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Understanding Youth Leadership Development: An examination of the Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning Program (YELL)

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Created in the fall of 2000, Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) was launched as the inaugural project of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC). The after school program was initially a pilot project to engage youth in an inquiry process that would assess the needs and strengths of Redwood City Middle School youth. Over the past six years, the program has evolved into a unique youth development program providing youth in both Redwood City and West Oakland with training and experiences in leadership and civic action.

John W. Gardner Center researchers have been studying the YELL program since its inception in an effort to better understand youth leadership development. Our synthesis of the literature as well as our analysis of the YELL program's evolution has led us to define leadership development along three interconnected dimensions: (1) communication and interpersonal skills, (2) critical reflection, and (3) positive involvement in the community. We have observed complexity and variety within those core dimensions as well as multiple ways to apply those skills. As John W. Gardner (1990) pointed out, "Leaders come in many forms, with many styles and diverse qualities. There are quiet leaders and leaders one can hear in the next county. Some find strength in eloquence, some in judgment, some in courage" (p. 5). The YELL program demonstrated that youth leaders are no different than adult leaders; they vary in their focus and style but approach their chosen issues with strength and passion.

This research brief summarizes analyses conducted by JGC research staff in collaboration with graduate student research assistants. We rely primarily on qualitative data in the form of observations and interviews, but also include findings from small-scale survey analyses. Our analysis also draws on documents written by YELL directors including their program updates, annual reports, funding proposals and foundation reports.

Overview of the YELL Program

YELL began as an after school program based at Kennedy Middle School in Redwood City, California, and at McClymonds High School (now, McClymonds Educational Complex) in West Oakland, California. In YELL, cohorts of 15 to 20 youth ages 12-18 were trained to use social science research techniques to study an issue of concern to them and to use their findings to formulate policy recommendations. They shared their recommendations through formal presentations to relevant stakeholders including school faculty, city council members, school board members and journalists as well as through workshops and trainings with other youth leaders and youth development practitioners. Over the past six years, youth have taken on a wide range of topics affecting youth in their schools and in their communities. YELL campaigns have targeted issues such as improving the community for youth, providing bus passes and transportation for students, combating bullying at school, gang issues, the dress code, school safety and negative stereotypes.

As shown in Exhibit 1, in its first year, YELL was a small program serving at most 20 students in Redwood City and West Oakland. By the 2005/06 school year, Redwood City YELL was serving up to 65 students per year and West Oakland YELL had as many as 100 students.

Exhibit 1
Number of YELL Participants, 2000-2006

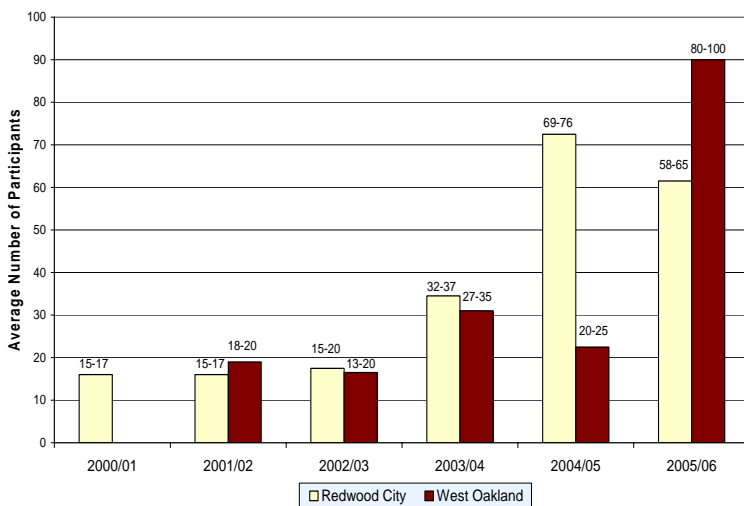
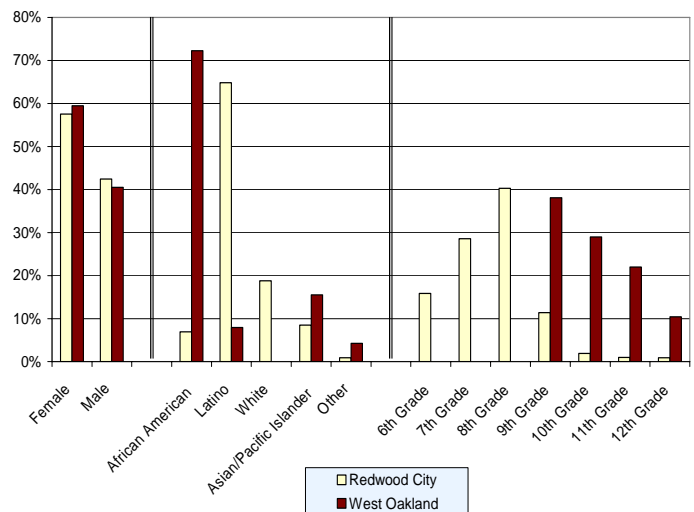


