Art-Based Autobiographical Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in an Urban School

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Abstract

This article examines a classroom-based implementation of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) that integrates art-based autobiographical methods to support student reflection, identity exploration, and voice. Grounded in a year-long collaboration between a ninth-grade English teacher and Project HighKEY at Cleveland State University, the study documents how over 100 students engaged in storytelling through collage, poetry, and narrative writing. Drawing on student work, survey and interview data, and a teacher interview, the article highlights how creative expression served as both data and action—positioning reflection as a foundational phase of YPAR. By centering teacher and student perspectives, this work contributes to the growing field of arts-integrated YPAR and offers a developmentally responsive model for embedding participatory research in K–12 classrooms.

Introduction

> Students have the experiences. Let's provide the language and the space for deep reflection.
> — Maggie Rahill

This article shares a year-long collaboration between Maggie Rahill, an English teacher, and Rosalinda Godinez, a postdoctoral researcher, as part of Project HighKEY at the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at Cleveland State University (CSU). The collaboration focused on implementing Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) integrated with art-based autobiographical methods in a ninth-grade English class. Over the course of a school year, more than 100 ninth-grade students engaged in a sequence of reflective, creative assignments—including collage, poetry, narrative writing, and mask making—that invited them to explore and represent their identities, lived experiences, and social realities. These assignments culminated in student-generated research posters presented at a youth research conference, where students used their creative work to share personal stories and advocate for change.

This article aims to contribute to the growing field of classroom-based YPAR by documenting a case of teacher-led implementation that centers artistic and autobiographical expression. While scholars have increasingly examined the transformative potential of YPAR for fostering student voice and agency, there remains limited research on how art-based and autobiographical methods can scaffold youth reflection and support teachers in classroom-based YPAR implementation. In response to this gap, we offer a detailed account of one teacher's pedagogical approach and the ways in which art-based assignments deepened students' self-awareness and prepared them to engage in inquiry and action. We show how

creative expression served as both method and meaning-making tool, and we consider the implications for teacher practice, student identity work, and YPAR curriculum development.

Grounded in a relational, justice-oriented approach to pedagogy, this article positions art-based autobiographical YPAR as a method for transforming classroom culture and broadening what counts as research, reflection, and action. Drawing on student work, teacher reflection, and student interviews, we explore how the integration of arts and YPAR fosters inclusive, affirming, and critically engaged learning environments. By slowing down the pace of the traditional YPAR cycle and foregrounding reflection, this approach offers a developmental on-ramp to sustained youth research and activism throughout high school. Through this case, we contribute to conversations about how educators can cultivate space for student voice, storytelling, and community-rooted inquiry in schools.

Literature Review

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) in K–12 Classrooms

YPAR is an educational and research approach that empowers young people to actively investigate and address issues relevant to their lives and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Ozer et al., 2013; Voight & Velez, 2018). Students are positioned as co-researchers, engaged in identifying questions, collecting and analyzing data, and taking action based on their findings. YPAR has been shown to foster agency, critical consciousness, and civic engagement among youth, particularly those in marginalized communities. As students gain tools to examine and address inequities, YPAR serves both pedagogical and justice-oriented purposes.

While existing research documents YPAR's positive impacts on student identity and school engagement, fewer studies explore how teachers enact YPAR in classroom settings or how pedagogical scaffolds can support its integration (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2024; Mirra et al., 2015). Our work addresses this gap by examining how a ninth-grade English teacher adapted and implemented YPAR through a structured, art-based autobiographical unit.

Art-Based and Autobiographical Methods in YPAR

Art-based research methods—including photovoice, collage, poetry, and storytelling—have increasingly been used in youth-driven projects to amplify underrepresented voices and disrupt dominant narratives (Aldana et al., 2021; Del Vecchio et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2020). These methods offer young people accessible, culturally relevant ways to explore identity, articulate lived experiences, and express ideas for change. In the context of YPAR, art can function both as a mode of inquiry and a form of action. Creative practices often make space for reflection and emotion, inviting students to express themselves in ways that conventional academic forms may not permit.

Recent scholarship further emphasizes how art-based YPAR can foster not only critical reflection but also collective healing. Wager et al. (2023), in their chapter "Collective Imagining and Doing," theorize and

document a participatory research project where youth use art to build bridges between personal experience, activism, and community healing. They articulate how embodied practices—such as collaborative art-making—allow young people to move between reflection and action in ways that are emotionally and politically transformative. The authors highlight the importance of creative practice not just as a product of research, but as a relational and healing methodology in its own right.

