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*‘Sitting there and listening was one of the most important lessons I had to learn’: critical capacity building in youth participatory action research*

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# 'Sitting there and listening was one of the most important lessons I had to learn': critical capacity building in youth participatory action research

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## ABSTRACT

This work builds upon critical youth studies' concern with capacity building in engaging young people as active agents for social change. This article analyses critical capacity building processes among young women engaged in youth participatory action research (YPAR) that sought to co-design a community sport programme in Melbourne, Australia. Participants included the first author, four young women (second to the fifth author), and a critical friend (sixth author). The experience of engaging young women in YPAR foregrounded significant capacity building such as: (a) learning to genuinely listen to young people in order to plan for change; (b) finding creative and flexible ways to build relationships; (c) learning to negotiate the messiness and uncertainty in the research process; and (d) improving problem-solving skills in order to listen and respond to young people in their community. This paper concludes by articulating how YPAR can potentialise the development of critical capacity building in youth studies, nurturing skills and knowledge linked with social justice, activism, and democracy, instead of instrumentalist and technocratic capacity-building models that focus on training and predefined practical skills.

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## Introduction

Critical youth studies centre democratic and emancipatory approaches to engage with young people as agents of change within their communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Carey et al. 2021; Fox 2013; Goessling and Wager 2021; Spencer and Doull 2015). Crucial to this body of research is the need to design, in collaboration with young people, humanising and liberatory spaces of learning and knowledge production (Freire 1987; Torre and Fine 2008). Critical youth scholars share a mutual goal to subvert adultism, a form of institutionalised oppression that deprives young people of

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opportunities for agency (Hall 2020). There is a need to comprehend anti-adultist approaches which create spaces for empowering young people by promoting equitable relationships and participatory practices (Bowman 2022; Goessling and Wager 2021; Hall 2020). This paper responds to calls for research to explore co-designed methodologies with young people as a way to reimagine a more socially just world (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Freire 1987; Goessling and Wager 2021).

Critical youth scholars have considered youth participatory action research (YPAR) as an approach to engage with young people in understanding, critically analysing, and negotiating social problems that affect their lives (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell 2016). YPAR is considered critical research with origins in critical pedagogy (see Freire 1987; 1996), in which researchers engage young people as co-researchers or partners whose experiences and knowledge are fundamentally valuable (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Desai 2019). YPAR aims to involve and support young people in all aspects of the research process: from formulating research aims and collecting and analysing data, through to presenting and disseminating findings and offering recommendations that lead to social action and meaningful change (Nicole Hall 2020; Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell 2016). As such, YPAR takes a radical humanising approach to research that transforms co-produced knowledge into solutions for community change and that directly involves young people who are immersed in the issues under investigation (Freire 1987; Goessling and Wager 2021).

While several studies have described the use of YPAR in critical youth studies (Carey et al. 2021; Goessling and Wager 2021; Mirra et al. 2013; Spencer and Doull 2015), the capacity building processes for young people involved in all aspects of research are less evident in the literature. There is a body of research that argues that community capacity building is essential for initiatives to be successfully implemented and sustained (Edwards 2015; Jones et al. 2020; Labonte and Laverack 2001; Monteith, Anderson, and Williams 2019). Communities, including young people, must possess or develop the capability for collective action, the resources to support the process, and the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively identify local problems and their solutions (Labonte and Laverack 2001). Consequently, capacity building is seen both as a means for achieving community change and an important outcome of community interventions in its own right (Edwards 2015; Labonte and Laverack 2001).

This article builds on our previous work on YPAR and community sport<sup>1</sup> (Luguetti, Singebhuy, and Spaaij 2022; Luguetti et al. 2022) in providing critical insights into capacity building processes among young women. This work is underpinned by the premise that YPAR challenges traditional research by privileging the co-production of knowledge with young people. The question this paper addresses is: what critical capacity building processes did the young women who engaged in YPAR that sought to co-design a community sport programme experience? This study aims to contribute to the literature on YPAR and critical youth studies by centring the perspectives and learning experiences of the young people involved in the project and by analysing their experiences through the lens of critical capacity building. We believe that the sport context offers a valuable setting to study critical capacity building among young people. By considering YPAR, the critical capacity building could be achieved by considering young people as partners in the co-designing of their sport programmes and extended to their participation in all research cycles. Sport engagement has demonstrated effectiveness in skill development,

knowledge and resource acquisition, relationship building, dialogue facilitation, leadership development, and encouraging civic participation (Edwards 2015), especially when sports programmes intentionally seek to promote community capacity (Jones et al. 2018; 2020). In this paper, we seek to move beyond the dominant technocratic approach to capacity building that researchers and practitioners of sport have taken, towards a more critical capacity-building approach.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss the relationship between YPAR and (critical) capacity building. This will be followed by an overview of the methodology and the study context. Next, we explore the capacity building processes that feature centrally in the results. Four key aspects of critical capacity building are discussed: (a) learning to genuinely listen to young people in order to plan for change; (b) finding creative and flexible ways to build relationships; (c) learning to negotiate the messiness and uncertainty in the research process; and (d) developing problem-solving skills in order to listen and respond to young people in their community. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of these findings for the field of youth studies.

