

**“It’s a life-changing point for me”: Critical consciousness, collective empowerment and global awareness as activist identity change in ‘popular education’**

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### Abstract

The Youth Global Awareness Programme (YGAP) is a two-week residential ‘popular education’ programme for young, diverse, international, labour movement activists, run by the International Federation of Workers Education Associations in Cape Town, South Africa. In this mixed method study ( $N = 47$ ) we draw on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning. We propose that the participatory, peer-to-peer learning during YGAP leads to activist identity change, where critical consciousness, collective empowerment and global awareness develop as group norms. The first longitudinal questionnaire study found significant increases in activist identity and critical consciousness, which predicted increased collective empowerment. In the second focus group study, data were analysed with reflexive thematic analysis and two themes provide compelling evidence of learning during YGAP as identity change processes. Participants’ commonalities and differences enhanced activist identities with global awareness. Simultaneously, new knowledge, passion, hope and connection to a global activist community created collective empowerment.

**Key words:** Identity change, popular education, participatory learning, global awareness, collective empowerment

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The climate emergency, unprecedented numbers of people migrating, rising inequality, precarious and insecure work, and a viral pandemic are interconnected and global. Responses therefore must be inclusive and global. This suggests that empowered active citizens who are globally aware and prepared to act for the most vulnerable are required (Cooper, 2020; Merryfield, 2008). We argue that part of the solution may be informal adult education that encourages collective empowerment and globally aware activism (Cooper, 2020; Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999). We draw on social psychological theory to explore if the radical learning in informal adult education can promote activist identity change.

**Popular Education**

‘Popular education’, also known as emancipatory or workers education is informal and activism oriented. It draws on the radical pedagogies of Freire and promotes critical consciousness, and resistance (Cooper, 2020). To do this the approach uses peer-to-peer, active learning methods to encourage activists who are critically conscious and collectively empowered (Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999; Jansson, 2016). Trade unions have traditionally provided ‘popular education’ among their membership (Heidemann, 2019), and are calling for its revitalisation (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020; Jansson, 2016). This article explores the Youth Global Awareness Programme (YGAP) a ‘popular education’ programme which aims to encourage global awareness at the same time as increase the critical consciousness and collective empowerment of young, international, labour movement activists.

YGAP is a two-week residential programme facilitated by champions of ‘popular education’ at the secretariat of the International Federation of Worker Education Associations

(IFWEA) based in Cape Town, South Africa. The intention of YGAP is to create critical consciousness, solidarity, and global awareness, defined as seeing the world as one interrelated system, and having knowledge, interest and engagement in global issues, local-global connections, and diverse cultures (Merryfield, 2008). This research provides an opportunity to engage with the politics of teaching and learning (Philip et al., 2018) by exploring identity change processes during a ‘popular education’ programme among diverse learners in a non-Western context. Indeed, we are responding to calls by critical education scholars to engage with diversity (Lee, 2008), and broader cultural and political contexts in our wrestle with the purpose of teaching and learning, by conducting research that ensures education arcs toward more just worlds (Phillip et al., 2018).

To understand activist identity change because of YGAP, we draw on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). This approach highlights the dynamic interconnection between integral elements, the individual and the learning context, that may promote social identity change. The approach recognises that learners commonly share a social identity. In this case young, international, trade unionists who likely come to the programme with a pre-existing ‘activist identity’. The approach suggests that learning is an active, reflexive process of active growth which involves learners purposefully considering, constructing, and transforming such social identities (Mavor et al, 2017). So here in partnership with IFWEA, we examine social identity predictions in a mixed method study with YGAP participants.

As a first step, a longitudinal questionnaire study explores if participants report an increase in activist identity, critical consciousness and collective empowerment over the two-week programme. If so, we ask if increases in activist identity and critical consciousness are

linked to increases in collective empowerment. As a second step, a qualitative focus group study asks if there is evidence that commonalities and racial, ethnic, and cultural differences among the group activate relational and cognitive transformations and lead to global awareness? Finally, does the content of the programme interact with identity change processes in participants' collective empowerment?

### **The Relevance of the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning**

A recent development of social psychological theorising is the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). Social identity scholars recognise that learning is a collaborative, social process and in alliance with critical education scholars (Bang et al., 2005; Holland & Leander, 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Nasir et al., 2008), are calling for the integration of cultural and identity processes in education research. The approach draws on the definition of social identity that Tajfel (1972) used to develop of Social Identity Theory, "the individual's knowledge that he (or she) belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him (or her) of this group membership" (p. 31). Importantly, social identities allow us to think of ourselves at the collective level and provide a sense of 'usness'. The creation of a shared social identity (as 'us psychology students' or 'us activists') in the classroom may be integral to successful learning and achievement (Smyth et al., 2017). This is because with the creation of a shared social identity, norms, beliefs, goals, and values of the group also develop and structure and guide behaviour (Smith et al., 2015). At the same time, when people see each other as belonging to a group, resources such as mutual influence, co-operation, support and trust flow more easily (Haslam et al., 2005; Jetten et al., 2020).