Our work builds on and extends this framework by embedding similar reflective, healing-centered practices within a ninth-grade English curriculum. Like Wager et al. (2023), we center students' personal stories as sources of knowledge and action. However, our case offers an additional contribution by exploring how a teacher integrated these practices into a full academic year of classroom instruction—something that is less frequently documented in art-based YPAR literature. By offering detailed pedagogical scaffolds and student work samples, we aim to illustrate how autobiographical artistic expression can serve as a developmental foundation for sustained YPAR in schools.

Autobiographical Approaches and Cultural Sustaining Pedagogies

Autobiographical and narrative approaches to education center the personal as political and theoretical. Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *autohistoria-teoría* (1987) guides our approach, framing personal storytelling as a means of theorizing identity and navigating interlocking systems of power. This work is especially important in urban schools, where students' multilingual and multicultural experiences are often marginalized. We build on traditions of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and trauma-informed practice (Minahan, 2019), recognizing that storytelling can be a liberatory act for students whose experiences are often excluded from dominant curricula.

Recent reviews and analyses of participatory research with youth further affirm the importance of methodologically inclusive practices that extend youth voice and agency. Jacquez et al. (2020) offer a participatory thematic analysis model that includes youth perspectives in both analysis and meaning-making. The Youth Futures Foundation (2023) emphasizes the need for ethical, participatory practices that honor young people's lived experiences while avoiding tokenism. Williams (2024) highlights how formal classroom contexts can also serve as sites of youth empowerment when supported by reflective and collaborative inquiry. Our art-based autobiographical YPAR approach speaks directly to these calls by linking identity-centered reflection with action-oriented inquiry embedded in curriculum.

Positioning Our Contribution

Our approach, which we term *art-based autobiographical YPAR*, adds to this growing field by focusing on structured, teacher-led implementation in a classroom context. Whereas many YPAR projects occur in extracurricular or afterschool spaces, our work demonstrates how creative autobiographical assignments can be embedded in the English curriculum to support students' transition into research, reflection, and action. This article contributes to ongoing conversations about the affordances of the arts in social justice education and the potential of YPAR to transform classroom practices, foster student voice, and cultivate deeper understandings of self and community.

Methodology

Site and Context

This study is situated within Project HighKEY, launched in 2021 with support from the U.S. Department of Education, which partners with educators across the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) to implement and study YPAR in classroom settings. The project is co-led by Dr. Adam Voight and Dr. Molly Buckley-Marudas, who support teacher-researchers through monthly learning communities and collaborative design sessions.

The specific classroom context for this study is John Marshall School of Engineering, where Maggie Rahill teaches ninth-grade English. Class sizes averaged around 18 students per class. Her school serves a diverse student population across many areas, all of whom qualify for free lunch. The school population in the year of study was 64% male and 36% female. The majority of students identify as African American (33.1%) and Hispanic (31.7%), with students also identifying as Caucasian (23.2%), Asian (5.1%), multiracial (5.9%), American Indian (0.3%), and Pacific Islander (0.8%).

Methods

This study draws on qualitative methods to document and analyze how an English teacher and her students engaged in art-based YPAR. Data sources include:

- **Fieldnotes** gathered through classroom observations by Rosalinda Godínez;
- **Student artifacts**, including poetry, collages, written narratives, and poster presentations;
- **Student surveys** (n = 40) and **student interviews** (n = 19), focused on students' experiences of identity exploration and reflection; and
- **A teacher interview** with Maggie Rahill, which provides insight into her pedagogical decisions, reflections on implementation, and evolving understanding of YPAR.

This combination of data provides a multilayered portrait of the teaching and learning process. Student voices are analyzed as both expressions of personal experience and sources of knowledge, while the teacher's interview is treated as a reflective narrative that helps situate the curricular and relational decisions behind the unit. Our approach is rooted in participatory and relational methodologies, which prioritize voice, storytelling, and the co-construction of meaning within educational research.

Learning from Maggie's Classroom

Example of Art-Based Autobiographical Assignments

Over the 2023–2024 school year, Maggie guided her ninth-grade students through an art-based autobiographical unit. From September 2023 to January 2024, she facilitated literature circles (Daniels, 2006), offering students eight novels featuring young protagonists navigating personal and societal conflicts. Options included books such as *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone and *Slay* by Brittney Morris, addressing themes like racism, immigration, environmental justice, and body shaming. These discussions encouraged students to connect the characters' challenges with broader social issues, laying the groundwork for their own introspective work.