## Capacity building and YPAR

Capacity building is a complex and ambiguous concept, and capacity building activities can be messy and unpredictable (Kenny and Clarke 2010a). Capacity building can be viewed as a process to increase the skills, infrastructure, and resources of individuals, organisations, and communities (Johnson, Williams, and Gillis 2015; Labonte and Laverack 2001; Monteith, Anderson, and Williams 2019). Capacity building can offer an appealing strategy as a community-level approach to reducing health and social inequities. However, in its instrumentalist and technocratic versions, capacity building often focuses on training and (predefined) practical skills, which tends to foreclose more critical perspectives and activism (Kenny and Clarke 2010a). The dominant capacity-building discourse is 'based on technical and communicative interests alone', and, in doing so, 'it is simply maintaining the status quo' (Black 2003, 117). In sport programmes, the dominant technocratic approach to capacity building would consider (predefined) practical skills whereby young people need to fit in, or assimilate, by adopting core values communicated by sport organisations and funding bodies (Dukic, McDonald, and Spaaij 2017). It is necessary to challenge the dominant technocratic approach to capacity building through which sport-based programmes operate, particularly in the ways such interventions are critically consider the impact and contribution of the sport programme beyond its immediate purpose. In this paper, we take a more critical approach to capacity building by explicitly connecting it to a concern with social justice, activism, and democracy.

A key concept in critical capacity building is empowerment, which refers to a process of group participation and action (Monteith, Anderson, and Williams 2019); that is, beyond – and against – neoliberal notions of the (superficially) empowered individual. Empowerment involves community members' collective participation so they can express their needs, present their concerns, devise strategies for involvement in decision-making, and undertake political, social, and/or cultural activities to meet those needs (Johnson, Williams, and Gillis 2015; Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988). The notion of empowerment draws particular attention to power relations. From a critical capacity building perspective, empowerment requires power over resources, power over relationships, power

over information, and knowledge and power over decision-making (Abdullah and Young 2010).

As noted earlier, YPAR is a way to address both the political challenges and inherent power imbalances of conducting research with young people (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Critical capacity building is an integral component of YPAR, as it gives young people an opportunity to explore issues that impact their communities while building content knowledge and interpersonal skills (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Freire 1987). Previous research associates YPAR with certain outcomes that we, for the purpose of this paper, interpret as aspects of critical capacity building. First, YPAR encourages an increased social justice awareness or critical consciousness (Carey et al. 2021; Freire 1987; Shamrova and Cummings 2017). Freire's (1987) notion of critical consciousness is defined as the ability to recognise and analyse the economic, historical, and socio-political forces that influence systems of inequality, and the commitment to take action against these systems. As a consequence of YPAR, young people can gain research skills, interpersonal skills, and the benefits that come from building a supportive network (Carey et al. 2021; Shamrova and Cummings 2017). Second, scholars have observed young people learning the process of taking responsibility and assuming leadership roles (Shamrova and Cummings 2017; Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, and Torre 2015). It is suggested that leadership increases young people's self-confidence and perceived ability to make a change (Shamrova and Cummings 2017). Third, young people learn to build relationships and strengthen a sense of community (Mirra et al. 2013; Shamrova and Cummings 2017). Relationship building emerges from the sharing of power between adults (researchers) and young people (co-researchers). This power dynamic enables the creation of a safe and supportive environment where young people are genuinely heard by adults (Cammarota and Fine 2008). Finally, YPAR creates a ground for developing and strengthening a sense of connectedness and belonging to the community. Involvement in YPAR provides young people a space to learn what it means to participate in community life and how to engage positively in creating social change (Shamrova and Cummings 2017).