Research is evidencing the central role of shared social identities in formal learning contexts, among primary pupils (Reynolds et al., 2017) and in higher education (Bliuc et al.,

2011a, 2011b, Bliuc et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2017). Yet little is known about shared social identities in informal education where the pedagogy and approach to learning is quite different. ‘Popular education’ programmes by their nature have low levels of external control, the learning is participatory, democratic and active (Cooper, 2020; Heidemann, 2019). As the meaning of social identity is cultural, flexible and dynamic (Drury and Reicher, 2000), the active approach of ‘popular education’ may be particularly conducive to changing, strengthening and enhancing participants pre-existing activist identity. In the present article we see activist identity as one who is politically active in general and has intentions to undertake actions towards change on behalf of less powerful groups (Louis et al., 2016).

A body of research in the social identity tradition highlights how a ‘physical group’ become a ‘psychological group’ and come to see each other as belonging to the same social category (Reicher, 2011). Work in crowd psychology (Drury & Reicher, 2009; Reicher, 1984) shows that when crowds experience a change in context a psychological shift occurs. Important for our analysis, a change in context results in individuals experiencing *relational transformation*, which concerns how they then act to and with each other, and inspires feelings of solidarity, connection, and unity among the group (Drury, 2012). It also involves *cognitive transformation*, and a shift from ‘me’ to ‘we’ thinking, such that ‘self-interest’ becomes ‘our interests’ and includes the realisation of shared goals, values and beliefs (Drury, 2012). These relational and cognitive transformations are crucial to becoming part of a psychological group.

In tandem, the Interactive Model of Social Identity Formation (Postmes et al., 2005) was developed to explain how social identity develops in small groups. The model proposes that social identities are constructed and understood from intragroup interaction through discussion, argument, and critical reflection (Postmes et al., 2005). Communication and debate help small

groups to integrate an understanding of the norms that define their group, their group-based emotions, their efficacy beliefs, and their opinions about appropriate actions (Thomas et al., 2009).

In ‘popular education’, the context often involves learner-centred activities that stimulate critical reflection, interaction and debate and methods based in popular culture. The approach encourages mutual sharing about participants’ everyday struggles (Foley, 1999). This has several aims. First, popular education teaches people to study their own experiences of injustice. Second, this approach encourages critical consciousness about the systematic causes of these injustices. Third, participants’ experiences, culture and perspectives are valued as important ingredients in the production of alternative knowledge (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020). In combination, this mutual sharing is likely to promote relational transformations and encourage norms such as unity, solidarity and respect and cognitive transformations in the realisation of shared goals, values, and beliefs (Drury, 2012; Reicher, 2011). In this way, inequalities in power and racial, ethnic, and cultural differences between diverse learners can be used as learning opportunities to develop group norms and values such as, critical consciousness and global awareness.

Peer-to-peer learning dynamics are likely to be important during YGAP which combines theoretical seminars and practical workshops in methods that draw on popular culture, including forum theatre, film, hip-hop dancing, photography and protest songs. The aim is to equip participants with knowledge, skills and tools to empower the communities they work with, to explore the issues they face and make their voices heard. In the second week, groups of three participants are placed for two-day internships with activist NGO’s working with impoverished communities around Cape Town, one of the most unequal cities in the world. The content of YGAP may facilitate a sense of agency and empowerment, which is both a process and an

outcome of the critical consciousness, capacity, and skills developed in ‘popular education’ programmes (Lavarack & Wallerstein, 2001). Again, research with crowds shows that collective empowerment can be an emergent process of psychological change resulting from connection and exhilarating feelings of collective hope for social and political change (Drury & Reicher, 2009). This rationale leads to the expectation that collective empowerment may be an outcome of the active learning approach among participants of YGAP.

### **The present study**

In partnership with the International Federation of Workers Education Associations (IFWEA) based in Cape Town, South Africa, this paper draws on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017) to explore learning during the Youth Global Awareness Programme (YGAP) as identity change processes. YGAP aims to encourage global awareness and increase the critical consciousness and collective empowerment of young, international, labour movement activists. In the first study, a longitudinal questionnaire investigates changes in, and relationships among, measures taken among participants at the beginning of YGAP (Time 1) and again at the end, two weeks later (Time 2). Drawing on the rationale presented, it is hypothesised that a psychological shift will occur as a result of learning, and activist identity will increase (H<sub>1</sub>), critical consciousness will increase (H<sub>2</sub>), and collective empowerment will increase across YGAP (H<sub>3</sub>). Integrating predictions from the literature it is hypothesised that; increased Time 2 activist identity and increased Time 2 critical consciousness will predict increased Time 2 collective empowerment (over and above Time 1 critical consciousness and Time 1 collective empowerment) (H<sub>4</sub>).

In order to take an in-depth examination of social identity processes evident in participants’ accounts of their YGAP learning experience, the second study uses a qualitative,

focus group design. We ask if there is evidence that commonalities and racial, ethnic, and cultural differences among the group activate relational and cognitive transformations and lead to global awareness? Finally, do the content and location of the programme interact with identity change processes in participants' collective empowerment?

