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## Storytelling through a Critical Positive Youth Development Framework: A Mixed Methods Approach

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## Storytelling through a Critical Positive Youth Development Framework: A Mixed Methods Approach

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### Introduction

Despite their meaningful and ongoing impact on social and environmental justice, youth seldom receive due recognition for their contributions (Han & Ahn, 2020; Warren & Kupscznk, 2016). Indeed, history books are mostly void of young people's impact in advocating for equity and advancing civil rights (Braxton, 2016). Increasingly, there seems to be a concerted effort, particularly in the media, to delegitimize young people's efforts and ideas with accusations of "wokeness," naivete, and inexperience (Benoit et al., 2021; Elliott et al., 2017). Such claims seek to diminish youth's ideas and perspectives and perpetuate the false narrative that young people should be seen and not heard when it comes to enacting social change.

A large body of education and youth development scholarship pushes back against viewing youth from a deficit perspective, instead focusing on young people's strengths and assessing the impact of youth engagement and leadership (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020; Lerner et al., 2005; Search Institute, 2018). The benefits of youth voice and meaningful and informed youth participation in social and systemic change initiatives are well-documented (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Gonzalez & Kokozos, 2019; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), especially when youth have a supportive adult(s) in their lives and feel a sense of belonging and connection to their schools and communities (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Lerner et al., 2005; Search Institute, 2018). To that end, storytelling has shown promise as an

effective pedagogical tool for nurturing and amplifying youth voices (Aldana et al., 2016; Checkoway et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Guided by this scholarship and inspired by the benefits of youth leadership, we (i.e., the authors) collaborated with three university undergraduate students to develop #PassTheMicYouth, a multimedia extension program that aims to amplify the social justice contributions of young people and provide educators with resources that center diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in high school and undergraduate classrooms as well as within youth-serving organizations. Our flagship resource is a twenty-lesson curriculum entitled *Amplifying Youth Voices: A Storytelling for Social Change Curriculum*. The curriculum is informed by the Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD) framework, which we also created (Gonzalez et al., 2021), and has been pilot tested with youth between the ages of fourteen to twenty-two. The overarching aim of the curriculum is to engage youth in 1) building a connected and supportive learning community, 2) developing critical reflection about social justice issues, 3) nurturing political efficacy (i.e., the belief in one's capacity to create meaningful social change), and 4) motivating critical action and community engagement through storytelling.

This paper first reviews and synthesizes scholarship related to the CPYD framework and storytelling as a pedagogical tool, with specific emphasis on personal storytelling and counternarratives. We then introduce and discuss our quantitative and qualitative findings. Finally, we review the strengths and limitations of the study and outline implications for future research and practice.

