

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Racial Microaggressions in U.S. High Schools: An Illustration of the Full YPAR Process From the Youth Research Council

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In 2021, the Youth Research Council (“YRC”) was formed to bring together high school students in the Northern Virginia region of the United States to conduct research on topics important to those youth (“YRC Fellows”). In its inaugural year, YRC Fellows designed a multi-method study to explore the effects of racial microaggressions on the mental health of their peers and to better understand how young people resist racial microaggressions and their often-deleterious effects on mental health. This article details the YRC’s full process, from formation of research questions to sharing findings in critical and participatory ways, as a model of youth participatory action research (YPAR). In addition to describing the ways in which the YRC embodies a YPAR epistemology, we are also showing our methods. To do this, we have built the article around a transcribed conversation held in July 2023 with the intention of teasing out and sorting through the implications of the YRC’s findings based on our first two years of research. The authors of this article include YRC Fellows and university-based researchers who facilitate the YRC.

In 2021, the Youth Research Council (“YRC”) was formed to bring together high school students in the Northern Virginia (metropolitan Washington D.C.) region of the United States to conduct research on topics important to those youth (“YRC Fellows”), in this case a minority-majority council. The YRC follows a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model. YPAR is a type of community-engaged research designed and conducted by youth, in collaboration with adult mentors, for identifying systems-level, institutional, and community-based problems and solutions. YPAR is driven by the local expertise and knowledge held by youth about their experiences, their schools, and their communities (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). In YPAR, youth are involved in every step of the research process, including formulating research questions, designing the research, making data collection decisions, conducting data analysis, and disseminating findings. YPAR is guided by normative commitments to positive social change and is action oriented. Some argue that YPAR seeks what Patti Lather (1986) terms catalytic validity, where the validity of research conducted is dependent on what change it stimulates.

In its inaugural year, YRC Fellows, centering their experiences as Students of Color, designed a multi-method YPAR study to explore the effects of racial microaggressions on the mental health of their peers. This article shares the YRC's process as a model of YPAR in order to consider how a youth research collaborative can confront and disrupt injustice through research — in this case, illuminating racial microaggressions as they are experienced by young people themselves.

The authors of this article include YRC Fellows (Khalid and Berhe-Abraham: Authors 3 and 4) and university-based researchers — adult allies — who facilitate the YRC (Call-Cummings, Keller, Best, Dazzo, and Davis: Authors 1, 2, 5, 6, 7). In keeping with a YPAR epistemology, which the YRC embodies and which demands that we center the experiences, expertise, and voices of youth co-researchers at every step of the knowledge production process (Call-Cummings et al., 2023), we have chosen to highlight community and collective knowledge by detailing the processes and methods we used at each phase of our collaborative inquiry, from research design, to data collection and analysis, to sharing findings. In a particularly novel approach to descriptive analysis and sharing findings, we have chosen to transcribe a conversation we held in July 2023 with the intention of teasing out and discussing the implications of the YRC's findings based on our first two years of research.

Racial Microaggressions and Their Effects

The concept of racial microaggressions was first developed by Pierce and colleagues (1977) to define acts that are “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal” (p. 65). The idea was further conceptualized by Sue et al. (2007) who identified three classes of microaggressions: microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Kohli & Solórzano (2012) note that these microaggressions are “often unconscious and unintentionally hurtful” but nevertheless result in the “‘othering’ of race, language, and culture” for Students of Color (p. 448). A growing body of research demonstrates that racial microaggressions result in negative academic and mental health outcomes for Black and Brown youth (Benner & Graham, 2011; Hope et al., 2015; Keels et al., 2017). More recently, McClure (2020) has argued that we should question the use of the term “microaggressions” and consider in what ways these acts are “micro” at all. Indeed, McClure (2020) proposes a “spectrum of escalating violence,” that begins with microaggressions and illustrates how they can move quickly to forms of hate speech, which, in turn, can lead toward hate crimes.

While the negative mental health effects of racial microaggressions are well documented (Benner & Graham, 2011; Hope et al., 2015; Keels et al., 2017), much of the current evidence suggests that the responsibility for addressing these issues in schools falls to the very youth who are recipients of these discriminatory behaviors (Keels et al., 2017), rather than institutional or collective redress. For example, in Call-Cummings's research with high school students, students often took responsibility for their teachers' aggressive

behaviors, while not holding the teachers to account for *their* actions (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2017). Similarly, students who have reported the deleterious effects of mispronunciation of their names as a form of microaggression are often left to correct and educate their teachers on their names and culture with little or no support from the school (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

In some instances, schools have created opportunities for what researchers call “counter-spaces” through which Students of Color seek and find support for grappling with their encounters with microaggressions (Huber & Cueva, 2012). These counter-spaces might include, for example, Black Student Unions and Equity Boards. Even in these spaces, though, it is the students’ own acts of resilience and resistance that provide the countermeasures to these subtle forms of racism, in place of system-level organizational change, because these counter spaces are constrained in building collective power for student mobilization. Absent decision-making authority, these “counter-spaces,” then, should be recognized as small measures that may have the unintended effect of reproducing the very systems of domination that make the countering of student alienation and oppression necessary in the first place. Even if they do offer safe havens from the assault on self that microaggressions (or hate speech) engender, they often fail in their current form as policy measures that have the potential to lead to systems or structural change. Indeed, systems-level support for addressing the needs of Students of Color in school, without relying on the work of those very students, remains underdeveloped. Recent work by Mann (2020) suggests that even when such measures are adopted through policies, vision statements, or other official documents, the measures are rarely enacted in practice.

Seeking Change through Youth Participatory Action Research

Bertrand et al. (2019) suggest that the systems-level change required to address unequal schooling experiences is best accomplished through intentional fostering of *shared* responsibility between youth researchers and the adult leaders they hope to influence, particularly school leaders, elected leaders, and others in power who may not be directly involved in the research project but who are nonetheless acquainted with it. To foster this shared responsibility for change, the YRC engages a YPAR methodology. YPAR is a youth-led research approach that centers the experiences and knowledges of youth throughout the lifetime of a study, from the identification of research problems or interests to research design and presentation of findings. Michelle Fine has described YPAR as a “radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (2008, p. 215). Anchored in epistemological commitments to questioning and disrupting societal norms about “whose knowledge counts,” and based on critical theories that demand social inquiry examine systemic inequity and injustice (Collins, 2010; Freire, 2000; Habermas, 1984; Harding, 1987), YPAR resists the neoliberal, deeply colonial

academic structures that reserve validity for formally trained and credentialed academics (Call-Cummings et al., 2023). YPAR crosses boundaries of identity, experience, formal education, geography, and institution to gather people as co-researchers, collaborators, and co-conspirators (Love, 2020), leveraging relationality, dismantling traditional power structures, and honoring those who are so often wounded by traditional research practices as holders and creators of knowledge, to enact meaningful and transformative community action (Scorza et al., 2017).

