
Democracy & Education

Heavy on the Solidarity, Light on the Adulthood Adult Supports for Youth Activism

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Abstract

This data-based theoretical paper explores the contrasting tensions of adults being in “solidarity” with youths while not reproducing systems of oppression through adulthood. Written by adults who have been engaged side-by-side with youth activism, the purpose of this article is to better understand what adult solidarity and support look like according to youth activists themselves as we grapple with the unintentional mechanisms of reinforcing oppressive power dynamics between young people and adults in activist communities. Extending on the Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2012) notion of *relational solidarity*, the findings offer four types of actions (modeling, connecting, supporting, and protecting) adults can do to authentically support youths and thereby adds conceptual clarification and nuance for adults seeking to work in solidarity in more authentic youth adult partnerships (YAPs).

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Introduction

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE more civically and politically active than ever before in the United States, especially young people of color (Cohen et al., 2018). The impact of youth activists around issues that face our world is visible in the media and recurring. Key youth-led groups include, among many others, chapters of the Black Lives Matter Movement (#BlackLivesMatter); the Chicago-based Assata’s Daughters of young Black women and girls; the global climate organization called Sunrise Movement, inspired by Greta Thunberg (#FridaysForFuture and #SunriseMvmt); the youths for Indigenous people’s rights threatened by Dakota Pipeline Access (#NoDAPL); youths from Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School to curb gun violence (#neveragain); and youth “squaDDs” (#SquaDD) of

Dream Defenders across the United States defending freedoms from poverty, violence, etc.

Within our Midwestern state, in the years of 2020–2022, microcosms of these movements were evident in our community

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and adjoining counties—youths were noticing social and racial injustices, uniting, and leading efforts for change. As we stepped cautiously into hopeful support roles alongside two separate groups of youths, we interrogated our actions and wondered how we might do so in ways that did not simultaneously reinforce oppression the youths were working to ameliorate. We sought to investigate what authentic youth adult partnerships (YAPs) might entail, according to youths themselves with particular aims to add to existing theory and research around the concept of solidarity (Freire, 1968/2001; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Oto, 2023). While youth activism is visible along nearly every contemporary issue that impacts our nation and world (Conner & Rosen, 2016), few studies explore how adults can uphold antioppressive ways of being to support youth activists (Clay, 2012; Liou & Literat, 2020; Oto, 2023). Thus, we ask, how do youth activists describe being supported by adults in empowering ways in their activism work?

Despite the prominence of youth activism, anti-protest legislation has been introduced or passed in at least 45 U.S. states, limiting people's freedoms to demonstrate or protest significantly since 2020 (International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, 2022). On top of policy restrictions that may limit activism, youth activists face challenges to do with ageism. Youths' perspectives on their own activism are often "undervalued, devalued, or silenced altogether" (Liou & Literat, 2020, p. 4663; see also Clay, 2012). Young people can experience oppression in "adult-produced/ adult-tailored systems" in ways that impact and shape youth activism (LeFrançois, 2014, p. 47). Adultism, a component of ageism, can function to reward youth obedience or simultaneously pathologize youths' critique of social issues as rebellion (Liou & Literat, 2020). Too often, adults are regarded as the "authentic" citizens with the requisite authority to "help, apprentice, or instruct" youths' development and compliance, while some youths—largely dependent on their race and class—are regarded as "citizens in waiting" with only future potential to be "good" or voting citizens (Clay & Turner, 2021, p. 390). Still, research abounds of examples of adults leading while "getting out of the way" for youths, which can foster positive outcomes for youth participation (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019; Mitra, 2005; Serriere, Mitra, & Reed, 2011; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Youths bring expertise to social change movements that is often distinct and complementary to adults'. Thus, prioritizing and empowering youth-led civic or political projects requires careful reckoning of both privilege and adultism. This navigation, albeit tricky, is worthwhile so that we do not rely on power structures that mirror those that youths are working to address.

Youth Adult Partnerships with More Solidarity

The concept of YAP seeks to contend with the element of adultism by framing a goal of shared decision-making and collaboration toward authentic youth empowerment (Mitra, 2014). YAP, often used in child and youth services, is valuable also in education and after-school club settings. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, for instance, offers typologies of youths' involvement in YAP that range from "manipulated" and "tokenized" at the lower rungs toward more authentic "child-initiated" and "directed"

opportunities for participation at the higher rungs, with the goal being youth-initiated projects in which adults and youths share expertise. While much research on YAP reflects the pervasiveness of factors that can constrain young people's capacity to pursue transformational change within climates of "managerial subterfuge" (Clay & Turner, 2021), authentic YAPs may offer supportive collaboration opportunities for youths to transform their shared school community (Mitra & Serriere, 2012; Mitra, 2014).