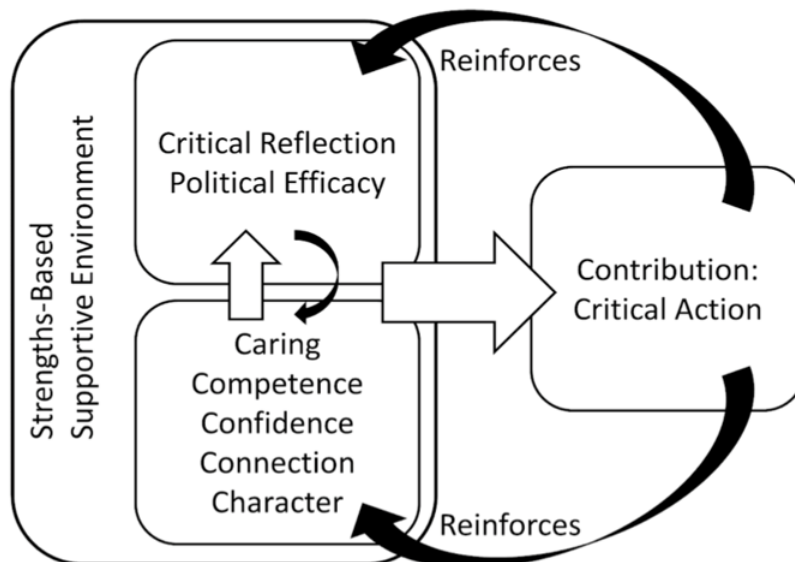
### Critical Positive Youth Development

The Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum was developed with and is guided by the Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD) framework (Gonzalez et al., 2021). CPYD connects critical theory—which acknowledges and challenges systems that create and perpetuate inequities (Friere, 2000)—with the Five Cs model of positive youth development (PYD), designating critical consciousness as the seventh C of PYD. According to the Five Cs model, positive youth development is characterized by five key indicators: caring, competence, confidence, connection, and character (Lerner et al., 2005). Development of the Five Cs leads to a sixth C: contribution, or the actions one takes to strengthen their well-being and improve their community. CPYD expands the Five Cs model by considering the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on young people's development and lived experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework begins with the development of the Five Cs in a sustained strengths-based and supportive environment. CPYD assumes that building such a foundation, rooted in belonging and self-worth, creates the conditions that foster youth's critical reflection and political efficacy, ultimately leading to the sixth C, contribution through critical action. Critical reflection is characterized by a critical awareness of the role of power in creating and perpetuating systems of oppression; political efficacy is the belief in one's capacity to create meaningful social change (Watts et al., 2011). The seventh C of CPYD, critical consciousness (Friere, 1973; Watts et al., 2011), is woven throughout the model and consists of critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical action is guided by critical reflection and seeks to address injustice with the goal of creating a more equitable world through informed action (Diemer & Rapa, 2016). Storytelling, which we identified as a vehicle through which to apply the CPYD framework (Gonzalez et al., 2021), is at the core of the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum.

### Amplifying Youth Voices Through a CPYD Framework

The CPYD framework is integrated throughout the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum. First, students develop the Five Cs of PYD through a series of connection and trust-building activities with a storytelling focus. For example, in one lesson participants share examples of stories that have deeply impacted them and analyze the storytelling strategies. Next, they work toward critical reflection through identification and application of key social justice concepts by participating in a variety of activities, including personal storytelling. Students also develop political efficacy by learning about youth changemakers throughout history and challenging dominant narratives related to young people's capacity to motivate change. They identify and apply the elements of effective and ethical storytelling to the creation of their own social impact story on a topic of their choice. Finally, students learn how to broaden the scope of their message through collaboration and community engagement.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model of Critical Positive Youth Development

*Note:* The development of the five C's in a strength-based, supportive environment lays the groundwork for critical reflection and political efficacy. Together, these components lead to the sixth C, contribution through critical action, which reinforces the five C's, critical reflection, and political efficacy. Simultaneously, the existence of critical reflection and political efficacy strengthens the five C's. The white arrows illustrate conditionality or the presumption that certain conditions must be met before other components can be developed. The black arrows serve as reinforcers. Critical consciousness—consisting of critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action—is integrated throughout the model and makes up the seventh C of CPYD.

Gonzalez et al., 2021

By spotlighting historical and contemporary youth contributions and nurturing skills like effective communication and creative expression, the curriculum empowers and prepares students to civically engage in their communities. Skill-building exercises cultivate critical thinking and creativity, fostering self-confidence and a proactive mindset, whereas exploring the impact of storytelling allows students to embrace their unique identities and perspectives while fostering empathy and social awareness. As an illustrative example, in the “Power of Social Media Storytelling” lesson, participants are guided in crafting impactful narratives tailored for social media platforms: from bold and concise tweets and hashtags to compelling Instagram and Meta posts, participants learn to distill their personal or social justice stories by pairing captivating images with evocative captions, ensuring that their messages resonate in the digital landscape.

The culmination of students' learning manifests as a showcasing of stories based on the social issue and format (e.g., podcast, spoken-word poetry, photography) of their choosing. Following presentations, students reflect on ways to broaden the scope of their message through collaboration and community engagement.

## Storytelling

Storytelling, an ancient practice of conveying beliefs, ideas, and life lessons (De Vos et al., 2003), takes on a contemporary relevance within the curriculum. As a pedagogical practice, storytelling can help cultivate connection in the classroom and increase student engagement (Bell, 2019; Bolkan et al., 2020). Once a climate of support and mutual respect has been established, storytelling provides a means for engaging in self-reflection and the sharing of personal narratives. Critically grounded storytelling considers the role of structural power and the impact of privilege and oppression on people's lived experiences and engages young people in using their voices to raise public consciousness and drive informed social action (Aldana et al., 2016; Bell, 2019; Checkoway et al., 2016).