## **Method**

### ***Research Context***

This research is part of a larger international, interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral project, during which the first author spent eighteen months as an international research fellow with IFWEA in Cape Town. IFWEA secretariat staff run YGAP, with the explicit aim to transform individual trade unionists into globally aware activists.

## **Study 1**

### ***Participants***

There were 47 YGAP participants in total across two years (27 in 2018 and 20 in 2019), 21 (44%) were male and 26 (56%) females, ages ranged from 22 to 36 years ( $M = 28.6$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ). In terms of social class 26 (54%) identified as working class, 7 (15%) lower middle class, 10 (21%) middle class, 2 (4.2%) upper middle class, 1 (2%) upper class and 2 (4.2%) didn't know. Participants came from 16 countries on four continents. A post-hoc power analysis confirmed the adequacy of the sample size, using G\*power (effect size from variance explained  $R^2$  increase, partial  $R^2 = .241$ , large effect size  $f^2 = 0.317$ , power = .93,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

### ***Measures***

All measures were completed using a 5-point response format from 1 = completely disagree, 2 = disagree a little 3 = neutral, 4 = agree a little and 5 = completely agree.

**Activist identity** - was measured with four items adapted from Leach, and colleagues (2008) in-group identification scale. Examples include 'I see myself as someone who is concerned about social change' and 'I feel connected to others who are concerned about social change'. Higher scores represent higher activist identity. Cronbach's alphas: Time 1  $\alpha = 0.8$ , Time 2  $\alpha = 0.7$ .

**Critical Consciousness** - was measured with four items from Diemer et al., (2017) Critical Consciousness Scale. Examples include 'Social and economic inequalities exist because the system is stacked in favour of some groups' and 'It is not OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others'. Higher scores represent higher critical consciousness. Cronbach's alphas: Time 1  $\alpha = 0.7$ , Time 2  $\alpha = 0.74$ .

**Collective Empowerment** - was measured with four items from Rogers et al., (1999) Empowerment scale. Examples include 'If we work together we can have a positive effect on the wider community' and 'If we unite as a group, instead of working individually, we will be more powerful'. Higher scores equate to higher collective empowerment. Cronbach's alphas: Time 1  $\alpha = 0.63$ , Time 2  $\alpha = 0.8$ .

Also measured were Global Social Responsibility, Political Orientation, Right Wing Authoritarianism, Populism, Political Self-Efficacy, Political Voice and Social Movement Participation. These measures are not pertinent to this study and are not included in further analysis.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were invited to take part in the research on day one of YGAP. This involved giving informed consent and completing a paper and pencil questionnaire at the beginning of YGAP (Time 1) and again two weeks later, at the end (Time 2). Participants were asked not to confer.

## Results

### Overview of analysis

To begin we examined any increases in activist identity ( $H_1$ ), critical consciousness ( $H_2$ ) and collective empowerment ( $H_3$ ) between Time 1 and Time 2 using paired samples T-tests (See **Table 1**, see supplementary material for all tables). Then relationships between variables were examined using simple correlations (see **Table 2**). Finally, a hierarchical multiple regression was used to test the theoretical predication that Time 2 collective empowerment was predicted by Time 2 activist identity and Time 2 critical consciousness, over and above Time 1 critical consciousness and Time 1 collective empowerment ( $H_4$ ). On the bases of the correlations and our hypothesis ( $H_4$ ) we targeted our analysis on two Time 1 predictor variables critical consciousness and collective empowerment, that were significantly related to collective empowerment at Time 2 (see **Table 3**). Time 1 critical consciousness and Time 1 collective empowerment were entered in the first step as control variables. Time 2 activist identity and Time 2 critical consciousness were entered in the second step. Time 2 collective empowerment was entered as the dependent variable. Our use of hierarchical multiple regression analyses for two waves of longitudinal data is supported by previous Social Identity research (Dingle et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2012).

Paired samples t-tests were conducted to test hypotheses 1 – 3 and to evaluate the impact of YGAP on the variables of interest measured before YGAP at Time 1 and after at Time 2 (see

**Table 1).** All variables increased significantly between Time 1 and Time 2. In support of H<sub>1</sub>, there was a significant increase in activist identity, Time 2 ( $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD = .39$ ) minus Time 1 ( $M = 4.56$ ,  $SD = .61$ ),  $t(45) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .02$  (two-tailed). In support of H<sub>2</sub>, there was a significant increase in critical consciousness, Time 2 ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = .53$ ) minus Time 1 ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = .73$ ),  $t(43) = 3.24$ ,  $p = .002$  (two-tailed). Finally, in support of H<sub>3</sub>, there was also a significant increase in collective empowerment, Time 2 ( $M = 4.9$ ,  $SD = .23$ ) minus Time 1 ( $M = 4.74$ ,  $SD = .37$ ),  $t(45) = 3.19$ ,  $p = .003$ .

