What are the Perceptions of Economic Barriers and Opportunities in Forsyth County, North Carolina? Using the *Youth*RISE Summer Program to Amplify Black Youth Voice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To better understand ways to increase economic mobility, community stakeholders must consider: 1) ways to overcome barriers to create more opportunity and 2) how to overcome barriers to ensure improved opportunity translates into greater mobility. Given the onset of complex thinking skills during adolescence, these young people are critical stakeholders in these conversations. However, adolescents, particularly those who are minoritized, are rarely given a seat at the table where issues such as economic mobility, poverty, racial gaps in education, employment and wealth, and solutions are discussed. To address this concern, this preliminary investigation used youth participatory action research as a framework to develop a 10-week summer program to gain insight into youth's perceptions of economic opportunity and barriers in Forsyth County, NC. Program participants included 11 Black adolescents (6 females) in grades 8 through 12 (M_{age} = 14.33) residing in East Winston-Salem, NC. In this brief report, the summer program is described and two themes that emerged throughout the implementation are highlighted. By doing so, this brief amplifies youth voice in the discussion of economic mobility in Forsyth County. This brief ends with implications for the advancement of polices, programs and procedures that may support upward economic mobility based on findings from youth collaboration.

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INTRODUCTION

Forsyth County, North Carolina has been recently identified as the third poorest county in the U.S. for upward economic mobility, which refers to one's ability to improve their income over the course of their lifetime. Though the concept of economic mobility may be relatively simple to understand, solutions to low economic mobility within Forsyth County are more difficult to grasp. Scholars understand that economic opportunity and mobility are not the same; however, opportunity is needed to see a systematic increase in intragenerational (changes within a person's lifetime) and intergenerational (changes between generations) mobility[1]. Forsyth County policymakers and community stakeholders concerned about improving economic mobility must consider ways to: 1) create more opportunity; and 2) support the ability to overcome barriers to ensure improved opportunity translates into greater mobility[2]. Local youth are critical stakeholders in these conversations because they represent the community's future. Yet, youth, particularly those residing in marginalized communities, are rarely given a seat at the table where issues such as economic mobility, poverty, racial gaps in education, employment and wealth, and possible solutions, are discussed[3].

The period of adolescence marks the onset of complex thinking skills and perspective taking[4]. These skills are critical as they give young people the ability to initiate a deeper exploration of issues within their community. With these new, rapidly increasing skills, adolescents can begin to ask questions about the world around them, understand the injustices that may occur within institutions and societies, and can help in generating systemic solutions that may reduce or eliminate barriers to opportunity[5].

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[1] Jencks, C., & Tach, L. (2006). Would equal opportunity mean more mobility?. Mobility and Inequality: *Frontiers of Research from Sociology and Economics*, 23-58.

[2] Smeeding, T. M. (2016). Multiple barriers to economic opportunity for the "truly" disadvantaged and vulnerable. *Russell Sage Foundation Journal of Social Sciences: RSF,* 2(2), 98-122.

[3] Evans, S. D. (2007). Youth sense of community: Voice and power in community contexts. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), 693-709.

[4] Piaget, J. (1964). Part I: Cognitive development in children: Piaget development and learning. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 2(3), 176-186.

[5] Mitra, D. L., & Serriere, S. C. (2012). Student voice in elementary school reform: Examining youth development in fifth graders. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(4), 743-774.

Therefore, the teenage years represent an optimal developmental period for inspiring youth to take action within their own community to improve economic mobility.

Not surprisingly, many scholars have stressed the importance of involving youth in research concerning their lives and emphasize young people's right to participate in decisions affecting them[6]. Since poverty is a well-established factor affecting youth's lives, their involvement in how it is conceptualized and addressed is strongly indicated[7]. Further, there is evidence that involvement in decision-making and control is particularly important for motivation and learning during the teenage years[8]. Though adolescents demonstrate a growing capacity and desire to exercise control over issues impacting their lives, these young people perceive fewer opportunities to exercise autonomy and participate in making decisions[9]. With this in mind, three undergraduate research assistants and I collaborated with youth residing in East Winston-Salem (a region of Forsyth County with particularly low economic mobility) to gain insight into their perceptions of economic opportunity and barriers in the county, and created space for these young people to generate solutions for upward mobility. The two questions guiding this work were: 1) What do Black youth residing in East Winston-Salem perceive to be the available economic opportunities and barriers to upward mobility in Forsyth County; and 2) What policy solutions do Black youth recommend to eliminate existing barriers and improve opportunity for similarly identifying youth in Forsyth County?

