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**I, Nina Lewis-Chapelle, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Studies.**

It is entitled:

**"I don't know what's best for you": Engaging youth as co-researchers in a Community-Based Participatory Research project utilizing Photovoice.**

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“I don’t know what’s best for you”: Engaging youth as co-researchers in a Community-  
Based Participatory Research Project utilizing Photovoice

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by

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### Abstract

The youth of this nation are the individuals that are most effected by educational policy and practices, however their perspectives are often not taken into account when developing programs and services. By including youth's perspective on their education we can gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of students experiences, utilizing the information to inform research and implement relevant policies. To engage students regarding their educational experience, the current study utilized a co-researcher model within a larger Community-Based Participatory Research project. Exploring the student identified topics of building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers, the current project utilized photovoice to capture student's voice. A participatory method, photovoice allows the students to photograph elements of their lives related to the topic, using those photographs as a catalyst for discussion, which aims to identify root causes and potential action plans. Through conducting photovoice, the students in the current study identified eight themes that were discussed as either a hindrance or as helpful in building relationships. Generally, the themes indicated that a stronger sense of community within the school, paired with spaces for students to practice their autonomy would assist in fostering better relationships both among students and between students and teachers within this setting. The findings support the notion that students are capable of conducting challenging research, and further suggest that students want the space to voice their opinions and make decisions within their school.

**Keywords:** Community-based participatory research, CBPR, photovoice, youth co-researchers, engaging youth





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### **Introduction**

For generations influential individuals have expressed the idea that youth are the future, many times citing the importance of education and/or learning in some way. Despite this notion, conversations regarding youth and their educational experiences often neglect to include youth's perspectives even though they are ultimately affected by the outcomes (Tileston & Darling, 2009; Jacquez, Vaughn, Wagner, 2013). Including student's perspectives on matters related to their education can allow a better understanding of the intricacies of student's lived experiences, a factor often not taken into account when developing programs and services for marginalized populations and youth (Stringer, 1999; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996; Vaughn, Jacquez, Lindquist-Grantz, Parsons, & Melink, 2016). Obtaining youth's perspectives on their school experience can play a crucial role in not only informing research, but also for the implementation of policy and the guidance of practice ultimately allowing for a deeper understanding of the issues, with greater accuracy and relevance (McIntyre, 2000). Additionally, youth are able to engage in critical discussions about elements of their lives given the opportunity and space to authentically engage (Livingstone, Celemencki & Calixte, 2014). The suggestion then, is that youth are not only capable of participating in these conversations but that their contributions will allow for more relevant and successful policies and programs.

One such way of obtaining youth's perspectives on their educational experience is by utilizing a co-researcher model, placing youth as the driving force of the research process. The current study served as an initial step toward authentically including youth's voices and perspectives on their educational experiences in a research setting. More specifically, this study authentically engaged a group of high school youth as co-researchers, inquiring upon their school experiences in a long-term Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project. As part of

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the larger CBPR project, the current study engaged student co-researchers utilizing the photovoice method (PV) to examine the factors within their school that either stifle or aid in building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. By engaging youth from a co-researcher standpoint on a topic that they chose, we have gained valuable insight into the factors that help or hinder in building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. The co-researchers in this study also explored potential plans to target factors described as hindrances and to build upon factors described as helpful.

### **Background**

This project represents one portion of a larger youth partnered CBPR project that is still in process and has aimed to engage high school youth enrolled in the UC scholars program. Prior to the beginning of the current study students participated in a group level assessment (GLA), a participatory large group method which allows for the inclusion of multiple stakeholders and ensured student driven data (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014). The GLA resulted in the identification of five themes surrounding youth's school experiences. Early stages of the CBPR project were dedicated to investigating the first three themes gleaned from the GLA (increase support, student success, and increased opportunities), leading to the creation and dissemination of a survey. The current study however focuses on the remaining two themes from the GLA: building positive relationships among students and between students and teachers. Two research questions were developed and shared with the student's. Ultimately students agreed on investigating the research questions: 1) How can we build positive relationships among students? 2) How can we build positive relationships between students and teachers?