## Methodology

### *Context and participants*

This study took place in a charity organisation's African Australian football (soccer) programme in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. The project comprised a sixteen-week YPAR. The programme was established in 2016 with the aim to improve the health and wellbeing of African Australian young people and to develop youth leaders who can contribute to the social inclusion of their ethnocultural community. In 2019, we undertook YPAR with a group of African Australian young women and four coaches in the programme (Luguetti, Singehbhuye, and Spaaij 2022). At the end of this YPAR, the co-researchers suggested extending the YPAR project to the other groups in the programme. The researchers invited four young women (three of them from the 2019 study) to develop a new study in 2021 where the intention was to involve them in all aspects of the research cycle.

Participants included the primary researcher (lead author), four African Australian young women (second to the fifth author), and a critical friend (sixth author). The lead

author (Carla) was a middle-class Brazilian woman living in Australia with eight years of experience using YPAR in a variety of sport programmes in Brazil, the United States, and Australia. The four African Australian young women in the YPAR (second to the fifth author) were Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, and Adut. Nyayoud was a 26-year-old Criminology and Justice student with professional experience in youth engagement and community engagement. Loy was a 24-year-old Law and Art student with three years of experience in the football programme. Kashindi was a 20-year-old studying a Bachelor of Applied Sciences with three years of experience in the football programme. Adut was a 23-year-old with three years of experience in the football programme. All four African Australian young women were employed as a researcher assistant on this project. Loy, Kashindi, and Adut had previously worked with Carla to co-create a sport programme for the female team in 2019, a project in which we hired and trained Loy as a research assistant (for more information, see Luguetti, Singehebhuve, and Spaaij 2022).

The last author (Ramón) acted as a critical friend. Ramón had engaged with qualitative, mixed methods, and ethnographic research for many years and helped Carla to reflect on, explore, and clarify the values and beliefs she brought to her research (Carr and Kemmis 1986). Ethical approval for this study was received from the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee. All participants signed written consent forms at the beginning of their participation in the study, and their iterative consent was negotiated orally at regular intervals during the study.

### *YPAR as a way to co-design research*

The first seven weeks were designed to prepare the young women for the YPAR. During this initial phase, Carla held collaborative meetings with the young women (Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, and Adut) to train them in research co-design and YPAR. In the first three weeks, Carla and the young women discussed the meaning of YPAR, what they had learned about the football programme from their own lived experience, and ways to listen and respond to young people's voices. In weeks 4–5, Carla invited Ramón to help in training the young women in the concepts of programme logic mapping and theory of change, and to facilitate the co-creation of a programme logic for the YPAR with the young women. Finally, Carla and the young women decided on the data collection process and discussed ethical considerations in YPAR (weeks 6–7).

The next nine weeks were designed to implement the YPAR in their community. In this phase, the co-researchers had the role of co-design a sport programme with young men. They worked with them for them for next nine weeks to design to implement the YPAR with the young men (for more information see Luguetti, Singehebhuve, and Spaaij 2022). A Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (Oliver and Oesterreich 2013) approach was used both as a process of working with the participants (young men) and as a framework for data collection. This process includes a *Building the Foundation* phase followed by a four-phase cyclical process of Planning, Responding to Students, Listening to Respond, and Analysing Responses (*Activist Phase*) as the basis for all content and pedagogical decisions.

*Building the Foundation* spanned six weeks with the intent of identifying what facilitated and hindered the young men's engagement in sport, particularly in the football programme. We started by inquiring into what the young men liked and disliked about the

football programme and the barriers to participation they encountered in both the programme and their local community as a whole. We engaged in six days of data collection with the young men. Given what we learned during *Building the Foundation* phase, we brainstormed activities for the *Activist Phase*.

### *Data gathering and data analysis*

Data collection included:

- (a) *Weekly collaborative meetings between Carla and the young women* (16 meetings). Carla organised weekly meetings with the young women to design and implement the YPAR. The collaborative meetings provided insights into the co-creation of knowledge with young people, as addressed further on in this paper. All collaborative group meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed (269 pages of transcription in total).
- (b) *Weekly observations of the data collection*. Nyayoud wrote field notes after each football session (9 pages in total) about the co-researchers' experience in the YPAR. This data was used to inform the weekly collaborative group meeting discussions with the young women.
- (c) *Generated artefacts*. All generated artefacts were collected, such as drawings, photos, freewriting, photos, audio recordings, and videos (36 pages of artefacts into Word document).
- (d) *Final interviews with the young women*. The young women participated in a final interview at the end of YPAR that was led by Carla. The final interview focused on identifying the barriers and facilitators they experienced during the design and implementation of the research, how they had addressed these, and what they had learned in the process. Examples of interview questions included: (a) What do you think you learned in this project?; (b) Could you tell me a story about something that helped in your learning? Why was it helpful?; (c) Do you believe in this project contributed to any forms of social change (e.g. challenge injustice)? Please give examples; (d) Are there ways in which we might sustain change beyond this research?; (e) What kinds of emotions did you feel in this project?
- (e) *Meeting between the first author and the critical friend*. Ramón served as a peer debriefer and assisted with progressive data analysis. He was contacted weekly for advice on how to progress through the YPAR and helped with the preparation of this manuscript. All meetings were audio-recorded and transcribed (a total of 18 pages).