Centering Youth Voice through the *Youth*RISE Summer Program

We developed a research-based 10-week summer program called Youth <u>R</u>esearch <u>i</u>n <u>S</u>ustaining <u>E</u>conomics or *Youth*RISE. Our program used youth-led participatory action research (YPAR), a

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[6] See for example, Ben-Arieh, A. (2008). The child indicators movement: Past, present, and future. *Child Indicators Research*, *1*(1), 3-16.

[7] Griggs, M. J., & Walker, P. R. (2008). The costs of child poverty for individuals and society: A literature review. York Publishing Services for Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

[8] Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, *48*(2), 90-101.

[9] Ozer, E. J., & Wright, D. (2012). Beyond school spirit: The effects of youth-led participatory action research in two urban high schools. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *22*(2), 267-283.

framework that centers voices traditionally silenced in academic scholarship. By using YPAR as the foundation for our summer program, we redefined who has the expertise to produce knowledge – not just academics, policymakers, and business owners, but young people who are living in the community[10]. During the program, the three undergraduate research assistants and I served as facilitators to engage youth in various activities that drew upon the youth's own expertise and perspective regarding economic opportunity and barriers in their neighborhood and more broadly, the Forsyth County. We also completed semi-structured individual interviews with participating youth, before and after the summer program, to elicit their "story" about economic mobility in Forsyth County. Finally, youth used photovoice, a visual research methodology, to document and reflect on the community's needs and resources, as related to economic mobility, from their experience[11]. Following research recommendations,[12] the data analytic strategic involved thematic coding and triangulation of the data sources: Semi-structured individual interviews, observational field notes written by the undergraduate student facilitators and I during program activities, and photovoice artifacts.

[10] Rodríguez, L. F., & Brown, T. M. (2009). From voice to agency: Guiding principles for participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 123, 19-34.

[11] Wang, C. C. (2006). Youth participation in photovoice as a strategy for community change. *Journal of Community Practice*, *14*(1-2), 147-161.

[12] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Table 1. Overview of *Youth*RISE Participants

> 11 youth residing in Forsyth County-
> - Gender Identity
>   - 6 females
>   - 5 males
> - Race/Ethnicity:
>   - Black/African American ($n = 10$)
>   - Afro-Latina ($n = 1$)
> - Mean Age: 14.33 years (range 13 – 17)
> - Grades 8 – 12

Table 2. Demographic Data for Schools/Neighborhoods of Program Participants

High School (Total Number of Program Participants)	Student Population	Student Eligibility for Free Lunch	African American/ Black Student Population	Graduation Rate for 2017-2018 academic year	Census Track of School Location	Median Household Income for Census Track (2015 Dollars)	For Census Track – % of Population 25 years and older with High School Diploma or equivalent/ % with Bachelor's Degree
Carver ($n = 4$)	672	664 (99%)	472 (70%)	62%*	16.01	$38,515	83% / 15%
WSPA[+] ($n = 2$)	431	422 (98%)	342 (79%)	78%***	16.02	$22,188	72% / 14%
Atkins Academic and Technical High School ($n = 2$)	952	204 (21%)	296 (30%)	≥95%	17.00	$41,719	25% / 14%
Quality Education Academy[a] ($n = 3$)	545	517 (95%)	402 (74%)	80%	16.01	$38,515	82% / 15%
School District	55,000		15,670 (29%)	**84%**			
Forsyth County						$45,724	87% / 32%
State	1,535,440	878,771 (57%)		86%			

Note: Data retrieved from <u>Winston Salem Forsyth County Schools website</u>, the National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau; *Lowest rate in the school district; ***Third lowest rate in the school district; [+]Magnet school; [a]Public charter school