Exhibit 2 shows the characteristics of these students. Across all the years examined, almost 60% of participants were female (slightly higher in West Oakland). The two sites served students with ethnicities that represented their broader communities—Redwood City included mostly Latino students (65%); West Oakland served mostly African-American students (72%). Across the six years examined, Redwood City had younger students than those in West Oakland. The majority of Redwood City students were in 7th and 8th grades, whereas West Oakland students were mostly in 9th and 10th grades while they participated in YELL. The difference in ages across the two programs did not necessarily translate into different programmatic features of YELL, although the level of sophistication of the projects students undertook was commensurate with their maturity.

Exhibit 2
Characteristics of YELL Participants, 2000-2006



Initially, in both communities, one adult staff member directed all aspects of the program including recruitment, curriculum development and implementation, as well as creating community connections and finding venues for youth participation. Graduate and undergraduate students, mainly from Stanford University, provided program support. However, staffing needs changed as the program expanded in both sites. Once YELL began to offer additional programs inviting youth to sustain their participation over multiple years, two AmeriCorps members joined the adult staff.

Core Dimensions of Youth Leadership Development

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

YELL promoted communication and interpersonal skills through activities in which youth were encouraged to speak their minds, to serve as formal facilitators, to work collaboratively with adults and peers, and to present analyses and recommendations in public forums. YELL directors in both Redwood City and West Oakland believed that young people's ideas and opinions were central to their leadership development. Staff in both communities tried to avoid telling the youth exactly what to do, instead offering support while still positioning the youth as leaders.

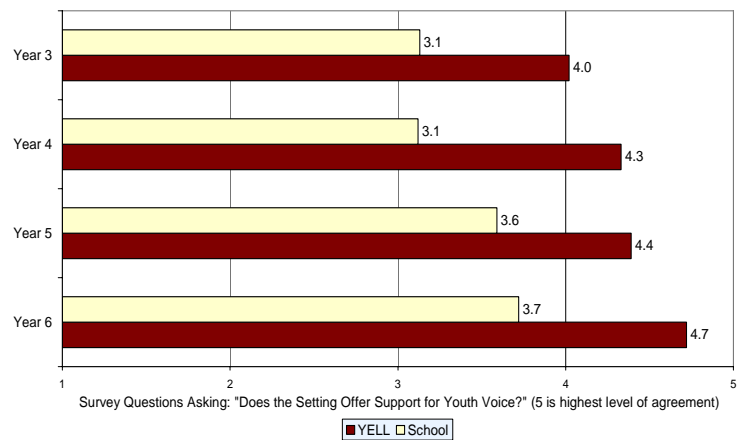
This intentional positioning of youth as leaders was well-received by participants. Youth in both communities consistently commented on the dynamic between youth and adults as a distinguishing feature of the YELL context. Often youth contrasted adults in YELL to teachers at their school and used terms such as "mentor," "partner," "friend," and "family member" to describe their relationship. As one Redwood City youth explained, adults tended to scaffold their learning while respecting youth's ownership of the work:

She gives us a lot of feedback. If she thinks that it's not a great idea she won't come straight out and say, "That's not a good idea, change it." She gives you simple answers—like, "What do you think would make this better?" She makes us happy with the ideas we have. But sometimes she is right: if we look at it again, there are some mistakes. And then when we look at it the second time we understand what she's talking about. But then that helps us because we find our mistakes for ourselves.