The concept of solidarity has been employed to clarify less oppressive relationships between oppressed persons and those seeking to help. More than five decades ago, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (Freire, 1968/2001; Freire et al., 2014) posited that "true solidarity" requires that those who benefit from oppressive circumstances be willing to sacrifice their status and privilege if they are to join the oppressed in their struggle for freedom. This also means that individualism is the antithesis of solidarity, and thus contrasted solidarity to mere charity. The concept of solidarity, though, has been reduced in some critiques such as those by Black feminist author Mikki Kendall (2020), who coined the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen, emphasizing how the feminist movement continues to marginalize Black women despite the invocation of solidarity. Still, Black and Third World feminist scholars like Chandra Mohanty (2005) and bell hooks (2000) have argued, regarding feminism, we should not be so fast to dismiss solidarity as an irrelevant concept in our current struggles for social justice. In fact, according to the cofounder of Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza, solidarity asks for a "continuous, involved, risky, fierce and hands-on" engagement with groups (Garza, 2016). Acts of solidarity are often enacted by, or in collaboration with, minoritized people and may require adults, in the case of working with youths, to give up their perceived power and risk physical safety, jobs, social hierarchy, and even relationships.

Oto (2023) analyzed ways adults worked with youth activists through aspects of Gaztambide-Fernández's (2012) pedagogy of solidarity. Three interrelated components of Gaztambide-Fernández's theory include *relational solidarity*, which affords a new way to imagine being in relationship that is not bound to oppression, *transitive solidarity* that emphasizes taking action in that relationship together in ways that restructure inequality, and *creative solidarity*, which works to reconfigure cultural symbols and resources. Oto's research with youths finds these concepts reveal salient aspects of solidarity but youth remain tentative, as trust and unlearning conventions is ongoing and deeply related to racial justice.

Across its conceptualizations, solidarity should be contrasted to allyship, especially in youth activism for social justice. Even with the copious calls for adults to act as allies to youths (Case & Amand, 2014; Popielarz, 2022), allyship still lacks the meaning for which we aim because self-proclaimed allies may not engage in enough meaningful action to change structural conditions for those most impacted by systems of oppression. Also, allyship has been called performative, a loud and shiny effort intended to show how informed one is about oppression yet may engage in few behaviors that sustain social justice change. Allies are often "helping" or "standing up for" someone who is "disadvantaged." In

solidarity, rather, we recognize the harmfulness of oppression to all of humanity and acknowledge that our collective well-being is interwoven.

The idea of solidarity is critical to contend with in our work with youth activists because unlike race-neutral ideologies, the concept of solidarity not only recognizes differences but also holds the strength of bringing people who are different in community with one another as working toward a shared goal (Blackburn, 2021). In our work with youths, positioning difference as potential source of power can remind us that adults and youths bring unique, often complementary, strengths toward a shared goal. Adolescence has long been framed as relational and oppositional to adulthood and continues to be a well-worn tool in defining adulthood as much as it defines youths (Lesko, 2001). Moreover, adolescence has held connotations of deviance, rebellion, and emotional reactivity (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992), especially when youths do not play the role of obedient citizen-in-training. Considering youth as a developmental phase that can be characterized with energy and emotion, activism may suit youths well when supported by adults. We also find that the concept of solidarity may benefit from authenticity mentioned in YAPs (Mitra, 2014), valuing the unique characteristics that youths bring to a project. Conversely, having witnessed a “fierce and hands-on approach” with youths, we know that the hands of adults do not always allow youths to experience the vital ownership and space to engage in work that feels like their own. As we seek to untangle this potential theory application (solidarity in YAPs), we explore how to frame YAPs as a potential form of liberation (in the larger systemic liberation), rather than as another source of forceful oppression.

Simultaneously, we recognize that youths are as diverse as the contexts in which they participate and the issues they face, and so civic engagement means different things to different groups of young people (CIRCLE, 2022), as does a sense of solidarity. Moreover, youths of color who engage in activism may likely be at a double bind of oppressive forces. For example, acts of protest can often place Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latin/x, LGBTQAI+ youths at risk for physical and legal harm. Centralizing experiences of historically minoritized groups of youths is of crucial importance in addressing the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2010) and valuing the lived realities, or lived civics, of young people (Cohen et al., 2018).

U.S. history is full of examples of peoples in solidarity for racial and social justice that both youths and adults can draw from. However, in this current environment, we wonder, what might intergenerational solidarity (with less adultism) look like in YAPs? How might we come alongside youths with the fierceness of solidarity while simultaneously recognizing our grand-ness may be a(nother) source of oppression? Thus, in hopes to offer clarity around the goal of solidarity in youth activism, the purpose of this article is to better understand what a liberating but supportive adult solidarity looks like according to youth activists themselves.

Framing Youth Activism

While the term *activist* encompasses a wide range of actions and behaviors aimed to improve communities, we examine justice-oriented activism for the purposes of this study, which may involve marching, lobbying, engaging in data collection to ask for school-wide change, and methods of online engagement that incite or rally direct action for social or intersectional justice. In contrast to community service programs where youths might clean parks, tutor children, or serve food to the homeless, activism also involves an active pursuit to influence public policy or change institutional practices (Kirshner & Geil, 2010) and necessitates having acted beyond the scope of their usual, everyday interactions to incite change. Inasmuch, we consider actions such as having a bumper sticker or posting on social media as an outlet that may lead to activism. Relatedly, not all civic actions are inherently democratic or justice-oriented (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), as has been made evident by the mainstreaming of misinformation in the information age (Hodgin & Kahne, 2018; Journell, 2019).