Examples abound of YPAR's possibilities for social change based in research conducted by collectives made up of youth, activists, scholars, legal experts, policy makers, and/or other community members and advisors — what Torre (2010) refers to as “contact zones.” Rather than doubling down on burdening Students of Color to solve their own problems and convince adults to change systems, YPAR invites youth to lead inquiry processes in ways that are liberating, rather than onerous. For example, YPAR with im/migrant youth researchers has centered student voices as they shared their experiences with racial microaggressions in high schools through photovoice projects that not only documented these experiences but created pathways for other students to learn how im/migrant students want fellow students, teachers, and members of the school and community to treat them (Roxas & Vélez, 2019).

Other studies have likewise demonstrated the power of YPAR to both highlight youth expertise and lead to structural change in ways that share the responsibility of calling for that change. Engaging arts-based inquiry methods such as creative writing, spoken word poetry, and photovoice (Wang, 2006; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001), students participating in *Courageous Conversations*, a YPAR project in a Northern Virginia public high school, analyzed student-generated data to reveal feelings of frustration and doubt about the ways in which school officials routinely silence Students of Color in classrooms. These student researchers then translated these performances into calls for practical change including the creation of more supportive learning environments, low-risk opportunities for peer feedback, and opportunities for students to share their voices with broader audiences (Call-Cummings et al., 2020). Youth researchers reflected on their YPAR experiences, calling the impact of their work “a whole revolution,” “pivotal,” and “powerful” (Call-Cummings et al., 2023, pp. 3–8). While the youth researchers felt the liberatory effects of engaging in YPAR, their non-student counterparts took on the less exciting responsibilities of the research (scheduling, inviting audience members, printing flyers, and so on) to ensure the co-researcher students were not burdened by them. While both parts of the work were crucial to the overall success of the project, by sharing responsibilities YPAR fulfilled both its epistemological and emancipatory promises.

The Youth Research Council

To support others working toward youth-led social change, this section details how and why the YRC was formed.

Starting Out: Getting the Band Together

In 2020, Call-Cummings had a conversation with a colleague in the United Kingdom, Dr. Kaz Stuart, who had founded a national young researchers group through the U.K.'s National Youth Agency. The conversation sparked several ideas for Call-Cummings, who reached out to Best and Davis shortly after her chat with Dr. Stuart. Call-Cummings, Best, and Davis had strong, established relationships, having worked together as colleagues on other initiatives at their university. Call-Cummings pitched the idea of a youth research council to these particular friends not only because she knew they would be champions of the idea, but also because they were perfectly positioned to help support the initiative: Best was the director of a university center that acted as an incubator for social science research innovations and Davis was the executive director of an accomplished college preparation and success program for future first generation college students in partnership with seven large public school districts in the region surrounding the university. This meant that Best's center could be the institutional "home" for the YRC (helping with administrative needs), and Davis's program infrastructure could be primarily responsible for recruitment of participants. Call-Cummings, as an established expert in YPAR, was the methodological lead of the initiative.

IRB Approvals and Recruitment

Initial emails and organizational meetings were held in the summer of 2021, giving limited time for program design and recruitment if they were to launch that fall. Because the three leads had established, trusting relationships, we proceeded with confidence and ease. The first step was to apply for approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) so that data gathered as part of the YRC's work could be used in publications and presentations toward local and system change. Because we were unsure of the substantive focus of the research that we would ultimately conduct with our youth counterparts, we wrote our IRB application broadly, with room for amendments once we better understood the goals, priorities, and expertise of the YRC Fellows.

With the help of Best's office manager (who has a graphic design background), we designed recruitment materials that were simple and targeted to the interests of high school students (Figure 1).

Funding and Resources

Because of the limited time to prepare for that initial launch, we had extremely limited funding. Each of us donated our time to the project; Call-Cummings used research funds she had been given by her university to pay YRC Fellows, Best tapped into her center's resources to purchase snacks and other supplies, and Davis used his program's funds as well. Luckily, Call-Cummings already had a dedicated graduate assistant (Dazzo) she assigned to help with the YRC, while another graduate student (Keller), a practicing

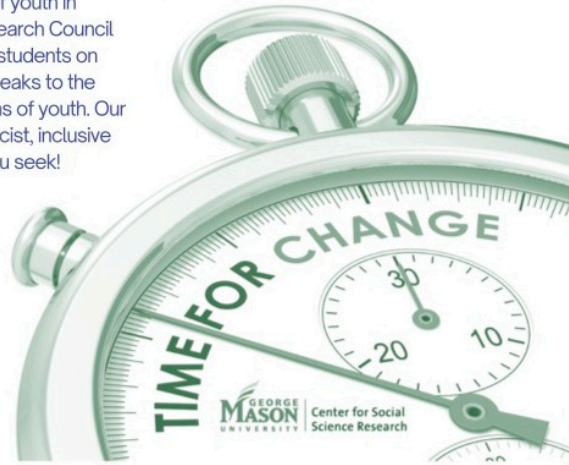
Join the Youth Research Council

Help us create the new Youth Research Council (YRC) and be a changemaker!

The YRC will act as consultants to local and regional organizations, school districts, and governments as they conduct research about youth. We will conduct our own research projects that will have an impact on the lives of youth in Northern Virginia. The Youth Research Council will advise university faculty and students on how to conduct research that speaks to the needs and builds on the strengths of youth. Our work will take an explicitly anti-racist, inclusive stance. Be part of the change you seek!



For more information, scan here.



YRC Recruitment Flyer

high school teacher who was looking for YPAR experience, also supported the initiative. Best and Davis also engaged the help of their own graduate students for administrative support. During our first year, we applied for and received internal funding that supported the growth of the program. Most importantly, we received enough funding to allow us to attend multiple regional and national scholarly conferences to share our process and research findings with a broad audience. These conference trips proved extraordinarily meaningful to the YRC Fellows who attended them.

The Fellowship Model, the Application, and Incentives for Participation

We decided to use a fellowship model because that would be helpful for students — particularly future first-generation college students — in their college applications. As part of the application process, we allowed Fellows to choose from three incentive options: they could receive \$250; they could use their time to count for required “service” hours for clubs or organizations they were a part of; or they could count their time toward internship credit. This gave the Fellows agency around how they received credit for their contributions. About half of the applicants chose to receive payment.