Over multiple years, our surveys asked youth to rate the extent to which their voices were valued in YELL. Sample questions included: "Adults at YELL ask what youth want to learn about," "Adults in this program give us choices about what we can do and how we do it," and "Adults in YELL give us suggestions and constructive feedback instead of telling us what to do." Exhibit 3 contrasts youth's strong sense of support for youth voice in YELL with their sense of support for youth voice in school. In all years in which we asked

these questions, we found strong agreement with the perception that YELL supported youth voice, particularly as contrasted with questions about school support for youth voice. The differences between youth's perceptions of support for their voices in the two contexts were statistically significant. Interestingly, we found that youth participating in later years of the program were more likely to perceive support for their voices than youth in earlier cohorts in both the YELL and school settings. It may be that over this time period, the school setting as a whole changed to better reflect youth voice.

Exhibit 3
Redwood City and West Oakland YELL Participants' Perceptions of Support for Youth Voice by Setting



In addition to feeling like their voices were valued within the program and among their peers, YELL participants in both communities consistently reflected on their improved communication skills. Ninety percent of the participating youth we interviewed in both communities credited YELL with their newfound comfort in sharing ideas, voicing opinions, and speaking comfortably in large groups. In addition, YELL youth were frequently reminded that communication involves more than the act of speaking their minds. They learned about the importance of facilitating others' voices and communicating effectively during collaborative problem solving efforts. YELL youth were also in the position of garnering the support of adults within the school or the community. In response to an interview question asking youth to reflect on what they may have learned from participation in YELL, one Redwood City youth shared: "I guess I would say communication with others. Like,

how to speak to... a city manager, a mayor, a senator, even teachers, adults in general.”

Analytical and Critical Reflections

In order to communicate effectively, youth leaders must be informed about the issues. YELL promoted analytic and critical reflections in multiple ways. The program’s curriculum was grounded in a research-based approach to social change. Once youth chose the issues that concerned them, they were trained in social science research methods and principles in order to ensure that their work represented the opinions of their peers as well as relevant adults. YELL participants learned how to conduct interviews, take field notes, develop surveys, create video documentaries and analyze their data. In addition to the emphasis on critical analysis of social issues, youth were exposed to different strategies for creating change. They gained knowledge and experience in a variety of settings, including talking to adults at a community forum, rallying at the state capitol and communicating a message through a mural project.

Focusing on YELL participants in West Oakland over the course of one academic year, Kirshner (2004) noted that youth entered the YELL program with individualistic interpretations of issues such as youth violence, drug use and academic failure. For example, youth attributed violence to “ignorance” and drug use to “wanting to be bad” and academic failure to “a lack of commitment.” However by the end of the year, after working on their campaign to counter negative stereotypes of West Oakland youth, YELL participants were more likely to offer contextual and systemic interpretations of the same issues in comparison to their reasoning at the beginning of the year. For example, one youth initially explained that academic success and failure stemmed from individual characteristics. At the end of the year, he attributed lack of student achievement to both individual characteristics and features of the community context. He commented on the role of individuals’ “self-will” to change themselves, the lack of support from schools and families as well as the role of the media’s negative portrayals of youth. He described school failure as a cycle in which youth act “true to the stereotype” and “fuel” the media’s negative portrayal.

