

BUILDING COMMUNITY

This practice brief is part of a series highlighting pedagogical strategies that supported youth social and emotional well-being during the summer of 2020. These approaches acknowledged both their present realities as youth coped with the pandemic, and their future lives as they prepared to pursue professional opportunities.

It draws on a larger study and report, **Youth Empowerment Summer: Crisis Response and Lessons for the Future of Collective Action and Work-based Learning**, which analyzed and documented the efforts of a New York City-based coalition of advocates, educators, community leaders, and youth activists. The YES coalition organized in 2020 following the onset of Covid-19 to create conditions that provided the city's most vulnerable youth with robust work-based learning experiences during a period of uncertainty, precarity, and unprecedented need.

Find the full report on the YES coalition and other practice briefs at www.yes2020.nyc

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BUILDING COMMUNITY

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Like adults, young people found that their lives were upended by the global pandemic. As one youth put it, “I feel like this pandemic really changed everybody’s lives, and it’s still changing each day.” Cut off from school, peers, and everyday routines, these changes disrupted youth’s sense of connection and purpose.

Many programs identified the importance of building community as a way to help youth regain a sense of connection and purpose. Yet, they acknowledged many challenges to building community within the context of short-term remote programming, such as limited opportunities for informal and organic interactions and the necessity of bonding over screens.

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to build community are featured here:

- + **offer informal spaces to hang out**
- + **generate lively interactions**
- + **develop a group identity**

When programs did not prioritize building community, youth were left feeling that their experiences of work-based learning were simply an extension of online school or a transactional way to get paid for completing busywork. As one youth pointed out, “If we want to work in teams, and kind of bond with each other, and have to create a product, I feel it would be a great idea if we actually knew each other and actually talk to each other, and work even more in sync with each other.”

YOUTH

“ It was hard in the summer, especially with Covid and my parents losing their jobs, so while being in the SYEP Summer Bridge program, it helped me not be worried too much about my situation and also how to adjust to quarantine life and how to be more involved despite being in my home, while also helping me think about my future.

YOUTH

“ It was a good learning experience, rather than sitting at home all day doing nothing or being depressed ‘cause online schooling right now is just ridiculous. So just having something that you can put all your heart into. Such an experience was really, really amazing for me, and it was very helpful in getting to know all these different types of people.

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Hang out in dedicated informal spaces?
 - + Enjoy lively group interactions?
 - + Develop a sense of group identity?

BUILDING COMMUNITY OFFER INFORMAL SPACES TO HANG OUT

What did we see?

In an effort to recreate spaces where adults and youth could hang out and get to know each other, programs offered optional times and spaces for youth to freely drop in.

These informal spaces ranged from Sunday brunches to “Lunch Time Fun Time,” where youth gathered to play games such as Fibbage or Uno while chitchatting and occasionally talking about work issues.

Other programs pursued an asynchronous approach, teaching youth how to use social technology platforms such as GroupMe, Slack, and Discord, where they could create their own channels to converse freely about work and non-work matters.

These informal spaces allowed youth to build connections and feel more comfortable opening up about their personal lives.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ I had a group of young women I was working with, and we were on Zoom, kind of talking about how we were all dealing with the pandemic, and you know, people were like, it’s hard, not really talking, and then I was on my phone, I was just on House Party, and then one of the girls was there too. And I clicked on and I was on a thirty-minute conversation with her just that quick, and she was telling me about how her mom lost her job and just how difficult that was. Funny thing was, three of the girls met us there, so we just had that discussion that we didn’t have on Zoom, because it felt like a less formal platform.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ There were GroupMe messages, every day throughout the day, connecting with them and sharing things. I know some of us shared pictures of when we were in high school so they could connect with us in that way. ... A lot of interactions that were not necessarily based on work tasks, but were getting to know you type of things.

BUILDING COMMUNITY GENERATE LIVELY INTERACTIONS

What did we see?

When youth saw facilitators consistently bring energy and warmth to group meetings and activities, youth appreciated the effort and grew more comfortable. In turn, as youth became more comfortable, they brought their own energy into the mix, and facilitators and youth could play off each other.

A program director from Empathy Unbound described the energy feedback loop that occurred during a “Trivia Tuesday” activity:

“I put the girls in groups, and I’ll ask a question. First one to respond with the right answer gets a point. And they were getting hyped. I started getting hyped. The language for me was like, ‘Yo,’ ‘cause I was just excited ‘cause they were excited, and they were really putting forth the effort.”

In addition to bringing their own energy, facilitators worked to position youth as a source of energy. For example, one program invited youth to lead their favorite games and activities in small peer groups. Another program identified high energy youth and asked them to drum up excitement and engagement among their peers.

YOUTH

“ [Adola] had very good energy and it was just nice to see her in the morning when she had our daily meetings. Sometimes she would play music and ask about our weekends, and even though it was all remote, I can tell she did try to foster a community and just welcome us. ... I got more comfortable as...I got to see her human side.

FACILITATOR

“ There’s a few students that were super engaged and I tried to target them to get the other ones in. They brought in the other students, I think by hyping them up. ... This cohort has been feeding off each other in a positive way.

BUILDING COMMUNITY DEVELOP A GROUP IDENTITY

What did we see?

One program, Empathy Unbound, mailed youth matching program t-shirts, which they wore at their final project presentations before a large Zoom audience.

During an ice-breaker activity, youth wrote down their “personal superpowers” (such as their smile, their mind, their desire to support others) on a piece of paper. After explaining the superpower they chose, they held up the piece of paper to their cameras for a group photo.

In addition to this group cohesion, youth were positioned as a peer-to-peer network of mutual accountability, as signified by the phrase, “sister’s keeper.” As their sister’s keepers, they were encouraged to check in on and support each other daily.

For youth, this role and responsibility of having a sisterhood entailed reaching out to peers who were late to meetings, filling them in on anything they missed, and making sure everyone was on the same page.

YOUTH

“ I would definitely say that phrase, my sister’s keeper, I really took that to heart, ‘cause now I’m always checking up on people, asking them if they’re okay, and we also got a shirt from there, and now I be walking outside with the shirt and I just be saying to people like, ‘Yeah, I’m your keeper, you know what I’m saying. I got you.’