by all the kids. That had a big impact on them because they saw, Hey, we can do that too.* Stockton K-8 counselor

(continued)

Table 1.

(continued)

	SW-PBIS from literature	YPAR from literature	YPAR example from qualitative case data
Aim to decrease disproportionality in outcomes[a]	Aim to reduce disciplinary and improve attendance and academic outcomes. Have challenges achieving this for marginalized groups (McIntosh et al., 2018)	Research-action cycles focus on creating or changing policies, practices, or programs that can decrease disparities and/or support marginalized students (Ozer et al., 2008)	*Student voice in our forums and climate surveys has really shown when we break it down by our ethnicities and by our genders some real disproportionate areas that we needed to pay attention to…it's really pushed the effort towards building more equitable systems.* Stockton District-level PLUS coordinator
Aligned with developmental needs of adolescence[a]	Youth have led efforts to set prosocial norms and rewards, less autonomy and relationship building around data-based decision-making (Martinez & Winneker, 2018)	Promote growth in adolescent developmental needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy through power-sharing and youth-led or youth–adult partnered data-based decision-making (Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020; Ozer, 2017)	*our principal meets with us, the students share their suggestions. I'm a liaison. Everything is student driven, I just support them by sending emails, scheduling trainings, training them. But we don't do anything unless the students are going to actually do it.* Hemet PLUS teacher

Note. YPAR = Youth Participatory Action Research; PLUS = Peer Leaders Uniting Students; SW-PBIS = School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

[a]Denotes areas where YPAR can enhance SW-PBIS.

Tier Two: Targeted Anti-Bullying Programming

Case examples indicated promise in YPAR complimenting and enhancing Tier Two data-driven decision-making and action to reduce bullying perpetration and improve communication. To illustrate this point, we provide an example from the 5th to 8th grades of a K-8 school in Hemet from the perspective of a PLUS advisor. PLUS leaders examined results from the Direction Survey mid-year and decided to provide anti-bullying educational support to grades flagged as high in bullying. To provide educational support around bullying, 8th grade PLUS leaders led a class session that included PowerPoint presentations, a conversation, and an inclusive activity, emphasizing why bullying is "a problem on campus, why we want to address it." Students were thus exposed to PLUS leaders who set norms against bullying; they also learned that they were not alone in their experience as well as how to support others. The PLUS advisor reported that students were more open in reporting bullying post-presentation: "During that time [right after the presentations], I was getting a lot of referrals from students saying my friend is being bullied or I'm being bullied. Students were more open about it, because they were more aware of what is bullying." There was evidence that the targeted intervention worked based on decreases in self-reported bullying victimization from mid-to year-end assessment: "[Bullying] decreased…they saw the impact that their presentations made in the numbers." The reduction is notable given that increased awareness often leads to greater reporting. School staff also observed change. School secretaries reported fewer kids in the front office, and campus security reported that a group that had been bullying were "Not an issue anymore… something you're doing is working." This example illustrates middle school age youth leading selection and implementation of targeted supports at Tier Two to address bullying.

Tier Three: Support Following Tragedy

Case studies suggested how a power-sharing youth–adult partnership after a tragedy can set positive school norms related to empathy, enhance a Tier Three intervention, and reduce burden on school counselors. The Stockton district-level PLUS coordinator and fourth author shared an example in which student PLUS leaders offered support after a traumatic student death. Students collaborated with the Wellness Center to create levels of support for students in the library. Peer leaders offered students refreshments, a quiet space, peer-to-peer support, and tables to write messages of support. The PLUS leaders, having been trained in supportive skills (e.g., calming breath), identified students who got their needs met in the library, provided peer-to-peer support, and referred students with highest need to Tier Three counselor support. The leveled system of support, with students assisting at Tiers One to Two

Table 2.

Stockton School Climate Data: Percent of Students Reporting Yes at Year End by Grade.

