

REVITALIZING HOPE

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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REVITALIZING HOPE WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Many programs in our study identified a need to provide opportunities for youth to regain a sense of hope about the future: the future of the world, of their local communities, and their own personal trajectories. This need for hope has been underscored by national surveys and reports emerging in the wake of the pandemic that evidence a major decrease in youth's confidence in their future career goals and college aspirations.

Creating a sense of hope within a remote work-based learning program, however, can be challenging. Positioning youth as contributors to creating better futures was difficult when screen interactions replaced physical work sites in youth's communities. As one SYEP provider put it, "A lot of businesses need the help right now. These participants and these interns are an asset every summer. They're an asset to the community," and "That's where it's been challenging, because even though the space is virtual right now, they want to find a way to make their way into the community."

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to revitalize hope are featured here:

- + **showcase youth-led efforts to create better futures**
- + **have youth contribute to the well-being of their communities**
- + **show youth the potential you see in them**

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“As a social organization, we were very focused on the trauma of the isolation, the loss, economic and relative family loss, and the pain of the racial injustice happening across the country, so I think we were really thinking about that as an opportunity to break through that isolation and build community and heal and have young people have joy and hope again. And we thought they could do it through projects that they worked together and saw themselves as contributors and active participants and making a difference and start to feel a hopefulness about the future, post-pandemic.”

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS

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- What steps is your program taking to help youth:
- + Be inspired by youth-led efforts to create better futures?
 - + Contribute to the well-being of their communities?
 - + See the potential that you see in them?

REVITALIZING HOPE SHOWCASE YOUTH-LED EFFORTS TO CREATE BETTER FUTURES

What did we see?

In one program in the study, facilitators organized a panel comprised of five youth who started their own organizations to advocate for climate justice. They shared their stories of how they became interested in the movement for climate change, and the steps they took to create their own organizations.

When the youth panel was asked, “What do you think others can learn from youth organizers, youth activists?” they positioned the youth in the audience as powerful agents of change: “Youth can do what adults can do, that we deserve a voice at the table, that we know our stuff, and that we deeply care about our future.”

The panelists emphasized that youth are visionaries, work well collectively, and are focused on empowering their communities, and pointed out that, historically, youth have been at the forefront of movements for civil rights and protesting the Vietnam War.

When asked, “What do you find motivates you and keeps you going in spite of literally everything that’s happening, especially in 2020?” youth shared hopeful messages by pointing to their optimistic beliefs (“A better world is possible... and worth fighting for”), specific actions (“When you strike, when you do emails, when you are talking to your friends, when you act based on the things you know, you become hopeful”), and collective visions (“It’s about building community, I conceptualize climate change as the fight against systemic racism, and that’s something I can’t personally give up”).

Hearing youth share stories and outlooks about working to create a better future inspired youth in the audience to not only imagine a better future for their communities, but to see themselves pursuing work that contributes to it.

YOUTH

“ One thing that inspired me was how important it is to care for the community.

YOUTH

“ Seeing how other people were impacted by things such as pollution and extreme heat inspired me to do what I can to fix these issues.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ We were excited to show youth that they can build careers in civic engagement and activism.

REVITALIZING HOPE HAVE YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO THE WELL-BEING OF THEIR COMMUNITIES

What did we see?

In one program, youth created public outreach campaigns to address issues impacting their communities, such as health care in low-income communities, mental health in New York City schools, and school reopening plans. They formally presented their campaigns to the New York City Public Advocate, an elected official, with specific asks for next steps.

In this same program, youth were paired with immigrant-owned local businesses to help them design and launch social media platforms to advance their businesses. As one SYEP provider described, “The youth were able to provide real value to our businesses and local economy during the pandemic, when creative online strategies could be the difference between shutting down and adapting.”

Similarly, youth in other programs conducted interviews with community members to learn about their needs and developed an outreach plan to address their community’s well-being. In Empathy Unbound, for example, youth created a self-care-focused business for parents dealing with the stress of the pandemic. They designed a self-care package, solicited feedback from parents, and gave a professional pitch. At the end of the summer, their idea won an out-of-program competition and received funding to be implemented during the school year.

YOUTH

“ Here is our ask: Will the Office of the Public Advocate tweet out in support of creating a counselor-to-student ratio in all NYC public schools of 1:65? ”

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ Over 500 students created prototypes around how to best support their community’s mental and physical health in the midst of Covid-19. ”

YOUTH

“ [We created] a care package for parents that are going through a lot of stress within remote learning. Basically to soothe their minds and just give them a sense of peace and motivation, something to look forward to, because it’s not only students that are stressed out all the time, it’s parents that are stressed too. ”

REVITALIZING HOPE SHOW YOUTH THE POTENTIAL YOU SEE IN THEM

What did we see?

One program in the study, Youth Audio, provided youth with digital music making software that allowed them to explore and develop their talents. Workshop facilitator Mel Fletcher warmly affirmed youth's potential as they shared their sample tracks. One youth interested in filmmaking described the impact this program had on him: "This program made me change my mindset from focusing on one area or aspect of creativity, to being able to branch out to multiple things. And I maybe don't have to necessarily excel at music production to be able to say that I can create music or sound design. I think that this program did a good job of showing me that."

In Finance You, program director Adola Sani gave youth financial literacy skills that helped them to see themselves as investors. As participant Isabel Mencia put it, "She taught us how to invest, and where to start in the stock market, how to start, what websites to use, how to research a stock, how to get one." Seeing herself as a potential investor, Isabel began researching foreign exchange markets, and enrolled in a class on Skillshare that allowed her to practice investing in foreign exchange markets with fake money. As Isabel put it, Finance You made investing "accessible and feasible. It's like, you can invest, you can do anything."

Programs also helped youth see their potential by having them meet people in successful leadership positions that reflected their intersectional identities. This approach allowed youth to readily imagine their future selves taking up leadership roles. As one program director put it, "A lot of the feedback we received was about how we were showcasing women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on our panels—it was uplifting to see how impactful that representation is for youth, to see themselves reflected."

YOUTH

“ I think one of the best parts was when it all came together and we had the [film] screening, that people were like, “Wow, you made this in five weeks?” And it gave me joy because other people liked something that we worked really hard on.

YOUTH

“ We was meeting successful women that was doing things like entrepreneurship... or owning their own businesses. ... Made you have a push on saying that you can do whatever you wanted to do.