Table 3. Timetable of *Youth*RISE Summer Program Curriculum and Alignment with Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

Week/ Topics*	Objective	Common Core State Standard[13, 14]
Research-Based YPAR Foundation: **1) Problem Identification**	Skills Gained: Critical thinking- students obtain information from a variety of sources, critically viewing existing documentation.	CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.8
Week 1: ▪ Team-Building ▪ Setting Ground Rules ▪ Introduction to Research ▪ Introduction to Participatory Action Research	▪ To create a space that allows participants to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences ▪ To get a sense of what participants already know about and how they feel about research ▪ To set a basic framework of research ▪ To co-construct an informal definition of Participatory Action Research ▪ To assemble an initial idea of the process our group might follow during the program	
Week 2: ▪ Who is My Community? ▪ Principles and Practices of Community Partnerships ▪ Barriers to Working Together	▪ To define your community ▪ To recognize communities that you are and are not a part of ▪ To develop a working understanding of principles and practices of community partnerships in YPAR To address barriers to working together toward common goals	
Week 3: ▪ Imagining your Dream Community ▪ Comparing Your Neighborhood to an Ideal ▪ Identifying Community Issues and Assets ▪ Economic Mobility and Community Opportunities for /Barriers to Education and Employment ▪ Local Business, Government, Decision-Making, and Power	▪ To visualize the group's ideal community ▪ To identify key issues and assets in the community ▪ To understand economic mobility and its significance ▪ To identify factors that influence economic mobility ▪ To identify knowledge (and knowledge gaps) about disparities in education, employment and wealth ▪ To determine opportunities for and barriers to education, employment and wealth attainment ▪ To determine who has power in decision-making processes ▪ To grasp the importance and power of government ▪ To think critically about the significance of "power" and its absence ▪ To introduce the idea of mutually beneficial solutions to community problems	
Week 4: ▪ Personal Connection with Issue ▪ Defining the research question ▪ Hypothesis Development ▪ Understanding Photovoice	▪ To identify a personal connection to an issue related to economic mobility ▪ To identify the issue of interest to be researched ▪ To develop hypotheses about the relationships between independent and dependent variables ▪ To experience different research methods ▪ To understand the pros and cons of photovoice	

Figure 1. Adult Facilitator and Youth Engagement in *Youth*RISE Program Activities

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from three sources (i.e., semi-structured individual interviews, observational field notes, and photovoice artifacts) were analyzed by the three undergraduate research assistants and I using grounded theory[13]. Grounded theory calls for collected data to be reviewed for repeated ideas and tagged with codes to be grouped into concepts, and then into categories[15]. The primary interest for the current report centered on amplifying Black youths' perceptions of barriers and opportunity to economic mobility in Forsyth County and data not addressing this focus were not analyzed. We first independently coded data from the pre-program and post program individual interviews and came together to review notes to ensure we had adequate interrater reliability. Once established, we coded the remaining data sources (i.e., observational field notes and photovoice artifacts) for discussions regarding perceived opportunities and barriers to economic mobility. We came together to compare what we independently found and worked to come to a consensus regarding any areas of

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[13] Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

disagreement by returning to the participant voices and examining our point of disagreement in the larger context of the data. Below, we focus on one barrier and one opportunity that resonated the most with youth in our program (i.e., was repeated most often across and within participants and the three data sources).

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Structural Racism in Forsyth County: A Barrier to Economic Mobility

The most prominent barrier to economic mobility in Forsyth County that participants spoke of was structural racism. Structural racism can be defined as the existence of policies and practices across various systems (e.g., housing, banking, education, criminal justice, public health) that provide differential access to goods, services and opportunities by race[14]. Structural racism has had its largest impact through economic exclusion and marginalization, such that racial stratification maps onto socioeconomic stratification[15]. Further, structural racism and its sequelae, including residential and economic segregation affect, the life chances of Black children and youth[16]. Several participants shared that because they "lived on the Black side of town," they were limited in their opportunities to be exposed to the same privileges, for example, access to public spaces with advanced technology, and diverse extracurricular opportunities, as compared to their white peers living in majority white spaces in Forsyth County. Jasmine, a 14 year-old rising 9th grader residing in a neighborhood adjacent to downtown Winston-Salem, also reflected on the ongoing gentrification occurring in her community and her frustration with its impact,

> "They like to take things over and ruin things. For instance, rich people... It's a lot of rich people coming in our neighborhoods and just doing stuff. I don't know. Why are you all here? Why are you all moving over here from where you all live in a nice neighborhood, and then you come here to the 'worst' neighborhoods? It's doctors, lawyers in our neighborhood and I don't understand why they move in our neighborhoods, and they don't stay where they were."