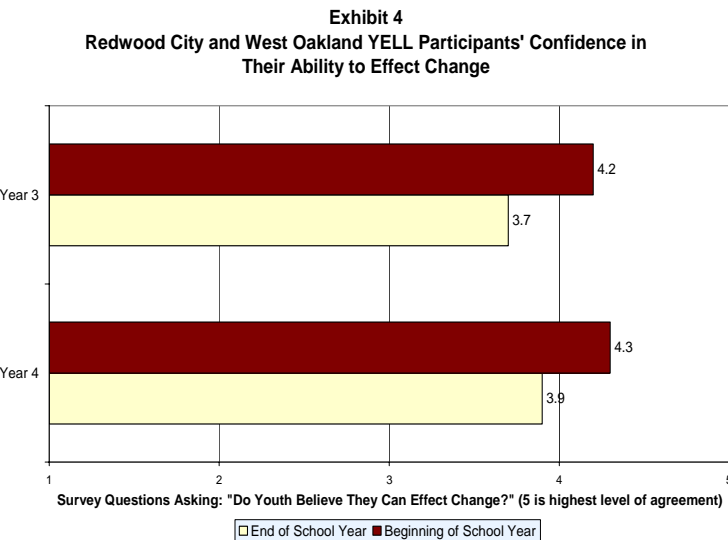
By the end of the year, Kirshner (2004) found that the youth were more fluent in systemic explanations that directed their attention to causes within the social systems in their community. This new perspective consequently influenced their choice of action for their campaign against negative stereotypes. Participants explained that it was necessary to share their work with both media outlets and younger youth. Their work aimed to persuade media outlets to report in a more balanced manner. They also felt it was important to educate younger youth in order to reduce the impact of the media’s messages. As the YELL participants explained, outsiders are constructing labels of Oakland’s youth, and too often youth fulfill the stereotype rather than fight it. By targeting media outlets as well as youth themselves, YELL participants acknowledged the complex interaction between social context and individual agency.

In addition to reasoning critically about the causes of problems in their communities, YELL youth also gained a greater comprehension of the complexity of social change processes. Through our survey data, we learned that youth in both Redwood City and West Oakland joined YELL with an inflated estimation of their ability to effect change. Sample questions from our survey included, “I can make a difference in the community if I try,” “I feel confident in my ability to make a difference in my community,” and “I am capable of helping to improve my community.” As seen in Exhibit 4, over the course of one year of participation, youth felt less confident in their abilities to effect change. In both years in which we asked these questions, participants’ decrease in civic efficacy was statistically significant. Through our interviews, we learned that, in both communities, declines in efficacy were accompanied by an increase in attention to the conditions needed to support change efforts. In particular, at the end of the year, when asked if their actions in YELL would make an impact on the issues they were addressing, youth qualified their answers with points about the benefits of collective action and the acknowledgement that the change process is not quick or easy. In addition, youth recognized the importance of research evidence as a leverage tool. Most important, decreases in efficacy were not equated with a lack of commitment or an unwillingness to maintain involvement in the program or in the community. Instead, through their sustained

involvement in YELL, youth were able to apply their more nuanced view of the processes that lead to social change.

program directors also formed partnerships with other youth programs and community organizations, such as Redwood City’s Teen Advisory Board and a grassroots advocacy organization in Oakland. Learning about these opportunities allowed youth to become more knowledgeable about the ways in which they could contribute to their communities and also enabled them to find a “fit” based on their talents and affinities. The deliberate links YELL staff forged with other youth development organizations enabled the participants to continue to serve as committed civic actors in a variety of capacities.