### Personal Storytelling

As outlined by Boris (2017) and Osborne (2021), personal storytelling involves the sharing of experiences, feelings, and perspectives. These narratives, when strategically employed, possess the ability to capture students' attention, build rapport and trust, foster critical thinking and reflection, and convey complex ideas in relatable ways. The universality of personal storytelling is a key tenet supported by scholars such as Smith and Watson (2010); its capacity to evoke mental images, words, and emotions caters to diverse learners, making it an inclusive method. Moreover, the therapeutic potential of personal storytelling, as suggested by Resilient Educator (n.d.), extends to aiding youth in processing and healing from traumatic experiences. Additionally, personal storytelling can benefit youth by boosting their motivation, engagement, and comprehension (Lucarevschi, 2016; Atta-Alla, 2012; Wajnryb, 2003). It can also empower young people to act on issues that matter to them and their communities as they learn to use their voice and agency to advocate for themselves and others (Ball, 2018; TED, n.d.).

However, personal storytelling illuminated by the CPYD framework is both a vehicle for expressing and reclaiming power and a reflection of existing power dynamics within society. One of the main considerations as to the role of personal storytelling in the curriculum, for example, is the dominance of certain narratives over others in society and schools. The dominance of these narratives, widely accepted as true or normal by powerful groups, shapes perceptions and often marginalizes or silences the stories of those oppressed or excluded (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To address this, our approach integrates personal storytelling within the CPYD framework by having participants critically examine their personal narratives and counteract the impact of dominant narratives.

### Counternarratives

A CPYD emphasis on countering dominant narratives aligns with the concept of counternarratives, which are strategies for challenging dominant narratives by bringing into classrooms the stories and life experiences of those who are often marginalized. They aim to critique traditionally accepted narratives and expose the underlying assumptions, biases, and power structures that sustain them. Counternarratives also seek to disrupt the status quo and create possibilities for social change (Miller et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By engaging in counternarratives, youth and educators can question and challenge dominant narratives and explore alternative ways of thinking and acting that are more equitable and inclusive (Ball, 2018; Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). There are challenges to these strategies, however. One of the main challenges is the resistance or backlash from those who benefit from dominant narratives or are uncomfortable with challenging them. Dominant narratives are often deeply ingrained and normalized in schools and society and thus can be difficult to recognize and resist. Those who uphold these narratives may react negatively or defensively to counternarratives, as they may perceive them as threats to their identity, status, or worldview. They may also attempt to dismiss, invalidate, or silence counternarratives, as they may not want to acknowledge or address the issues they raise (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Personal storytelling and counternarratives are closely related and mutually beneficial for youth by empowering them to share their voices and perspectives, value their identities and cultures, and learn from each other's experiences (Osborne, 2021; Ball, n.d.). They can also promote social justice and transformation by raising awareness of systemic oppression and discrimination, fostering solidarity and empathy among diverse groups, and inspiring action for change (Berrett-Abebe et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2020). Furthermore, personal storytelling and counternarratives can take various forms and formats, such as oral, written, visual, or digital stories. They can also be integrated into various subjects and activities, such as language arts, social studies, arts, or service learning.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum by measuring growth in the development of each of the seven components of the CPYD framework (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, contribution through critical action, and critical consciousness) using pre- and post-tests and reflection assignments, which were de-identified (i.e., personally identifiable participant information was removed) to mitigate potential privacy risks.

## Research Question

Our research question is as follows:

How and to what extent did youth participants demonstrate growth across the seven Cs of CPYD—competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, contribution through critical action, and critical consciousness—as a result of the curriculum?

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were fourteen undergraduate college students enrolled in a semester-long honors course. Of the participants, eight (53 percent) identified as women, six (40 percent) as men (one did not respond), and six (40 percent) identified as White. Two participants who completed the pre-test withdrew from the course in the first week; as such, fourteen completed the pre-test but only twelve completed the post-test and reflection journals.

### Procedure

The study received approval from the institutional review board (IRB) to ensure ethical standards were met. Only data from students who agreed to participate in the study were analyzed. The study utilized the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum, which was designed to enhance the development of the seven components of the CPYD framework. Participants completed a pre- and post-test survey and maintained reflection journals throughout the semester. These reflection journals served as the primary source of qualitative data for thematic analysis. Surveys provide quantitative data that can be analyzed statistically to identify patterns and relationships among variables (Fowler, 2014), and the use of journal responses provides qualitative data that can be analyzed thematically to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In addition, journal responses can be completed at the participant's convenience, which may increase participation rates (Janesick, 1999).