Data analysis involved iterative procedures using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022). The analytic process was largely inductive and only loosely informed by the aforementioned conceptualisation of (critical) capacity building. Throughout this process, we maintained a detailed electronic 'audit trail' of the analysis, which contained examples of coded data items (i.e. extracts from field notes, meeting notes, interview transcripts, and artefacts), lists of codes, thematic maps, and theme descriptions. This trail was shared, reviewed, and discussed with all six authors. The data were initially organised chronologically and filed by session date. Through multiple stages of data engagement, we generated, reviewed, and refined themes that appeared salient and meaningful across

the data. First, Carla studied all data from the collaborative meetings, interviews, observations, and generated artefacts, in order to build an initial set of codes and higher-level themes, which were developed iteratively as data was read and re-read. The second process of analysis involved Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, and Adut, who reviewed and refined the initial interpretations and codes that Carla had generated. During this process, they challenged some of the interpretations of the coded data, the construction of themes, and the narrative associated with the analysis. For example, Nyayoud challenged the concept that the issues with messiness and uncertainty in YPAR occurred due to their lack of knowledge or familiarity with this type of research. Nyayoud, Loy, and Adut had previous experience with community engagement and youth engagement, and their experiences helped to interpret the data on the theme of messiness and uncertainty in YPAR.

Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, Adut, and Carla met twice to discuss our interpretations and collectively developed insights into the themes. As we shared our different perceptions and interpretations over several conversations, we concluded that for each theme we should elect one of the young women to represent each theme. Rather than attempt to document all skills and experiences across all of these themes, we decided to select examples that we believed were both the most meaningful for each theme and provided insight into the learning trajectory of each young woman. The last step included Ramón, who engaged in a collaborative process of checking and discussing the interpretations, which led to multiple revisions being made until all authors felt that the themes accurately captured the relevant data meanings, seeking to both retain an empathic awareness of the experiences described by the participants, and engage in theoretical analysis of (critical) capacity building.

The final themes we constructed as empirically grounded aspects of capacity building were fourfold: (a) learning to genuinely listen to young people in order to plan for change; (b) finding creative and flexible ways to build relationships; (c) learning to negotiate the messiness and uncertainty in the research process; and (d) improving problem-solving skills in order to listen and respond to young people in their community. Although the data analysis included the aforementioned multiple data sources, in the next section we draw particularly on the final interviews to discuss these themes.

## Results

In this section, we will introduce the young women individually and discuss the four themes that we developed from their reported experiences of capacity building processes. Rather than attempt to show how all the young women developed skills and experience across all of these themes, we have selected examples that we believe are most illustrative and meaningful for each theme.

***“Sitting there and listening was one of the most important lessons I had to learn” (Loy): learning to genuinely listen to young people in order to plan for change***

Loy has been involved in the football programme for more than five years. As noted earlier, she was also part of the first study we developed in her community club in

2019, as one of the young women who acted as co-researchers (Luguetti, Singehebhuwe, and Spaaij 2022). Loy thus had prior experience of what YPAR entailed and what strategies might be needed to engage young people as co-researchers in this process. Loy's participation in this project created a learning space for her to genuinely listen to and understand young people in her community. For Loy, genuine listening meant to recognise the real faces and stories behind the young people:

I learned that there's an importance of listening to anyone and everybody. The fact that some of the young people had so much to say – and sometimes it's not about us talking or trying to get them to say something, it's just listening to what they have to say. [...] It's about you sitting down and letting them – giving them an opportunity to just let out whatever they're feeling. (Loy)

We dedicated the first seven weeks to preparing ourselves for the YPAR. During this initial phase, Carla held regular collaborative meetings with Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, and Adut in order to co-design the research with them. After discussing the nature of YPAR and what they had learned from the football programme, we spent a day discussing ways to listen and respond to young people's voices. We considered the Student-Centered Inquiry as Curriculum (SCIC) as a learning framework (Oliver and Oesterreich 2013), shared Carla's and Nyayoud's professional experiences with youth engagement, and reflected on some of the previous and anticipated challenges.

