

**“It’s a life-changing point for me”: Global awareness and collective empowerment as  
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 members of the labour movement run by the International Federation of Workers Education Associations in Cape Town, South Africa. In this mixed methods study we draw on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning to explore if the participatory learning methods used in YGAP lead to social identity change among participants ( $N = 47$ ). 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 subject to a reflexive thematic analysis and two themes provide compelling evidence that participatory, peer-to-peer learning led to identity change. Activist identities were enhanced with global awareness. In turn, activists were hopeful and collectively empowered by new knowledge, skills, and a connection to a global knowledge community.

**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 more recently 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). We argue that part of the solution may be informal adult education that encourages collective empowerment and global activism (Cooper, 2020; Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999). We draw on social psychological theory to explain why the radical pedagogies used in informal adult education are particularly conducive to empowered global activist development.

**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, resistance and societal transformation (Cooper, 2020). The approach uses peer-to-peer, active learning to build solidarity and to empower learners by working together to challenge injustice (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 development of global awareness and collective empowerment among international members of

the labour movement during a ‘popular education’ programme, the Youth Global Awareness Programme (YGAP).

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 a common understanding of pressing global challenges among young, international, trade unionists and worker educators. This research provides an opportunity to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the transformative potential of a ‘popular education’ programme among diverse learners in a non-Western context.

To understand these dynamics we draw on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017) which highlights the dynamic interconnection between integral elements, the individual and the learning context, that may promote social identity change. Here the focus is on the development of global awareness and collective empowerment among a diverse group of international learners who may come to the ‘popular education’ programme with a pre-existing activist identity.

### **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 (SIAEL; Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017). Scholars in this field argue that learning is a collaborative, social process and therefore analysis needs to move away from understanding learners solely as disparate individuals. Instead, a shared sense of social identity may be integral to successful learning and achievement (Smyth et al., 2017). This is because, shared social identities (‘us learners’ or ‘us trade unionists’), structure behaviour in line with the internalized norms, beliefs and values of the group. Mutual influence, co-operation,

support and trust flow easily between people who see each other as belonging to the same in-group (Haslam et al., 2005; Jetten et al., 2020). Understanding the dynamic interaction between the learner and the context of learning may help researchers and educators to identify aspects that can empower (or disempower) learners (Bliuc et al., 2017; Platow et al., 2017).

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 the role of shared social identity 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 and enhancing activist social identity.

Social identity can be constructed in a number of ways. A body of literature has focused on the performative aspects of social identities (Klein et al., 2007). It is through *intergroup* performance that group identities are created and understood, and group members’ behaviour can produce, reproduce and reinforce group norms to both in-group and out-group members. In addition, it is through *intragroup* discussion, argument, critical reflection and interaction that social identities are constructed and understood in small group settings such as learning spaces (Postmes et al., 2005).

To extend this, we can draw on a body of research that highlights how a group of otherwise disparate individuals experience social identity change in response to contextual conditions. Work in the Elaborated Social Identity Model of Crowd Behaviour (Drury &

Reicher, 2009; Reicher, 1984) has shown social identity change through *intergroup* interaction in collective action (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Reicher, 2011) and *intragroup* interaction in emergencies (Drury, 2012). Important for our analysis, individuals experience relational transformation, which inspires feelings of solidarity and unity among the crowd and cognitive transformation, underpinned by shared goals, values and beliefs (Drury, 2012). These transformations allow the crowd to respond collectively and work together.

In ‘popular education’, the learning often occurs literally through theatrical performance, in forum theatre or learner-centred activity that stimulates critical reflection, interaction and debate. This approach encourages mutual sharing about participants’ everyday struggles (Foley, 1999). This has a number of 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, these factors are likely to promote unity and respect that may overcome inequalities and dissimilarities between diverse participants.

Peer-to-peer *intragroup* learning dynamics are likely to be important during YGAP. The *intragroup* dynamics and the content of YGAP may facilitate a sense of agency and empowerment. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome of the critical consciousness, capacity, and the competencies and skills developed in ‘popular education’ programmes (Lavarack & Wallerstein, 2001). For group members, collective empowerment can be an emergent process of psychological change, resulting from connection, solidarity, mutual support and exhilarating feelings of collective hope for social and political change (Drury & Reicher,

2009). This rational leads to the expectation that collective empowerment may be an outcome of the active learning methods of YGAP.

### **The present study**

In partnership with the International Federation of Workers Education Associations (IFWEA) based in Cape Town, South Africa, this paper explores identity change among an international group of labour movement activists during the Youth Global Awareness Programme (YGAP). In the first study, a longitudinal questionnaire investigated 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 theoretical evidence reviewed it is hypothesised that activist identity will increase across YGAP (H<sub>1</sub>). Similarly, critical consciousness will increase across YGAP (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 these processes and explore participants' accounts of identity change in the development of global awareness and collective empowerment the second study uses a qualitative focus group design. We ask if sub-group differences and commonalities are important to the development of global awareness among international activists. Furthermore, we ask if participatory active methods and globally aware activist identity are reported as important to the development of collective empowerment among participants of YGAP.