	I have been bullied on campus in the last 30 days			I have been cyberbullied in the last 30 days			I have friends my age that really care about me		
Year	4th – 5th	6th – 8th	9th – 12th	4th – 5th	6th – 8th	9th – 12th	4th – 5th	6th – 8th	9th – 12th
2019 to 2020[a]	13%	10%	6%	11%	7%	5%	89%	89%	86%
2018 to 2019	16%	11%	9%	9%	6%	7%	89%	87%	85%
2017 to 2018	17%	13%	10%	10%	7%	8%	89%	88%	85%
2016 to 2017	19%	15%	10%	—	—	—	87%	87%	81%
2015 to 2016	16%	13%	10%	—	—	—	85%	87%	85%
2014 to 2015	19%	15%	8%	—	—	—	86%	87%	89%
2013 to 2014	—	16%	9%	—	—	—	—	—	—

Note. Stockton is Stockton Unified School District.
[a]2019 to 2020 represents winter data for that year due to the pandemic/distance learning in March, April, and May.

and referring to counselors at Tier Three, freed up counselors to focus on intensive support for students most in need.

Discussion

Both case studies illustrated similarities in YPAR and SW-PBIS: flexible implementation within school structures, participation of students from a variety of backgrounds and achievement levels, prosocial norm setting, multi-level impacts, regular assessment and data-driven decision-making, relationships between youth and adults, and the goal to decrease disproportionality in outcomes for marginalized students. The examples from Stockton and Hemet show preliminary evidence of how to successfully integrate YPAR across SW-PBIS tiers. At Tier One, YPAR processes aligned with norm setting for anti-bullying messaging and a supportive campus. At Tier Two, YPAR informed data-driven decision-making in identifying student groups in need of targeted support and progress monitoring following student-selected intervention. At Tier Three, students provided age appropriate support and referrals.

Power-Sharing in a Youth–Adult Partnership to Meet Developmental Needs

Results also highlighted why YPAR should be integrated with SW-PBIS. First, SW-PBIS implementation has been misaligned with the adolescent developmental needs for relatedness and autonomy. Both case studies showed how YPAR can address this gap via the promotion of a power-sharing youth–adult partnership that prioritizes and values youth' lived experiences in

research and action, a finding supported by the broader YPAR literature. Power-sharing is crucial because it spreads expertise to all stakeholders, regardless of age or social identity (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Wong et al., 2010), which disrupts the dominant narrative that adults are experts and authority. An anti-ageist lens situates youth as experts of their lived experiences and youth relevant issues (Kennedy et al., 2020), providing them the opportunity to identify and describe oppressive social factors and contexts in their schools. Specifically, one YPAR aim is critical consciousness, which consists of critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. Kennedy et al. (2020) examined youth of color's critical consciousness development in a YPAR program in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Sustained dialogue between youth and adults provided opportunities for discussions of race in a charged national political context and reflections on their own views and avenues for action.

Critical consciousness development occurs in a colearning process that has the potential to reduce bullying. Colearning is different from the typical transfer of knowledge from adults to youth that occurs in traditional education (White et al., 2004). As youth engage in complex conversations with peers and supportive adults, their perspective taking and empathy skills grow (Kornbluh, 2019). Including this critical and reflective process in SW-PBIS programming enhances school climate by creating understanding of difference and shared lived experiences, leading to increased support for students by teachers and peers, as exemplified in our cases.

Youth–Adult Partnered Data-Driven Decision-Making to Advance Equity

Second, SW-PBIS implementation has struggled to decrease disproportionality in academic outcomes for marginalized students (McIntosh et al., 2018). Case studies demonstrated that YPAR can enhance SW-PBIS's equity aim through research and action prioritizing students with lived experience of marginalization to produce transformative changes in policies, practices, and programming to improve school climate. The finding is supported by the YPAR literature. In a youth-partnered or youth-led data-driven decision-making process, youth design research that reflects their lived experiences, democratizing data-driven decision-making and moving away from deficit-focused analyses (Ozer, 2016). Youth are typically excluded from decisions surrounding the development and implementation of policies and programs that shape their environments and well-being (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), such as SW-PBIS processes. The absence of youth' participation as key stakeholders in decision-making processes can lead to "adult-prescribed" interventions that do not adequately respond to youth' needs (Kennedy et al., 2020). Youth–adult partnered or youth-led analysis from YPAR can contribute

to the creation of more relevant and responsive interventions (Lindquist-Grant & Abraczinskas, 2020), including universal and targeted SW-PBIS programming and can lead to increased validity since planning and implementation are led by those closest to the issue (Ozer, 2015). At the middle and high school level, youth-led components can reduce school staff burden of navigating data-driven decision-making about programming across a complex campus. Youth-designed Tiers One to Three supports can better meet students' needs, due to their lived experiences.