Although we reflected on ways to listen and respond to young people's voices, Loy described that her learning happened when she started to listen to the young people in their community. Even though Loy knew most of the young people in her community club, the YPAR gave her a space to learn the value of genuine listening. Based on the SCIC approach, we spent six weeks identifying what facilitated and hindered the young people's engagement in sport. We started by inquiring into what the young people liked and disliked about the football programme and the barriers to participation they encountered in both the programme and their local community more broadly. Loy described how her genuine listening allowed her to understand the importance of football in young people's lives. The YPAR offered her and her fellow co-researchers the opportunity to really see and recognise their community members' feelings:

I just think the boys had that opportunity to express themselves. [They] literally opened their hearts and they were like, "I feel this. I feel that. I feel that. Football is a place that gives me this joy. It's a place where I escape violence. It's a place where I do that." [I]t showed us as the researchers this is something that they hold dear. It's something that means a lot to them. It's not just coming here to have fun. It's something that is attached to their emotions – it's something that's attached to them spiritually. (Loy)

Loy's encounters with the young people thus challenged her assumptions as to the meanings they associated with playing sports. Loy confessed that she initially 'didn't know how' to genuinely listen to young people's stories, which was 'a learning experience' for her. She reflected that when there is 'no connection or linking between the people that are doing the research and those that are part of the organisation, you are mostly trying, I guess, to force things down people's throats. It's not genuine'. It was critically important to Loy that the research be 'genuine': 'You want the people that are participating to give things from the heart, to say what they feel like. And there should be no restrictions whatsoever'. Here, Loy refers to two critical issues in capacity building: the undesirability of a

top-down approach that ‘forces things down people’s throats’, and the importance of participation not being tokenistic, where young people have little or no influence (Kenny and Clarke 2010b). For Loy, the YPAR required genuine listening as a foundation for creating possibilities for action towards social change. Loy had to learn how to access information in relation to her community members’ feelings and perceptions. This was a complex process that required time. For example, some of the young people found it challenging to express themselves openly, especially when it came to any critical feedback they might have regarding the programme.

Loy acknowledged the tensions and challenges in genuinely listening to young people in their community. She recognised the power relations within the programme and the need for (co)researchers to be aware of this. For her, the fact that we were continuously planning and reflecting after the sessions helped her to negotiate some of the challenges:

I learned the importance of actually having structure, having a plan. If there’s no planning – and also, I think the reason why this works as far as it did work – this whole entire program worked was because that – there was a structure in place. There was a plan on how to go about it. The fact that we had weekly meetings to prep for the next session made it easier for us to actually go in like, “Okay, we have a plan on what to do.” But if we didn’t have a plan, it would be a little bit out of everywhere. (Loy)

The reflective sessions would always start with sharing our experiences – including challenges and facilitators – of working with young people in the previous session. We would then plan collectively for the following session with the young people. As a team, we would brainstorm possible solutions to some of the challenges we were facing; particularly for Loy, this involved developing strategies to avoid tokenistic research. Loy learned that genuine listening is crucial in YPAR.

***“I just don’t do the whole social thing [...] I’m getting out of my comfort zone”  
(Kashindi): finding creative and flexible ways to build relationships***

At the age of 20, Kashindi was the youngest woman in the research team. She had been playing football in the community club for the last four years where she was also a coach for a while. Kashindi knew most of the young people by name. She was knowledgeable on social media platforms, following most of the young people in the YPAR. Kashindi’s biggest learning was to be more social and to find creative ways to build relationships, which she found uncomfortable: ‘I just don’t do the whole social thing and so for me doing the social thing is kind of like, yeah, I’m getting out of my comfort zone’. Kashindi had to ‘put on her people face’ to develop the YPAR. She needed to ask the young people questions, which she experienced as an uncomfortable task, particularly at the beginning of the research. Although Kashindi was knowledgeable and had interacted with most of the young people online, she struggled to build face-to-face relationships. In addition, Kashindi had to negotiate her expectations of how young people should behave during the research, including the resulting frustration she experienced:

Frustration was definitely felt [...] You kind of expect more cooperation from an older age group which is what we were kind of working with but – yeah. I guess at a point it was expected but it was kind of like, yeah, it’s annoying because it was like, yeah, we are coming here I might as well put in the effort [...] So for me, it’s like the majority of these guys outside of the newer ones who were there they’re all people that we know. We’ve

trained with them before. We kind of know their social media personalities and so it was kind of like I don't know why people are acting up right now when I know for a fact you're more than willing to go in front of a camera to make a recording [...]. So, there's nothing really that different that you haven't done before. I guess that's where my frustration came from. (Kashindi)