## Literature Review

Gaining popularity, CBPR has been shown as an effective way to engage various community stakeholders in a research process driven by their experiences and perceptions. (Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 2001; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Rooted in critical pedagogy, CBPR is not identified as a research method but rather as an orientation to research in which the focus is on equitable power sharing and decision making between the researcher(s) and the partnered community members while developing knowledge and change (Israel, et. al, 2001; Minkler, et. al 2008; D’Alonzo, 2010). Freire (1970) posited that individuals of oppressed and marginalized communities must be the driving force in their own liberation. His work, which engaged individuals in all parts of the process, followed a cyclical process of knowledge generation, reflection, and action. By identifying and examining root causes, individuals can prioritize issues needing attention and solutions that should be implemented. Put simply he contended, “that anyone could and should be able to critically engage with their personal and social reality” (Skovdal, Newton, & Ullah, 2014, p5). To ease the utilization of this critical framework that has influenced CBPR, Israel and colleagues (2013) have identified and developed key principles that help guide the development and sustainability of a CBPR project, as noted in Table 1.

Table 1.

### Principles of CBPR

1) Acknowledges community as a unit of identity.	2) Builds on strengths and resources within the community.	3) Facilitates a collaborative, equitable partnership in all phases of research
4) Fosters co-learning and capacity building among all partners.	5) Integrates and achieves a balance between knowledge generation and action	6) Focuses on local relevance of public problems and on ecological perspectives
7) CBPR involves systems development using a cyclical	8) Disseminates results to and involves all partners in wider	9) Seeks a long-term partnership, committed to

and iterative process.	dissemination of results.	sustainability.
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While the use of CBPR has become popular in the healthcare field, less literature utilizing CBPR in other fields of study without a healthcare component have been published. Additionally, there have not been many CBPR projects that engage youth both as co-researchers and as the guiding force of the research. A recent review of the youth driven CBPR literature found that of the 385 articles chosen for review only 15% or 56 of the articles were deemed as CBPR with youth, classified by a partnership with youth in some form (Jacquez et. al, 2013). This review highlighted the scarcity of youth driven CBPR in fields unrelated to healthcare as only seventeen of the fifty-six identified articles contained content areas unrelated to health or general wellness. Of those seventeen articles, there were seven that focused on engaging youth as a means to change the school environment, four focusing on safety/violence and six focusing on youth engagement with interest in the process and outcome.

By authentically engaging youth as co-researchers investigating their experiences within school, CBPR immediately shifts the focus from doing research ‘on’ the youth to doing research ‘with’ the youth. This focus allows for youth to take on the role of expert, as their lived experiences and knowledge of the school context will drive the study (Livingstone, et al., 2014). In framing the youth as co-researchers and subsequently producers of expert knowledge, this shifts traditional power dynamics typically placing the outside researcher in the role of expert (Mendenhall, Berge, & Doherty, 2014; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). This helps in efforts to create an open space where youth feel comfortable to discuss and analyze their experiences (Schensul, & Berh, 2004). Additional benefits of these shifting power dynamics, (when paired with established trust), include youth feeling comfortable to disagree with experiences and ideas, even when proposed by adults, and the opportunity to challenge the way youth issues are

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currently framed and described in the dominant media and literature (Livingstone, et al., 2014; Merves, Rodgers, Silver, Sclafane & Bauman, 2015). These benefits have contributed to youth developing their voices as decision makers, and researchers who can critically analyze their lives with a social change focus (Schensul et al., 2004). When youth are engaged as co-researchers we may gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences while in school, allowing for the development and implementation of relevant change efforts (Israel, et al. 2001; Mendenhall et al., 2014).

Photovoice has emerged as an effective method in CBPR, particularly in engaging populations like youth who don't typically have a voice in society (Chio & Fandt, 2007; Hergenrather, Rhodes, & Bardhoshi, 2009, Jacquez, et al., 2013). Utilizing photography, the participatory nature of PV allows for authentic student input from their perspectives. Also rooted in Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, this method asks participants to photograph their lives, using chosen photographs as a basis for critical discussion. The aim is to gain knowledge from the perspective of the community that is then used to catalyze change. In addition to the influence of critical pedagogy, PV also draws on the theoretical foundations of feminist theory and documentary photography (Baker & Wang, 2006). Feminist theory suggests that emphasis needs to be placed on the voices of marginalized populations, as they are the best resources for understanding the intricacies of the communities with which they are apart (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004). Documentary photography can then be seen as a way of communicating a population's voice (Hegenrather et al., 2009). The photographs serve as the voice of the individual's concerns and considering the universal nature of photography, their concerns can be viewed and received by anyone (Wang & Burris, 1997).