From February to March 2024, Maggie led students through art-based activities like collages and poetry, designed to prompt self-reflection and articulate life experiences. In March, students crafted narrative essays, integrating their art into personal stories that showcased their individuality and creativity. As a culminating project, students created research posters based on their essays and presented them at CSU. These assignments fostered self-expression, critical thinking, and empathy, creating a foundation for a more inclusive and compassionate educational environment.

Student Collages

The first assignment within this unit was to create a collage of at least five photos that represented how students perceived themselves. Students were allowed to highlight anything important to them, from the food they enjoyed to the sports they played; even favorite movies or artists were featured. This collage allowed students to begin reflecting on their identities and sharing those traits in a low-stakes way. They could practice discussing themselves with their classmates and teachers but still had a layer of protection that the photos provided. In this way, the collage activity was an excellent first scaffold for this autobiographical unit.

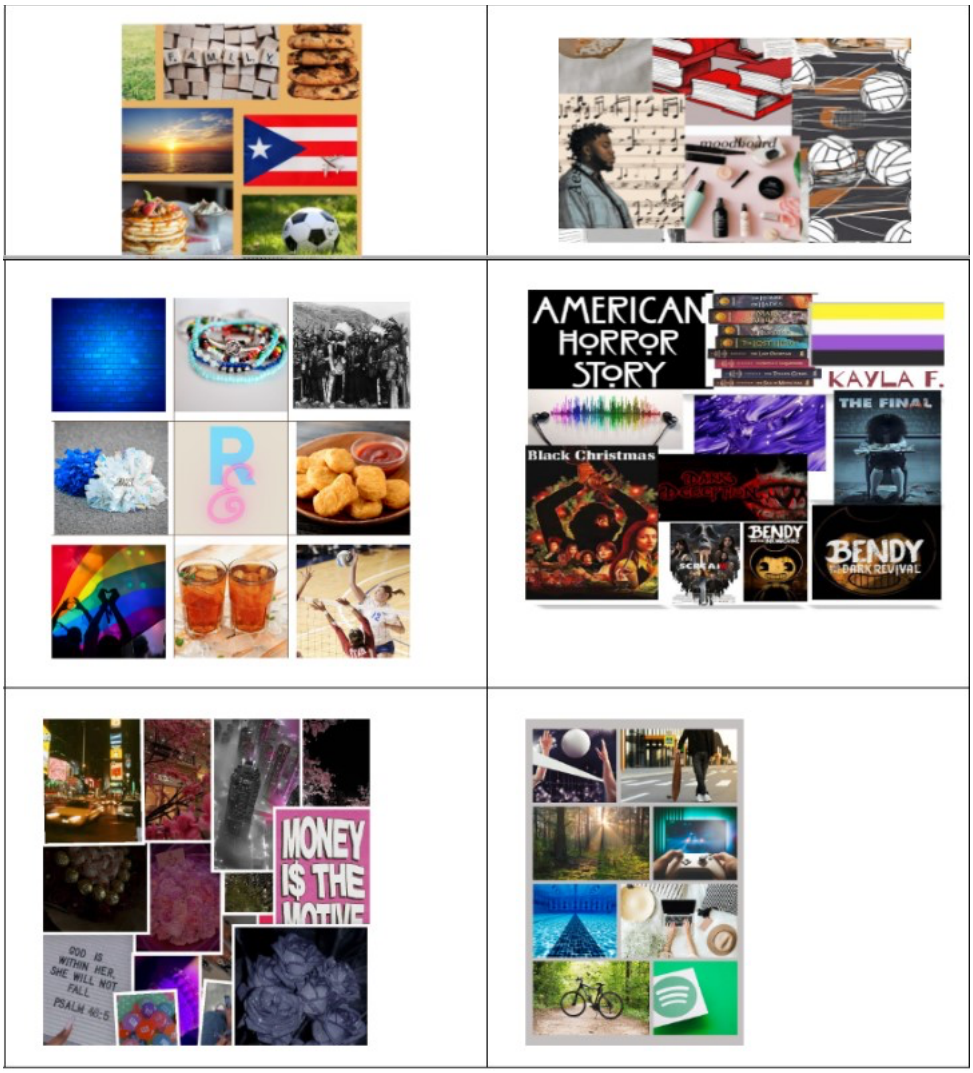

Fig. 1: Student collages showcasing their interests and important cultural artifacts

Poems

After looking at other ways of storytelling, from taking pictures to making videos, the class shifted toward the written form of storytelling and began with poetry. Students began by reading poems such as "Where I Am From" by George Ella Lyon and "My Honest Poem" by Rudy Fransisco, in which both authors highlight aspects of their identities using rich figurative language. After reading these models, students practiced writing poems inspired by the ones they had read. To spark the creation of these poems, students answered reflective questions related to the model poem's language. Questions included: What do you remember seeing as a child? What smells do you recall being in your home? After answering these questions, students shaped their responses into poetry. They captured moments of childhood memories, cultural significance, and personal identities through figurative language in their poems.