We wanted to ensure there were very few or no barriers to participation, so the application process was simple. There was no GPA (grade point average) requirement, no requirement for previous research experience, etc. Ultimately, we accepted all applicants who committed to attending all the meetings, limiting excused absences (for sickness or competing priorities) to two during the academic year. If Fellows missed more than two meetings,

they could still be a part of the YRC, but they were no longer eligible for the \$250 payment. They could still, however, receive fractional service hours or internship credit, based on their involvement.

Goals and Structure

Our primary goal was to gather a diverse group of young people to conduct research on an issue important to them and to provide research findings and recommendations for policy change to local decision makers. We began from the view that these students' lived experiences and local, context-based practitioner knowledge (e.g., teachers, policymakers), when analyzed using systematic methods and analyses, constitute strong research evidence that can be utilized for decision making (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

To meet these goals, the YRC meets twice per month on Saturdays for two hours at a time. We chose to align our meetings with the existing schedule of Davis's program, as most of the Fellows also participated in that program, which included Saturday meetings, with the belief that aligning those schedules would reduce the transportation burden. During our third year, we started with a day-long retreat with the goal of kickstarting relationship building among Fellows, but we learned that that was overwhelming for participants and have returned to only having two-hour meetings.

Focusing and Designing Our Research

Following a YPAR model, we proceeded inductively with YRC Fellows generating broad areas of research interest that eventually led to a research plan to investigate how racial discrimination affects the lives of youth in this geographic area. At the first two meetings at the outset of each year, the university researchers facilitated interactive data gathering activities to elicit broad participation and discussion, including activities such as card sorting (Chambers, 2002) to prioritize our collective's most pressing concerns and establish group norms to guide the collaborative inquiry. During our initial concept mapping session, YRC Fellows were organized in small groups to prioritize a series of index cards on which they had annotated their concerns and interests. Using these index cards to facilitate discussion, co-researchers across each small group began discussing and noting the most relevant themes. As we reconvened as a large group, it was immediately apparent that racial injustices had risen to the top as each small group's most pressing concern. After an open discussion with the entire collective, the YRC Fellows articulated how these racial inequities affect their mental health, and in turn, the overall educational environment in their high schools.

The majority of YRC Fellows (in both the 2021–22 and 2022–23 cohorts, and including Khalid and Berhe-Abraha) identify as future first-generation college students, within racialized communities, as first- or second-generation immigrants to the United States, members of a religious minority, and women or non-binary. These intersecting identities are important to note

because the YRC Fellows are those who are most affected by, and therefore most knowledgeable about, the types of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies designed to combat racial and gender discrimination. Two of the YRC Fellows (Khalid and Berhe-Abraha) are co-authors of this article and have actively participated in its framing and writing.

Data Collection and Analysis

After identifying a research interest that was shared by all members of the research collective, the YRC Fellows designed a research plan to begin to explore the effects of racial microaggressions on high school students in Northern Virginia. We made design decisions by learning about and then prioritizing the Fellows' "known methods" (Dazzo, 2024), or the everyday methods they already used for generating knowledge and making meaning of their own lived experiences. In keeping with YPAR's onto-epistemological stance that young people and their ways of knowing and being should be centered in the process of knowledge creation, there was no methods "training," *per se*. Rather, we had discussions about how to engage with their peers in equitable and authentic ways. These conversations became co-created research design work.

YRC Fellows began collecting data by conducting qualitative interviews with their friends and peers at school. The Fellows knew that their peers would likely not want to sit down for lengthy, recorded conversations based on strict interview protocols; thus, the Fellows created "hallway interviews" ($n=70$) that were made up of two or three questions intended to strike up a short conversation like they would have naturally in between classes, on the way to lunch, or after school. This would reduce the Fellows' stress in having to memorize a long interview protocol and it would likely increase the trustworthiness of the data because Fellows' peers would likely feel less on guard with their responses.

We used simple, dialogic activities to begin the process of data analysis. Our first step was to meet via Zoom and discuss the data the Fellows had collected. While on Zoom, we used the chat function so that if Fellows were not comfortable speaking in front of everyone, they could still share their impressions in written format. One Fellow, Berhe-Abraha, shared, "I noticed that teachers/staff were some of the aggressors, and I was wondering if they were held accountable because it is not okay if *anyone* is racist, but it's even worse if a teacher does it to their students" (emphasis added, personal communication, January 29, 2022). Others responded in the chat that they noticed the same thing, validating Berhe-Abraha's observation.

At the same meeting, we also used the online collaboration tool Jamboard to make sense of the experiences Fellows' peers had shared with them. We used Jamboard because it mimicked the use of sticky notes to organize ideas, an approach that was commonly used across our collaborative. We created Jamboard slides based on the types of microaggressions we were interested