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Photography as a means to investigate youth's realities has become increasingly popular, particularly with the use of the PV (Hergenrather et al., 2009). Previous youth PV projects lend support to the use of the method with this population from both the researcher and youth perspectives. Researchers note that PV's interactive processes allow for youth to have a better opportunity to actively engage and participate while gaining empowerment and self-confidence (Wilson, Dasho, Martin, Wallerstein, Wang, & Minkler, 2007; Messias, Jennings, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2008). Youth value the creativity of the method and enjoy participating, some stating they would be willing to participate in future PV projects (Chio et al., 2007). Results of a youth PV project found that youth enjoyed taking and talking about their pictures, felt the photos were accurate representations of their lives and were appreciative of having been included in the process (Strack et al., 2004). These previous findings support the notion that PV can be helpful when engaging youth as co-researchers and that PV should not hinder the research process.

Aspects of this methodology can assist in the current studies goal of authentically engaging youth as co-researchers. By taking photographs of their experiences in school, the gleaned information is more likely to be of importance to the youth, contrasting more traditional research motivated by researcher interests (Griebeling, Vaughn, Howell, Ramstetter, & Dole, 2013; Livingstone et al., 2014). The photographs give youth an alternative way of both expressing themselves and of representing their lives, ultimately giving them the opportunity for their voice to be heard in a powerful way (Schensul et al., 2004; Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000; Wilson et al., 2007) By subsequently engaging youth in critical dialogue surrounding their chosen photos, youth have the opportunity to describe the meaning of their photos and reasoning for taking them, while serving as a space for active reflection on the commonalities and/or

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differences among the group (Livingstone et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2007). This can allow for not only a deeper understanding of the youth's experiences, but also an understanding of how they make meaning in their lives (Griebeling et al., 2013). This suggests that using PV will allow for youth to authentically contribute their ideas and experiences as they are in control of which photos they choose to represent their experiences.

With both CBPR and PV seeking to authentically engage populations in inquiry, reflection, and action, utilizing PV in the current CBPR project may strengthen the validity and credibility of the research by “drawing on local knowledge, developing local theory, and progressing toward action, hallmarks of CBPR” (Streng, Rhodes, Guadalupe, Eng, Arceo, & Phipps, 2004, p. 405). A recent review exploring the prevalence of CBPR projects using the PV method suggested a need for more projects engaging youth (Hergenrather et al., 2009). In the review's initially chosen 188 articles evaluated for exclusion criteria, thirty-one articles using PV in a CBPR project remained. Only eight of the 31 articles engaged youth in the process with three of those eight engaging both youth and adults. Neither of these eight studies investigated youth's experiences while in school, indicating a gap that may be filled by the current study. The review by Hergenrather and colleagues (2009) suggests a need for additional studies engaging youth in CBPR projects using PV, particularly investigating student's experiences in school.

### **Method**

#### **Site/Participant Selection**

Located across the street from the University of Cincinnati (UC), Hughes is a STEM magnet high school emphasizing science, technology, engineering and math. The relationship between the UC and Hughes has been growing in collaboration over the years. The UC scholars program, a prime example of this collaboration, focuses on getting students to be “college-ready”

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by exposing Hughes juniors and seniors to a three week college experience which includes taking classes and learning about campus life. Hughes students must apply and interview in order to be selected for the program, and those who are admitted were described as “the cream of the crop” and headed for college. Students involved in the UC Scholars program share an advisory period to allow for additional college readiness experiences. The students in this year’s UC scholars program were the co-researchers in the current study.

I was granted access to work with the UC scholars during their advisory period for a total of six sessions over the course of a two-week period. Accompanied by the individual engaging the youth in the larger CBPR project, the only constant factor was the time frame with which we were with the youth. The number of students present varied each session from three to twelve, the space to conduct the research changed multiple times, teachers came in to make announcements, and sometimes students needed to complete advisory assignments before we could begin research.

### **Partnership Development and Positionality**

With partnership development and sustainability as key tenets of CBPR, I was worried that as an outside Caucasian female graduate student entering a high school in which 96% of the student body are minorities, that the youth may have initial feelings of apprehension or mistrust (Israel, et al., 2013; U.S. News & World Report, 2017). Acknowledging the limited time frame I emphasized my role as a learner and strived to maintain an atmosphere that valued the voices of the youth, actions that have been shown to assist in alleviating feelings of apprehension and mistrust (Isreal, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Fortunately the youth were extremely willing to share their stories and even correct me when I misinterpreted their ideas, supporting previous research (Livingstone, et al., 2014).