Youth activism has an extraordinary potential to transform communities and carries important benefits to those who participate. Examples abound of youths who are politically marginalized or who attend low-resourced schools (Clay & Turner, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2018; Kirshner & Geil, 2010; Schultz, 2018; Warren et al., 2008), including youths who have worked to improve those schools, performed action research to expose environmental polluters, and persuaded policymakers to stop the building of “super jails” for juvenile offenders (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Kwon, 2006). Youths in the LGBTQ+ community have used documentaries and *art-ivism* to impact social change in their communities (Rhoades, 2012). African American, Black, Asian American, and Latin/x youths who collectively organize and civically engage can gain important insights into social change, systems change, citizenship, and democracy that many educational systems are currently failing to provide (Carey et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2021).

Researcher Positionality and Context

We are scholars in our community who advise or lead separate groups of youths, mainly through processes of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). We met through a high school teacher who pointed out that the two separate groups of youths that we work alongside were aiming toward similar goals, namely, promoting racial justice across the two majority white high schools in our district. Over conversations at a local café and a later conference presentation with youths, we discussed and grappled with the particulars of how to not reinforce uneven power dynamics between young people and adults. Informed by our research alongside youths and hours of conversations and interviews with youths, we come together in common struggle and inquiry of how to support youths in liberating ways. In doing so, we begin with the starting point that youths have the best vantage point of the issues that impact their lives.

Researcher Identities

I, Stephanie, am a white cisgender woman and professor of social studies education who has shared political, personal, and teaching

spaces with Black and Brown peers for over two decades. Although I actively work toward antioppressive stances, I acknowledge that I have blind spots as a white woman and recognize how generations of my family have benefited from structures of oppression. This makes the work of recognizing my presence as a white adult with a PhD working with youths, often youths of color, evermore critical. In addition to my current faculty role, I have served as an elementary school teacher, a cross-country coach, and a camp counselor and held leadership roles at two action civics summer camps. I have led over 10 workshops on YPAR with a total of over 300 high school youths. Since the summer of 2020, I have served as a community advisor, alongside a high school teacher, to a youth-led leadership club (mentioned in data as Youth Leadership Club) whose mission is “For high schools to be a safe environment for BIPOC perspectives and to actively counter all racism and issues of oppression that intersect with race.” It is in this advisory role that my work intersected with the Tennisha’s work.

I, Tennisha, am an African American, descendant of slavery and cisgendered woman. I have had a long career as a learner/student, family therapist, and now educator. My most profound learning experiences have come from working alongside youths, during which I have learned about their experiences and aspirations. As a result, I have developed a strong commitment to youth-led and community-led work, where youths are experts of the work that will shape their experiences. I recognize that I am among the few African Americans who hold a PhD and that my work with minoritized youths is often impacted by my degree or education “status,” such that a hierarchy of respect is often customary. I was born and raised in the U.S. southern states, and so, in my own working and personal relationships with Black or African American PhDs, and any Black or African American elder, I have used “doctor,” “professor,” or more outdated pronouns of status, “ma’am or sir,” to signal deference and hierarchy. Deference is a position I recognize and grapple with when working alongside minoritized youths and specifically Black or African American youths. I work toward dismantling the idea that age or educational background defines who holds knowledge by positioning myself as a member of youths’ support team and not a leader. As a current college professor, I am an instructor of future teachers and counselors within secondary education settings. I model my position on youth-led work for students who will ultimately engage in learning with the same young people. Additionally, since 2020, I have worked with minoritized youth in youth-led spaces, including learning with students as part of YPAR and working alongside a high school teacher and group of self-identified women of color to support their personal experiences in their school and community.

Methodology

We came together by discussing our initially separate but eventually overlapping research projects (Serriere et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2024, Rowan et al., 2024), in which we merge our data and ongoing analyses for this paper. While most research about YAPs is written about and by adults, our work seeks to intentionally protect youths’ identities while centralizing their experiences and voices.

Inasmuch, we humbly offer this research to contribute a situated bottom-up understanding of youth activism in relation to the larger edu-political climate and adultist systems. Again, we ask, how do we, as adults, participate with our fierceness and hands-on ways without usurping youths’ voices and expertise? In other words, how do adults support youths in ways youths themselves describe as supportive?

Artifacts of Activism and Meeting Notes

We draw from public-facing work where we encountered youth activism in the southcentral region of our Midwestern state. This included seven marches, five public rallies, four school board meetings, three local conference presentations in which youths and adults presented together, eight social media accounts of youth activists (as individuals and groups), and 12 newspaper articles. In addition, we collected anecdotal and meeting notes from high school groups (two school-based clubs and one community-based youth group).

Interviews

With Internal Review Board (IRB) permission from our university, we interviewed 22 youths individually in person or over Zoom. Two of the youths requested to be interviewed at the same time, which we did. The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes, during which we encouraged youths to narrate their experiences and share as much or as little as they would like. We also offered each youth a transcript of their interview. As per our university’s IRB protocols, all youths and their adults were given study information. Those under 18 gave their verbal assent, and one parent/guardian gave written consent; youths who were already 18 gave consent.