After documenting some of the young people's concerns, we decided to use creative methodologies to familiarise ourselves in more depth with the young people's experiences with football. Kashindi suggested the use of images and videos. We asked the young people to record short videos responding to some questions in relation to their experiences with football. Kashindi was frustrated by the lack of engagement of the older young boys in the programme. She had to negotiate her expectation that most of the boys would be willing to record the videos. Although they did record videos for the football programme, most of them did want to be on camera for research purposes. In the YPAR, we decided to offer multiple recording options and most of the young boys decided to record audio messages. Kashindi reflected on this process as follows:

I guess I learnt what participatory action research is. I have never heard of it before. I'm more on the other side of research with science, so, yeah. That's something I've learnt. [...] During the whole process I guess it's just overcoming setbacks. [...] We had to be creative and learn to just be more flexible in how we conduct the research in order to fit what is our project really and to get the things that we need. (Kashindi)

Kashindi learned that flexibility and creativity are important elements in building relationships with young people in her community. She had to overcome some of her assumptions that her 'followers' in the online environment would be as communicative and actively engaged face-to-face. Our weekly meetings helped Kashindi to negotiate some of her assumptions and to plan sessions and activities that would allow young people to participate in ways that *they* valued, even when this deviated from the original methodology. The latter testifies to the messiness and uncertainty of YPAR, a theme that also featured centrally in the experience of Nyayoud, to which we now turn.

### ***“Taking it week by week every time, and seeing how the vibe is” (Nyayoud): learning to negotiate the messiness and uncertainty in YPAR***

Nyayoud was not from the same football community. She had extensive experience with community engagement and youth engagement. She was an advocate for the importance of considering young people's voices in community projects and research. The YPAR created a space where she could see the value of young people's voices in research and the messiness and uncertainty in this process. Nyayoud understood that YPAR should consider young people's voices and possible actions that they would like to put in place:

I feel like the one thing this program did was bring young people in – some more invitation to share. So, I liked the idea of not forcing people to do stuff, and if – so that's one thing I really loved about the project as well, and yeah [...] a lot of things are done without us, yeah, for us. So, that's what I mean when I said like bring people into that. And also, asking if there's something we can do for them, I think that's the biggest thing. (Nyayoud)

After better understanding the young people's concerns and lived experiences in football, we brainstormed possible actions to change some of the issues they had raised. However,

it became evident that the young people did not want to be involved in any collective action. In our weekly meetings, we (Carla and the young women) expressed our frustrations about the young people's inertia. As the YPAR team, we needed to make sure that the action would be something the young people wanted to do, and not just the researchers or programme leaders. Nyayoud noticed that we were not forcing young people to do stuff. As (co)researchers we needed to understand the complexity and messiness of YPAR, moving away from traditional research *on* participants. In that sense, Nyayoud had to recognise and allow the messiness and uncertainty of doing research with young people:

I don't know if you remember, but I asked about what a definition of success looks like to all of us individually, and all that stuff. So, "When we go, what are we aiming to do every week?" for example, and not having any expectations on a quota or amount of people that we speak to. That is a challenge and an emotion in that sense. Yeah, I think taking it week by week every time, and seeing how the vibe is, but also just seeing maybe from the start to the end what we accomplished. And then thinking about, "Okay, at least someone wanted to speak and did that," so it was checking my expectations. (Nyayoud)

Nyayoud learned to adjust her expectation and understand that the young people's levels of participation in the research would fluctuate considerably. The young people would engage in some sessions and not engage in others. They would share 'profound stuff' with the co-researchers and sometimes just play without participating in the tasks. Nyayoud learned that embracing the messiness and uncertainty in YPAR would help her to navigate different levels of participation:

We had to navigate – it depended on their mood if that makes sense. Yeah, we don't know what mood they're in that day, so then when we go ask them they're like, "Nah," and I'm like, "Say less," and I walk away and I'm like, "Ugh." [...] I think that's the thing, yeah, when you have – it's actually sometimes humbling though because you look back and it teaches you a lesson but it's humbling. As much as it's like, "Oh, it hurts," it's humbling because it's like they're the experts in their life. We need them, they don't need us. (Nyayoud)

Nyayoud learned that we were there to understand the young people's experiences as 'they're the experts in their life'. Based on this understanding, we sought to collectively name, critique, and transform some of the social injustices they faced. We could not force them to do anything and had to work with fluctuating levels of participation, which emerged for Nyayoud as an essential element in the YPAR.