Simple bivariate correlations were used to explore relationship between variables. As expected, there were significant positive correlations between activist identity at Time 1 and at Time 2  $r(46) .358$ ,  $p = .015$ , between critical consciousness at Time 1 and Time 2  $r(44) .483$ ,  $p = .001$ , and between collective empowerment at Time 1 and Time 2  $r(46) .462$ ,  $p = .001$ . There was no correlation between activist identity at Time 1 and critical consciousness at Time 1  $r(47) -.073$ ,  $p = .63$ . Nor between activist identity at Time 1 and collective empowerment at Time 1  $r(47) -.023$ ,  $p = .88$ . There was a significant positive correlation between critical consciousness at Time 1 and collective empowerment at Time 1  $r(47) .315$ ,  $p = .03$ . There was no correlation between activist identity at Time 2 and critical consciousness at Time 2  $r(44) .036$ ,  $p = .81$ . There was however a significant positive correlation between activist identity at Time 2 and collective empowerment at Time 2  $r(46) .300$ ,  $p = .04$ . There was also a significant correlation between critical consciousness at Time 2 and collective empowerment at Time 2  $r(44) .499$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the ability of Time 2 activist identity and Time 2 critical consciousness to predict levels of Time 2 collective empowerment, over and above Time 1 critical consciousness and Time 1 collective empowerment. Preliminary analyses

were conducted to ensure assumptions were not violated. Time 1 critical consciousness and Time 1 collective empowerment entered at step 1, explained 20.4% of the variance in Time 2 collective empowerment, only Time 1 collective empowerment ( $B = .408, p = .007$ ) was significant. After entry of Time 2 activist identity and Time 2 critical consciousness at step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 37.6%,  $F(5, 38) = 7.49, p < .001$ . In support of H<sub>4</sub>, Time 2 activist identity and Time 2 critical consciousness explained an additional 19.3% of the variance in Time 2 collective empowerment over and above Time 1 measures,  $R^2$  change = .19.3,  $F$  change (2, 38) = 7.49,  $p = .005$ . In the final model only Time 2 activist identity ( $B = .289, p = .03$ ) and Time 2 critical consciousness ( $B = .371, p = .01$ ) were significant.

Taken together, these analyses demonstrate that participants had relatively high levels of collective empowerment at the beginning of YGAP and these feelings were strong predictors of collective empowerment at the end. However, when activist identity and critical consciousness measured at Time 2 were entered into our model these initial feelings of collective empowerment no longer added to the model. This model provides compelling evidence of social psychological processes, an increased sense of activist identity and critical consciousness developed during YGAP, which contributed to participants reported feelings of collective empowerment. In order to capture the richness of this experience and to bring global awareness into the analysis we employed a qualitative focus group design in study 2.

## Study 2

### *Participants*

In study 2, 22 (40%, 12 females and 10 males) participants took part in four focus group interviews, two in 2018 ( $n = 12$ ) and two in 2019 ( $n = 10$ ). Eight participants were black, one

Middle Eastern, one Asian, one Hispanic and eleven were white. In terms of occupation, sixteen were labour organisers (trade unionists) five were youth organisers and one a worker educator.

(See **Table 4** for participant's characteristics and pseudonyms).

At the beginning of YGAP, participants were invited to take part in focus groups to take place two weeks later, at the end. Focus groups happened around a table in a small room with a phone placed in the middle to record the discussion. The focus of the discussion was YGAP as a learning experience and a semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide. The topics covered in the focus groups included why and how each participant came to YGAP, the work they do as trade unionists, youth workers and worker educators, the aspects of YGAP that they enjoyed and did not enjoy, what they learned and how they felt after completing the two-week programme. Each participant gave their name, age, country and role and they were assured a pseudonym would be used in the write up. Focus groups ranged between 40 and 57 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

### *Analytic Approach*

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). Assumptions of reflexive TA are that meaning, and knowledge are situated and contextual which puts an emphasis on the researcher's subjectivity as a resource in the research process, reflexivity in terms of theory, data and interpretation is also key (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Reflexive TA offers a flexible approach to analysing qualitative data by generating themes, or patterns of shared meaning, with an eye to the broader social context and focus on the limits of material reality. We considered reflexive TA the best approach for our present research purposes as it is a data-driven strategy that marries the 'top-down' deductive theoretical perspective that we examine here drawing on predictions of the Social Identity Approach to Education and

Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017), with the ‘bottom-up’ inductive experience of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020).

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2020) recursive six-part process. This started with engagement, reflection, and familiarisation with the transcripts, re-listening to the recordings and writing notes. With the theoretical perspective in mind the entire data corpus was coded for meaning and theoretical concepts, using the highlight and comment function in Microsoft Word. In an organic process, codes were interpreted and grouped into loose overlapping clusters. For instance, talk about diversity, respect for difference and unity were considered one cluster while talk of common values, goals and beliefs were considered another cluster, although these codes likely fell into one theme, namely global awareness. All instances of talk about feeling changed as a consequence of learning were highlighted. The clusters of codes, now potential extracts, were moved into separate Word files, given an initial broad theme label, reviewed and refined. In line with Braun and Clarke (2020), description of themes as interpretive stories about the data, the process of generating and naming themes was active, iterative and creative. Finally, the extracts that best represented the themes and sub-themes were chosen for write up. Pseudonyms replace participant names and ellipses [...] indicate when an extract has been edited for brevity.