[14] Jones, J. M. (1997). *Prejudice and Racism* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hi

[15] Harrison-Hale, A. O., McLoyd, V. C., & Smedley, B. (2004). Racial and ethnic status: Risk and protective processes among African American families. In K. I. Maton, C. J. Schellenbach, B. J. Leadbeater, & A. L. Solarz (Eds.), *Investing in children, youth, families, and communities: Strengths-based research and policy* (p. 269–283). American Psychological Association.

[16] Coll, C. G., Crnic, K., Lamberty, G., Wasik, B. H., Jenkins, R., Garcia, H. V., & McAdoo, H. P. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. *Child Development*, *67*(5), 1891-1914.

Jasmine further elaborated that as a result, her neighborhood "doesn't feel the same" because [more affluent residents] are taking control and thereby limiting her future access to formerly available opportunities such as "internships, jobs and housing."

Many teenagers also spoke about a culture of discrimination they felt existed in relation to the interaction between residents in their neighborhood and local government. Specifically, youth spoke about the invisibility of local government in their community. When directly questioned about barriers to economic progress for him, Jared, a 15 year-old rising 10th grader explicitly stated, "the government because they don't do nothing." Kevin, a 16 year-old rising 11th grader, further elaborated on his desire to see more direct involvement of local government in East Winston-Salem,

> "[City government officials] need to honestly come and talk to the people who live here and in the surrounding areas. Because Old Greensboro Road, 'OGB' gets a bad name a lot. OGB is mostly associated with the hood. People think it's some slang term. It's just short for Old Greensboro Road. [City government officials] need to come and talk to the people who don't have enough money to go out and buy their kid's school supplies. People who don't have, who are barely making it paycheck to paycheck a month. If [city government officials] talk to us, they will understand what we need to survive."

Another youth, Kaycee, a 17 year-old rising 12th grader shared similar sentiments, "[City government officials] need to just get out and talk to us, and help us, because I have literally never seen the mayor in my hood, ever. I'm even forgetting we have one."

These narratives speak to the emergence of social and psychological segregation resulting from structural racism[18]. Social and psychological segregation occurs when families and children of color lack access to important social and emotional resources, such as power, voice and influential interactions with local government[18]. Though not stated directly by these youth, research points to feelings of fear and distrust by marginalized groups who find themselves living in "different worlds"

from mainstream society[17]. Both economists[18] and critical race theorists[19] have developed various models to describe how racism impacts the life chances of Black people. In essence, racism not only affects the ability of Black youth to obtain skills, training, and credentials, but also often prevents them from receiving rewards equal to those of their white counterparts when they do have comparable skills and training[20]. Further, the lock-in model has been used to explain how racial inequalities can persist, even after discriminatory practices have ceased. This model suggests that the early advantages in resources and opportunities white Americans gained through past, exclusionary practices reproduce themselves through positive feedback loops that allow these advantages to continue to accumulate[21].

In addition to voicing the impact racism would have on their chances to move up the economic ladder, participants demonstrated their insight into the intersectional nature of their lived experiences. Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a lawyer and scholar, that can clarify understanding of how membership in social categories, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, might combine to create unique disadvantage[22,23]. When directly questioned about what she foresees as the most prominent barrier in Forsyth County to moving up the economic ladder, Kia, a 14 year-old rising 9th grader expressed,

> "Gender and my race because most people don't really value females and their opinions nowadays and especially African American females."

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[17] Harry, B. (1992). *Cultural diversity, families, and the special education system: Communication and empowerment*. Teachers College Press.

[18] See for example, Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination. *American Economic Review*, *94*(4), 991-1013.

