

**Project DREAMS: Using Youth Participatory Action Research with Youth of Color to Address
the Historic and Contemporary Effects of Racism**

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Challenge

Historically, academic, and social institutions have ignored the perspectives of Asian, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Black, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic and Latine, and Multi-Racial children. Too often, schools, higher education, and even non-profit organizations are sites of oppression and curricular violence (Johnson, 2017). When, or if, youth of color are noted in research, they are often problematically conceptualized as either needing a savior to lift them out of their dangerous communities or as needing reform because they are a danger to their communities (Ferguson, 2002). Any success they achieve is often perceived and framed in terms of their assimilation into whiteness. This long-standing deficit approach has harmed youth of color and has acted as anaesthesia in higher education and K-12 schools to deny, ignore, and block the reality of white supremacy in education.

The Cooperative Extension System (CES) has no special immunity. When studied over time, the decision-making by Extension has reflected the priorities of the white farmer, then his wife, son, and daughter (Schor, 1986), despite decades of recommendations to engage Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and their communities as equal partners in scholarship (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999). The need to respond and address the experiences of people of color was especially apparent during the summer of 2020. COVID-19 shed light on how the built environment affects a range of health risks and outcomes for Black and Indigenous communities. The deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor also sparked a focus on ending racism across all social institutions, including K-12 schools and CES.

It is incumbent on Extension professionals to identify all forms of racism, make changes that oppose deficit thinking, and strive toward an anti-racist identity based on justice and equity. Table 1 draws comparisons between historical and current features of Extension programs and necessary shifts to align future programs toward racial justice and equity. In the aspirational model, educators, and leaders value diversity for more than the virtues it signals. The outcome of learning is additive rather than subtractive, youth of color are whole rather than framed as broken, and strengths are enriched rather than focus on replacing deficits (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Table 1

Comparison Between Historical and Current Features of Extension Programs and Necessary Shifts to Commitments Based on Racial Justice and Equity

Historical and Current Features of CES Programs	Necessary Shifts to Align Future Programs to Racial Justice and Equity
CES makes symbolic commitments to diversity (Ahmed, 2012).	CES centers the languages, histories, religions, origin stories, and contemporary issues of youth and people of color (T. Hibbeler, personal communication, November 6, 2019).
Youth of color, their families, and neighbourhoods are described by CES as “at-risk.”	CES administrators investigate how language and discourse is framed. Program leaders disrupt deficit-oriented narratives in curricula, annual reports, and grant making. (Davis & Museus, 2019).
The educator role is to teach, participants’ roles are to learn, and the community is a laboratory to address or explore a set of needs (Pasque, et. al., 2005).	Educators elevate communities of color as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 106). Educators integrate empirical based knowledge and respect Indigenous ways of knowing. Educators’ experience changes alongside participants (Knopp, 1976).
CES programs aim to influence individual behaviors.	CES identifies and addresses social and cultural forces that contribute to the cause of health disparities and racial inequities. Investment is made to address structural failures.
The university has the most wealth and access to resources.	Currency is non-monopolized and cultural wealth, "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 154) is prized. CES allocates materials and resources to people of color—including time and compensation.
Accountability is to funders.	Accountability is to the community. CES strategizes with communities of color on what conditions facilitate health and wellness, workforce development, sustainable food systems, environmental quality, and youth empowerment.

Action

In a predominantly white and affluent community like Delaware County, Ohio racial incidents have gone largely undocumented and unaddressed for decades, especially within Delaware City Schools, to the result of two lawsuits in the 1990s, and among local 4H programs. Help is needed to ensure youth-serving organizations can read, recast, and resolve racially stressful and traumatic situations.