## Results

Two themes were generated (see **Table 5**). The first, developing global awareness, (Merryfield, 2008), has two sub-themes representing relational transformation and cognitive transformation processes (Drury, 2012). The second, transformed and empowered by YGAP, captures expressions of strengthened, changed activist identity stemming from collective empowerment.

**Theme 1: Developing global awareness**

The participatory and active learning during YGAP encouraged purposeful interaction with the intention of allowing participants to study and understand their own and each other's experiences, and struggles. In addition, the group's core values were stated, including openness and receptiveness towards both cultural, experiential and ethnic differences and similarities.

Drawing on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017) we suggest that participants learning about their differences and similarities fed into the development of global awareness and can be understood as activist identity change. In line with crowd research (Drury, 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2000; 2009; Reicher, 2011), crucial elements are conceptualised as relational and cognitive transformation. Thus, the first theme includes two sub-themes relational transformation and cognitive transformation that capture identity change process.

**Subtheme 1: Relational transformation, expressions of solidarity and respect for diversity**

Many participants talked about relational concepts such as solidarity and unity despite their differences.

***Extract 1 YGAP 2018 Focus Group 2***

*Pauline:* I think I will say what identifies us in a way is respect and unity and diversity.

Why am I saying so? We come from different places, different but I think from the beginning till now everybody was like... I respect what makes you different.

Pauline's account suggests that despite differences in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, the YGAP participants identified as an inclusive group based on respect, unity and diversity. These elements are not incompatible. Indeed, collectives often benefit from being heterogeneous and united, for instance, in many communities' individual creativity is the bases for solidarity and the

successful division of labour (Postmes, et al., 2005). Through her use of ‘everybody’, Pauline illustrates that respect for difference was a common feature of the group.

The next extract follows immediately after extract 1, and Pauline, a black labour organiser from Cameroon, expresses a fear held by her and some black colleagues initially, that inequalities in power might have been problematic for them during YGAP.

***Extract 2 YGAP 2018 Focus Group 2***

*Pauline:* Sometimes you think when you'll be, sorry if I offend anybody, sometimes you may think okay when we came like I could count the number of coloured people like me with a whole bunch of white people...

*Pauline:* We're not saying... you respect maybe like that difference like okay I talk to you like how I find is really superficial but at the end you see not everybody is like that because at some point that's the image some people gave us like, when you're there people will just “yeah hello” and just run away. But at the same time, you see when we have the same values or when we come for the same thing, I think some of those barriers or frontiers just fall off and it was really good. I think I noticed it with most people. So, we respected each other, respected our differences but it did not stop us from being together.

*Interviewer:* Brilliant.

*Percy:* Yeah, we would not find the Africa, Europe, Asia groups.

*Pauline:* Yeah, Europe, Asia or something.

*William:* Yeah, it was just global.

After an initial awkwardness, Pauline reports trepidation that black participants would be at the receiving end of prejudice, inauthenticity and superficiality from the majority white participants

during YGAP. Perhaps to give this fear credibility she positions this as also outside the group, shared among participants' networks prior to YGAP, 'that's the image that some people gave us.' It is common for minority group members to experience suspicion and threat in situations of intergroup merging because of power differences between groups (Dovidio et al., 2008). While majority group members expect their representation in the new group, minorities often fear cultural assimilation and lack of recognition for their contribution (Wenzel et al., 2008). However, the participatory learning methods, critical consciousness and stated group values seemed to facilitate common appreciation and respect for diversity. Pauline's account suggests that cultural and ethnic differences were experienced as positive and embraced as learning tools in the development of global awareness. At the same time, Pauline points to a common desire for growth that brought these activists to YGAP, 'we come for the same thing'. At the end of the extract Percy and William, both black participants from Zimbabwe, suggest the sub-continent groups that did not form, 'we would not find Africa, Europe, Asia groups' and the inclusive group that did 'it was just global'.

In the next extract Hasan, a Syrian refugee now living and working as an educator in Turkey, articulates identity change processes through his exposure and learning about cultural differences during YGAP.

***Extract 3 YGAP 2018 Focus Group 1.***

*Hasan:* Yeah, I totally agree about the cultural differences, like I am in love with this thing, because I was very socially closed, and I'm opening up to different cultures, different backgrounds... I've learned a lot here, hopefully I'm going to take it back home and run some study circles in Istanbul for Syrian refugees living in Turkey, because they

are struggling with these cultural issues. So, hopefully I'm going to open them up about it, and teach them something...It's a life-changing point for me.

In Hasan's account, experiencing cultural diversity among YGAP participants gave him an opportunity to grow and realise a passion for cultural difference that was not possible in his mono-cultured life in Syria. There were a wide spectrum of perspectives, cultures, and political experiences, among YGAP participants, some came from countries with authoritarian dictatorships, while others came from Nordic socialist, democracies. The participant's everyday experiences became new and alternative forms of knowledge (Choudry, 2015). These differences added to the richness of the learning and development of authentic global awareness (Merryfield, 2008). These transformative identity processes for Hasan, were life changing.

In the next extract, the development of global awareness is evident in Maya's description. She has discovered that participants from different parts of the world nonetheless have shared experiences in their work as trade unionists.

***Extract 4 YGAP 2019 Focus Group 3.***

*Kaya:* And just learning how alike we are even though we come from different parts of the world.