[19] See for example, Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (Vol. 20). NYU Press.

[20] Hardaway, C. R., & McLoyd, V. C. (2009). Escaping poverty and securing middle class status: How race and socioeconomic status shape mobility prospects for African Americans during the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*(2), 242.

[21] Roithmayr, D. (2000). Barriers to entry: A market lock-in model of discrimination. *Virginia Law Review*, 727-799.

[22] Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*, 1241.

[23] Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). *Intersectionality*. John Wiley & Sons.

Kaycee also expressed that race and gender would be a likely barrier to economic mobility given society's insidious and stigmatizing views of Black males as dangerous and aggressive,

> "It's kind of like African American males, people are fearing us. I don't know what there is to fear, but it's like, they see us, and they're like, 'it's a tall dark man; what is he going to do? Is he going to beat me up, is he going to rob me, is he going to rape me or something,' and it's like, no, I'm just in here to buy some juice. It's that. I feel like my skin color and how people think about me are the biggest steps for me to get over. Sometimes, I don't think I'll even get a job here because I'm a Black man."

Other participants elaborated on structural racism being their biggest barrier to economic mobility through photovoice. For instance, several youth took photographs documenting police involved traffic stops to depict the criminal justice system and its actors (e.g., law enforcement) as an active manifestation of structural racism in their neighborhood. Further, participants spoke of a highly visible police presence within their community and professed to know that "other", i.e., majority white, neighborhoods in Winston-Salem do not experience police surveillance in the same ways nor have the same type of engagement (e.g., physical or verbal force), as residents in their neighborhood, with law enforcement. The participant's awareness of an intensive police presence in their community is consistent with other youth reports[24] and adult experiences living in neighborhoods with concentrated disadvantage noting the same[25]. Perhaps also not surprising, higher levels of police presence within a community can have far-reaching consequences including increased involvement with the criminal justice system which may impact economic mobility opportunities[26]. More specifically, data indicates that unnecessarily high rates of incarceration reduce employment, wages and income, and in the U.S. for example, the total earnings of Black men who are incarcerated is reduced by 9 percent[28].

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[24] Brunson, R. K., & Weitzer, R. (2009). Police relations with black and white youths in different urban neighborhoods. *Urban Affairs Review*, *44*(6), 858-885.

[25] Lerman, A. E., & Weaver, V. (2014). Staying out of sight? Concentrated policing and local political action. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *651*(1), 202-219.

[26] Jannetta, J., Travis, J., & McCoy, E. (2018). Participatory Justice (policy brief). Retrieved from Mobility Partnership website.

Figure 2. Photovoice image taken by youth depicting a highly visible police presence in their East Winston-Salem neighborhood.

What *Can* Create Opportunity?: Education as a [Potential] Means to Economic Mobility

Contrary to theory suggesting that Black students may develop an academic identity that is oppositional to high achievement[27], many Black youth express a high regard for education[28, 29]. Indeed, participants perceived education to be critical for economic mobility. Isaiah, a 14 year-old rising 9th grader spoke of the "key life lessons" learned from his mother in which he strongly believed and noted "Education is the one thing that you really need more than anything, to really succeed in life." Participant's positive attitudes regarding the utility of education for upward mobility was also reflected in their understanding of how significant adults in their lives may potentially receive returns on education advancement. Kia, noted that

> "Because I feel like my mom, she already has a good job, but I feel like if my dad goes back and gets a degree in something good, or he gets even more of an education, he can get a really good job, and that can bring in a lot of money. And if my mom really wants to, she could go back and she could be a nurse, and she could be bringing in a lot more money too."

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[27] Ogbu, J. U. (Ed.). (2008). *Minority status, oppositional culture, & schooling*. Routledge.

[28] Ispa, J. M., Su-Russell, C., & Im, J. (2019). Conversations between African American mothers and children about school and education. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*.

[29] Rowley, S. J. (2000). Profiles of African American college students' educational utility and performance: A cluster analysis. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *26*(1), 3-26.