Youths

Of the 22 youths who participated in this research, 14 were contacted through our role as club advisors, and we assured them it was their choice to participate or not, taking care to not mention study participation or nonparticipation in group/club meetings. We accessed other youths by reaching out to high school clubs, placing flyers in local high schools, and sharing invitations to participate in our research on social media. Appendix A outlines participating youths’ identities and foci of activism, as self-identified. Eight youths (36%) identified as Black, African American, or Caribbean Black American; three (13%) identified as Latinx; 10 (45%) identified as white; one (4%) identified as Asian American; and one (4%) identified as Italian-Serbian American. Across racial and ethnic identities, six of the 22 students (27%) identified as LGBTQ+.

Data Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2014), we initially searched inductively, and coded for the broad supports that youth report in their activism. A theme of “supportive adults” emerged. Then, we conducted a second level of inductive coding for the ways in which adults supported the youth. As we developed a constellation of salient and recurring adult supports, we shared

this initial analysis with youth as a member check. Youth who responded confirmed or clarified four categories of adult support. The aim of our analysis was to reveal how power shapes, enables, or constrains youth to work toward change.

How Adults Support Us, According to the Youths

Figure 1 illustrates the four most common and salient supportive actions adults do for their activism, according to youth. As this article seeks to build theory around adult solidarity in youth activism, this figure allows for more actions as potential strands to be added.

Model: “It’s Really Inspiring”

Youths connected their experiences in activism with key adults around them, in their clubs, places of workshop, or within their family as supportive to their activism. Nearly half of the youths described adults supporting their own activism in a way that the youth learned by observing the adult in the role of an activist, a mode of peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 2001). Several youths recognized that they belonged to a “culture” of activism supportive of their own activism. In a presentation at a local youth conditions conference, Jayla, who is the leader of her school-based cultural club and has engaged in petitioning students to enact social justice change, described that it “makes it easier” for her to engage in social justice activism as she sees “somebody else has already done it . . . A lot of strong people of color being able to ask for changes, it’s really inspiring.” Jayla later joined the debate team at her school and took part in public-facing speeches at school

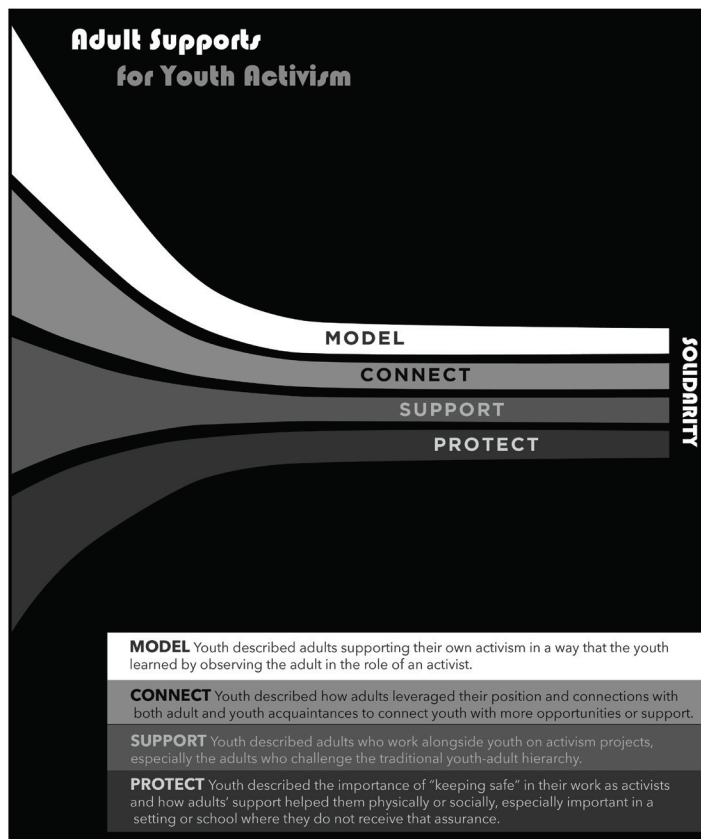


Figure 1. Adult Supports for Youth Activism

board meetings alongside adults and youths in support of district-wide racial justice. With a sense of belonging, she is “fueled” by knowing other people of color have done similar work.

Annan, the leader of a youth-led climate action group across the state, described how he initially learned from mentors in his field by attending a weekly environmental working group through the legislative session during which he heard leaders in the field of climate justice “share updates about bills and what’s going on [at the statehouse].” He said that he learned by “listening in” on these adult-led meetings and then “going to the statehouse and watching my mentors give testimony.” Within the adult-led environmental working group, Annan described one particular adult who served as a mentor and helped him conceptualize how “the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy” is also “an issue of race, disproportionately hurting people of color” in a major southern city surrounded by coal plants. Annan described how this adult helped him understand this intersectional aspect of this work, which “elevated the issue” for him. Annan then became a leader of a youth-led statewide climate justice group, first giving testimony at the statehouse at the age of 15 and doing so several times since. Annan said advocating for policy change as a teenager isn’t easy and in a news interview added that, “It can be a bit scary . . . because you’re fighting in a place where it’s mainly adults in the room.” Still, adults, he shared, modeled for him how and why to do the work.