*Interviewer:* Alike in terms of what? What do you mean? Explain that to someone.

*Kaya:* In terms of experiences, in the work that we do because we all come from trade unions, we all experience the same things.

Despite racial, ethnic, and cultural differences Maya points out how alike YGAP participants are with reference to their work experiences and labour movement activism. Her account of learning captures the development of global awareness and is a good example of relational transformation and the realisation of collective self (Drury, 2012; Reicher, 2011).

**Subtheme 2: Cognitive transformation, realisation of shared beliefs and values**

Juxtaposed with respect for diversity as a unifying aspect of an emergent global awareness, there were also frequent references to sites of commonality among the groups. Participants realised they shared beliefs and values as labour activists whose shared interest is justice and decent working conditions.

The next extract begins with Hasan relaying his realisation of commonalities among colleagues during the two-day internship with a grassroots NGO.

*Extract 5 YGAP 2018 Focus Group 1.*

*Hasan:* I was on the internship, so me from the Middle East, Adom from Ghana, Jenny from Uganda, so it was like totally different. I was worried about it, but we were like together, oh, we share the same ideas exactly, so we just went with it.

*Ramesh:* That's true, it's like we are likeminded we want to do something for working people. We don't want to see injustice. We are always there we are in solidarity, I would say. Coming from different, even from formal, informal economy workers but we are together, that's what we share.

*Adom:* And most of the issues are similar, because we look at issues like inequality amongst workers, and there's the issue of precarious work and all that. So even together, we are all fighting the same cause, and hoping to achieve change in all these areas. So, that's what we want.

*Kaarina:* Yeah, the problems are quite similar, but they show up in different ways in different countries.

In Hasan's account, his initial worry about difference dissolved when he realised that he and his internship comrades were united by shared beliefs. Their activist identity here referenced by

Ramesh, from India, contains both relational solidarity and shared cognitions, beliefs and values, ‘we are likeminded’. Collective global awareness and critical consciousness are evident in Adom from Ghana expression that as activists they are fighting a common cause to bring justice and change for all workers who are facing precarious working conditions. Finally, Kaarina from Finland, expresses global awareness in the issues that they face from different corners of the world, may manifest differently but they are similar. Again, we see reflective discussion about the challenges that workers of the world face and that connect participants as globally aware activists (Choudry, 2015; Cooper 2020).

Many participants expressed the psychological benefits of a shared activist identity united by shared beliefs and values.

***Extract 6 YGAP 2019 Focus Group 4.***

*Milla:* It was so great to be around with people that unite and share the same thoughts.

*Astrid:* Yes, values I reflected on that as well, not for the first time in this but in these kinds of contexts I always, it hits me like, its’ so nice that you have people around that share your values. You don’t need to be annoyed and angry or frustrated the whole time and you kind of feel that yeah, we are, it’s more than me and I am not alone, there are other people than me that believe these things.

Milla and Astrid both reflect that the shared values among the group contributed to a positive YGAP experience. Astrid has reflected on this before, on top of positive features of being among likeminded in-group members, the stress of having to defend this position among out-group members is absent, ‘you don’t have to be annoyed and angry or frustrated the whole time’.

Sharing an empowered activist identity like this, allows protective social identity resources to

dispel hopeless notions of being alone and fighting a lonely cause ‘there’s more than me and I’m not alone’ (Louis et al., 2016; Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

## **Theme 2. Transformed and empowered by YGAP**

Many participants expressed feeling changed by YGAP, which was transformative and collectively empowering because it allowed participants to feel part of a much larger global activist community.

The internship with grassroots NGOs working among marginalised communities around Cape Town, was highlighted often as an empowering, transformative learning experience.

### *Extract 8 YGAP 2018 Focus Group 1.*

*Mia:* Yes, it’s really different, so I’ve learned a lot. And especially, the study visit that we had, it was very touching, and I got a totally different perspective. They are real activists, and as we were talking about in Sweden, so most of the people in Sweden are like, ‘No, I don’t want to get involved’, they’re too comfortable, they have it pretty good so they don’t have to get involved. And the situation is very different here, so the fire in them is very unique and special.

Mia’s account of feeling changed by exposure to ‘real’ activism during her internship ‘I got a totally different perspective’ was typical of the participant’s descriptions of this element of the programme. Mia’s fellow Swedes by comparison are often reluctant to engage in political activism because of comfort and complacency. Like Mia, participants claimed that their understanding of activism was transformed because the grassroots activists in Cape Town do not have the luxury or privilege of complacency; they fight for justice where poverty, injustice and inequality can seem insurmountable. Yet, ‘popular education’ and labour activists played a key role in the struggle for democracy in South Africa (Cooper, 2020), and the internship provided

YGAP participants a powerful opportunity to connect with the fire and passion among grassroots activists that continues to burn.

In the final extract, Anna sums up the identity change processes reported by participants as their activist identities strengthened across YGAP and allowed them to connect with activists across the globe.

***Extract 9 YGAP 2019 Focus Group 3.***

*Anna:* I agree but you have stronger passion in you now and also that like we are all more pissed off in the world but also, we have some extra hope because we know that it's people like us that we have them everywhere, like we are from all over and we have like this same focus.