### Measures

The pre- and post-test survey measured demographic information, students' perceptions of the Five Cs, and their perceptions of themselves as storytellers. All items were on a scale of 1 (not at all accurate) to 5 (completely accurate). The survey items were adapted from PYD and critical consciousness scales such as Lerner et al. (2005) and Diemer et al. (2020), respectively. Critical reflection was measured with two items (e.g., "I understand what oppression is and how it manifests"  $r_{pre} = .39$ ;  $r_{post} = .28$ ). Political efficacy consisted of the average of ten items (e.g., "I can make a difference in my community";  $\alpha_{pre} = .65$ ;  $\alpha_{post} = .67$ ). Critical action consisted of the average of twelve items (e.g., "I am involved in activities or groups that promote equity and justice";  $\alpha_{pre} = .86$ ,  $\alpha_{post} = .92$ ). The Five Cs were each measured using one item (e.g., "I trust the people in this group"). Perception of self as a storyteller was measured using four items (e.g., "I consider myself a storyteller").

### Data Analysis

#### *Quantitative*

We compared participants' scores on the pre- and post-test for each measure using paired t-tests with bootstrapping to account for the small sample size. Repeated measures ANOVAs tested whether White students changed more than students of color on critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action.

#### *Qualitative*

We analyzed the data using thematic analysis and content analysis (Patton, 2002). Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from the participants' de-identified reflection journals. This involved a systematic process of organizing, coding, and analyzing the qualitative data to identify recurring patterns, topics, and concepts

related to the participants' experiences and growth in the CPYD framework. Content analysis was employed to assess the depth and frequency of participants' growth across the seven Cs of CPYD. This involved systematically coding and categorizing the content of the reflection journals based on the specific components of the CPYD framework. The coding scheme was developed in accordance with the CPYD framework (Gonzalez et al., 2021), which guided the analysis and interpretation of the data. The data analysis process involved the authors collaboratively coding and analyzing the reflection journals. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion and consensus among the research team.

## Results

### Quantitative Analysis

A total of fourteen students participated; fourteen completed the pre-test and twelve completed the post-test. When comparing how participants' self-ratings on the survey changed from the beginning to the end of the course, the average score increased on all variables (see Table 1). The differences were statistically significant for all except for the statements "Storytelling is an effective way to promote social justice," which went from a mean of 4.71 (SD = 0.47) to 5.00 (SD = 0.00) and "My personal experiences have value," with a pre-test mean of 4.17 (SD = 0.47) and a post-test mean of 4.93 (SD = 0.27). White students (n = 6) and students of color were not significantly different in their mean levels of change. My personal experiences have value," with a pre-test mean of 4.17 (SD = 0.47) and a post-test mean of 4.93 (SD = 0.27). White students (n = 6) and students of color were not significantly different in their mean levels of change.

### Qualitative Analysis

Twelve participants completed reflection journals. Data analysis from the journals yielded four overarching themes that illustrate the process and outcomes of storytelling through a CPYD framework: (a) building a connected community, (b) critical reflection, (c) political efficacy, and (d) contribution through critical action. The first, building a connected community, describes participants' expressed need to develop and maintain a sense of trust and connection prior to and while engaging in dialogue about social justice concepts, their social identities, and their lived experiences. Critical reflection refers to participants' ability to identify and analyze social justice concepts and understand their positionality within a hierarchical system of oppression. Political efficacy includes participants' exposure to the stories and contributions of youth activists and participants' skill development relative to effectively creating and delivering a social impact story. Finally, contribution through critical action refers to the public showcasing of participants' social impact stories and their expressed commitment to create micro- and macro-level change. The research team used pseudonyms and did not explicitly reveal participants' racial and ethnic identities to protect their anonymity.

### Building a Connected Community

Nearly all participants (ten out of twelve) expressed hope for a rich and inclusive learning experience. They recognized that building a connected community prior to engaging in dialogue about social justice concepts and their social identities and lived experiences is paramount. Jesse exclaimed, "Having a sense of community in the classroom would make this a positive learning experience for me."

Fatima and Rae both aspired to create a comfortable and inclusive environment. Fatima hoped to create a comfortable environment and work toward creating a similar space for others. Rae found excitement in the existing community being built and expressed, "By building the safe space and community that we have started working to create, it makes me excited to come to class."

Amaya emphasized the significance of student voice and choice in the learning process. She believed an engaging learning experience occurred when learners can explore their interests, tailor material to those interests, and actively participate in knowledge creation. Amaya shared, "I enjoy learning when I choose what I'd like to learn about, tailor material to my interests, and discover and create knowledge, rather than merely being told information by someone

of ‘higher authority,’ such as a teacher.” Amaya’s perspective underscores the value of agency and the collective empowerment that comes from intra and interpersonal dynamics.