Six youths described learning from adults in their family about activism knowledge and tactics that they apply to their own activism. Yazmin, who was raised in a community-engaged and politically active home, recently became more public facing in her youth activism. Yazmin played a role speaking to school board members about the racial discrimination experiences students experience in schools and the lack of school guidelines that address the harm caused to students of color. During a local conference presentation, she summarized her parents’ modeling and encouragement:

I learned that from, like, a very young age, and I saw my mom and my dad speaking out about certain topics like gun violence, or racial injustice, or just problems concerning our community, and they’ve put themselves in multiple groups and encouraged me to also do the same, like Black Leadership Club.

Addy was a senior in high school when we found out about her activism through public radio news and two major newspapers reporting on her testimony at the statehouse against an education bill that would require teachers to post publicly their curricular plans and materials. When we asked about the ways she had been supported, Addy described a multigenerational “culture of advocacy” in both sides of her family. She gave specific examples of how her mom modeled activism tactics such as canvassing and rallying, which she said, “familiarized me with just the day-to-day, practical strategies of organizing.” From her dad’s side of the family, she described her grandparents, who “have been activists, basically, their entire lives . . . involved with labor organizing, civil rights organizing, feminism, definitely a diverse range of issues . . . There’s always been an underpinning in my family of questioning the assumptions about the social system that we make today.” Amia

similarly described how she was “born into” a life of activism, with a grandfather who was a lawyer active in the NAACP and a close, intergenerational home in which four adults (her parents and grandparents) are all activists on various issues.

Two youths in the Youth Leadership Club (YLC) described in interviews their place of worship as grounds where activism has been modeled for them. Lisa, who practices Judaism, reported that people at her synagogue are “not afraid to speak out and to emphasize values in Judaism, such as love thy neighbor and tikkun olam, which means ‘repair the world,’ . . . and using it to push back.” Another youth, who belongs to a Unitarian church, described how she saw adults engage in environmental, social, and racial justice efforts regularly. Whether through places of worship, generations of family, or activism groups, youths recognize when adults engage as activists and note ways that it is supportive of their own actions.

Connect: “Introducing Me to Someone Who Could Actually Help”

Youths described how adult “connectors” leverage their social or professional connections with both adult and youth acquaintances to link youth activists with more opportunities or support. Shanice described, in a conference setting, how a local doctoral student, Zoe, helped make the right connections for her YPAR group when they were sending emails out to people they didn’t know: “Like, sometimes you don’t have the access to be able to be like, oh, I want to talk to the reporter about this.” Zoe did have this access, which reportedly made “everything like a lot easier.” Another YPAR group member, Yazmin, similarly described how adult advisors of their YPAR group helped by making connections, specifically by “giving us, like, emails or just, like, introducing us to people that they think would be helpful in this and this whole process.” Direct connections with others provided communication pathways not yet explored by youth.

Seb shared that, the summer before his senior year of high school, the president of his local school board met with him at an outdoor café after he wrote a letter to her and the entire school board to register his concerns about equity and inclusion in his school’s social studies curriculum. Based on his previous negative and unsupportive experiences at his high school, he was surprised that she “actually wanted to hear more about my experiences at [name of high school],” and then she “introduced me to someone who she said could possibly help me” to make changes in his school. From the coffee meeting with the school board president and another introduction to another local adult, Seb formed a high school club, YLC (which eventually merged with an extant high school club). This club, eventually 20 members, shared their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the school and wondered if others in their school felt similarly or not. Seb said that they “created a student survey to gauge schoolmates’ experiences with the school curriculum and climate for inclusion and diversity.” Seb said that, for the “first time in my high school career,” he was having an experience where he felt like he had “some power” and was “more connected to schoolmates than I had ever been,” but only right before he left for college, he added with humor.

At one of the YPAR meetings, Shanice described how guidance and discussion with an adult state policymaker empowered her to reach out to additional adult supports. In her previous efforts, Shanice engaged with adult leadership directly, asking for meetings in which she could express her concerns. She described her engagement with adults as often presenting “barriers,” in which they set the guidelines for what could or could not be done. This new connection within a YPAR setting enhanced her understanding of who could and would support her social justice efforts by “giving her some ideas,” which created a ripple effect of adult connections that are “in support of” youth work to address racial equity and their resolutions toward justice for previously inflicted harms. “I’ve been speaking with Dr. G.,” Shanice said. Dr. G. is a long-time civil rights and equity activist and member and education committee chair of a state NAACP chapter and holds a high-ranking position at a child-focused policy and law organization. Shanice added, “She [Dr. G.] was giving me some ideas, because I feel like I was not doing everything I could do. So, I called the NAACP to see what’s up.” She further described the information gained about how the NAACP could help and was provided with confirmation of support by members. “He [the NAACP president] said that he could get an audit of what the bullying report was . . . and he said that the NAACP is in support of [the school] making a public apology and making a public apology statement on social media as well. And if that’s not done, that they are going to take further action.” Shanice describes how the members of the local NAACP took her concerns about lack of racial equity at her school “seriously” by listening, supporting her ideas about resolution, and providing information about the purpose and role of the NAACP organization.