James writes:

I am from a hot island
from where coconuts hit the dry dirt
I am from basketball hoops made
from food crates and kids playing in the
rain

Jannet writes:

I am from the smell of soul food and cooking
From the rich smell of cocoa butter
I am from my grandmothers' woody porch
(Caused black feet and splinters)
I am from Jefferson park and the lake trying to run as fast as I can through the sand
I am from the hand-me-downs and bossiness
From children playing and laughing

James reflects on life on a hot island, portraying a resourceful and vibrant community. Jannet's poem evokes sensory memories, from the smell of soul food and cocoa butter to the rough feel of a grandmother's wooden porch. She recalls running through sand at Jefferson Park and highlights family dynamics through hand-me-downs and laughter. These poems showcase students' courage in sharing their identities through culture and personal experiences, which we as teachers, researchers, and adult audience members deeply admire.

Student Narrative

After doing those various forms of art expression, the class turned to their final assessment, a student narrative. Students read narrative examples from teens and adults alike and studied how those writers used techniques they had been studying all year to make their narratives impactful. As they continued reading and annotating mentor texts, Maggie introduced the prompts for their narratives. Prompts included:

1) Who are you?
2) What event has impacted you?
3) How has school affected you throughout your life?

After brainstorming various answers to these questions, students began writing their narratives as a rough draft. To engage students in writing, Maggie encouraged them just to write: write what they remembered, write what they felt, and write what they thought about these events they were including in their narratives. Often times, students are so consumed with a fear that their writing is not good enough that they do not even attempt it. The goal of this rough draft was to get them just to try. After that, Maggie read through rough drafts and made suggestions, and she also encouraged students to look back on the mentor narratives they had read and annotated. Were they including strategies the mentor authors used? Did they have a dialogue? A moving plot? Could you hear their voice? These questions probed their edits

for their final narrative draft, which they submitted a few days later. In their narratives, students focused on various experiences, such as divorce, migration stories, mental health, teacher abuse of power, jail/family incarceration, student life, student interests like basketball, and leisure activities.

Below we share a narrative example, which showcases a student's reflection on his identity and the emotional weight of navigating racism and Islamophobia as a Palestinian American in this current climate. We intentionally preserve Ben's authentic voice, including moments of anger and frustration, to emphasize the importance of creating spaces where students can honestly express themselves, even when those expressions are uncomfortable or difficult. We honor the student's full humanity by allowing students' writing to be a place where they are able to process legitimate emotions like anger and frustration to injustice. Ben's narrative is a great example of this as he writes:

> Another key characteristic of me is being a Palestinian Muslim in what some people would say is a "difficult time" for people like me… As of recently, there has been more hate toward the Arab Muslim culture, especially toward Palestinians. Now, the war between Israel and Palestine is something I honestly do not like talking about. I get uncomfortable on the subject, and even if I do say something, it is something along the lines of "there are terrible things going on both sides of the war really terrible things." It just so happens that Israel has been doing a terrifying amount of terrible things, but I try my best not to show or tell my opinion all that much. I have experienced an irritating amount of racism, especially at school, a good number of times, I am ok with it, but there are a few times where that really irritates the f[***]out of me. Most of the time when people make the joke, it's somewhat funny, but half the time, it is equivalent to "911!" then looking at me with a dumbass face, or literally just "Bomb!" and people just say anything that they think that sounds like Arabic which it really f[***]ing does not and again the same stupid ass face. When moments like that happen, I really want to give them a crazy Mike Tyson ass overhand, but I have never done anything like that and never intend to. And I'm not on some alpha male shit that would prove to them that Arab Muslim people are violent.