As youth developed within the context of YELL, we noticed significant differences in their interpretations of their tasks and in their contributions to their communities. Based on our data, we constructed a typology of three approaches to community involvement: advocate, activist, and educator. An *advocate* was distinguished by his or her commitment to an issue such as school safety or equity in education. For example, one Redwood City participant identified herself as an advocate for multicultural awareness. In high school, she joined a multicultural awareness club. As she explained:



Positive Community Involvement

YELL promoted positive involvement at different levels in the community. Youth were afforded opportunities to become involved within their cohort at YELL, within the program as a whole, within their schools, within their neighborhoods, and in the city or county. Returning youth could graduate from being a YELL researcher to assume the role of YELL mentor. As mentors, youth facilitated discussions, offered insights based on their experiences in the program, and helped support the new cohort of researchers. Mentors also helped the program staff to build a cohesive group culture in which leadership was distributed and collective efforts took center stage. Youth also had the option of becoming YELL ambassadors by participating on panels or helping to plan and lead workshops at local as well as national conferences. As mentors and ambassadors, youth served as resources, sharing their expertise and knowledge with other students and adults.

The YELL staff also apprised the youth of other opportunities outside of YELL to become involved in effecting change, to represent the youth perspective, or to cultivate leadership skills. Program staff took interested youth to rallies and to conferences. The

An *activist* was less attached to a particular cause and more interested in the process of engaging in a range of change efforts with the goal of always contributing to positive reform. As one YELL activist reflected:

[I'm in] a group on campus where all the different diversity groups come together and have meetings....I'm on a subcommittee this year to plan...instead of Columbus Day we're going to call it "Rediscovering History" and it's going to offer both sides...We just want make people more aware. [P]eople didn't know that people were offended by [Columbus Day]. And let other people voice opinions why they don't think it's offensive.

When I think of a leader not only do important legendary figures come to mind, but also normal everyday people like you or me. Everyone complains, but only a handful of people do anything about their complaints. I have decided that I will be one of those in the handful.

An *educator* focused on empowering others to make a change or feel that they could make a difference. As one West Oakland youth explained, "I like the whole idea of taking someone under your wing and then teaching them your skills and helping them reach their goal." YELL's program structure allowed youth to identify with any one of these three approaches to community involvement. Moreover, some youth aligned themselves with one particular approach throughout the course of their participation in YELL, while others switched approaches as they developed within the program.

In both communities YELL youth's involvement led to increased awareness about the importance of youth input in school and community decision-making. Also, because of YELL, new opportunities for youth involvement were created in the host schools and communities. Youth joined committees in their schools and advisory boards in their communities. For example, in Redwood City, YELL participants joined the Climate Committee and Leadership Team at their school, attended meetings with City Council members and participated in the city's Teen Advisory Board. In West Oakland, youth also joined the Leadership Team at their school, created a Youth Leadership Council, led professional development workshops for the school's faculty, served on the board planning the school's new health center and participated in the district's all city council.

Implications

Analysis of the YELL program leads us to break down the concept of youth leadership development into three core dimensions: (1) communication and interpersonal skills, (2) critical reflection, and (3) positive involvement in the community. Understanding and promoting leadership development requires skill building within each of those areas. However, alone, none of these skills or competencies should be equated with leadership. For example, social action alone is not sufficient if the youth's capacity for critical analysis is missing or if his or her skills of communication and respectful social interaction are lacking. Strong communication skills require knowledge of issues. Yet, being critical can lead to frustration unless youth have outlets to discuss and debate as well as opportunities to work toward addressing those issues. It is important for both researchers and practitioners to be aware of the

interplay between communication and interpersonal skills, critical thinking and positive community involvement. Our experience suggests that these core leadership skills should not be developed or applied in isolation of one another.

Moreover, the YELL program serves as a model of the meaningful ways in which young people from diverse backgrounds can contribute to their youth organizations, schools and communities. To replicate this model and extend its reach, more opportunities for youth leadership are necessary. Specifically, across all settings in which youth participate, youth should be viewed as having valid ideas and as valuable stakeholders who have the potential to maintain a long-term commitment. By embedding more opportunities for meaningful youth involvement within the community, a greater number of youth will have the chance to develop their leadership potential, while the community as a whole will become better equipped to address the needs of its youth.

References

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For more information about the YELL program and its curriculum please visit the John W. Gardner Center website at <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>.