

Exploring Agricultural Issues through Youth Participatory Action Research in FFA Cross-Chapter Collaborations

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Introduction

Teaching school-based agricultural education (SBAE) students about agricultural issues has been an important topic in the profession, including national education standards (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2023) and research (American Association of Agricultural Educators, 2023). Furthermore, these classroom initiatives are complemented by various FFA events, including the Agricultural Issues Forum Leadership Development Event (National FFA Organization, 2025). The agricultural issues can vary by course and community; however, popular topics include issues surrounding genetically modified organisms and animal welfare. These are often hotly debated, with multiple viewpoints and elements of truth for different positions, with many people having deep beliefs. For example, SBAE teachers often have to walk a tight line between education on agricultural issues and advocating for a position.

While various standards and curricula exist on these topics, the teaching methods required to teach the agrarian problems are poorly developed. Considering the inherent challenge of preparing SBAE students to make informed decisions and formulate factual arguments for positions on inherently debatable issues, the methods of teaching these topics deserve further examination. This manuscript uses critical reflection to explore one specific method of teaching SBAE students on agricultural matters.

Mezirow (1998) describes critical reflection as starting from a frame of reference, and when a new abstraction is introduced, potentially changing or expanding your view based on the new information. Critical reflection is an important tool for understanding how we can teach about agricultural issues for several reasons. First, agricultural issues can be value-laden, with teachers and even students having predispositions to a point of view before being introduced to the topic. Second, agricultural issues are often dynamic, involving social, economic, cultural, and environmental issues. Critical reflection presents pedagogical goals for students, and this study explores how Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods can teach SBAE students about agricultural issues.

Conceptual Framework

YPAR is a research methodology designed to encourage youth to use research techniques to explore issues important to themselves and their communities and to take action to advocate for change to these issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2016). YPAR is designed to help youth think critically about issues and empower them to seek changes to their world (Ozer, 2017). YPAR has been successfully used in both school (Rubin et al., 2017; Voight & Valez, 2018) and afterschool (Malorni et al., 2022) settings. It has been used in an elective agriscience course to teach students about food insecurity in their communities (Anderson et al., 2024). A three-year YPAR project in East Oakland included community mapping to determine the location of food deserts and documented youth-led change of the items sold in liquor/corner stores to include more fresh produce and healthy products (Akom et al., 2016). YPAR positions

youth as “experts” in their own communities and teaches youth to investigate issues in their communities and look for actionable solutions, along the way learning to critically reflect on the different perspectives surrounding the issues (Caraballo et al., 2017). The Youth Researcher Empowerment YPAR Framework (Leman et al., 2024) includes a list of the eight research components for leading YPAR, as well as the social-emotional competencies youth gain from YPAR. The eight components guided our process; however, the youth researchers directed the topics and methodology, resulting in different processes followed in the groups.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this case study research is to evaluate YPAR as a curricular method to teach agricultural issues and build critical reflection skills.

Methods

This study utilized a case study methodology guided by constructivist epistemology (Stake, 1995). Specifically, the three YPAR groups (two FFA chapters in each group) constituted a collected case study, with the findings from the three sites bound by student groups participating in YPAR. The project had IRB approval. Table 1 includes the FFA chapters paired together, their research topics, and their USDA County Rural-Urban Continuum Code (USDA, 2023) to determine the relative environment of each FFA chapter. The YPAR groups met in person once to begin the project, then met virtually due to their different locations across the state. They met together in person during their state FFA convention after three months of work.

Table 1

Participating YPAR FFA Chapter Groups by County Population Size

FFA Chapter	County Rural-Urban Continuum Code	# Students	Research Topic
Chapter A	3 - Metro area of fewer than 250,000	6	FFA elections
Chapter B	1 - Metro area of 1 million or more	6	
Chapter C	3 - Metro area of fewer than 250,000	4	Agriculture industry mentors
Chapter D	7 - Nonmetro area of 5,000 to 20,000, not adjacent to a metro area	5	
Chapter E	3 - Metro area of fewer than 250,000	2	Perceptions of 4-H and FFA livestock projects
Chapter F	3 - Metro area of fewer than 250,000*	5	

*Metro area associated with the county is in a neighboring state.