In his narrative, Ben expresses discomfort discussing the Israel–Palestine war, recognizing atrocities on both sides but feeling particularly distressed by Israel's actions. His reflection highlights the tension between his personal convictions and the broader political climate that stigmatizes Arab Muslim identities. Ben recounts repeated experiences of racism at school, where he becomes the target of offensive jokes and dehumanizing stereotypes linking him to violence and terrorism. His visceral anger in response to these incidents is palpable, yet he consciously restrains himself from acting on those emotions. Importantly, his restraint is not merely a matter of personal self-control; it reflects an acute awareness of the racialized expectations placed upon him—the fear that any expression of anger could be weaponized to reinforce harmful stereotypes about Arab Muslims as inherently violent. Through his narrative, Ben illustrates the emotional labor required to navigate and resist these oppressive dynamics, underscoring the critical need for educational spaces that allow students to express anger, pain, and resistance without fear of further marginalization. Through educational spaces like this writing assignment that allow students the freedom to express their full humanity (in all the messiness it encompasses), we make steps toward a more understanding, communicative space that prioritizes authenticity to work toward a more just space for all our students.

Other students also wrote about their life experiences in their narratives. For example, Allie, James, and Becca shared the following pieces.

Allie:

> I am a high school student currently. I am still growing up, learning about life, and figuring out new things. Life for me was not the hardest, but it also was not the easiest. I know a lot of people have gone through worse events than me, but this is my story of how one of the biggest events in my life made me the way I am. The event was my parents' divorce. My reason for this is because if it never happened, then I would not be going out to Michigan every other weekend and I would not be going to John Marshall either.

James:

> Hi, my name is James. Even though I am only in the ninth grade, but life has taken its toll on me. I know what you might be thinking. "Oh, you're too young" or "Oh, you don't know what life all is about" but you are wrong. I know I am only learning how to live life right now, but that's what most people don't realize: that just because we are young doesn't mean we don't go through stuff and that we also need some help with what we go through. Most people don't really show their hurt or their emotions because they either think that they would be a bother or they don't know who to trust. So, today, I will talk about what I have been through how I found a way to get through it, and how you might be able to too.

Becca wrote her narrative as a poem:

Dark
From the substance that went in you
Don't do this
Came out with string around my neck
Don't do that
Like I was gonna get taken from your arms
Blah blah blah
Grew up in the dark
Don't turn out like you mom and sister
Grew up stealing to make a living
You're too good for that
That substance you had stopped using
You have too much to look forward to
Back But I don't that's the thing
The end of it is rigged
Everybody around me was never clean
The flame so hot
Always dirty Sharp
Burns so well
No tape Feels good
No smile
No none see through things
No laugh
No pictures that aren't on plain paper
And once again

No contact without glass in between us
I'm all alone in the dark
Couple years go by
I'm all alone Just sad
Left while at school
Nobody to take care of me but my grandpa
No to talk to all alone so I suffer
All alone
All alone
All alone

Allie navigates life amid her parents' divorce, traveling to Michigan biweekly while attending John Marshall High. She sees the divorce as pivotal in her growth, though she acknowledges others may face greater challenges. James, despite his youth, insists that young people endure significant hardships and deserve support. Becca's poem reveals a childhood shaped by family substance abuse, survival struggles, and stigma. Despite encouragement to overcome these obstacles, she feels isolated, relying solely on her grandfather for care.

In these works, we see students describe deeply personal experiences and feelings, which inevitably complicates the boundaries of a traditional teacher–student relationship. In creating a space of safety and trust, students were never expected to share anything beyond their comfort level, and that which was shared invites a relational shift to occur—from simply teacher of English to trusted adult in a young human's life. This relational shift comes with emotional weight and new ethical responsibilities. Part of the "messiness" of this work lies in the absence of a clear roadmap: as a teacher, I am not a therapist, yet I cannot be indifferent to the emotional weight students carry. This is especially true in the subject of English, as much of the work centers around the experiences of characters whose full humanity is on display, mess and all. Holding space for students' full humanity sometimes requires simply listening without rushing to intervention; at other times, it necessitates connecting students to additional supports, such as counselors or trusted adults in the school or community. Navigating when and how to act is complex, situational, and deeply relational. What remains constant, however, is a commitment to honoring students' disclosures with care, respect, and a willingness to sit with the discomfort of not always having immediate solutions.

Poster Presentations at CSU

After weeks of creating various art forms, students selected pieces to share at CSU's Campus Conference 2024, organized by Dr. Buckley-Marudas. This event brought together students from local CMSD high schools to present their research projects. Maggie's students used posters to showcase their art-based research, sharing stories and artwork that reflected their identities. While not all aspects of their work were included, the presentations provided audiences with valuable insights into the students' experiences and identities. Students also used their posters to share key takeaways and recommendations for future actions in their communities. This action-oriented sharing reinforced YPAR principles, demonstrating the power and importance of their voices. Rooting this work in action solidified its place within YPAR, ensuring it transcended a traditional creative writing unit to embody the transformative essence of YPAR.