Jared also yearned for a space where voices are heard, opinions are valued, and dialogue thrives. He shared, “An Honors seminar I took last spring was heavily focused on argumentation, so I am looking forward to trying out a more collaborative method of conversation.” This desire for collaborative engagement underscores the participants’ collective desire for inclusive and cooperative learning. Deen further reinforced this sentiment by preferring group activities and working together. Deen stated, “I prefer group activities where students talk in small groups of two to three before having a large group discussion on a topic and prefer having the opportunity to work together.”

Melissa valued the power of diverse perspectives, recognizing that engaging with different viewpoints is key to personal growth and critical evaluation of one’s stance. She explained, “I find learning the most engaging when I hear from and consider many different perspectives.” George expressed this sentiment: “I will be happy to be in a space where students can share and learn from each other’s opinions.” Brad shared a similar sentiment: “I’ve learned that appreciating the backgrounds of others is critical in understanding their perspectives. I am hopeful to learn more about social causes through this class along with a higher sense of cultural awareness through the stories of others.”

## Critical Reflection

Through a series of assignments, experiential group work, and reflective activities, all participants reported an increased understanding of and capacity to analyze social justice concepts. For example, Amaya claimed that course content taught her “more about social structures and methods such as socialization, which meet the needs of dominant groups and oppress targeted groups, thereby perpetuating injustice.” Jared shared that the assigned readings “informed my understanding of how socialization can shape cultural ideas and . . . keep social norms in place.” Andrew described learning about “the intersectionality of social injustices, and how it is important to recognize someone’s background before offering your own opinion.”

Learning about storytelling through a social justice lens further developed all participants’ critical reflection. For instance, Deen revealed, “The readings and activities we’ve done in class have taught me how different social groups face oppression from the dominant culture and how counternarratives can challenge that dominant narrative with a new perspective.” All participants reported a stronger understanding of allyship, particularly as it relates to ethical storytelling. Melissa shared that prior to the course, she “had never given any deep thought to what it meant to be an ally to a marginalized group,” and added, “listening to marginalized groups would be more ethical since I would not be speaking over these people whose voices have been historically silenced. Being an ethical storyteller and an ally means listening to marginalized groups and lifting their voices to more audiences.” Rae shared similar sentiments: “As an ally, the story we are sharing with the world should act to uplift the voices of the group at hand rather than overshadow or attempt to misinform.” In addition to an increased understanding of social justice concepts, storytelling through a CPYD framework resulted in a deeper awareness among participants of their social location and lived experiences. Melissa revealed that listening to other people’s stories was “incredibly eye-opening. I am starting to realize my privilege and the extent of systemic discrimination against people who are not born privileged. I am learning that the world is not as fair as I once thought it was by listening to the stories of people’s struggles, both from students in our class and from the stories we hear about in class.”

Drawing on his understanding of socialization and dominant narratives, Andrew admitted “how little exposure I had to the LGBTQ+ community growing up; in elementary school any deemed-feminine traits or actions were called gay.” Similarly, Jesse described that “there are lots of things in my life that I do simply because it has been imprinted in my brain that it is socially acceptable. For example, the toys that I played with while growing up were often ‘boyish’ toys and I had ‘boyish’ tendencies.”

Amaya reflected that the course content and activities provided “appropriate and descriptive language to describe the feelings I faced while growing up in the United States as a minority and oftentimes feeling embarrassed of my identity and culture, which is a habit I am working to slowly unlearn.” Rae described her tendency to think more about her target identities than agent identities and added that the course has helped her “recognize all parts of my identity, both target and agent.”



### Political Efficacy

All twelve participants demonstrated political efficacy by expressing their belief in their ability to effect change; they articulated this belief by recognizing the contributions of youth in improving their communities. Take George, for example. His perspective shifted as he realized the distinctiveness and significance of youth activism, acknowledging that young people bring their own unique tools to the table. He recognized the power of youth in challenging existing power structures and introducing new values conceptualizing youth as an invaluable resource with “the imagination to believe in a better world and the determination to build it.” This newfound understanding not only changed his perception of himself but also made him view his peers differently, acknowledging their passion as a crucial resource for driving meaningful change.

Concurrently, with regard to learning about youth activism throughout history, Brad was surprised at how “one voice . . . can drastically impact an entire system that has been set in stone for decades.” Jordyn acknowledged the power of youth as a collective engine for activism, expressing the importance of working with others to make social change happen: “I don’t have to be the face of a movement to make a change; I just have to work with others who hope for a better future to make it happen . . . there is power in numbers.” As all the participants learned more about the societal contributions of young leaders in class, they saw the same potential in themselves. Deen shared how hearing and reading about youth leadership showed him the “courage of young individuals and how effective youth movements rely on raising awareness and gathering the voices of youth.” He also saw that prepared youth can bring social change “even without being in positions of power if they properly organize and gather information.”