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The students and the individual overseeing the larger CBPR project were very familiar and trusting of each other due to their interactions in earlier stages of the project. While I believe this trust may have contributed to my success in engaging the youth, I believe that a candid statement I made at the end of my initial introduction helped to solidify student 'buy in.' I simply stated that, "I don't like the way adults come in and tell you how to live your life. I don't know what goes on in your life, or what you go through so who am I to tell you how you should be living. I don't know what's best for you." One of the students immediately replied "Oh yeah, I like that" which was followed by affirmative head nods and mumbled "yeahs" from other students. Despite this positive interaction suggesting student buy-in there were no other indications until the last session. I thanked the youth for their time and for allowing me to learn about their lives. One of the students came to hug me, followed by multiple students asking if I could continue coming. I was surprised by this reaction. Unless students were contributing to discussion, they would talk amongst themselves, look at their phones and put their head down on the desk throughout most of the sessions. This interaction helped me to understand that engaging youth in a short term CBPR project can be successful when the intended values are accurately portrayed to the youth.

### **Photovoice**

**Training.** Before data collection began, the youth went through a 'training' aimed at orienting them to taking pictures for the sake of research. This included discussions surrounding photography ethics and attention to potentially harmful scenarios. Examples of situations to avoid including taking photographs of illegal scenarios, breaking school/classroom rules, and taking photographs in inappropriate places such as locker rooms/bathrooms was also discussed. This discussion resulted in the basic ground rules of: Don't photograph anyone in a scenario you

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wouldn't want your picture taken, and don't take a photograph if it's going to put anyone in danger. The students were also notified about the need to obtain informed consent when photographing recognizable pictures of individuals. A sample dialogue to obtain consent was provided along with multiple consent forms, and a written version of the training information.

**Data collection.** Youth were in immediate agreement to investigate the topics of building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. Keeping in line with the tenets of CBPR, I brought the research questions and photo assignment to the youth for input. In order to obtain information about these topics, the photo assignment stated: What are the people, places, or things that help or hinder building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers? The group wanted to investigate both positive and negative aspects that contribute to building these positive relationships. By investigating negative aspects students could identify issues to target during action plans and by investigating positive aspects they could build upon factors that already contribute to building these positive relationships.

Despite the literature that describes PV as a well-liked method among youth (Chio et al.; Strack et al.2004), these youth didn't seem to need pictures to engage in critical discussion about this topic. Over half of the students never took a picture, and the majority of pictures that were shared with the group were either taken outside of the school environment or in the classroom when they walked in the door for that day's session. Even with these shortcomings, every student contributed to discussions surrounding the photos at some point and students were able to relate the photos to larger ideas within their school.

**Data analysis.** In order to analyze the photographs that youth brought to the group sessions, PV uses the SHOWED acronym corresponding to the questions: 1) What do you see in

this photograph?; 2) What is happening in this photograph?; 3) How does this relate to our lives?; 4) Why do these issues, concerns, strengths exist?; and, 5) What can we do to address them? (Wang et al., 2000). In order to ensure ownership of the pictures, the individual responsible for the picture began the discussion. After their initial input, the discussion was then opened up to the group with the aim of identifying root cause(s). During this process I was responsible for facilitating group discussion, recording information and probing youth to think deeper. During the last session, I presented the various themes that were identified by the group over the five sessions and asked for feedback. Our main focus of this conversation was to further develop the students corresponding responses to the previously answered question: What can we do to address them? Although no action was planned, a number of ideas regarding plans were generated.

### **Findings/Results**

Students indicated eight themes that either hinder or help in building positive relationships among students and between students and teachers. The five themes indicating a hindrance to building positive relationships included: 1) Social media usage 2) Students sleeping in class 3) Lack of support 4) Cell phone usage and 5) The Alternative Learning Center (ALC).

Alternatively, the three themes indicating factors that help in building positive relationships included: 1) Advisory Class 2) Bonding experiences, and 3) Social Support. Table 2 further groups the eight themes, identifying which type of relationship they correspond to. Students in this project described teachers as either ‘allies or enemies.’ Within the results, utilizing the term teacher does not suggest all teachers feel or act the stated way. More so, the ideas presented in the results section are a general representation of teachers who fall in either the ally or enemy category.

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Table 2.