Through sharing their stories, community members saw the experiences students faced firsthand and listened as students imagined a different path for those who come after them.

Fig. 2: Students presenting at CSU

End of the Mask Making Unit

> Mask shows how people really feel in a creative way.
>
> —Ben, YPAR Student

At the end of the school year, the students created artistic masks to represent themselves as a celebration and final reflection on all the work we did this year. As we discussed identity throughout the year, we often highlighted how people display themselves differently to others than how they feel on the inside. So, the goal of this activity was for students to consider how they presented themselves to others on the outside and how they felt on the inside. They painted the front to represent the emotions or actions they present to others and the inside to represent how they feel internally.

Fig. 3: Student masks

Students reacted to this assignment in various ways. Some highlighted favorite anime or video game characters, others memorialized art for a loved one who had passed away, and some created designs they thought looked cool. However, they could articulate connections between their art and their experiences, feelings, or identities when asked. For example, Allie's mask, inspired by Sal's "Sally Face," a video game character who hides a scar, features flowers symbolizing her interests and life process, alongside abstract shapes requiring explanation. Nick's portrayal uses pink for his outgoing nature and black for his introverted side, reflecting on his eagerness for responsibilities like mowing the lawn and getting his driver's license.

Student Perspectives of Art-Based Autobiography

At the end of the art-based unit, close to the end of the academic school year, we asked students to share what they learned and how the art-based autobiography unit helped them tell their stories. With this intention in mind, Rosalinda visited Maggie's classroom, administering a survey, and gathering students' perspectives in a focus group setting. Rosalinda, being an advocate for art-based autobiographical research, especially that of Anzaldúa's concept of autohistoria-teoría (1987), where personal narrative is intertwined with theoretical exploration, wanted to understand how students described their experience writing about themselves and their story. The following are some of the students' comments from the survey.

> I've learned that we all have a lot of traumas throughout our lives but sharing our stories can help us reflect and be ourselves.
>
> I learned to embrace my story and that we all have our unique stories, especially after collaborating with friends and seeing how different our stories were but still equally important.
>
> I learned that sharing your story through art is easier than saying it out loud.
>
> I learned narrative unit could help a lot of people relate to you.
>
> I learned how to express myself.
>
> I'm a good storyteller.

> I learned that not all poetry has to rhyme to be poetry.
>
> I learned about how poems and photos convey a whole story and that it is a beautiful way of expression.
>
> I learned that many people's stories are not told.
>
> I learned that everyone has a right to be heard.

Students' responses show their learning of the narrative unit. They highlight the importance of embracing and sharing personal stories and recognizing the uniqueness and value of everyone's experiences. Several students emphasized that art, whether through poetry or collages, can be a powerful medium for storytelling, often making it easier than verbal expression. They noted that stories, even those filled with trauma, can foster connection and reflection. The students also learned that storytelling does not require adherence to traditional writing, such as rhyming in poetry, and that everyone deserves to be heard.

In sharing how art-based autobiographical YPAR helps them reflect on who they are and their life, students explained:

> It felt like I was out of my comfort zone, but it helped me. It made it easier that I didn't just have to write; I could use other things to express myself. It did help me feel seen and heard.
>
> Telling my story in art has shown me that my story matters.
>
> It helps me to think differently.
>
> It felt kind of weird telling my story. Different kinds of art did help tell my story. The process kind of did help me feel "heard."
>
> It felt good to speak up about what happened.
>
> At first, it felt very awkward to tell my story, but soon I felt better, the different people also expressing helped with anxiety.
>
> It helped me see and remember my life.
>
> It helped me release my struggle and be a better writer/English learner.
>
> It felt good to share my story and my experience.
>
> This project made me remember my childhood and adolescence when I was 11 or 12 years old. It helped me to be clear about certain things in my life that had changed in a big way. Seeing myself now and the way I think has made me feel proud of myself.
>
> It helped me become more confident in telling stories.
>
> It felt nice knowing I have a voice. It made me feel heard because my teacher was helping me.

This second set of student responses underscores the transformative power of storytelling through art. Many students expressed initial discomfort and awkwardness in sharing their stories but noted a gradual shift toward feeling seen, heard, and more confident. Using various artistic mediums, rather than just writing, allowed them to step out of their comfort zone and facilitated self-expression in a more approachable way. This approach helped them articulate their experiences, improved their social skills, and provided emotional release. Students reflected on their personal growth, with some gaining new perspectives on their lives and feeling proud of their development.