Support: “Holding Space” and “Paving the Way”

Every one of the youths participants described at least one adult in their life who works alongside them on activism projects. In their descriptions, the youths articulated ways in which adults challenged the traditional youth-adult hierarchy, sometimes consenting by yielding power to the youths, “holding space” for them, or “paving the way” for their work to succeed. Often these adults worked within their schools and became important figures for the student activists.

Lisa indicated the impactful support of YLC’s adult advisor, Dr. K., who was also her biology teacher. Lisa explained that the club worked for several months to craft a student survey on the curriculum and climate of diversity, equity, and inclusion to administer at their high school. The group sought permission from the school administration to administer the student survey. Although the work may have seemed youth-led, Lisa explained how Dr. K. played a significant role in the survey process, something they are now working on annually: “Dr. K. works with the people that we will be presenting to, and . . . she’s been helping get our [club’s] mission pushed . . . so we can get things done more effectively.” While Lisa went through over seven rounds of emails to coordinate a club meeting with the school administration, Dr. K. assisted in interpreting what the youth saw as administration pushback and aided them in continuing onward. Lisa described an

instance in which Dr. K. not only spoke with an administrator to “smooth the way” for YLC’s data meeting but also met with the youths separately before the administration meeting to anticipate “particular” concerns from administrators and had the youth “practice, in pairs, possible hard questions” about their research they may encounter.

Youths described particular clubs as distinct places they feel they can lead the conversation, even with an adult in the room. In an interview about her experiences, Jayla said:

Like, every Monday when Black Leadership Club is happening, I feel, like, empowered, and it makes me like not want to miss Mondays. It also makes me feel like I have, like, a community that I can talk about racism with or talk about just anything with, really, just makes me feel more comfortable.

Several of the YPAR group members also described how adults shared space within their school clubs, which further supported their social justice goals. During an individual interview, Ashlyn, who has been a vice president of the Black Leadership Club, described how the adults’ support of her school club provided readings on topics of social justice to support students “processing the idea of doing something” (i.e., taking action). In addition to supporting her acting on social justice issues, the adults, Ashlyn described, in this space were important to raising awareness and knowledge around racial equity issues: “Because outside of, like, Black Leadership Club, they’re not going to hear much about what’s happening in their community as a POC.” For Ashlyn, the Black Leadership Club group is a “community” where they can talk about things, contrasted to other school spaces where they do not engage in conversation about social justice issues or open conversation about their identities as youths and as activists, where they “get those accomplishments for ourselves” rather than “being controlled and doing something like being told to do [it].”

Protect: “Like Someone’s Got You”

Five Black youths, one Serbian Italian youth, and one Asian and Jewish youth described the importance of “keeping safe” in their work as activists and how adults’ support helped them in doing so. One youth activist, Jayla, described how the aforementioned doctoral student, Zoe, was always thinking about their safety within their process of presenting an antiracist policy proposal in their school district; Zoe shared information with them that “teaches us, like, ways to protect ourselves so we’re comfortable with what we’re doing because when we go and talk about these things, there’s always a risk, some type of risk.”

Within group YPAR meetings, other adults helped youths strategize steps of moving social justice issues forward with safety and protection in mind. Specifically, community advocates outside the club met with youth to ease their concerns about adult retaliation for speaking out. In group conversation, Dr. G. noted that there are other community advocates that can help youths and their parents navigate discussions with adult leaders. Dr. G. discussed bringing parents, the NAACP, and a family attorney into meetings with adult leaders to protect youth: “When you reach the superintendent office, that’s when you have all the community

people in there. Most [school] principals are kind of nervous when you start bringing other people in.” In addition, Dr. G. provided some insight on progressing the conversation of social justice issues by way of youth demonstration (e.g., sit-ins) in leadership offices.

DR. G.: This is kind of radical.

[Group laughter because the group had recently worked to define the term radical based on Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968/2001)]

DR. G.: If you do a demonstration at the Education Service Center, wherever it is, and say, “We’d like to meet with the superintendent, and these are our demands,” and have the news media come and cover the demonstration.

SHANICE: This is what we were hoping for.

JAYLA: This is what I’ve been saying: “Come on, guys. Let’s do it. Let’s do it. Let’s do it.”

While the students were eager to engage in the idea of organizing a public demonstration, Dr. G. provided some protection by discussing the realities of social justice work, “and be prepared for the consequences. They’re going to label you a troublemaker. But as John Lewis said, ‘Get into good trouble.’” In this group meeting, Dr. G. armed the youths with ways to protect themselves legally but also rhetorically; if they chose to go through with a demonstration, the youths would be getting in “good” trouble, rather than being “troublemakers.”

After giving public testimony of her experiences of racial discrimination at a school board meeting, Shanice described the value of a feeling of safety in seeing her “people” from the Black community in attendance. Regarding asking for a district antiracism policy in May of 2022, she said, “I definitely felt safe because I saw a lot of people that I knew . . . Generally, at the school board meetings, there aren’t a lot of other people of color there. [But] a lot of people came to show support.” The presence of “her people” made her feel simultaneously supported and safer in her public sharing and policy request. Shanice reiterated the importance of safety in the context of her school when she described how her school security guard made her feel safe. “We have a security guard named Mr. Jordan . . . He and his daughter now work at the school; they’re super helpful to the culture of Black students.” When asked what he does, she explained that it was just his presence, as an “older Black male” who was “physically there for you . . . like someone’s got you.” Although these adults did not serve her activism per se, the presence of Black authority figures in a school that is only 7% Black was notable and palpable for her.