### Photovoice Themes

Photovoice Theme	Relationship Building Among Students		Relationship Building Between Students and Teachers	
	Helped	Hindered	Helped	Hindered
Social Media Usage		x		
Students Sleeping		x		
Cell Phone Usage		x		x
Lack of Support				x
ALC				x
Advisory Class	x			
Bonding Experiences	x			
Social Support	x		x	

### Hindering Themes

**Social Media.** Despite acknowledging the ease and usefulness of social media in communicating with peers, students noted social media as a hindrance to building positive relationships. They identified several examples of how social media negatively affected positive relationships among students, centered around hurt or negative feelings. Utilizing social media to bully, or put other students down was cited as a factor that hindered positive relationships among students. The ease of access to social media makes this particularly hindering as students can communicate almost anywhere at any time. Students also identified issues with social media that result from misunderstandings. They described instances in which the context or tone of written words can be misinterpreted through text, potentially leading to negative feelings. The group

discussed the potential for a peer mediation group aimed at addressing conflicts developed through social media but ultimately decided that it wouldn't be feasible.

**Students Sleeping.** Surprisingly, students only cited their peers sleeping in class as a hindrance to building positive relationships among students. The students suggested that upon waking the common practice for the individual who was napping is to attempt to copy the class assignment. This puts students in a difficult scenario potentially harming their relationships. Students feel that their peers should also have to complete the assignments on their own. If the napping individual is a friend, there can be an additional layer of tension given the stated perception that “you’re supposed to help your friends.” Students suggested that teachers could help with this hindrance by creating several versions of assignments, making certain to give neighboring students different versions. This would allow students the opportunity to help their peers with assignments without affording them the opportunity to copy.

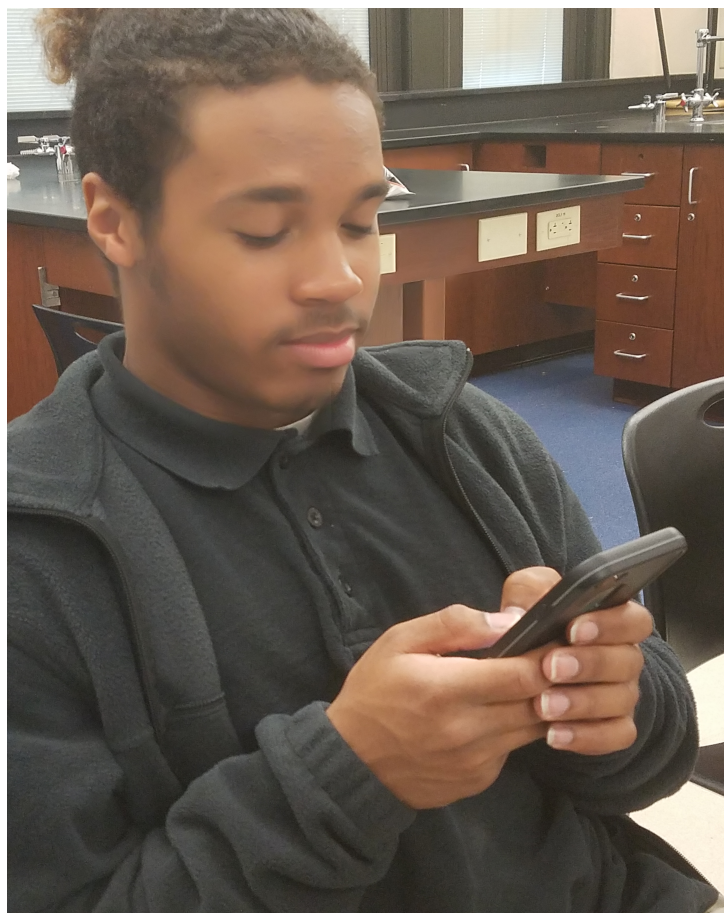


**Figure 1.** Advisory Classmate Sleeping

**Phones Usage.** The use of cell phones in class was seen as a hindrance to building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. Some students noted feeling hurt when their peer's attention was focused on their phones. One student described a scenario in which their peer began looking at their phone mid conversation,



essentially ignoring the remainder of the conversation. This student recalled feeling upset and uncertain about the stability of the friendship.



**Figure 2.** Student on cell phone during class

Students also described the difference in maturity between 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> graders and 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> graders, arguing that there should be different cell phone policies for the two groups. They claimed that 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely to use their phones for socializing and surfing the internet, while 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> graders are more likely to use their phones as tools to aid in their educational experience. These students believe cell phone rules should be stricter with 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> graders and allow for more freedom with 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> graders. Students also noted

that teacher's enforcement of cell phone rules varied. The use of cell phones in class was noted as a hindrance to the teacher student relationship with those teachers that followed the rule more strictly. In attempts to gain student compliance to the cell phone rule, some teachers may react aggressively and/or "snatch the phone." Students expressed their dismay and the negative feelings that have resulted from similar scenarios.