The research team collected multiple forms of data, including YPAR team notes from all meetings, observations from team leaders, a group focus group at the end of the project, and student written reflections. The four different sets of data facilitated triangulation. Data analysis focused on a three-step thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2013). First, transcript and reflection data were coded using the research purpose statement as the initial guide by two team members. Second, the two-person team analyzed the coded data to identify themes. Finally, the team reread the data to verify that the themes help develop credibility and dependability.

Findings

Our findings are divided into four parts, one for each of the three groups, and a fourth describing the final reflections of the entire group on the YPAR process. The YPAR process for all three groups began with processes by which the youth brainstormed potential issues using the guiding questions “what bothers you?”, “what keeps you up?”, “what do you talk about with

your friends?”, and “what do you worry about?”. From there, the groups discussed their individual responses and narrowed the choices down to one topic to move forward. The three YPAR groups are at different stages of the process, but came together for an end-of-year reflection at the state FFA Convention, allowing the three groups to share their results and reflect on the YPAR experience as a large group.

Agriculture Mentors

The first group (Chapters C and D) began the process of identifying a research topic through exploring previous YPAR group projects, discussing relevant research (in *Journal of Extension; Journal of Agricultural Education*), interacting with scholars in agriculture, and unpacking personal experiences. This process required the two school groups to answer a common research question, with one group gravitating to a topic related to the urban context. In contrast, another group started with questions around women in agriculture. The broader topic of mentorship in agriculture was identified because of the linkages to both initial ideas of the two groups. The group also determined that exploring mentorship to support the experiences and careers of individuals who did not have a background in agriculture or were not traditionally involved in the field. Their official research question was “How does mentorship play a role in the experiences of students not traditionally involved in agriculture? What can be done to support their experiences in organizations related to agriculture, such as FFA?”

The group chose to complete interviews of individuals who considered themselves not traditionally involved in agriculture about their experiences and the role mentors played in their journey into the field of agriculture. They compiled a list of potential individuals in their network who came from nontraditional agricultural backgrounds or entered the SBAE program with limited prior experience. The YPAR members conducted one interview together and then each chose someone to interview virtually on their own time. A total of 4 interviews and one focus group were completed. The agriculture industry sponsor of the project put together the focus group, consisting of three of their employees who came to the organization with no experience with production agriculture, and talked about their experience finding mentors to navigate areas of agriculture that they were unfamiliar with to complete their jobs.

The students found that mentorship plays a key role in people's journey toward their agricultural careers. When mentors were available, especially those from similar cultural backgrounds, the transition to agricultural careers and ventures could be positive if the person had little agricultural experience. However, if there were no mentors and the cultural compromises were great, then a similar journey would be much more complex, and the determination of that individual would need to be greater.

Livestock in FFA and 4-H

The second group (Chapters E and F) was motivated to look at public perceptions of livestock care in youth exhibitions based on information they gained from watching TikTok videos about an FFA Chapter President in Texas accused of poisoning her fellow chapter member's goat (Hernandez, 2025). The group felt that there were many negative opinions on TikTok about the incident and that the public would develop negative views about youth animal projects and the association with FFA and 4-H. The group hypothesized that individuals who received information from social media were more likely to have negative opinions of animal projects. Once the YPAR group decided to research public thoughts about animals, they had a long discussion about what animal projects in FFA included. One of the group mentors shared that in her urban FFA chapter, animal projects included raising rats and small animals. At the same time, members from a more rural area only thought of traditional livestock species. The

group changed their wording from animal to livestock projects. Their research questions were (1) How do individuals perceive livestock projects in FFA and 4-H? and (2) Are there differences in perceptions of FFA livestock projects by age or agriculture experience?

The group first developed a survey on Google Forms for piloting questions. They shared it with approximately ten fellow FFA chapter members. From this initial version, they realized they needed more in-depth questions and options for skipping questions. They expanded and moved their survey to Qualtrics. Group members distributed the survey to other students and teachers in their schools, as well as their social media circles. A total of 190 individuals completed the survey. Participants felt that the information about 4-H and FFA livestock was most positive from friends, family, and school, while it was most negative when from social media. Almost all respondents felt FFA and 4-H animals were treated better or pampered compared to farm animals. The youth researchers are now digging into their second research question to determine differences by age and agricultural experience.