Responding at the local level, Project DREAMS initiated cross-sector partnerships to better understand racial inequities and more appropriately develop efforts that would cultivate equity, even under pressure or demands to ignore race or racism. Our main goals were to elevate youth as experts in community-based racial justice work, amplify the analyses of racial injustice they were already producing, and increase the uptake of their policy and program demands. The program had two objectives: (1) examine how project-based learning and youth participatory action research (YPAR) support high school students of color in co-creating equitable conditions in schools and communities; and (2) explore how anecdotal and personal experiences of high school students connect to wider cultural, political, and social meanings of race, racism, belonging, and othering.

To address the first objective, we used photovoice, a YPAR method that supported youth to document attributes of their school and community features that perpetuate **racial equity** or **inequity** (Mirra et al., 2016; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). In Project DREAMS, equity is two-fold: Equity is having access to bias-free environments and places of belonging. This work starts with evaluating the built environment, who can take space, claim space, and be in a relationship with space without being policed, owned, or exploited. Students document through photography their experiences representing those spaces and use psychogeographies to describe the felt sense of safety or danger. Equity is also about redistributing material and physical resources to non-white youth and their communities. This work starts with a commitment to action, prioritizing historically neglected groups and focusing on eliminating disparities. Project DREAMS mobilizes resources to pay young people and community partners a liveable wage for their participation in the program as well as distributes technology to ensure fair access to resources.

In weekly workshops, youth shared their equitable or inequitable findings with the team, identified themes, and began assessing what resources would support more safety and justice for young people. In a culminating event, youth shaped plans for Equity Day, a community-wide event that outlined calls to action and reported on the young people's perceptions of the built environment. By the end of the program, the community redefines who has the expertise to produce knowledge to our world — not just professional adult researchers but young people who are living the issues they are studying. Young people are also empowered to develop a socio-political identity and have increased

understanding of the roots of problems facing their communities as well as new skills and relationships to take action. The following are examples of some of their calls to action:

1. *Respect the Latinx culture and don't discriminate.*
2. *Hire more Black teachers in Delaware City Schools.*
3. *Avoid microaggressions such as "You're pretty for a Black girl", "You talk well," and "Can I touch your hair?"*
4. *Recognize trans people.*
5. *Elevate Black history.*
6. *Don't stereotype Muslims.*

Impact

In the background of the program, critical race theory became a flash point in culture. Project DREAMS quickly adopted a community development approach that developed a shared understanding of racial inequity and why it is in the best interest of partners to use youth-generated data to design future equitable programs or government plans. As a result, new partnerships emerged with the local health department, public library system, city schools, city government, local funders, and grassroots organizations. As we expected young people to change in the program, we too, expected these partners to demonstrate their institutional commitments to equity through investment, increased flexibility, and identifying subtle biases perpetuated by their organizations. Toward that end, we received an increase in funding from local partners (\$10,000), a proclamation delivered on Equity Day from the Mayor, a billboard campaign sponsored by the health department featuring the project and student work, as well as opportunities for youth to present locally to decision-makers and local stakeholders. The formative results of the project are still being evaluated, however; the project represents an initial effort that elevates youth of color as experts of organizational change, program development, and racial justice organizing:

Project DREAMS has been really big experience. Where I'm from, there is not a lot of programs like this that embrace historical Blackness, so I feel this project has been a really big support to Black students finding their voice, who they are, and their place in schools.

Another student described:

I can't really live my life with the comfort of ignoring racism, or Islamophobia, and homophobia and they're all intersecting parts of my identity that people will see when they look at me. Being outed at Metro, and to the Somali community was definitely something that scared me and changed my life permanently. I didn't think things would get better, ever, until I realized people were just painfully uneducated. I'd like to be able to help, even a little bit to change people's stigma around what it means to be open and vulnerable with your identity.

In the future, Project DREAMS hopes to add to the growing literature on youth organizing for racial justice and explore how this model could be replicated nationwide to create lasting, innovative change.

This project means I'm not the only one. What I mean is I'm able to speak about things, and someone else can relate to me. The project means I'm not all alone; we can come together as one. We can talk about it, and not repeat history.



Learn more and watch our case study video at u.osu.edu/projectdreams

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