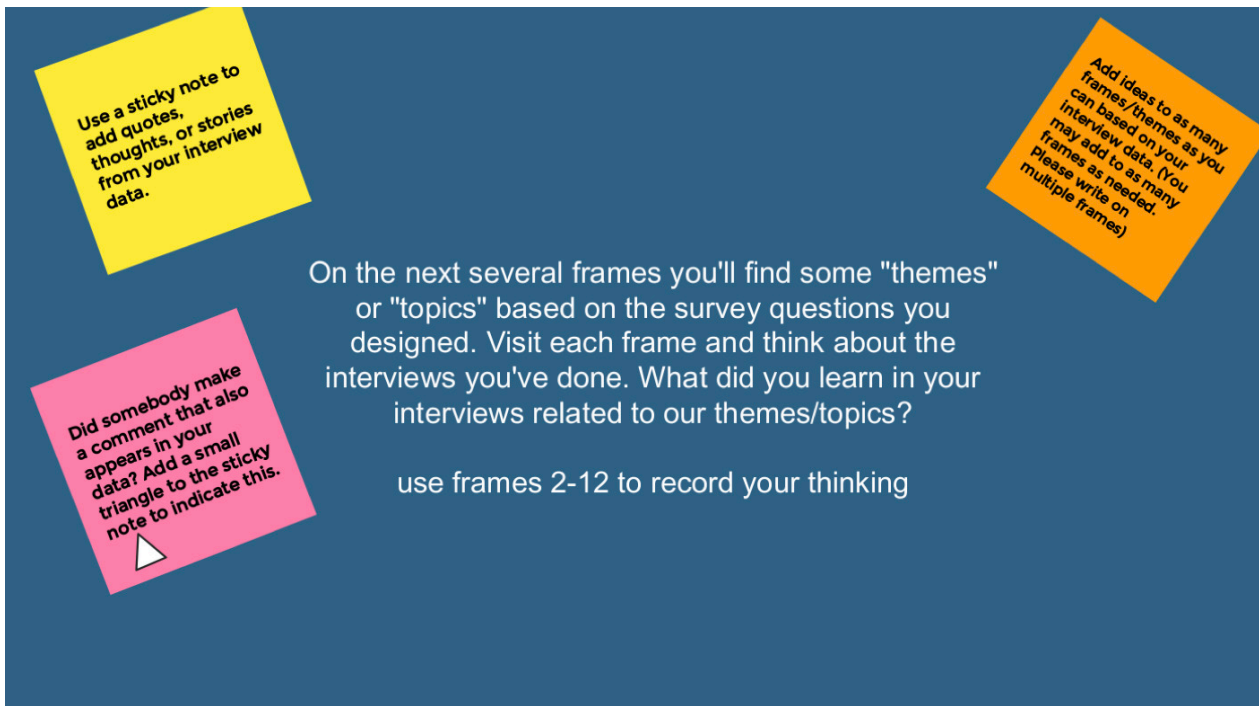


Figure 2. Jamboard Data Analysis: Instructions

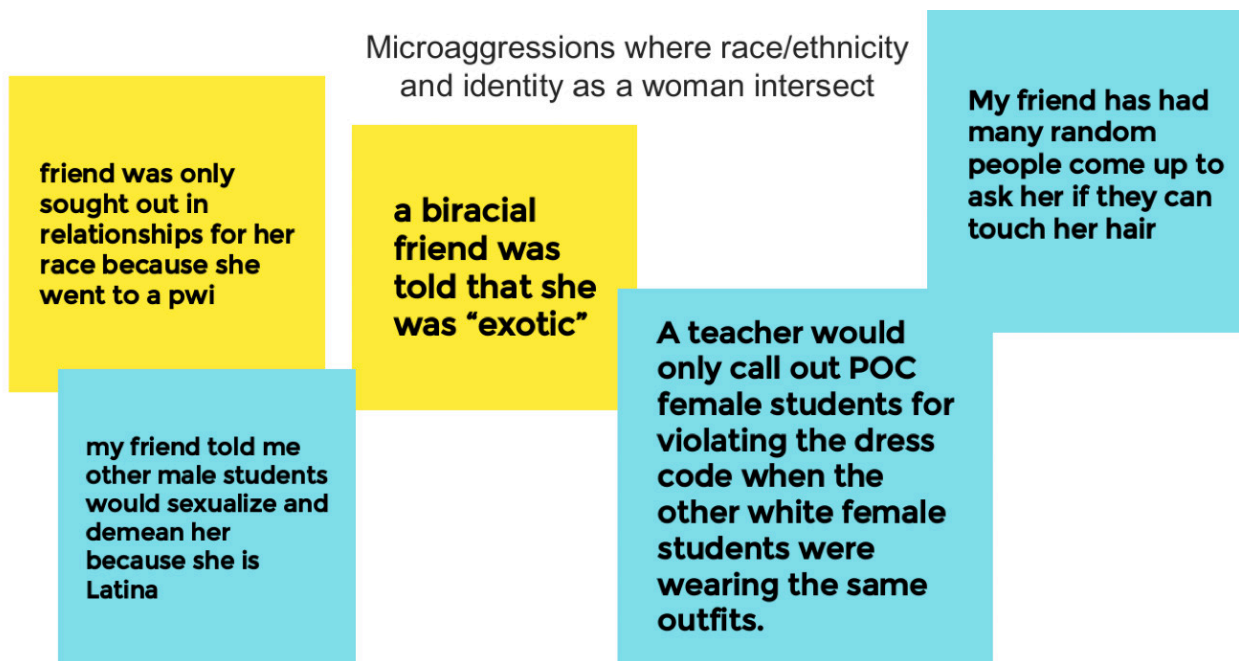


Figure 3. Jamboard Data Analysis: Race/Ethnicity and Woman

in learning about and Fellows then populated the slides with pieces of data and interpretations of their data. [Figures 2 through 6](#) offer samples of this analysis.

