

Co-researching with Immigrant Youth in Tokyo during COVID-19: Possibilities of Virtual Youth Participatory Action Research

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I was stressed because I was unable to contact anyone. It started to affect my life and made me feel like every day was becoming harder. By participating in the YPAR project, I talked to people with similar experiences and found something I could sympathize with.

This quote reflects the virtual Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project written by Arjun, who was born in India and migrated to Japan at the age of 15. He is a co-author and youth researcher of the project we conducted in Tokyo at the outset of the pandemic. This co-authored article examines innovative ways to co-research with youth¹ during a global crisis, specifically focusing on the process of the virtual YPAR project and the unique contributions of the youth researchers.

YPAR and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the well-being of immigrant children and youth both locally and globally (Everson and Barbero 2020; OECD 2020). Research shows that during disasters and crises, children and youth are typically perceived as “victims” or “at risk,” in need of protection and excluded from voicing their opinions and participating in research and action (Cuevas-Parra 2020). Scholars and practitioners in Japan have revealed the vulnerability of this population—many of whom have migrated from the Global South—including a lack of educational access and support, difficulties in accessing information due to language barriers, and economic challenges (Suzuki 2021).

While we are aware of ethical dilemmas such as the possibility of overburdening youth who were already impacted by the pandemic (Liegghio and Caragata 2021; Nind, Coverdale, and Meckin 2021), we believe that engaging immigrant youth in collaborative research is critical to addressing their needs during a global challenge. Therefore, we drew on YPAR, an innovative methodology that honors the local knowledge of youth participants and “places students at the center of knowledge production” (Caraballo et al. 2017, 315). YPAR scholars problematize traditional research that often pathologizes and objectifies youth, and they argue for engaging young people in the research process and collectively acting for social change (Cammara and Fine 2008; Irizarry and Brown 2014; Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up possibilities for scholars to co-research with youth virtually such as through one-to-one interviews using virtual platforms (Cuevas-Parra 2020) and a remote photovoice project (Liegghio and Caragata 2021).

The Process of the Virtual YPAR Project during COVID-19

The YPAR project developed out of ongoing community partnerships among a high school, NPOs, and a university faculty member who worked to co-create an afterschool program at a public high school in Tokyo since 2015 (Tokunaga, Machado Da Silva, and Fu 2022). The core members of a multi-generational, multilevel, and multicultural YPAR team included Tomoko (Japanese university faculty member), Joshi (Nepalese postgraduate student), Shinya (half-Japanese and half-Korean NPO staff), and two youth researchers who were recent high school graduates. The youth researchers are Arjun (Indian first-year college student, age 20) and Paolo (Filipino first-year vocational school student, age 18). Tomoko interacted with the youth researchers previously through programs at the high school and recruited them for the project. We attempted to share power *with* youth to build trust and collaborative relationships (Irizarry and Brown 2014; Rodriguez and Brown 2009).

Youth researchers engaged in the entire research process from June 2020 to March 2021. Due to strict social distancing measures in Japan, we utilized accessible tools such as Zoom, Google Drive, and LINE to enhance digital participation and conducted research virtually. During the research period, we had weekly online meetings for about an hour on Zoom.

The research was conducted in three phases: 1) defining the issues, 2) collecting and analyzing data, and 3) taking action. In the initial phase, we held meetings where youth researchers received research training and reflected on their experiences and thoughts during the self-quarantine period. Youth researchers wrote self-reflective essays and conducted photovoice activities where they took pictures that represented their health concerns and the ways they took care of themselves. They then shared their photographs with the team to enhance collective sensemaking. Paolo shared his concerns about the changes in his daily habits due to the school closure. He said, “I would go to bed between two and four in the morning and wake up around midday, or not eat breakfast because I couldn't get up early enough.” The sharing sessions encouraged the youth researchers to articulate their lived experiences, and discover themes relevant to the wider immigrant youth community. Based on the youth researchers' experiences and concerns regarding health issues, we generated research questions to explore the impact of the pandemic on mental and physical health among immigrant youth.

In the next phase, we formulated interview questions, recruited youth participants, conducted zoom interviews, and analyzed interview data. Through community partnerships and personal networks, we recruited seven immigrant high school students and four vocational school students (aged fifteen to twenty-one) most of whom reside in Tokyo. Their countries of origin included the Philippines, Nepal, India, Myanmar, and Australia. With the support of adult researchers, youth researchers conducted interviews and later wrote interview reflections. The team wrote interview memos in a shared Excel spreadsheet using interview transcripts and deepened their analysis through discussions.

In the action phase, we collaborated with an NPO to organize an online storytelling session where current immigrant high school students in Tokyo and a former student who virtually connected from the Philippines interacted through ice-breaking games and dialogue on their pandemic experiences. To ensure that participants could be proactive with storytelling in a virtual space, we devoted around half of the session to games to encourage sharing. This virtual event provided a platform for immigrant youth to nurture a sense of community and empowerment through listening to each other as well as addressing their concerns and needs to the researchers and practitioners. We presented our findings and experiences at a symposium, in high school and university classes, through co-authored reports, and by creating a website and video to reach a wider audience.

Youth Researchers' Contribution to the Project

Youth researchers provided valuable contributions to the project. They constructed interview questions, including “cheerful” ones (e.g., “What did you do to cheer up during quarantine?” and “What are your plans after the pandemic?”) that they preferred to be asked to reduce participants’ stress. Arjun mentioned, “We wanted to ask cheery questions along with the typical ones to maintain that sense of casual talk with friends and not to burden the participants.”

In selecting youth participants, youth researchers reached out to their high school friends or acquaintances, which facilitated recruitment and relationship building. Though our initial focus was on high school students, the youth researchers desired to include new high school graduates who attended vocational schools as they also might have similar health concerns, which broadened the scope of research. They actively listened to their peers with empathy and curiosity, unpacking their unique experiences and needs, which were less explored in academic research. Paolo stated, “It’s not just saying, ‘that’s good,’ or just responding passively, but empathizing with their emotions. Otherwise, you cannot say you understand them.” During the interviews, youth researchers provided advice on high school life and college preparation, which led to informal support that was lacking during school closure. In engaging with youth who have little time to spare between their part-time jobs, schools, and caregiving within their family, creating a virtual space can ensure accessibility of participation. As Cuevas-Parra (2020) argues, virtual YPAR provided opportunities for youth researchers to develop research skills and actively contribute to issues relevant to their lives.

Following scholars who experimented with creative ways to co-research with youth virtually (Cuevas-Parra 2020; Liegghio and Caragata 2021), this project shifted the entire research process to a virtual format. This shift included using various virtual methods such as photovoice, online

interviews, and an online storytelling to enhance youth participation. Even during a global crisis, scholars should reimagine and develop ways to co-research with youth, such as conducting a virtual YPAR, which, as demonstrated through this project, can strengthen research and directly respond to the emergent needs of young people.

Endnotes

¹ Following the United Nations' definition, we define youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years (UNDESA 2013).

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