Both Isaiah's and Kia's attitudes are primarily ideologically based and essentially reflect that opportunity through education is a core component of the American Dream, or what Mickelson[30] termed as *abstract attitudes* toward schooling. Uniting both examples of attitudes from Isaiah and Kia, is an underlying faith that education will bring opportunity.

While participant's perceived education to be critical for improving economic opportunity, they also reported to experience unfair treatment within the schooling context and perceived such inequity to have the potential to be a barrier to optimizing their opportunity. Participant's spoke boldly and used photovoice to reflect their concerns regarding depleted infrastructure, lack of technology equipment, the high number of long-term substitutes who did not engage them with the curriculum, large class sizes, and teacher perceptions of incompetency due to their race, as key issues in their Title 1 (or low-income) schools. Most notably, these students shared that they fully recognized these as observations from their own school spaces, but that "other high schools" located on a "different side of town" do not have these same "issues" because they have "more money."

During one program session, participants, excitedly said they wanted to act out a skit, to be further developed into a public service announcement, to illustrate the points they were trying to make, imploring adult facilitators to leave the room to give them full creative license. Upon our return to the space, participants presented two skits illustrating the differences between their schooling context and that of other, white, affluent youth, living in separate regions of the city. In the first skit (both portrayed by participants) depicting their lived school experience, students simulated entering their high school English classroom consisting of worn desks covered with hand drawings and old chewing gum. As the scene continued, the substitute makes an attempt to take attendance and mispronounces several of the students' names to which three students respond in aggravation because the substitute "had been here mad long" and "still [didn't] know [their] names yet." Another student followed-up with a question

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[30] Mickelson, R. A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among Black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 44-61.

directed to the substitute, "Do you even care enough to want to know our names?" As the skit continued, the substitute passed out a packet of worksheets with instructions that the students needed to complete the work by the end of the class period. As the skit ended, only one student attempted to complete the worksheet packet, while other students either laid their heads down on their desk or engaged in conversation with a neighboring peer. This, to the participants, was a representation of their own schooling experience marked by less than engaging interactions with an adult and the curriculum due to the absence of a highly qualified teacher.

In the second skit that represented the experiences of white students living in a more affluent regions of the city, the scene was similar, yet vastly different. Upon entering their high school English classroom, students were happily greeted by their teacher, "Mrs. Monroe" at the door. In this scenario, students approached new, clean desks and as they sat down, were told by their teacher to pull out their iPads in preparation to review the material covered from yesterday's class. Mrs. Monroe also stated that she wanted to review important announcements including an afterschool Science Club meeting that included a free t-shirt distribution, a guest speaker that would be attending class the next day, and the application due dates for upcoming internship opportunities in a neighboring city. In this skit, the students remained engaged and the teacher was able to call several students by their first name when they raised their hand to ask a question. As the participants looked to the adult facilitators at the conclusion of the skits in anticipation of their reaction, Joshua, a 17 year-old rising 12th grader explained, "This is how it is. You know there is a big difference in what school looks like for us at [high school] and I take school seriously, but know that we don't get the same stuff other kids do. I'll definitely have to work harder to get those type of opportunities. [School] may work out to make my life better in the end and it may not."

These skits were a clear representation of the education inequity students perceive despite simultaneously maintaining their ideologically-based abstract attitudes that education is the key to success in the future. According to Mickelson[32], *concrete attitudes* differ markedly from *abstract*

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attitudes because they do not adhere to dominant ideology nor hopes for the future. Instead, these beliefs reflect material realities in which education may or may not lead to social mobility. Because concrete attitudes are derived from a person's lived experiences, they offer insights into the ways in which race, class and gender differences in the opportunity structure shape beliefs about the reality of education as a means to economic mobility. In their understanding of the impact education might have on their own economic opportunity, participants had doubts about their probable returns on education from the opportunity structure given existing equities.