We hope it is apparent that art-based autobiographies extend beyond the mere task of research and writing; it is a voyage of self-discovery and empowerment for students. Students' responses show how they gained skills in reflexivity and confidence in their voices from art-based autobiographies. As we reflect on their responses, we are reminded of Anzaldúa's (1987) quote, "Through writing, I find my voice, my language, which enables me to regain my power and to shape a new reality," which resonates deeply with the experiences shared by students. This reflects their journey of discovering personal empowerment through storytelling. Many found that expressing themselves through art-based methods allowed them to reclaim their narratives and articulate their thoughts and emotions more authentically. The act of storytelling, whether through the written word or visual art, became a transformative process that empowered them to reshape their realities.

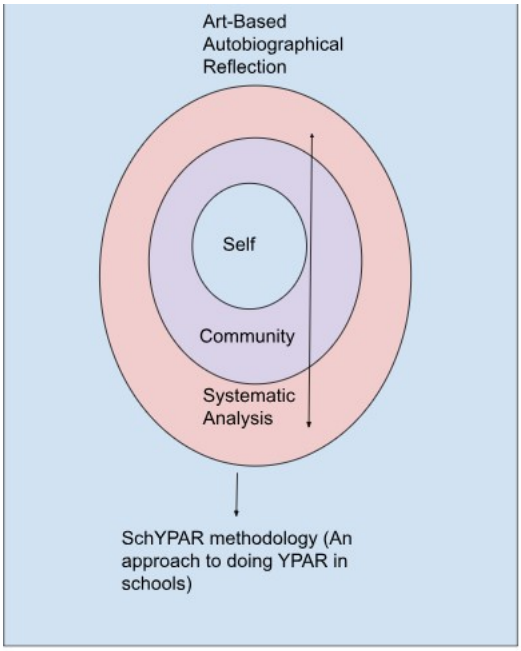

Fig. 4: Visual representation of our description of art-based autobiography

Learnings from Maggie's Interview and Reflection

Maggie's reflections on teaching YPAR provide crucial context for understanding the pedagogy and practice behind the unit described in this article. In an interview conducted at the end of the 2023–2024 school year, Maggie described the process as both "liberating and labor-intensive," emphasizing the dual demands of creating space for student voice and navigating institutional constraints.

Maggie shared that the unit was intentionally designed to help ninth-grade students develop the skill of reflection—something she described as "almost a prerequisite to issue identification." Based on previous experiences, she found that students needed opportunities to explore their own identities before they could meaningfully engage in broader social inquiry. She structured the unit to ease students into self-expression, beginning with accessible forms like collage and poetry before transitioning to narrative writing. This scaffolding, she noted, helped students "see that their stories mattered" and built trust over time.

Rather than adhering to a traditional YPAR cycle, Maggie described "bending and turning it around" to meet her classroom's needs. Students' creative work functioned as data—poems, collages, and narratives were both expressions of identity and tools for inquiry. While students did not conduct formal data analysis, Maggie framed their participation in a youth research symposium as a form of action. She sees this foundational work as preparing students for deeper research and collective action in future years.

Assessment, Maggie explained, was intentionally flexible. While she created rubrics aligned with standards, she emphasized that "if they were producing art, they were doing what I wanted them to do." Success in the unit was defined less by traditional metrics and more by effort, engagement, and authenticity. This approach allowed her to adapt expectations for students with Individual Education Plans and provide equitable access to the project. She also acknowledged the emotional labor involved in holding space for vulnerability—noting that she, too, modeled reflection by sharing her own stories with students.

Maggie spoke candidly about the challenges of teaching YPAR in the context of chronic absenteeism, limited institutional support, and standardized accountability pressures. She described how deeply rooted inequities—like food insecurity and transportation barriers—shape students' ability to engage. Still, she remained committed to creating a classroom culture rooted in relationships, choice, and care: "I'm not trying to fix everything with my class," she said, "I'm just trying to give them space."

Her reflections show the importance of teacher agency in adapting YPAR to classroom realities. Maggie's evolving approach—marked by humility, creativity, and critical reflexivity—reinforces the article's argument that teacher-led, art-based autobiography can serve as a powerful entry point into participatory research. Her interview highlights both the promise and the complexity of implementing YPAR in schools, and calls attention to the supports that teachers need to sustain this transformative work.