Latizia articulated how a trusted adult can see safety issues clearer in her work than she might herself, describing how her biology teacher helps her groups: “If they see, oh, there’s a flaw in the way that you’re going to go about doing this, or they think there’s a better way, they’re going to tell you about the better way.” When asked what kind of “flaws” the teacher pinpointed, Latizia explained, “They’re like, ‘I’m concerned for your safety.’ They’re going to help you become—They’re going to help you be safer

about going about something, which, sometimes, you don't always have that luxury in activism.”

Discussion

These data show that there are numerous ways adults can be supportive of youth activism such that youths rightfully hold ownership of their social justice work. First, adults might model activism in their own work as well as within scenarios in which youths are actively observing and coming up alongside adults—watching and learning both activist strategies in activist communities and historical rationale for activism. Youths recognize when adults are authentically engaged in activism work, and it is these adults whom youths also perceive as committed to issues of equity even in the case of equitable and shared expertise alongside youth activists. While modeling is often viewed as passive, youths in this study described those who model activism as adults who are engaged in the active fierceness of solidarity with their “hands on” yet not necessarily directed at the details of youths’ work.

Second, adults connect youths with resources or committed individuals or groups, such as Dr. G. connecting a youth group to the NAACP, which propelled their project further and created a web of adult supports. Adults also connected youths to new platforms to share their voices, including platforms that youths might believe they do not have access to, such as school board meetings, media personnel, or public testimony at the congressional statehouse. In such instances, adult support might look like sharing expertise on how to navigate spaces that are adult-held and adult-led, all the while providing access to youths. These are often resources that are readily available to adults, but just out of reach for youths until a connection has been made.

Third, youths in this study emphasized the impact of adults who deeply value youth life experiences and expertise by holding space, showing up, and co-creating pathways to share. In this most precarious and involved theme, youths described adults who did not have their own agenda but were there to support the aims the youths wanted to accomplish. As such, the youths recognized that adults in solidarity of youth activism work did so for the greater well-being of everyone, without expectations of personal gains and with, often, the willingness to risk loss of personal gains and relationships. As described by youths in this study, adults explicitly used language to signal that they were challenging the youth-adult hierarchy and were learning alongside and from youth. Thus, solidarity may look like adults working in more subtle ways alongside youths by holding space for youths in meetings or communicating anticipated perspectives of other adults before a meeting.

Finally, adults protect youths by locating and sharing policies or tactics of “keeping safe” as they speak out in public places or by letting youths know of potential dangers. Albeit with our small sample size of 22 youths, it is notable that only youths of color mentioned the importance of keeping safe as activists and adults’ role in protecting them. This protection ranged from physical (bodily) and psychological (sense of positive identity) safety to legal and rhetorical safety. For example, one adult reframed youths’ activism from being viewed negatively while other adults validated

their work as “good” and part of their role as citizens. For instance, Jayla described the presence of key Black adults in her school as both psychologically and physically supportive. Moreover, adult solidarity may look like giving a youth a heads-up when they are entering a space in which they are likely to receive resistance or antagonism. In such adult-led spaces, adults in solidarity might reframe youth activism away from being construed as deviant and toward being helpful and necessary.

We situate our findings on youth activism within Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2012) solidarity model component of relational solidarity, as youths identified the ways that adults aided in their activism by developing relationships that were not bound to oppression. More specifically, youths were not experiencing the emerging themes of modeling, connecting, and supporting as directives but as “encouraging” and “inspiring” invitations for both adults and youths to engage alongside each other in activism toward social justice. As noted by Gaztambide-Fernández, solidarity is relational because it requires multiple people and relationships and an interrogation of how systems have structured and influenced relationships between the beneficiaries of oppression (adults) and those who are oppressed (youths). Most youths we interviewed discussed how adults engaged in ways such that relationships between youths and adults were reimagined, with adults willing to share access and opportunities to aid in youth activism goals.

We too grappled with our relationships with youths during the support of youth projects and the writing of our findings. As a result, our findings on youth safety and protection expand on the pedagogy of solidarity model (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Oto, 2023) by examining who and how youths may need protection in their activism work alongside adults and how adults actively operate in ways that do not position adults as oppressors. Safety is a basic need and an important component of solidarity. Youths must feel that adults are dismantling not only adultism but its connection with white supremacy or whiteness, even when adults share with the youths similar racial and ethnic identities. Adultism through the lens of whiteness can impose the idea that there is a “proper” way to act or behave, which is in opposition to youth activism. When adults uphold these ideals of solidarity, it is at a risk for loss as it is the anchor for safety and protection.

In moving toward more authentic YAPs in solidarity, these data support resistance to the idea of “adulthood” as being done or fixed (e.g., we have a “terminal” degree and know things or know more than youths) and give proof that being in more authentic, reciprocal learning with youths can have important implications. It is necessary, then, for adults working with youth activists to act thoughtfully and purposefully in the spirit of continued learning, rather than doing all they are capable of doing, which may result in further oppression of youths. In fact, previous research has also shown that when adults in official leadership capacities, even those such as school principals, take the title of “lead learner” (Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012), a culture of cross-generational inquiry is promoted.