**Lack of Support.** This was a big theme for the students in terms of hindering positive relationships between students and teachers. Students discussed the various ways they felt a lack of support from teachers, one student even going as far to say they “feel like they’re against us instead of there to help us.” Students gave many examples when teachers would react and punish students without listening to the full story, thus punishing innocent students. In describing instances in which teachers have put students down and/or displayed negative emotions toward students, some view these teachers as immature. There was some disagreement among the group, as some students acknowledged that teachers could be hard on them because the teachers care and want to push students to do their best. Everyone agreed if that was the case then teachers should work on the ways they convey their messages to students.



**Figure 3.** Picture of Unsupportive Manager

There were also descriptions of the lack of support students received from teachers in terms of academics. The youth recognize favoritism towards students who participate in athletics and feel as if teachers are more concerned with disciplining students than with ensuring their academic success. Students feel as if they can’t ask some teachers questions about school assignments. They claim that teachers have gotten upset with students for asking questions and have failed to help students when needed. When some teachers do acknowledge questions they may describe them as dumb or suggest a student is dumb for asking the question. Students who

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are in school leadership described similar scenarios in which teachers and faculty have dismissed student's ideas about without allowing the opportunity for discussion.

In order to address these issues of support, the students suggested creating a peer mediation advisory board composed of both students and teachers/faculty. Using a traditional peer mediation model, this board could help to solve disputes between teachers and students in an environment of their peers. Key to this advisory board would be both a student and adult present during mediation, attempting to have an equal distribution of power. Students believe that having an open space for dialogue could help both parties to better understand each other, and could allow for growth from constructive criticism.

**ALC.** Located in a classroom, the ALC is this high schools version of an in school suspension, or detention. If students become unruly or disorderly, teachers can send students there with class work and know that they will be looked after. There is always a



**Figure 4.** Door leading to the ALC

teacher in the ALC and rules dictating what students are allowed to do while present. Students cite the utilization of the ALC as a hindrance to building positive student teacher relationships. Teachers “say it’s not a punishment” according to students, and yet students describe the ALC as jail and mention feeling like a prisoner when they are there. This has left students

feeling as if ‘teachers don’t like us and just send us there,’ a notion that was verbalized by one but confirmed by others. Tying in to the lack of support theme, students also felt that they are sent to the ALC without a chance to tell their side of the story. One student gave an example of a time a classmate was using profanity to put them down and called them names. After attempting to calmly ask the individual to stop many times with no response, this student got frustrated and started yelling at the offender. Upon hearing this student raise their voice, the teacher then sent that student to ALC without listening to their side of the story and the other student went free without any punishment. Students suggested that occurrences like this one are common practice throughout school.

### **Helping Themes**

**Advisory Class.** Students cited their advisory class as a place that helps build positive relationships among students. While these students may have other classes together, the largely nonacademic setting of the advisory class was considered more conducive to relationship building. With a more relaxed structure, students are given more flexibility to get to know one another and build deeper connections. They would like to see some changes to the current advisory structure however. Students believed if advisory class was more consistent, perhaps once a week, the space could allow



**Figure 5.** Hallway leading to advisory class



for more students to build relationships. Additionally, students want more fun activities to fill their free time when there's not district assignments to complete.

**Bonding Experiences.** This group of students had many opportunities to build relationships amongst themselves being that they were all enrolled in the UC scholars program and shared the same advisory class. They recognize how instrumental these bonding experiences have been to the growth of their relationship as a group, but acknowledge how small their group is in comparison to the student body. While bonding experiences could have been placed under



**Figure 6.** Two UC Scholars students

the advisory theme, students saw this as a separate entity. Programs like UC scholars allow students to come together outside of the typical school day and engage in activities surrounding a shared interest. These students viewed these types of bonding experiences as more beneficial to relationship building than the required advisory class. They wished there were more programs for students to choose from that could help to create these bonding experiences.

**Social Support.** Students gave many examples of ways the student body could support each other, potentially creating an environment more conducive to building positive relationships. They believe that students should attend more sporting events for their classmates,

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claiming that these experiences could help athletes to feel supported and appreciated by students who aren't involved in sports. They also believed that the school should try to foster more experiences in which students can help one another. Particularly, these students believe that they should be helping one another with class assignments as this could help build positive relationships among students.