CONCLUSION

Black youth residing in areas of concentrated disadvantage are often underrepresented in research on economic mobility. The purpose of this preliminary investigation was to elevate the experiences of Black youth residing in East Winston-Salem, a region of Forsyth County with particularly low economic mobility, in relation to barriers and opportunities. The most prominent barrier to economic mobility that emerged from data analyses was structural racism. Though schools are an institution through which structural racism often manifests[31], education was the most prominent means for economic mobility noted by the participants. Despite maintaining these ideologically-based attitudes that education is the key to future success, participants simultaneously recognized potential limitations on educational utility for upward mobility given pervasive inequities within school experiences. Ultimately, the participant's doubts about the probable returns on education given the existing opportunity structure in their community and broader society, again point to the potential impact of structural barriers on economic mobility.

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[31] See for example, Hope, E. C., Skoog, A. B., & Jagers, R. J. (2015). "It'll never be the White kids, it'll always be us": Black high school students' evolving critical analysis of racial discrimination and inequity in schools. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *30*(1), 83-112.

Figure 3. Photovoice image taken by youth depicting their school building (located in East Winston-Salem), a source of opportunity encumbered with structural barriers.

Policy Implications

As policymakers and community stakeholders grapple with improving economic mobility in Forsyth County, East Winston-Salem has emerged as a critical region for targeted transformation. The presented youth narratives sound the call for the city to address structural and systemic racism and capitalize on improving the schooling experience, as two existing needs requiring urgent attention. Because the results of this investigation are preliminary, policy implications must proceed with great caution. Nonetheless, policymakers can take several measures to reduce and eliminate existing structural barriers and improve education opportunity for marginalized youth. The following policy recommendations were generated in collaboration with youth participating in the *Youth*RISE program and aim to support this critical endeavor:

- o Participants reported having an unusually large law enforcement presence in their community as a function of structural racism. This experience can undermine community autonomy and power and hamper economic mobility[28]. Therefore, implementing a participatory justice model[28] for communities to set their own direction for ensuring safety is recommended. This community-driven model encourages residents to identify what they want and need from the criminal justice system to feel safe at home and in their neighborhoods. Upon adopting a participatory justice framework, local government can partner with the community to use data to monitor progress. Scholars who advocate for the use of participatory justice voice that such practice result in reduced justice involvement and victimization which ultimately leads to higher labor market participation, increased educational attainment, and money saved for every

year of avoided incarceration[28]. The cost savings that might result can then be used to address other community priorities such as education initiatives.

- o Participant narratives make it clear that centering equity is critical for creating opportunities for students to succeed in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS). It is likely that radical changes that intentionally agitate the status quo will be required to redress existing disparities. Such changes might include:
    - Eliminating *de facto* (i.e., by personal preference) and *de jure* (i.e., resulting from racially-motivated public policy) racial and economic segregation
    - Allocating resources for increasing the capacity of teachers at low-income schools to deliver evidence-based, gap-closing learning opportunities in and outside of the classroom
    - Informing educators on how culture, identity and context interact and building on the cultural assets that Black students bring with them to the classroom.

Ultimately, schools, local government, businesses, and community stakeholders must work collaboratively and with specific intention, to improve the social and economic conditions of the East Winston-Salem community.

Moving Forward

This preliminary study should be seen as a springboard for more in-depth investigations focused on barriers and opportunities to economic mobility in Forsyth County, North Carolina. Our research protocol amplified the narratives of Black youth and centered their perceptions regarding economic mobility, but questions remain about how youth's perceptions about the opportunity structure within their community and the city more broadly, might 1) change over time, 2) be used to galvanize community efforts to promote change and improve economic mobility, and 3) actually impact movement up the rungs of the economic ladder. It is possible that sustained follow-up with youth from the inaugural year and also recruiting more youth to comprise additional cohorts of the *Youth*RISE program, will bring greater attention to the lived experiences of a group that is often pushed to the margin and advance the city's understanding of community needs and potential targets for policy reform.

Recommended Reading

Fox, M. (2019). Crossing under the highway: youth-centered research as resistance to structural

    inequality. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(4), 347-361.

Freire, P. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury publishing USA.

Jannetta, J., Travis, J., & McCoy, E. (2018). Participatory Justice (policy brief). Retrieved from

    [Mobility Partnership website](#).

Rodríguez, L. F., & Brown, T. M. (2009). From voice to agency: Guiding principles for

    participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Youth Development,*

    2009(123), 19-34. [Wiley Publishing website.](#)