In addition, participants demonstrated political efficacy by sharing how they were developing skills to create and deliver a social impact story effectively. Participants recognized the value and impact of storytelling in influencing policy, power dynamics, and mental models. They discovered their own abilities and strengths as storytellers, whether through writing, podcasting, videography, or photography. Rae shared that she discovered her talent for writing spoken-word poetry and her potential to “be a good advocate.” Amaya expressed her intention to apply the strategies she learned about storytelling for social change to her future endeavors in activism and advocacy. Fatima expressed her desire to include personal stories in her profession: “I have felt how powerful those [stories] can be. I also want to make sure that the topic I work on is thoroughly researched and that the final project will include a thorough explanation of its history and present issue in order to combat the confusion that many people, including myself, feel when it comes to social change.”

### Contribution through Critical Action

Critical action includes identifying, executing, and assessing appropriate responses to the needs of vulnerable communities. All participants demonstrated their commitment to engage in existing or potential opportunities to challenge oppression and motivate social change through storytelling and effective messaging at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. George exemplified this by expressing, “For if I am going to take one step of the millions required, I want to be as sure as possible that it’s the right one. True and productive social change doesn’t start with emotion, planning, or action. True social change starts with communication.”

Intrapersonal commitment to critical action requires taking steps to change oneself. Etta identified specific course readings in which the storytelling was “very helpful in providing a set of things we can do to change our mindsets and be better allies, and reading those things was helpful in giving me hope that there are things we can do for each other.” George elaborated on this by saying, “The clearer we as individuals can see the world, the better steps we can take towards the future.” Interpersonal commitment requires that individuals take steps to mediate relationships to enact change. Jordyn recognized the power of developing relationships through storytelling with the statement, “I don’t have to be the face of the movement to make change, I just have to work with others who hope for a better future to make it happen,” and the necessity of doing so to create change with, “It is difficult for a single person to change the fundamentals of society, but there is power in numbers. . . . There may be one major face representing the movement, but it is all the people doing the groundwork that actually make the movement powerful.” A commitment to create change at the institutional level requires that people take steps to challenge and change institutions. Jared explained the change in his understanding that came through this course: “This project allowed me to see how individual people can be impacted by specific wrongful actions by companies, and it also gave

me a better idea of the role governments play in local cases [redacted]. I think it is even more important to fight for people's right to not be exploited after seeing some of the effects of [redacted]."

For Jesse, learning about storytelling "has inspired me to speak up more for things I am passionate about" to change others' mindsets in order to engage in critical action. Andrew sees storytelling as a means for people "invigorate their message, to be a vehicle for critical incidents, so that we continue to strive for positive progress." Etta believes in the power of storytelling to enable youth to make contributions through critical action because she has already witnessed it. She explains, "We have already made changes in how we treat each other and what is 'socially acceptable,' and I know that we will continue to do so."

## Discussion

Using pre- and post-tests and de-identified reflection assignments, this mixed methods study examined the impact of the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum by assessing participant growth across the seven components of the CPYD framework: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, contribution through critical action, and critical consciousness. Qualitative and quantitative results yielded growth across the seven components of CPYD, with the most significant growth seen in the Five Cs of PYD, especially connection; qualitative results also indicated substantial growth in political efficacy and the impact of learning about young people's contributions to social justice. Further, storytelling showed promise as an effective medium through which to apply the CPYD framework. By the end of the semester, participants' perceptions of themselves as storytellers increased substantially. For example, participants' response to the item "I consider myself a storyteller" went from a pre-test mean of 2.94 (SD = 1.14) to a post-test mean of 3.79 (SD = 1.19).

Quantitative and qualitative results highlighted the value and necessity of establishing connection and community—as depicted in the Five Cs of PYD—in a safe and supportive environment prior to developing critical reflection, political efficacy, and contribution through critical action. Because the Five Cs are woven into the foundation of and throughout the CPYD framework and Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum, participants grew more connected, more comfortable sharing their insights and ideas, and felt more supported as the semester progressed. Indeed, findings from the pre- and post-tests illustrated an increase among all participants in variables related to the Five Cs of PYD (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring). Of the seven components of CPYD, participants showed the most growth in the Five Cs, particularly connection, as evidenced by the participants' responses to the following items: "I feel a sense of community with members of this group," which went from a pre-test mean of 3.00 (SD = 1.24) to a post-test mean of 4.14 (SD = 1.03) and "I feel more comfortable opening up about my personal experiences in this group than I do in other settings," with a pre-test mean of 3.21 (SD = 1.31) and a post-test mean of 4.36 (SD = 1.01). These findings align with previous scholarship related to the role of supportive environments in nurturing youth voice (Lerner et al., 2005; Search Institute, 2018).