FFA Elections

The third group (Chapters A and B) began their discussions with how different parts of the state see urban agriculture. To the FFA members from the large urban school, urban agriculture included rooftop and community gardening or sustainable food systems. While in a city, members from the other chapter had a corn field across from their school and did not see urban agriculture the same. The group came together around the fact that one of their shared friends from a different FFA chapter ran for state FFA office the year before but did not win. They felt their friend would have been an excellent choice for the position. One of the teachers talked about how the election process influences who and how students make their choices. They decided to look more in-depth at the state election process. Specifically, their research questions were (1) What are the experiences of FFA members who are running for leadership positions in their chapter, section, or nationally?, and (2) what are the barriers to participation?.

The YPAR group devised an observation checklist and piloted it by observing section-level elections for one of the two YPAR chapters. They used this information to reform their observation checklist and then observed and filled out the revised checklist during the state FFA elections. In addition, they had a poster at the state FFA convention asking participants to record their thoughts about the election process on a sticky note.

Final Reflection Themes

YPAR allowed members to explore their past and reflect on their personal growth. One student reflected, “everyone has their own story and they all connect together and relate.”. A student from the group researching mentorship reflected on their connection to the research topic. While others were discussing their struggles to find representation in the FFA initially, she reflected on how mentorship in her local FFA chapter helped her to overcome issues of belonging. She did not come from an agricultural background and was skeptical of the FFA. However, the power of mentorships helped her become active in the FFA. She said:

My perceptions were completely changed ... someone came in and truly said, Hey, you can belong here. You can come from somewhere, even if you don't have an ag background, and then you can change it.

YPAR enabled members to explore the negative experiences they faced at FFA events. The group researching the systems of electing FFA regional and state-wide officers focused on how representation (or the lack thereof) impacted their own experiences in the FFA.

One member from an urban area explored how engaging with members from across the state in the YPAR research process opened her mind to different viewpoints. They said:

Soon after I joined, was my first convention, and it really like kind of shifted my perception of it, because I experienced, like some discrimination while I was there. So I really didn't feel comfortable anymore, but going to other spaces and seeing like different opinions ... definitely kind of helps shift my perception back to being more open.

While the feeling of being discriminated against is unacceptable, this member had an opportunity to explore her own perspectives through YPAR and develop an open mind to others. The topic of feeling discriminated against was brought up again in the discussion. From a reflection prompt asking how students would be different without YPAR, one said, "I would still be in a place where I thought people were not accepting and loving, but I found that here."

Members discussed that the YPAR process could serve as a tool for creating open-mindedness in FFA members. A student reflected that the YPAR process has "continued to open my mind to different perspectives and ideas I would not have had." Another member discussed how YPAR allowed them to develop meaningful relationships and learn from members outside of their school. They reported:

So I grew up in the, you know, predominantly black middle school. So I really never had like the opportunity before high school to like interact with people of different backgrounds...being given the opportunity to talk to more and many different people ... It really shows how open-minded I am like for our research.

Members of the YPAR research teams shared appreciation for members' different backgrounds in the discussion. The YPAR process created opportunities for meaningful engagement in the FFA with respect and openness. One member described the process as lifting a weight off them. They related, "I feel like this is a really comfortable space, as like now, we have all the groups here ... all of our community." Another reflected, "we all come from different backgrounds, but we all strive to change and fix an issue we want to change."

Discussion

Our case study delves into both the YPAR process and the process the groups took to pick their research topics, as the initial processes set the stage for the youth to make their own choices. All three groups started from the same prompts and ended with different projects. All took very different paths to collect information, using different research skills and techniques (interviews, surveys, and observations).

Members of all three groups seemed to learn more about their topics and the research process. In addition, the group reflection revealed more discussion about the process of YPAR than the topics themselves. Members discussed reflecting on their own experiences and learning from other members' experiences, showing aspects of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1998) as they compared their own situations to those of others. For others implementing YPAR to teach agricultural issues, it is important to remember that YPAR is first and foremost youth-driven, so the chosen issues cannot be picked prior to the project.

This study has limitations. Our case study involved FFA members from one state and was led by researchers and college students. All YPAR project implementations differ based on the specific context and experiences of both YPAR facilitators and participants, even with the same research topic. Therefore, others who use YPAR to teach agricultural issues may have very different experiences. In addition, more individual data is needed to fully determine the level of knowledge change related to the chosen agricultural issues among participants.

YPAR led students to look at issues from multiple perspectives in this case study. The students may have come to the same conclusions when working with only students from their own chapters. However, a common theme in the group reflection session was working with students with different perspectives, adding to the experience. Other teachers and researchers implementing YPAR should consider the benefits of working in conjunction with students from a different chapter to add to the depth of the experience.

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