***"Learning things like problem-solving and just being adaptive" (Adut):  
improving problem-solving skills in order to work with young people in their  
communities***

Adut had been part of the football community for the three years prior to the YPAR. She was actively engaged in the community and committed to creating participation opportunities for young people. In the YPAR, Adut learned the importance of problem-solving skills in working with the young people in her community:

I think us coming together, you know, once the theory and then there was the practical part they're two very different things, you know. You sit down and you plan and you think it's going to work but when you get there it's completely different and so you're learning things like problem-solving and just being adaptive to what the environment is and all

that stuff. Yeah, so I think that coming together once we went out on the field and coming together again and reviewing what we did really, really helped me understand what I could do better or how I could go back on there and deliver on my next session what we could do differently, stuff like that, yeah. (Adut)

We met weekly to discuss the challenges of doing YPAR in the football community. Although the young people had a lot to say, we needed patience and creativity to find a language that resonated with them. We planned all activities collectively, shared them on a Google Drive, and, in the subsequent collaborative meetings, reflected on the challenges and facilitators we encountered in the process. Adut mentioned that we were always finding ways to solve problems that emerged during our interactions and activities with the young people. Adut found the weekly sessions particularly helpful to brainstorm ways to listen to young people who were her age and were part of her community:

Sometimes what you plan to have as a result, in the end, won't always be the result was something I learnt. I don't know how to word this, but how people that you're familiar with [are] sort of reacting when trying to do something like we did. [...] So, it kind of takes away, I guess, the seriousness of what you're trying to do. Obviously, I've never done anything like this before so the whole thing was a new learning journey and a new learning curve for me that I absolutely enjoyed. And also, you know, going out there and working with people my age was also something it's a skill that I developed whilst conducting the research. (Adut)

Adut learned that self- and collective reflection was essential to ensure our YPAR would be successful. She mentioned how she would like the young people in her community to take her more seriously. The process of solving issues through listening and responding to the young people made Adut realise how the young people started to open themselves and demonstrate respect for one another:

As much as we were dealing with the younger people [...] it was really nice having those older guys come and respectfully participate and also respected us as women and those younger than themselves. It's not something you see in the community a lot, especially in the African community. So at first, we were actually a bit, you know, timid or like a bit, we were distancing ourselves from them even though they were a part of the program but we found that most of the input, the user input, that we used in the research was actually from the older people. (Adut)

Adut expressed feeling surprised by the engagement and respect of the young people, particularly the older young people. The fact that different young men showed up to play football on different days of the week added another layer of the complexity of building trust and rapport. The young people voiced that they wanted the programme to be better organised, including better time management and respected and fair referees. They further requested that proper food and refreshments be made available after the training sessions. According to Adut, our collaboration as researchers and co-researchers helped to build problem-solving skills that we needed to deal with this complexity. She described the joy she experienced during this process as follows:

Going out brought me pleasure, I guess, and seeing the girls and working on the project, as in practice working on a project. It was good to come to collaborate and then go out there and try to implement it and then you're faced with challenges and everyone reacts differently, but

we're still laughing and trying to figure it out so. Yeah. [...] How the beginning you were shy, particularly, because you didn't know each other, but in the middle, to the end, you were all joking all the time. (Adut)

Adut's experience foregrounds the space created within the YPAR for collective reflection and problem-solving, in which the young women were given shared power over all research-related decisions. In this process, Adut learned the importance of problem-solving skills in order to work effectively with the young people in her community.

## Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine capacity building processes in YPAR from the perspectives of the young women involved. The findings highlight the potential of YPAR to develop *critical* capacity building. This study responded to the call on critical youth studies (MacDonald, Shildrick, and Woodman 2019) to critically consider the impact and contribution of the research beyond its immediate purpose. Our paper took a critical perspective on the way that capacity building is understood. We challenged instrumental and technocratic capacity-building models that focus on training and predefined practical skills to genuinely engage young people as partners in YPAR. The young women in this study were involved in all cycles of the YPAR and they nurtured skills and knowledge linked with social justice, activism, and democracy. We did not come to this project with predefined objectives or top-down methods of decision-making, which has been a common critique of the dominant functionalist capacity building discourse (Kenny and Clarke 2010b). Rather, we sought to trust the process for activism (in a bottom-up manner), nurturing skills and knowledge linked with social justice, activism, and democracy. The young women whose experiences we have highlighted in this paper reported improved communication and critical thinking skills that developed from the action-reflection cycles in understanding their communities. Whilst this finding strongly resonates with previous research that suggests how YPAR can enhance young people's capacity to solve problems, take responsibility, assume leadership roles, and develop a sense of connectedness (e.g. Carey et al. 2021; Shamrova and Cummings 2017; Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, and Torre 2015), this study also extends this knowledge by foregrounding listening, creativity, and messiness and uncertainty as crucial aspects of critical capacity building.