Once participants built a connected and trusting learning community, they engaged in and strengthened their sense of critical reflection. Quantitative and qualitative findings indicated a deeper understanding and more nuanced analysis of social justice concepts. Specifically, quantitative data demonstrated that participants better understood oppression and its various manifestations. Data from participants' reflective journals revealed that their comprehension and capacity to analyze social justice concepts was strengthened by their engagement with critically grounded storytelling. Specifically, participants expressed greater knowledge of allyship by learning about ethical storytelling; more comprehensively understood notions of power, oppression, and privilege by writing and listening to personal stories; and gained insight about socialization as well as how to effectively challenge power structures through exposure to and engagement with dominant and counternarratives. Qualitative data also demonstrated increased introspection relative to how participants' social identities, biases, and lived experiences shape their worldview and inform how they share and interpret stories and which stories they choose to share. These findings underscore previous research on the impact of storytelling, particularly critically grounded storytelling, on critical reflection (Boris, 2017; Osborne, 2021; Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Findings reflected in both quantitative and qualitative data showed that participants' belief in their capacity to inspire social change (i.e., their sense of political efficacy) increased throughout the semester. Further, data gathered from participants' reflection journals highlighted the impact of recognizing and celebrating the important contributions of young people in driving social change, both past and present. Specifically, learning about the successes

of youth activists served to push back against dominant narratives of young people and presented participants with pathways and possibilities for youth-led social change, revealing the power of youth voice. Further, participants' understanding of storytelling as a vehicle for social change opened their eyes to the transformative potential of stories, both in their personal lives and as a means to address social justice issues. Through this exploration, participants gained confidence in their storytelling abilities, specifically as it relates to creating awareness about social issues and motivating change. Existing research also supports the role of storytelling in amplifying youth voices and increasing youth's confidence as agents for social change (Aldana et al., 2016; Checkoway et al., 2016).

Participants' experience developing critical reflection and political efficacy in a connected and supportive environment paved the way for contribution through critical action. This finding reflects existing scholarship on the factors that foster informed youth activism (Aldana et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al, 2020; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). Participants demonstrated growth across the twelve quantitative survey items related to contribution through critical action. Data from the reflective journals also demonstrated a universal commitment from participants to engage in social change initiatives at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional levels. Further, participants expressed the intention to integrate effective messaging and storytelling skills into future critical action and emphasized the valuable role of storytelling in inspiring social change. Indeed, post-test data indicated that all participants strongly agreed with the following survey item: "Storytelling is an effective way to promote social justice."

In essence, this study underscored the holistic impact of the curriculum, not only in cultivating individual growth across CPYD components but also in fostering a collective understanding of social change as a multidimensional endeavor. By weaving together historical, contemporary, and personal narratives, implementing skill-building exercises, and creating supportive learning environments, the curriculum emerged as a dynamic and promising tool for shaping empowered and empathetic youth activists poised to drive enduring social change.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Our study has several strengths that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, a Mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of college students' critical positive youth development competencies. Additionally, journal responses as a data collection method allow participants to reflect on their experiences and provide detailed and nuanced accounts of their thoughts and feelings, which can provide rich and detailed data that may not be captured through other data collection methods like surveys or interviews.

Like any research study, there are limitations as well. First, the sample size of fourteen respondents for the study's quantitative pre-test and twelve participants for the post-test and qualitative components is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a larger population (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, using self-report measures in both components may introduce bias and limit the accuracy of the data collected (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The use of journal responses as a qualitative data collection method could have been complemented by other methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to triangulate further and ultimately assure the quality of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, the study is also subject to selection bias given that participants were not randomly selected from the population of college students; instead, these were students who were both interested in and allowed to enroll in the course (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

This study's findings have important implications for future research and practice in education and youth development. Future research should be conducted with a larger sample size and across a wider age range. Though the curriculum has been pilot tested with youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two, the inclusion of high school-aged youth in a future research study would allow researchers to draw more insightful conclusions about the applicability of this curriculum to a younger demographic. Additionally, future research should examine the use and impacts of this curriculum with youth who have not self-selected into an honors level course to determine efficacy across students with a wider variety of studenting skills. Finally, the use of interviews or focus groups for triangulation of data could increase the accuracy and credibility of the findings (Patton, 2002).