Anna's account suggests that the participants' passion for fairness and justice strengthened across YGAP, and they became more outraged and angrier as their critical consciousness increased (see study 1). At the same time however, as their activist identities strengthened and were enhanced with global awareness the rage was balanced with hope. YGAP allowed them to connect to a much bigger global activist community 'people like us we have them everywhere like we are from all over and we have like this same focus'. Scholars in popular education argue that facilitators must assist participants to transform their rage into hope because rage can be disempowering, but with hope, action can follow (Choudry, 2015).

### **Discussion**

This research explored if and how the learning of a residential, 'popular education' programme that took place in Cape Town, South Africa was social identity change. YGAP aimed to develop global awareness, critical consciousness, and collective empowerment among young, international labour activists. We examined learning of YGAP through the lens of Social Identity

Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017), and the first longitudinal questionnaire study found activist identity and critical consciousness increased across YGAP and fed into the participants' improved sense of collective empowerment. The second qualitative study found evidence of relational and cognitive transformation (Drury, 2012) among the diverse YGAP participants, which enhanced their activist identity with global awareness. Finally, the content of the programme provided tools and experiences that were collectively empowering and provided participants with passion and hope in their activism going forward.

Researchers in Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017) align with critical education scholars (Bang et al., 2005; Holland & Leander, 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Nasir et al., 2008), and point to the importance of dynamic interactional elements in education settings including the learner, the context, and the process of learning. They suggest that an important element in education research is social identity. Understanding learning as active, engaged processes that develops norms, values, and beliefs, can help to shape, and inform educational experiences and outcomes (Bang et al., 2005; Bliuc et al., 2017; Holland & Leander, 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Nasir et al., 2008; Smyth et al., 2017). Activist identity expanded and strengthened during YGAP and alongside critical consciousness, contributed to participants' sense of collective empowerment. Shared social identities are important because they satisfy fundamental needs, they allow learners to connect with each other and feel their experiences are valued. Shared social identities encourage agreement, influence, consensus and respect, which are critical to learning (Haslam, 2017). Our focus group discussions gave depth to our findings by allowing participants with more and less power, to articulate their fears and joys at connecting as a unified group on relational and cognitive terms.

Social identities are dynamic and flexible and can be constructed, manipulated, and performed for strategic, and consolidation purposes, while at the same time identity content is constrained by material reality (Postmes et al., 2005; Drury & Reicher, 2000). As demonstrated in this study, activist identities were strengthened through active, peer-to-peer learning, exposure, debate, discussion, reflection about their own, and each other's experiences. In line with predictions (Lavarack & Wallerstein, 2001), critical consciousness also increased because of the radical, participatory learning methods used during YGAP. These activist identities strengthened through interaction that specifies norms for action based on opinions about the way the world should be (Smith et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2017). This is important because, such groups have been shown to be excellent predictors of socio-political action (Thomas & McGarty, 2009). Our research can contribute therefore, to education that arcs towards more just worlds (Philip et al., 2018).

A strength of this study is in the use of mixed methods to triangulate findings, and to test and develop theory. The popular education literature points to the role of critical consciousness and collective empowerment as a process and an outcome of popular education programmes (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020). The questionnaire study allowed us to add social identity to this model, while the longitudinal design permits us to make tentative claims that increases in these variables are attributable to YGAP. The focus group study facilitated a deeper exploration of participants' experiences and allowed for the development of two sub-components of activist identity in terms of the relational, solidarity and cognitive, goals and values, transformation (Drury, 2012).

### **Limitations**

In terms of limitations, YGAP is undoubtedly a rare opportunity that may only be experienced by a small number of labour movement activists. This limits the generalisability of the findings. However, the emancipatory, participatory and democratic pedagogy is universal in ‘popular education’ and therefore not unique to YGAP, and despite our small sample and the niche status of YGAP; this study can nonetheless inform the call by the labour movement for the revitalisation of ‘popular education’. This study also speaks to the call by critical education scholars to include identity processes in education research (Bang et al., 2005; Holland & Leander, 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Nasir et al., 2008). A further limitation is that the same questionnaire was completed by participants at Time 1 and Time 2, only two weeks apart. We appreciate that this timeframe is short but believe that if anything this would reduce the difference between pre- and post-programme scores because participants are likely to try to respond consistently. Therefore, the short timeframe would not increase the difference but instead reduce the difference. However, we show significant increases in our constructs of interest. A final limitation here is that we have not explored any lasting effects of the YGAP programme. Ideally in future studies, follow up questionnaires should be used.