Discussion

Reflection as Action and Contribution in Art-Based YPAR

Both Maggie's and her students' perspectives highlight the importance of slowing down the YPAR process in K–12 settings. Maggie intentionally adapted the YPAR model to prioritize identity exploration, trust-building, and creative expression. This reflective foundation not only aligned with the goals of the English curriculum but also responded to the developmental needs of ninth-grade students who, as she observed, had "never had practice of someone listening to them." Her pedagogical choices—grounded in care, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness—resonate with work by Wager et al. (2023), who advocate for artmaking as a process of healing, theorizing, and collective transformation.

The inclusion of student voices and teacher reflection in this article represents a deliberate intervention into YPAR literature. Much existing research highlights student outcomes, but fewer studies document the day-to-day implementation decisions, tensions, and adaptations made by classroom teachers (Buckley-Marudas et al., 2024; Mirra et al., 2015). Maggie's experience illustrates how a teacher can creatively bend and stretch the YPAR framework to meet students where they are—especially in environments shaped by chronic absenteeism, standardization, and structural inequities. Her reflections also serve as a reminder that teachers, like students, are learners in the YPAR process, evolving their practice through dialogue, iteration, and uncertainty.

As students articulated in their reflections, this unit helped them feel seen, heard, and empowered. Several noted that using art allowed them to express difficult stories more comfortably than speaking or writing alone. Others described the experience as a turning point in their confidence as writers and thinkers. Importantly, these outcomes did not emerge from a single assignment or lesson, but from a cumulative process grounded in trust, relationships, and creativity. These insights contribute to a broader understanding of how art-based methods can serve not only as pedagogical tools, but also as research and reflection methodologies that affirm youth voice and lived experience.

Finally, this work offers a model for schools and educators seeking to implement YPAR in a developmentally and structurally responsive way. Rather than rushing through the phases of inquiry, this approach advocates for **a scaffolded, recursive model**, where reflective storytelling is positioned as both an end in itself and a foundation for future research and action. By embedding this work into the ninth-grade curriculum, Maggie is not only meeting standards—she is preparing students to be critical participants in their education and communities for years to come.

Implications for Practice and the Field

This approach offers a key implication for educators interested in implementing YPAR: begin with identity work and reflection before moving into issue analysis or data collection. Maggie's unit prioritized belonging and affirmation, ensuring that students had tools, language, and trust to explore their stories at

their own pace. Her scaffolded design also allowed for differentiation—especially for students with IEPs—and offered multiple entry points into research through visual, poetic, and narrative modes.

Importantly, the work also illustrates how reflective storytelling can be a form of action in its own right. When students presented their stories at a youth symposium, they not only contributed to a public dialogue about student voice—they took a public stand that their lived experience mattered. As Maggie reflected, "Even if they're just talking about basketball, that story is still valid." In contexts where youth are often silenced, pathologized, or over-surveilled, the invitation to narrate their own lives is itself a political act.

For the broader field of YPAR, this case contributes three interrelated insights:

1) **Teacher-led implementation matters**. Maggie's creative adaptation of the YPAR cycle shows how classroom educators can authentically integrate participatory methods within curriculum and standards constraints—especially in early high school grades.

2) **Art and autobiography are not add-ons—they're central methodologies**. They can scaffold students' movement from personal to political and provide accessible ways to process and present complex experience.

3) **Reflection is not a detour from action—it is action**. Particularly for younger students, reflective work lays essential groundwork for deeper inquiry, collective analysis, and community-based change in later grades.

Looking ahead, we imagine this unit as the first step in a four-year pathway, where each year builds on the previous one. As Maggie's ninth-grade students become sophomores, juniors, and seniors, they will be equipped to draw on their prior reflection to identify community issues, conduct peer-based research, and lead projects for change. This recursive approach honors student growth while embedding YPAR into the fabric of the school experience—not just as a project, but as a pedagogy of transformation.

Conclusion

This article shares how art-based autobiographical YPAR can serve as a powerful foundation for student reflection, identity development, and future activism. Maggie Rahill's classroom shows how creative storytelling—through collage, poetry, and narrative—can invite students to explore who they are and how their experiences shape the world around them. By centering both student and teacher perspectives, this work contributes to the growing field of YPAR by offering a classroom-based model that is reflective, relational, and developmentally responsive. Maggie's approach affirms that reflective storytelling is not separate from action—it is a critical step in helping students recognize their voices as sources of knowledge and power. As these students move through high school, this early grounding in self-expression and critical reflection lays the foundation for deeper inquiry and collective action. In this way, art-based YPAR becomes more than a unit—it becomes a pathway.

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