Youth-led data-driven decision-making can improve school climate by shedding light on issues experienced by marginalized groups through research and action focused on those most impacted by the issues. Illuminating these issues may lead to a decrease in disproportionality in outcomes for marginalized groups, due to a focus on addressing systemic inequities (Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020). With those issues addressed, youth may have increased connections to school and a sense of mattering, fewer roadblocks to academic success (e.g., bias in disciplinary strategies), and better relationships with their peers and teachers. This can improve attendance, positive behaviors, and domains of school climate. Changes in school climate are especially important since marginalized students generally report more negative experiences of school climate compared to their peers (e.g., Konold et al., 2017). Thus, YPAR has the potential to strengthen SW-PBIS' alignment with youth developmental needs, while also improving their engagement, equity outcomes and reducing bullying, and improving school climate.

Unique YPAR Implementation Challenges

There are unique challenges for integrating YPAR into SW-PBIS in schools in order to make systems change in oppressive policies and practices to decrease disproportionality for marginalized student groups. Political climate, institutional power structures, and community interests all influence the approaches/theories permitted in school curricula. A potential contested YPAR goal, depending on the community, is having discussions around and working to change systems to overcome oppressive policies and practices that disenfranchise marginalized groups. One recent example is passed legislation in eight states banning discussions related to critical race theory in classrooms and proposed legislation in 20 additional states (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). In another example, Arizona's Commissioner of Education halted a Mexican-American studies program in Tucson, Arizona, which included a social-justice–oriented YPAR program, due to supposed "misalignment with American values" (Orozco, 2012). Notably, social-emotional programming has also received recent backlash as a preconceived "vehicle or platform" for discourse around issues of equity (Kingkade & Hixenbaugh, 2021).

With such contexts in mind, school staff may experience notable barriers when discussing concepts and engaging in action plans emerging from YPAR projects (i.e., addressing issues of discrimination, equity, and social change). While beyond the scope of this paper, empirical literature suggests that school staff interested in YPAR and SW-PBIS should assess the readiness of the school climate for engaging in such social change programming (i.e., identifying allies or champions within the administration, having conversations to prepare for backlash or pushback; Hannigan & Hannigan, 2020; Kohfeldt et al., 2011; Langhout, 2015); prepare students for potential roadblocks for engaging in YPAR and celebrating "small wins" when pushing for school-wide change (Foster-Fishman et al., 2006); as well as offering parents, educators, and community members compelling frameworks that highlight the benefits of such programming in relation to child development and school wellness (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Kornbluh et al., 2015; Ozer, 2016; Suleiman et al., 2021).

Future Directions

The current study provided an initial conceptualization of the integration of YPAR with SW-PBIS using a multiple case study approach with exemplar sites. Future directions for research are to systematically measure the impact of the integration of YPAR and SW-PBIS through randomized controlled trials or other intervention research designs to compare the implementation of SW-PBIS with YPAR to SW-PBIS alone. Additionally, obtaining youth perspectives will be crucial to align with participatory values. Collecting longitudinal student data, in addition to cross-sectional student data, will also be pertinent to track quantitative changes in domains that are hypothesized to improve when YPAR is integrated with SW-PBIS (e.g., bullying, school climate, disproportionality in discipline, attendance, and academic outcomes for marginalized students). Future directions for practitioners are to find ways to prioritize youth voice despite fluctuating political climates and priorities, especially the perspectives of youth experiencing marginalization. Creating online and in-person YPAR communities of practice, partnering with local youth-serving organizations known and respected by the community for implementation support, and providing time for schools and districts to learn from each other may be ways to work with these challenges.

Conclusion

Through analysis of interviews and document review, our case studies provided a framework and practical examples to integrate YPAR and SW-PBIS processes. Youth participatory action research can enhance SW-PBIS by increasing youth engagement in program planning and implementation to

increase the likelihood that prevention and targeted intervention meets students' needs. Youth participatory action research paired with SW-PBIS can further SW-PBIS' youth engagement goals by meeting adolescent developmental needs of autonomy and relatedness through a power-sharing youth–adult partnership. Youth participatory action research addresses gaps in equitable outcomes through youth-led data-driven decision-making and action to support changes in policies, practices, and programming to benefit marginalized students. Youth-led efforts can lead to positive developmental and socioemotional impacts, improvements in school climate, and reductions in bullying, while simultaneously improving SW-PBIS relevant outcomes and transforming school systems in the process.

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