Still, adults do not need to completely relinquish or deny their own expertise or resources as adults. Instead, adults in solidarity

might smooth and back-channel the work of youths, as Dr. K. did for the YLC group, to ensure that adults do not steal the show. Adults might frame positive assets of youths—signaling a culture change in more adult-led or hierarchical settings—by acknowledging youth perspective as valid and normalizing and prioritizing youth voices as part of school and community policy structures. Adults can give credence to the idea that youths, especially marginalized youths, should have a say about structures that shape their experiences. In fact, youths are at a prime point in their lives for engaging in activism work, given the social and cognitive perspectives of their experiences and identities.

There are diverse ways that adults can show solidarity and that actions of solidarity may occur or work to impact various levels. At the individual level, adults may connect with and support youths to hold space and listen. At the social level, adults can sponsor clubs for activism or affinity groups or might provide information about resources helpful to youth work. At the institutional level, adults might decipher policy for youths and offer institutional and/or legal support, as the NAACP did for the YPAR group. As adults hold various positions of power, they can maneuver through various institutions as insiders. Thus, they not only have “expertise” to share with youths but may also share privilege and access to their own arenas.

Conclusion

While the notion of solidarity (Garza, 2016) demands that adults be “fierce” and “hands-on,” this conceptual goal requires nuance when working with youths so that adults do not overpower their agenda with their own. Inasmuch, adults might resist being interpellated (Althusser, 1970; Butler, 1990), or called into existence, into being the experts in the room by discerning if their fierceness will strengthen youth ownership or impede it. We have seen adults in our own work protect youths from further adultism by giving the mic or megaphone back to the youths when it was being handed to another adult or by explicitly asking a journalist to speak only with the youths and not the adults in the room. While a fierce and hands-on solidarity might initially be understood as using all of our adult capacities, rather it is using select capacities that youths cannot yet do or see on their own. What can be done by youths is for them to decide, and this might be based on the working YAP, shared expertise, and youth perception of authentic adult solidarity.

The intent of this article is to both widen the net *and* give clarity on what solidarity might look like for adults working with youth activists for social justice and add to existing work in the field (Clay & Turner, 2021; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012; Liou & Literat, 2020; Oto, 2023). While these data are particular to the certain place, time, and circumstances under study, further research may build from this data-based model of adult solidarity in youth activism. In conclusion and to return to the research question, while adults seek to support the fight against systemic oppression, they must simultaneously seek to undo smaller systems of oppression between ourselves and youths. The macro and micro of oppressions are interrelated and must be recognized so that adults overcome them simultaneously. We

advocate for adults participating with fierceness and hands-on ways without usurping youths’ voices and expertise. Thus, we envision our fierceness directed at the forces that may impede youth work by modeling, connecting, supporting, and protecting.

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Appendix A

Participant Bios

Pseudonym	IDENTITY	ACTIVISM Focus/interest
1. ADDY	White female	Racial and social justice efforts; testified at the statehouse twice; youth reporter on a local radio talk show
2. Andrew	White male	Inclusion in his school; reducing instances of bias and racism
3. Amia	White female	Race and gender; active in high school leadership club, church, and show choir
4. Ana Sofia	White female	Race and gender equity; concern for her adopted biracial siblings
5. Annan	Black male	Cofounder of a statewide climate crisis group who often does advocacy work at the statehouse; serves on his school's DEI specialists board
6. Anura	Caribbean American/Black female	Racial justice; concerned about lack of students of color in her honors/AP classes

Pseudonym	IDENTITY	ACTIVSM Focus/interest
7. AsHLYN	Black female	Improving her community for youths of color
8. Bella	Latina female	Racial justice
9. Cici	White female, LGBTQ+	Race in curriculum; reproductive rights; many political topics
10. Elaine	White female	Race and gender; active in church and show choir; has a sibling who is transgendered
11. Elly	Black female	Racial and gender equity
12. Talon	Mexican/Latina, LGBTQ+ female	Racial and LGBTQ activism
13. Jayla	Black female	Racial justice; vice president of a Black leadership club; developed initial draft of school antiracism policy
14. Latizia	Serbian-Italian American LGBTQ+ female	Active member of a statewide political party group for youths and a statewide group for climate change; does activism work from fair maps, trans rights, teaching of sex ed, and other intersectional topics
15. Lea	White, nonbinary, LGBTQ+	LGBTQ+; race; gender justice
16. Lisa	Asian, Jewish female, LGBTQ+	Race, religion, and gender justice; emerging leader in the high school leadership club
17. Maria	White, Latina female	All forms of injustice; an informal leader in high school leadership club
18. Natalie	White, LGBTQ+ female	Race and gender justice, especially in school curriculum
19. Nia	Black female	Institutional racism
20. SEB	White transgender male	Racial and gender justice, especially in school curriculum
21. Shanice	Black female	Combating racial discrimination and outlining policies that support people of color in school
22. Yazmin	Black female	Antiracism

Note. Participants are cisgendered unless otherwise indicated.