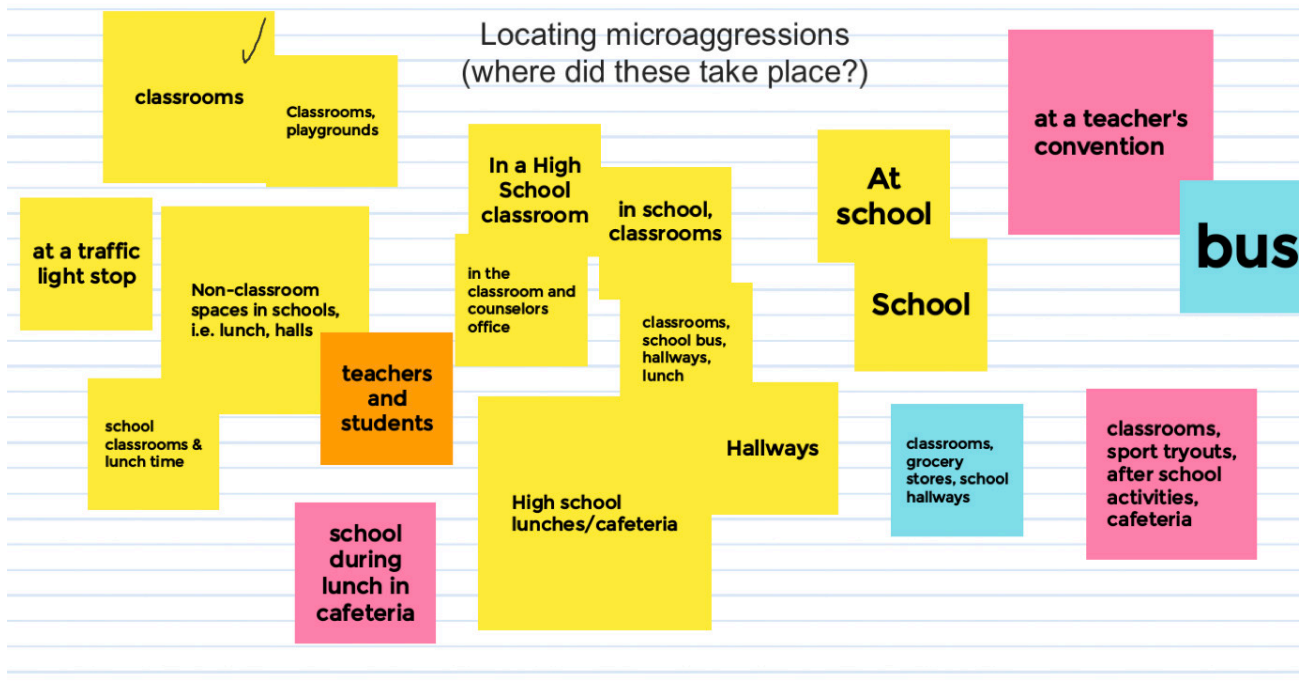


Figure 4. Jamboard Data Analysis: Locating Microaggressions

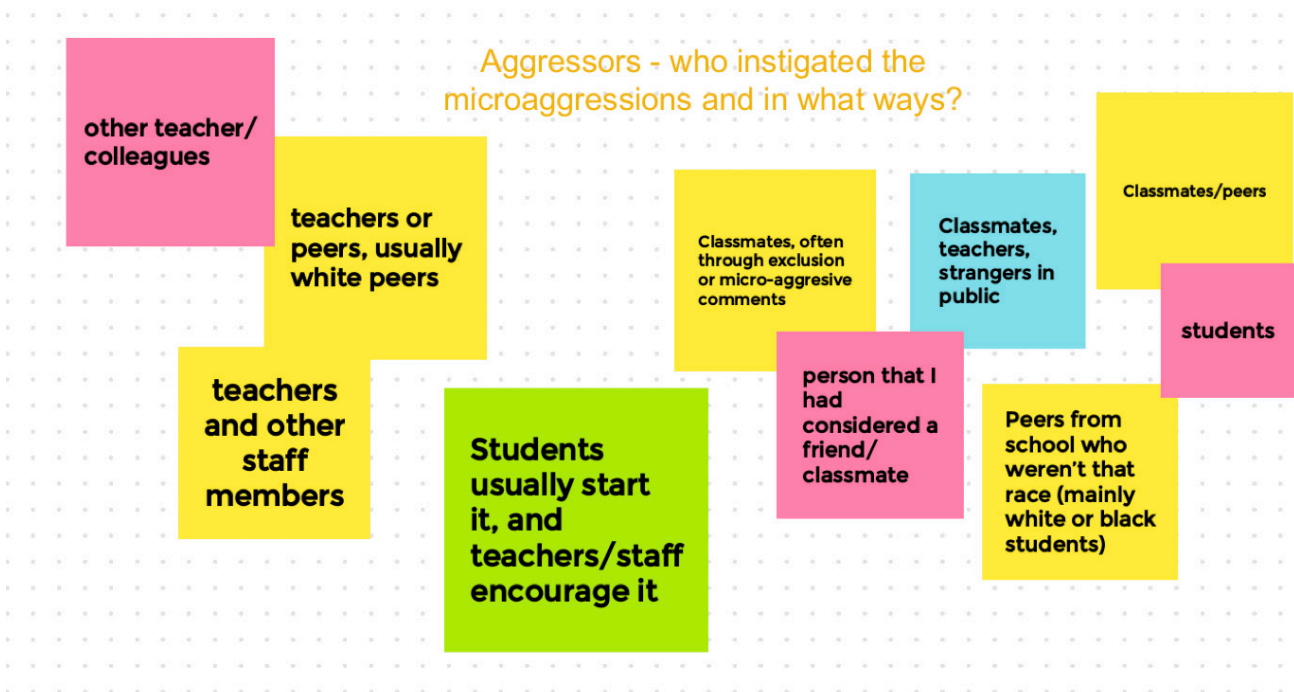


Figure 5. Jamboard Data Analysis: Aggressors

Fellows made clear that they were not only interested in understanding and amplifying the experiences and effects of racial microaggressions, but also in learning how high school students respond to and resist those discriminatory behaviors.