## **Conclusion**

In an increasingly individualised and unequal world, critical education scholars are calling for the inclusion of culture, diversity and identity processes in education research, that orients towards education for more just worlds (Lee, 2008; Philips et al., 2018). At the same time the labour movement are calling for a revitalisation of ‘popular education’ to reenergise collective identity, solidarity and the grassroots struggle for social justice (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020; Jansson, 2016). This research is a response to these calls. We drew on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017), which

highlights the importance of creating shared social identities in learning and education. We found evidence of learning as social identity change. A longitudinal analysis found activist identity and critical consciousness increased during YGAP and fed into increased collective empowerment. Focus group discussions supported these findings and found activist identity change where participant activists connected with global awareness to the wider activist community, and left YGAP with new tools and a collective sense of empowerment, passion, and hope for social and political change.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and paired sample T-Tests results.

|                           | T2 Mean<br>(SD) | T1 Mean<br>(SD) | Mean Change<br>(SD) | t    | df | p    | Cohens<br>d |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|------|----|------|-------------|
| Activist<br>Identity      | 4.76<br>(.39)   | 4.56<br>(.61)   | .21<br>(.59)        | 2.36 | 45 | .02  | .34         |
| Critical<br>Consciousness | 4.74<br>(.53)   | 4.41<br>(.73)   | .32<br>(.66)        | 3.24 | 43 | .002 | .51         |
| Collective<br>Empowerment | 4.9<br>(.23)    | 4.74<br>(.37)   | .16<br>(.33)        | 3.19 | 45 | .003 | .50         |

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SD = Standard Deviation

**Table 2.** Simple correlations between variables of interest

|                                | 1     | 2      | 3     | 4     | 5      | 6 |
|--------------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|---|
| 1 Activist Identity T1         | 1     |        |       |       |        |   |
| 2 Critical<br>Consciousness T1 | -.073 | 1      |       |       |        |   |
| 3 Collective<br>Empowerment T1 | -.023 | .315*  | 1     |       |        |   |
| 4 Activist Identity T2         | .358* | -.068  | .174  | 1     |        |   |
| 5 Critical<br>Consciousness T2 | -.091 | .483** | .342* | .036  | 1      |   |
| 6 Collective<br>Empowerment T2 | .102  | .302*  | .462* | .360* | .499** | 1 |

Note \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis predicting Time 2 Collective Empowerment from Time 2 Activist Identity and Time 2 Critical Consciousness while controlling for Time 1 Critical Consciousness and Time 1 Collective Empowerment.

| Predictor                     | Time 2 Collective Empowerment |                  |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|
|                               | Model 1 <i>B</i>              | Model 2 <i>B</i> |
| Time 1 Critical Consciousness | .174                          | .063             |
| Time 1 Collective Empowerment | .408**                        | .264             |
| Time 2 Activist Identity      |                               | .305*            |
| Time 2 Critical Consciousness |                               | .367*            |
| Adjusted $R^2$                | .204                          | .376             |
| <i>F</i>                      | 6.51**                        | 7.49**           |
| $\Delta R^2$                  |                               | .193             |
| $\Delta F$                    |                               | 6.66**           |

Note:  $N = 47$ . \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 4.** Participant Characteristics and Pseudonyms.

| <b>Participant</b>   | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Country</b> | <b>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Occupation</b> |
|----------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>YGAP 2018 FG1</i> |            |               |                |                  |                   |
| Thema                | 30         | Female        | Ghana          | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| Ramesh               | 31         | Male          | India          | Asian            | Labour Organiser  |
| Hasan                | 30         | Male          | Syria/Turkey   | Middle Eastern   | Worker Educator   |
| Mia                  | 26         | Female        | Sweden         | White            | Youth Organiser   |
| Kaarina              | 29         | Female        | Finland        | White            | Labour Organiser  |
| Adom                 | 33         | Male          | Ghana          | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| <i>YGAP 2018 FG2</i> |            |               |                |                  |                   |
| Percy                | 32         | Male          | Zimbabwe       | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| William              | 22         | Male          | Zimbabwe       | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| Jenny                | 28         | Female        | Uganda         | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| Xavier               | 31         | Male          | USA            | Hispanic         | Labour Organiser  |
| Pauline              | 28         | Female        | Cameroon       | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| Erik                 | 29         | Male          | Sweden         | White            | Youth Organiser   |
| <i>YGAP 2019 FG3</i> |            |               |                |                  |                   |
| Lerato               | 32         | Female        | South Africa   | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| Anna                 | 31         | Female        | Sweden         | White            | Labour Organiser  |
| Arto                 | 34         | Male          | Finland        | White            | Labour Organiser  |
| Tanya                | 22         | Female        | Belarus        | White            | Labour Organiser  |
| Kaya                 | 32         | Female        | South Africa   | Black            | Labour Organiser  |
| <i>YGAP 2019 FG4</i> |            |               |                |                  |                   |

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|        |    |        |         |       |                  |
|--------|----|--------|---------|-------|------------------|
| Ella   | 22 | Female | Sweden  | White | Youth Organiser  |
| Lars   | 24 | Male   | Sweden  | White | Youth Organiser  |
| Milla  | 36 | Female | Finland | White | Labour Organiser |
| Oscar  | 28 | Male   | Sweden  | White | Youth Organiser  |
| Astrid | 29 | Female | Sweden  | White | Labour Organiser |

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**Table 5.** Themes and Subthemes

| Themes                               | Subthemes  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Developing global awareness       | 1. Relational transformation including solidarity and respect for diversity<br>2. Cognitive transformation including shared beliefs and values |
| 2. Transformed and empowered by YGAP |  |