Students currently feel as if there is only



**Figure 7.** Helping a coworker

competition amongst themselves in terms of academics. Along those same lines, students felt 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders should help guide the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The advisory class is comprised of juniors and seniors, and even these juniors were able to note the benefits of advice given to them from the seniors. They wished other students were able to benefit from this type of mentorship among students.

In order to build more positive relationships between students and teachers, these students suggested that teachers would need to foster more support towards the students. The main way these students have witnessed support from teachers that has helped in building positive relationships was to get to know the students. When teachers place importance on getting to know their students, and on sharing information about themselves, students view these teachers as allies. One student gave an example of the importance of this notion. Without a ride home for the day, a teacher who was previously disliked by the student offered to take them home. This car ride together, in which they were able to talk candidly about their lives, resulted in the student having a change of heart and beginning to like the teacher. These students

acknowledge that teachers' jobs are difficult and that they are under pressure from the district, they just want to feel more included in their teacher's lives.

### **Discussion**

The current study provided the student co-researchers space to voice their experiences regarding school issues, while offering potential solutions. These students are not happy with the general status of relationships in their school and through conducting a PV project, they were able to identify issues and target strengths upon which to build. Like previous findings, these co-researchers demonstrated their ability to engage in critical discussions about elements of their lives when given the opportunity and space to authentically engage (Livingstone, et al., 2014).

While students identified eight themes that helped or hindered building positive relationships among students and between teachers and students, there are commonalities between the themes. Many of the PV themes suggested that students desired a stronger sense of community within school. Seemingly contradictory, some of the PV themes also suggested the importance of student autonomy. This contradiction may be seen as a typical balancing act with this population as youth struggle to gain autonomy while also remaining connected to larger groups like family (Brezina, 2008). Connecting this idea to the current context, previous research has suggested that when students have a strong sense of belonging to their school community, the student teacher relationships and the relationships among students are stronger (Anderman & Leake, 2007; San Antonio & Salzfas, 2007). Additionally, positive student teacher relationships have been shown in school environments where the students feel respected, supported and valued by teachers (Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, & Michalowski, 2009).

Students cite experiences that allow them opportunities to have conversations with their peers and teachers as instances helpful in building positive relationships. Similar to previous

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findings, students wanted opportunities to get to know their peers and teachers, preferably in a nonacademic, fun environment (Cothran, & Ennis, 1997). Specifically they believed that creating more bonding experiences surrounding a shared interest, more consistent advisory classes, and more social support could aid in building more positive relationships among students and between students and teachers. Essentially students want more experiences that help in building the community of their school.

Alternatively when students are faced with experiences that hinder or halt communication, these experiences hurt relationships. Individual disputes between students and teachers can damper the positive feelings of surrounding individuals as they may develop a bias based on their perception of the incident (Sheets, 1996). Themes indicating negative interactions among students and between students and teachers may then be seen as hindrances to the positive community vibe and thus the building of positive relationships. Examples include utilizing social media to bully or put others down, student's voice being cut short from teachers, and cell phone usage that both created tension among students and between students and teachers. Although these examples were not discussed on a community level in the results, they may speak to the climate of the school on a whole.

Students in the current study however differed from previous findings in that they understood the value of academics in relationship building (Allen, 1986). More specifically, students saw the benefits in assisting each other with academic pursuits. Students believe creating an environment allowing for a mutual exchange of help with school work, support for each other in extra-curricular activities and peer mentorship programs could help in building positive relationships, particularly among students. Even in hindrance themes we can see that they value education. Students don't want their napping peers to copy their work, but they are



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happy to help them to complete the assignment. These students also want academic support from their teachers. Currently they feel like their teachers have favorites, and that they can't ask teachers questions regarding classwork. The suggestion then is that students also believe that increasing the community feel in terms of academic support will help in building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers.