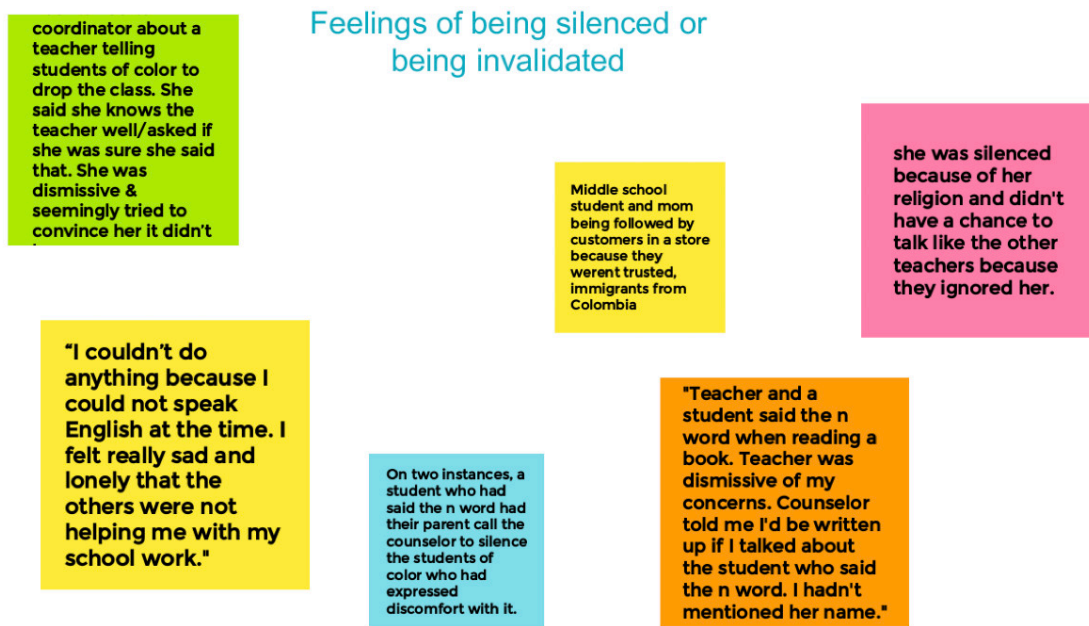


Figure 6. Jamboard Data Analysis: Silencing and Invalidation

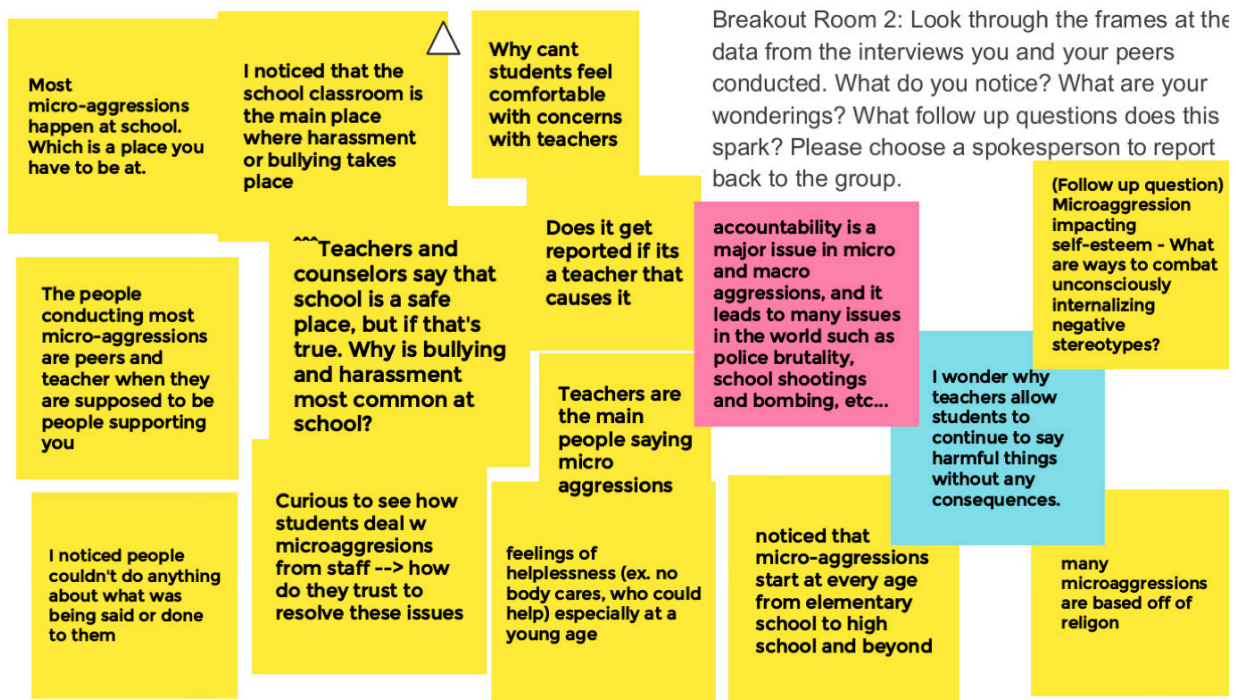


Figure 7. Jamboard Data Analysis: Noticings and Wonderings

Through this exercise, Fellows not only analyzed the interview data but also identified areas where they wanted to pursue subsequent data collection, including teachers as aggressors, lack of accountability, and longer-term effects of microaggressions.

Based on what you learned in your interviews, what identities are most discriminated against in schools?



Figure 9. Mentimeter Results: What identities are most discriminated against?

- Accused of not being “enough” of your race/culture/ethnicity
- Being challenged for your knowledge
- Women of Color treated as prize/token/sexual (racial fetishization)
- Romanticizing appearance/culture/exotification
- Qualifying oneself as not part of the problem (“I’m not a racist, but...”)
- Being invalidated, told not to be dramatic, or to calm down
- Jokes (stereotypes, insensitive)
- Comments on appearance (whether blatantly negative or falsely positive)
- Comments about cultural differences
- Can’t pronounce names (intentionally, repeatedly, or not even trying)
- Treating you as exceptional for “normal” behavior
- Register of fear of group, increased, or enhanced surveillance
- Being treated like a threat

As a group, the YRC Fellows reviewed questions from different scales designed to measure everyday types of perceived racism. As the YRC Fellows began the design of their own questionnaire, the questions from the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS), developed, tested, and validated by Torres-Harding et al. (2012), offered the best alignment with the thematic areas identified from the dialogic analysis process following the interviews the YRC Fellows conducted. YRC Fellows reviewed each question of the RMAS and decided whether to include it and, if so, whether it needed to be reworded or altered to speak directly to their interests and their peers' experiences. The YRC's questionnaire included a series of demographic questions and asked respondents about the types and frequency of racial microaggressions they experienced in school, where they occurred (e.g., classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, school bus, locker room), and from whom (e.g., teachers, fellow students, guidance counselors, administrators). A smaller series of questions asked about the mental health impacts of racial microaggressions. Once the questions were written by the larger group, a smaller team of YRC Fellows used Google Forms to build the questionnaire, which went live in January 2022. Between January and April 2022, 300 high school students completed the questionnaire. Between January and April 2023, an additional 432 high school students completed the questionnaire.

A final round of qualitative data collection was completed in Spring 2023. YRC Fellows innovated a "data blitz" approach to collect more data related to questions based on analysis of hallway interviews, story circles, and our questionnaire. Over the course of two, two-hour research meetings, Fellows texted their friends, peers, and family members two questions: 1) Can you share a time you experienced a racial microaggression?; and 2) How did you resist or respond to a microaggression you experienced? Responses were shared virtually, populating an online dataset, and a final round of discussion-based data analysis using the tools previously mentioned (Jamboard, Mentimeter) completed our research.

Centering Youth Knowledge in Sharing Findings

During the last month of each academic year the YRC works together, we dedicate time and space to sharing both our process and findings in ways that are valuable to YRC Fellows. By so doing, we maintain our alignment with the epistemological commitments of YPAR to center the knowledge and life experiences of young people through the entire research process. In our work we have written a white paper and created short documentaries to distribute to educators and educational decision makers (available at cssr.gmu.edu/initiatives/ycrc), published scholarly articles (of which this article is an example), presented at national and regional conferences, presented to teachers at local schools, and presented to our school-based partners, who then take our evidence-based recommendations back to their own school districts for consideration and, hopefully, implementation.

In this section, we show rather than narrate how the YRC lives up to our epistemological commitments. We are literally centering the words, knowledge, and ideas of YRC Fellows by transcribing portions of a conversation members of our research collective conducted together with the express purpose of highlighting and discussing findings deemed most important by the YRC Fellows. We contextualize each discussion transcription with pieces of data that act as “evidence” of our findings. These findings had already been selected, presented, and discussed by other YRC Fellows at two local, one regional, and one national conference prior to our virtual recorded findings conversation. Thus, *all* of the YRC Fellows were involved in identifying these findings — they are not the product of a select few nor were they solely created by adult facilitators or authors. We chose to record this conversation to facilitate the YRC Fellows’ equitable contribution to this section without throwing up unnecessary barriers to participation in knowledge creation by requiring lengthy writing reliant on academic jargon. Based on findings discussed in conference presentations, collaboratively written reports, and our transcribed conversation, we focus on three main findings: teachers as aggressors, intersectionality and hypersexualization of Women of Color, and possibilities for resistance. While we are aware these findings are not necessarily novel, we describe them here because they illustrate elements related to the method we engaged to maintain our epistemological commitment to centering community and collective knowledge as we moved from data collection and analysis to findings.