The findings of this study underscore the importance of a strong sense of community in order for youth to engage in dialogue and storytelling. This sense of community allowed participants to feel safe engaging in dialogue about social justice issues and their own identities and experiences. Thus, it is essential that facilitators engage in intentional community-building activities that set expectations for sharing, listening, and engaging with each other with respect. The Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum includes lessons to support the development of such a community in the classroom and within youth-serving organizations and the results of this study indicate that they are a valuable component. Further research could delve into the specific facilitation techniques and pedagogical approaches that contribute to creating such environments.

The curriculum's emphasis on critical reflection and exposure to social justice concepts had a notable impact on participants' understanding of oppression, power dynamics, and privilege. Further, participants expressed substantial benefit from learning about the social justice contributions of young people throughout modern history. This underscores the value of integrating social justice education into youth development programs and spotlighting the accomplishments of youth activists. Participants' journals facilitated their processing, growth, and monitoring of their progress. In addition to increasing participants' critical reflection, journals underscored storytelling's role in boosting political efficacy and driving social change. Future facilitators should embrace journaling for ongoing reflection, emotional clarity, and experience-sharing. The results of this study support the use of Amplifying Youth Voices to develop the seven Cs of Critical Positive Youth Development and to position youth as informed agents for social change.

Indeed, the Amplifying Youth Voices curriculum presents a versatile framework that can be effectively integrated into various classroom contexts, fostering CPYD across disciplines. For instance, in English or literature classes, the curriculum can be seamlessly woven into discussions about narratives, enabling students to explore diverse perspectives and social justice themes through literature. In history classes, educators can leverage the curriculum to amplify the often-overlooked contributions of young activists, providing a nuanced understanding of historical events and encouraging students to reflect on the ongoing relevance of these narratives. Social studies classes can benefit from the curriculum by integrating it into units on civic engagement, allowing students to connect theoretical concepts with real-world applications. Science teachers can utilize the curriculum to help students effectively convey complex scientific issues to a lay audience. Additionally, in extracurricular and community settings such as debate clubs or youth-serving organizations, the curriculum can serve as a catalyst for dialogue on pertinent social issues, motivating students to translate their learning into action. The flexible nature of the curriculum lends itself to adaptation across a spectrum of subjects and youth programs, cultivating an environment where critical reflection, political efficacy, contribution through critical action, and storytelling become integral components of the learning experience.

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**Table 1.** Paired Samples T-Test Analysis

Variable	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Mean difference	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
When and if I share my perspective in this group, I feel like I am or would be listened to.	4.07(0.83)	4.50(0.94)	-0.43	0.01	-0.71	-0.21
I feel a sense of community with the members of this group.	3.00(1.24)	4.14(1.03)	-1.14	0.01	-1.86	-0.50
I feel more comfortable opening up about my personal experiences in this group than I do in other classroom settings.	3.21(1.31)	4.36(1.01)	-1.14	0.04	-1.93	-0.50
The people in this group care about me.	3.64(1.01)	4.36(0.63)	-0.71	0.04	-1.36	-0.14
I feel like I can make a valuable contribution to this group.	4.07(0.83)	4.79(0.58)	-0.71	0.02	-1.14	-0.36
I trust the people in this group.	3.50(1.16)	4.57(0.51)	-1.07	0.01	-1.71	-0.50

Youth Development Framework

Storytelling is an effective way to promote social justice.	4.71(0.47)	5.00(0.00)	-0.29	0.06	-0.50	-0.07
I consider myself a storyteller.	2.93(1.14)	3.79(1.19)	-0.86	0.04	-1.43	-0.36
My personal experiences have value.	4.71(0.47)	4.93(0.27)	-0.21	0.16	-0.43	-0.07
My perspectives on social justice are worthy of sharing publicly.	3.93(0.73)	4.43(0.65)	-0.50	0.01	-0.86	-0.21
Critical Reflection	3.93(0.87)	4.50(0.83)	-0.57	0.03	-1.04	-0.18
Political Efficacy	3.93(0.35)	4.34(0.28)	-0.41	0.00	-0.61	-0.24
Critical Action	2.87(0.81)	3.30(1.01)	-0.43	0.05	-0.82	-0.09