A vital quality that stands out in the perspectives of the young women documented in this paper is the ability to listen genuinely to the lived experiences, ideas, and feelings of other community members (in this case, the boys in the programme). Using a strengths-based approach, we acknowledged and celebrated the young women's diverse existing capacities in entering the YPAR. The young women nurtured practical knowledge and skills such as problem-solving and creative and flexible ways to build relationships that emerged due to the needs of their own communities. In this sense, we sought a way of working that emphasised an organic, iterative process of decision-making, aligned with a critical capacity-building approach. The ongoing open dialogue among the participants created a democratic space in the YPAR that helped develop their expertise in research and social activism (Cook and Krueger-Henney 2017). For instance, in the process of building relationships, the young women entered into dialogue to challenge some of their assumptions about their community peers (Mirra et al. 2013; Shamrova

and Cummings 2017). Relationship building emerged in part through the dialogue and sharing of power between researchers (Carla and Ramón) and co-researchers (Nyayoud, Loy, Kashindi, and Adut) as well as between the co-researchers and young people participating in the research. In both types of relationships, we sought to create a safe environment in which young people's knowledge and experiences were valued and genuinely heard (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Fox 2013).

In considering critical capacity building, our findings thus draw attention to the ways in which power circulates in YPAR and how we can nurture a genuinely dialogical approach. In this study, capacity building processes were facilitated through a combination of activities and support, underpinned by the young women's active involvement and decision-making power in all aspects of the research process. The weekly workshops and reflective meetings offered vital spaces for the young women to discuss and reflect on their experiences, the attitudes, perceptions, and voices of the young people, the challenges and enablers we encountered in the YPAR, and the actions we designed collectively. The practical and emotional support offered by the research team to the young women in all phases of the YPAR was also an essential enabler for the identified capacity building processes.

Whilst this study found evidence for how YPAR can contribute to young people's recognition and analysis of economic, historical, and socio-political forces that influence systems of inequality (Carey et al. 2021; Freire 1987; Shamrova and Cummings 2017), we understand that an increased social justice awareness or critical consciousness is only a first – and by no means certain – step towards actual change in community capacity. Our findings regarding the messiness and uncertainty of this process echo Kenny and Clarke's (2010b) call for 'a realistic understanding both of the limitations of capacity building as a development concept, but also of it as a development practice' (249).

Even though this paper has focused on the capacity building processes and outcomes from the perspectives of the young women co-researchers, we acknowledge that YPAR draws on mutual learning and capacity building in which researchers and co-researchers both share and receive knowledge to build specific skills needed to create social change (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Coppola, Holt, and McHugh 2020; Freire 1987). In a mutual collaboration process, the researchers (Carla and Ramón) co-designed research strategies and tools with the young women to analyse conditions and make informed decisions on actions in order to improve their communities (Freire 1987; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). This type of collaborative learning and capacity building should be adopted to ensure that researchers understand that while their expertise is important, there are valuable knowledge and skills to be learned from young people. Such a collaborative approach utilises the idea of partnership, in which critical capacity building is a mutual journey where all partners can learn and grow (Kenny and Clarke 2010b).

In line with critical capacity building and YPAR theory, we recognise that capacity building is never a one-size-fits-all proposition and that groups and organisations can benefit from tailored capacity-building initiatives that are grounded in individual and community realities and needs (Wegner et al. 2022). The insights from this study should therefore be engaged critically and contextually, and not as some predetermined series of procedures. Following Freire, we would argue that our approach and findings

should be creatively adapted to the specificities of each context, that is, be engaged dialogically. Re-creating dialogical spaces with young people in ways that build genuinely empowering and equitable relationships can enhance the ability of YPAR to nurture critical capacity building and, ultimately, contribute to more democratic and socially just communities. We hope the insights and illustrations presented in this paper can help carve out space in youth studies for connecting capacity building more firmly to a social justice agenda.

## Note

1. This study emerged from a longer-term partnership with a community sport programme in Melbourne, Australia. The programme was established by a group of refugee-background young men, motivated by their passion for football and their intention to give back to their community. The partnership started in 2019, resulting in two YPAR projects and four publications.

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