Teachers as Aggressors

As seen in Figures 5 and 7, one of our most surprising and disappointing findings was that teachers are often aggressors in instances of racially motivated micro (and macro) aggressions. According to YRC data, the majority (60%) of racial microaggressions take place in classrooms, in full view of teachers who often dismiss racial microaggressions as misunderstandings or “not racist,” or who were the perpetrators themselves according to 29% of questionnaire respondents. Many of these percentages increase significantly when differentiated by students’ racial identity. As an example, according to respondents who identified as Black or African American, 81% reported that microaggressions occurred in the classroom (compared to 60% of all respondents) and more than 50% reported that teachers were the perpetrators of these offenses (compared to only 29% of all respondents).

Khalid: That is an important point. Teachers, being perpetrators, that is always on my mind. And I think that’s really important.

Berhe-Abraha: Teachers play a big role as perpetrators. Starting in elementary school, teachers have a tendency to dress code Girls of Color more than their white counterparts. And particularly ones who may be curvier. It’s something that’s

very concerning. I think it speaks a lot to how those teachers are viewing their students. Those actions are very telling, microaggressive, and harmful. And I think that it's much more harmful when it's coming from someone who has that level of authority, who you should be able to trust to rightfully and honorably enforce these different rules rather than uphold harmful ideas.

Call-Cummings: One person said their anatomy teacher said, "You don't need sunscreen since you're already so dark."

Khalid: Those are really important because they speak to the fact that they're saying this about my whole race! They're educating you in a wrong way. And those are the people making your tests and doing all those things. These are your educators saying these things!

Berhe-Abraha: And it's also, those are the people who confidently say that to a room full of students who will one day be in hospital spaces giving diagnoses! So, it gets to a much more severe scale when we're talking about teachers saying these things. The implications of it are really scary. That "little" microaggression could mean skin cancer for someone. There's so much emotional labor in not being able to trust the people that your peers are able to trust.

Hallway interviews, text responses, testimonials by YRC Fellows and their peers, and questionnaire responses all indicated the prevalence of teachers engaging in these actions. Some of these microaggressions appeared in the form of assumptions about knowledge or achievement, based both in the myth of the model minority (assuming "Asian" people are smarter or are better test takers) and in negative stereotypes (making assumptions about lack of knowledge, understanding, or ability to speak English). Many respondents indicated that one of the most prevalent teacher microaggressions is the mispronunciation of names even after being corrected multiple times. During our dialogic data analysis sessions, several YRC Fellows observed that this microaggression is particularly meaningful, as it may mean those students miss out on critical classroom learning engagements because teachers can be less inclined to call on students whose names they cannot pronounce.

Many respondents noted specific experiences including when "a teacher call[ed] the country my mother is from a 'hellhole' due to being in the Middle East despite my correcting him." Respondents noted that teachers routinely body shame Students of Color, assume some male Students of Color are in gangs, question Students of Color about cheating (without questioning white students similarly), and target Students of Color during lessons on particular topics such as 9/11 and the Civil War. One respondent noted a teacher directly asked about their immigration status.

Collective Thinking Across Critical Intersections

[Figure 9](#) clearly shows in the center of the word cloud that, based on interview data as well as their own lived experiences, YRC Fellows noted the prevalence of microaggressions targeting Black and Latina women. [Figure 3](#) also offers insights into the experiences that were shared with YRC Fellows about how race intersects with ethnicity and gender identity when people experience microaggressions.

Berhe-Abraha: Yeah, I mean, being a Black woman, that's something I've been hyper aware of from a young age and have come to understand in more detail more later on. Although it's disappointing, it's not surprising to see that other Women of Color are having these experiences where they're being hypersexualized, especially in comparison to their white female counterparts. I think there's this image of purity, and so in contrast, it's like, where does that leave Women of Color? I think it strips lots of Women of Color of the ability to just be kids. It also becomes internalized in some very harmful ways.

Khalid: Yes, I agree. Especially because they're still minors and they are being objectified in these ways. It definitely has an impact on them. And it happens even younger.

One Woman of Color shared with a YRC Fellow via text that someone assumed she was sexually active. Another Woman of Color described how someone suggested she “was in charge of cooking food and cleaning in the household.” Other women discussed being asked to touch their “exotic curly hair,” enduring “mansplaining” in Robotics and other STEM clubs, and getting called various slurs “because of her sexuality.” Several respondents noted microaggressions related to their hair, including being told they were not allowed to wear natural hair or braids for an internship, being told their hair looked like “worms,” and being called “Travis Scott when I wore my hair in twists.”

Several experiences shared by text message with Fellows also clarified that religion, particularly when a woman is Muslim, significantly increases the likelihood that Women of Color will be targets of microaggressions. For example, multiple people shared via text and in hallway interviews that someone had either pulled off her hijab in public or threatened to do so.

In addition to these qualitative findings, results from our questionnaire show that, of those students who reported being hypersexualized because of their race or ethnicity, the largest proportions identified as Black and African American (32%) and/or Asian (31%). A significant majority of these students identified as female (79%), and 41% reported identifying within LGBTQ+ communities.