### **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. In the first week, participants attend a seminar programme facilitated by IFWEA staff that encourages reflection through informed and purposeful interaction between the participants. The second week includes a two-day internship placement, to immerse participants in practical grassroots experience through exposure to organisations working and organising around issues relevant to labour and social movements.

### **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%) female, 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. Participant's 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, Rapa, Park, and Perry (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, Chamberlin, and Ellison (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  $H_1$ , 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  $H_2$ , 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  $H_3$ , 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 analysis 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. 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 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. The entire data corpus were 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. 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 relates to the development of global awareness, with two sub-themes representing relational transformation and cognitive transformation. The second theme captures expressions of identity change through empowerment stemming from strengthened activist identity.

### **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, common problems and struggles. In addition, the group's core values were stated explicitly and included openness and receptiveness towards both cultural, experiential and ethnic differences and similarities'. The aim was to stimulate identity change by strengthening and enhancing activist identity with global awareness. In line with crowd research (Drury, 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2000; 2009), social identity change is conceptualised as a relational and

cognitive transformation. Thus, the first theme includes two sub-themes a relational element, solidarity, and a cognitive element, consciousness that capture the identity change process.

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

Many participants talked about unity among the group despite their different backgrounds.

#### *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. And for some people what makes you different may be what I have to learn, to make myself much, much better.

Pauline's account suggests that despite sub-group differences in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture, the YGAP participants identified as an inclusive group based on solidarity and difference. 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 was a common understanding among the group. However, she reflects that exposure to sub-group differences may be a particularly potent learning experience for 'some' unspecified participants.

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 sub-group differences 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 a 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 in the group. 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 ingredients of the participatory learning methods, critical consciousness and stated group values and norms facilitated common appreciation and respect for diversity. Pauline's account suggests that cultural and ethnic differences were experienced as positive and embraced as a learning tool in the development of global awareness. At the same time, Pauline points to common values and pre-existing activist identity that brought them to YGAP, 'we come for the same thing'. At the end of the extract Percy and William, both from Zimbabwe, express the possible sub-continent groups that did not form, 'we would not find Africa, Europe, Asia groups' and the global identity that did 'it was just a global'.

In the next extract Hasan, a Syrian refugee now living and working as an educator in Turkey, articulates his identity change because of exposure to the cultural, social and political content of the programme.

***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 diversity among YGAP participants gave him an opportunity to embrace a globally aware identity and realise a passion for cultural difference that was not possible in his culturally closed life in Syria. Reflections like this were an extension of the active, participatory learning during YGAP. There were a wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences, some like Hasan, came from countries with authoritarian dictatorships, while others

came from Nordic socialist, co-operative, democracies. Choudry (2015) argues that participant's everyday practices and struggles contribute to the construction of new and alternative forms of knowledge during 'popular education' programmes. These differences added to the richness of the learning and global perspective during YGAP (Cooper, 2020). For Hasan, this identity change is 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 to YGAP participants' commonalities with reference to their work experiences and shared identity as activist, trade unionists. Her account captures the development of global awareness and is a good example of social identity change through relational transformation (Drury, 2012, Reicher, 2011), among diverse individuals.

**Subtheme 2: Cognitive transformation, consciousness, 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. The commonalities

were in terms of shared beliefs and values as labour organisers and worker educators to promote justice, decent working conditions and equality for working and oppressed people.

The next extract begins with Hasan expressing these commonalities, which overcome concerns about cultural differences among colleagues during the two-day internship with a grassroots organisation.

***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'. Again, he points to differences that unite participants as they advocate for

workers from both the formal and informal economy. Collective global awareness is expressed by Adom from Ghana, as activists they are fighting a common cause to bring justice and change for all workers who are facing precarious working conditions. Adom's account also evidences some critical consciousness with his references to the causes they are all fighting 'inequality among workers'. Finally, Kaarina from Finland, corroborates, 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 face and that connect participants as activists (Choudry, 2015; Cooper 2020).

Many participants expressed the psychological benefits of connecting due to 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 ideas and values among the group contributed to a positive YGAP experience. Astrid has reflected on this before, on top of positive features of being among a likeminded in-group, the stress of having to fight for and defend this position among out-group members is absent, 'you don't have to be annoyed and angry or frustrated the whole time'. Being part of an in-group allows protective social identity resources, such as

belonging, solidarity and support, to dispel hopeless notions of being alone and fighting an isolated, lonely cause 'there's more than me and I'm not alone' (Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

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

Through collective exposure to the content of YGAP, many of the participants expressed feeling changed by the experience. YGAP was psychologically and collectively empowering, because it provided a deeper authentic understanding of global issues, new tools for activism and it allowed participants to feel part of a much larger global knowledge community of labour activists.

YGAP included a range of creative, popular methods as tools to engage communities emotionally, to move them physically, and give them voice to participate in activism for social change. For many participants these methods were transformative.