Students in the current study also hinted at their desire for autonomy as a way to help in building relationships both among students and between students and teachers. More specifically, they viewed instances in which their autonomy was denied as a hindrance to building relationships particularly between students and teachers. Students discussed the ways teachers silenced their voices, an act which has been viewed as "treating them and their intellectual capabilities as insignificant" (Camarota & Romero, 2006). In the ALC and lack of support themes, students expressed their dismay with teacher's seemingly unjust punishments, desiring the space to voice their perspectives on the conflict. Those participating in student government feel as if their attempts to make change and provide programs for their peers are thwarted by teachers/administrators without discussions for alternatives. Students have ideas about school policies, like the idea for different cell phone use rules for the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> graders compared to the 11<sup>th</sup>/12<sup>th</sup> graders, they just don't currently feel as if their voice matters. These students want the space to verbalize their opinions and they want to contribute to decision making within their environment.

Although partnership development is an incredibly important part of CBPR (Israel et al., 2001; Minkler et al., 2008), the current study showed that students could successfully engage in a PV research project despite time constraints and minimal time devoted to partnership development. Despite worry that the youth may have initial feelings of apprehension or mistrust,

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emphasizing my role as a learner, and striving to maintain an atmosphere that valued the voices of the youth may have assisted in alleviating those feelings (Isreal et al., 1998). The findings suggest that student's strong desire to implement change and voice their opinion assisted in the research process. Given that students already felt a strong sense of community within the advisory group, and that from the very beginning importance was place on their perspectives and opinions, this PV project may be seen as an example of the type of environment these students see as beneficial for building positive relationships

Students put thought into how the PV themes were applicable to the current investigation and how this information could be utilized to create a better environment for building relationships. Even when discussing issues surrounding building relationships with teachers, these students tried to understand the complexity of their teacher's roles. Although time restrictions impeded our ability to execute an action plan, students identified potential solutions to address some of the PV themes as described in the results. Generally speaking, increasing activities that will build a sense of community throughout the school, like attending sports games and increasing non-academic bonding experiences, while also striving to ensure space for student autonomy will help in building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. The idea of a peer mediation advisory board consisting of both students and teachers/adults is a perfect example. The entire school community would have the opportunity to serve on the board and to utilize the mediation services. Individuals would then have the opportunity to voice their grievances with others in a safe space. Students engaged in peer mediation within their schools have been shown to have increased levels of conflict resolution, and decreased levels of aggression suggesting the peer mediation process to be successful in

solving high school conflicts (Turk, & Turnuklu, 2016; Turnuklu, Kacmaz, Sunbul, & Ergul, 2009).

### **Limitations**

Although the current project was successful in engaging high school youth in a CBPR project investigating how they could build positive relationships both among youth and between students and teachers, there were some limitations. Strack and colleagues (2004) have suggested conducting PV with youth in a ratio of six students to one adult, and over a period of four to six months. Given that the current study suffered from time constraints, a changing physical environment and sporadic attendance of youth each sessions, there is the possibility that the current findings did not capture the entire scope of the youth's perspectives on relationship building. More time for partnership development, and more time for the research processes could have resulted in more in-depth findings. Future PV projects engaging youth should allow for a longer partnership development process.

While the findings do represent this group of youth's perspective on the topic, we can't suggest the findings are applicable to the entire student body. This was a highly selective population of students, based on criteria for admittance to the UC Scholars Program, and so their perspectives should not be generalized to students outside that specific program. In order to better understand the ways to build positive relationships among students and between students and teachers in this setting, a randomized group of students should be engaged.

Although the impacts of time constraints have been discussed in terms of partnership development, the PV process may have also been impacted. The PV prompt asked students to look for people, places and things that help or hinder building positive relationships both among students and between students and teachers. As a result, students were very eager to discuss the

hindrances but had a harder time discussing helpful aspects. Utilizing separate PV prompts to capture the hindrances and helpful items would result in a more focused discussion and potentially result in more information about the categories as they stand-alone. Additionally, students had a difficult time conceptualizing ways to build positive relationships between students and teachers as compared to ways to build positive relationships among students. Studying these two populations separately or in separate PV prompts could have lead to a more equal distribution of information.

### **Conclusion**

As CBPR and PV become increasingly popular forms of engaging youth, including additional scopes/topics will allow their many benefits to impact a wider variety of people. The current study sought to do just that by lending support to a small but growing body of work. Investigating the ways to build positive relationships among students and between students and teachers, this project pushes the scope of CBPR-oriented projects using PV past the more traditional health related topics to utilize the benefits in another field of study. Implications of the current study suggest the importance of community building activities within schools and the importance of allowing students space to practice their autonomy when attempting to foster positive relationships. This study may influence scholars from a variety of fields to seek additional sites of investigation, may strengthen support for utilizing youth engagement within schools, and may serve as a model by which others can guide similar investigations.

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