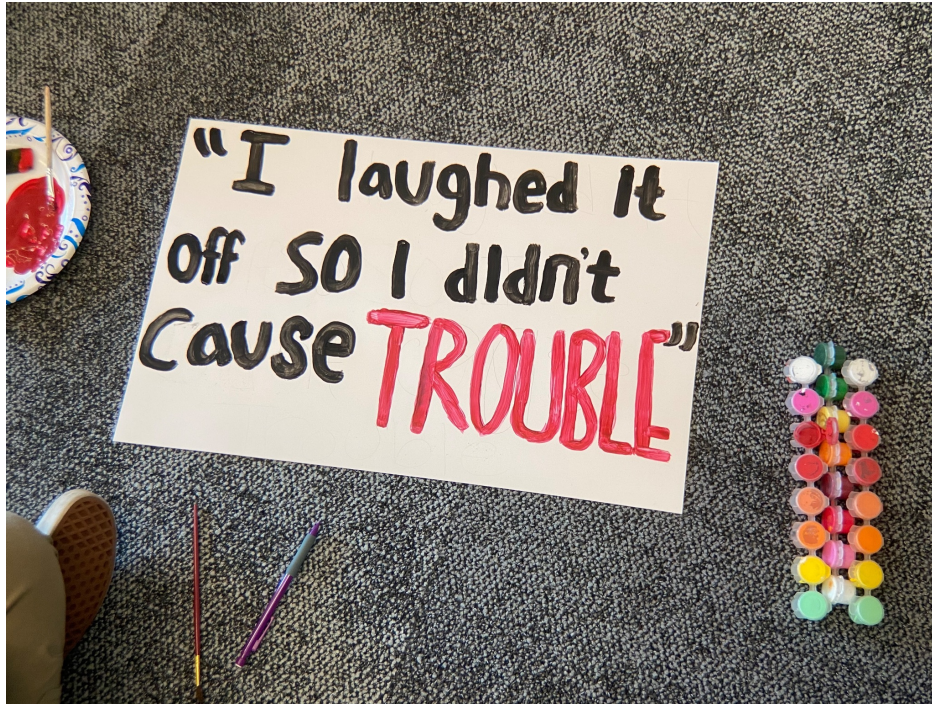


Figure 10. YRC Findings Poster: I laughed it off

Possibilities for Resistance

According to YRC data, approximately 63% of high school students who identify with a racialized community laugh off or internalize racial microaggressions because schools and school districts lack policies needed to hold perpetrators accountable.

Berhe-Abraha: Sometimes it's just so shocking. It's like you just don't know how to react. And thinking of how the brain processes that, it might be difficult to even remember. So sometimes students might not even realize the extent of microaggressions that they have experienced.

Khalid: Most of them are not really resisting. Just, like, internalizing it. Just taking it in and internalizing it.

Berhe-Abraha: One that really stuck out to me as a kind of effective tactic of resistance was the one where they were questioning it. Just keep questioning like, why? Why? Why? And keep doing it until they can't answer the question anymore. But sometimes it's a little difficult to do when we look at some of the things people have said. I think also, part of the difficulty with emotional responses is that they will be used to confirm the stereotypes.

Khalid: Yeah, like, if I replied, then I give them that satisfaction, or maybe that's what they were looking for. Like, conforming to what they expect me to do or what they want me to do.

Berhe-Abraha: I do think laughing it off is important, though, because laughing it off means you're making sure that you don't internalize it, or just carry it with you. But then going to support systems.

Often students reported that they ignore microaggressive behaviors, responding with silence, walking away, or changing their behaviors to not encounter the perpetrator or situation again. Many indicated that they were "shocked" and that they "didn't know what to say" when these experiences occurred. While several respondents offered examples of active resistance, including saying "no," directly questioning microaggressions, or "throw[ing] a box of pasta" at the aggressor's head, the majority of students responded that they "felt like [they] couldn't do anything, that [they] didn't have any power." This lack of power connects with the finding around a lack of accountability for teachers and other adult microaggressors.

"What research still needs to be done."

In this article, we have sought to document how our research collaborative engaged in the process of conceptualizing racial microaggressions by articulating their lived experience in the context of structured exchanges. We have also documented the process of participatory data collection and analysis to map how we came to a richly textured, youth-centered set of understandings about what racial microaggressions are and what they do. In keeping with the epistemological commitments of YPAR, which demands a centering of the voices and experiences of young people, we conclude here with final words from our YRC Fellows.

Call-Cummings: What do we want our conclusions or recommendations to be?

Khalid: I think it would be interesting to get more data about religion next year because I remember during the questionnaire, you know how we had that last question like, 'If you want to tell us anything else...,' I think one person was like, 'Yeah, I'm white, but I am Jewish.' So, they were talking about their experiences with Anti-Semitism because, like, yes, when they were checking off the boxes, they picked white for race but then if we were just looking at it we wouldn't know that they were Jewish. That was a big part of their responses and their experiences.

Berhe-Abraha: I think if we asked college students or older students who may have processed more of this and have figured out how to navigate spaces such as these there would be more answers. So, I think that's part of why the data is like this. This survey is probably one of the first times that students are feeling acknowledged in this sense to begin with. So, I just think part of it is that they haven't really been given the room to fully think about it, you know, the way to really deal with these microaggressions in a way that's effective. But I do think that's the reality of the situation for high schoolers. That's not to say that there isn't anything that one could do to, like, take care of their well-being in the face of microaggressions. It's just that it might look different. It might look like support systems and community. That space where you can go to immediately to be validated instead of carrying that internally.

Khalid: I think it's important to note that there were some people that actually resisted. Like, they did show actual resistance. Although it was rare, we should really highlight that.

Berhe-Abraha: Yeah. We could say that's something to look into, ways for people to do more research into that. But also, the stuff with the teachers is not only careless, but dangerous. That's so dangerous. We need to connect how dangerous these microaggressions are and their severity to how important it is to have accountability structures in place. I want to reiterate that, with teachers, it's not like you're impacting one student life, or one person's day. This goes on. What you say in one class can impact that student for the rest of their life.

We have been intentional in our choice to ensure the adult, university-based researcher members of our collective do not offer any final remarks, nor do they attempt to “make sense of” what the Fellows offer as concluding thought. As the Youth Research Council, we believe young people's knowledge can stand on its own and should not be repackaged in academic jargon, as this changes the knowledge generated in crucial ways. We note that the processes documented in this article made possible understandings of racial microaggressions that were layered, attuned to intersectionality, and traceable to the lived knowledge and experiences Youth of Color bring with them as they move in and out of school.

Takeaways and Final Thoughts

At a recent national conference, we were taking post-presentation questions and comments from our audience members. Several asked about specific aspects of our research methods, and many were congratulating us on our work. Then the final question came: “What surprised you most about

your research?” After looking at each other down the line of the seven of us who were presenting that day, one of us decided to take the lead: “Nothing.” Some of the audience members chuckled a bit, but she went on:

Nothing really surprised us because we live this every day. I’m white so I don’t live this like so many of the YRC Fellows do every day, but I still see it. I still witness it every day at school. So, what surprised us? Nothing, really. What’s important is that we now have concrete evidence that we have collected and analyzed ourselves. We are now equipped with an ability to call for change from our school leaders and decision makers who so often treat the problems we have outlined as normal, or the way things are. That is what we are walking away with.

Ethics Declaration

The authors received approval from the George Mason University Institutional Review Board (1826152-2) to conduct this study. All participants provided appropriate informed consent according to the requirements of the aforementioned review board approval to participate in this study.

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