Similarly, the internship with grassroots NGOs working on issues relevant to the labour movement, among marginalised communities around Cape Town, was highlighted often as an empowering, transformative 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 learning by exposure to 'real' activism during her internship 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 politics 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. It is racialized, glaring and deeply entrenched. Yet, 'popular education' and the labour movement played a key role in the struggle for democracy in South Africa (Cooper, 2020), and the internship provided YGAP participants with a unique and powerful opportunity to connect with and be part of the fire and passion among grassroots activists that continues to burn.

In the final extract, Anna sums up the identity change reported by participants as their activist identities strengthened and they connected with solidarity to the global labour movement.

***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 global justice for working people, strengthened across YGAP, and they became more outraged and angry as their critical consciousness increased (see study 1). At the same time however, their activist identities strengthened and transformed with globally awareness. The rage was balanced with hope because of their connection to, and solidarity with, a much bigger global knowledge community 'people like us we have them everywhere'. 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 a residential, ‘popular education’ programme that took place in Cape Town in South Africa was a transformational learning experience. YGAP aimed to develop global awareness and prepare an international group of labour organisers and worker educators to take up the challenges brought about by changes in the world of work. From a Social Identity Approach we examined identity change among participants with global awareness and collective empowerment. In two studies, this research provides supporting evidence for the realisation of these aims. The first longitudinal questionnaire study demonstrates that 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 a 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.

Relatively recent research in the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017) points 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 and missing element in education research is social identity. A gaze towards learners being and becoming as active, engaged processes with associated norms, values and beliefs can help to shape and inform educational experiences and outcomes (Bliuc et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2017). Our research gives support to this theory. 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 that they belong, and their experiences are valued in the learning space. 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 to articulate their fears and joys at connecting as a unified collective on relational and cognitive terms.

The content and meaning of social identities is a dynamic and flexible cultural product, they 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). By way of illustration, working class students cannot construct their way out of a disadvantaged position but awareness, recognition and support at an institutional level can transform educational experiences for marginalised students (Stephens et al., 2014). As demonstrated in this study, activist identities were strengthened through active, peer-to-peer learning, debate, discussion, reflection about their own, and each other's experiences. In line with predictions (Lavarack & Wallerstein, 2001), critical consciousness also increased as a consequence 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). Such groups have been shown to be excellent predictors of socio-political action (Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

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 attributual 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, consciousness, transformation (Drury, 2012).

As is typical of popular education programmes, YGAP had participatory and active practices that allowed the differences among learners to function as a tool in the development of authentic global awareness. Informal, adult, popular education, aims to transform unequal power relations among learners, between learners and teachers and in society (Choudry, 2015; Foley, 1999). Although, minority group members, because of the very real inequalities in power, expressed fear of prejudicial treatment from white participants, their fear was not realised. Moreover, the perspectives and experiences our participants shared were wide ranging because of the variety of political, economic and cultural situations in their countries of origin. This gave a richness and an authenticity to the global perspective that would be hard to replicate among a less diverse group of learner activists.

### **Limitations**

In terms of limitations, YGAP is undoubtedly a rare opportunity that may only be experienced by a small number of labour movement members. 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'. The activist identity was an important predictor and alongside critical consciousness fed into collective empowerment. Activist identity is also a precondition to the solidarity and unity of the

labour movement (Jansson, 2016). Activist identity was enhanced with global awareness through the participatory and active learning among a diverse group of learners.

Globally aware active citizens and grassroots community organising are essential to respond to the most pressing interconnected, current, global issues (Choudry, 2015; Cooper, 2020). The challenges of in work poverty, increasing inequality, the climate emergency, unfair globalisation and increasingly precarious working conditions and pandemics, will require concerted, collective effort from the grassroots towards system change. The content of YGAP was oriented towards creative popular tools specifically for the young activists to take to their work and to give community members a way to identify problems, make their voices heard and challenge unequal power relations and structures (Lavarack & Wallerstein, 2001).

## **Conclusion**

In an increasingly individualised and unequal world, the labour movement are calling for a revitalisation of ‘popular education’ to reenergise collective identity, solidarity and the grassroots struggle for social justice. This research is a response to that call. We drew on the Social Identity Approach to Education and Learning (Haslam, 2017; Platow et al., 2017), which highlights the importance of social identities in learning and education. We found evidence to support this theoretical position, using a mixed methods approach, in an evaluation of a residential, popular education programme that took place in Cape Town, South Africa. A longitudinal analysis found that activist identity and critical consciousness increased during YGAP and fed into increased collective empowerment. Focus group discussions supported these findings and showed that activist identity was enhanced by global awareness.

The active and participatory learning approach and the stated values of openness and respect for diversity meant that the differences among the participants enriched the experience.

Respect for diversity was a defining feature of the group as were solidarity and justice values. YGAP aimed to be a transformational learning experience. This research found evidence for social identity change where participant activists connected with global awareness to the wider knowledge 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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