

UNPACKING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

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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UNPACKING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Workplaces vary when it comes to identity safety for youth who are subject to marginalizing forces such as racism, sexism, and ableism (Santo et al., 2020). Workplace discrimination takes many forms, from inequitable hiring and promotion practices, to harassment, to a lack of accommodations. Yet, not all work-based learning programs make workplace discrimination transparent or help youth anticipate how they may be impacted by it in a given industry (Vossoughi, 2017).

Research shows that youth who are critically aware of how discrimination plays out within the workplace in relation to their own identities experience positive outcomes, including increases in the clarity of their vocational goals (Diemer & Blustein, 2006), their desire to pursue educational pathways aligned with those vocational goals (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2015; Olle & Fouad, 2015), and their occupational attainment and job earnings (Diemer, 2009; Diemer et al., 2010).

Three pedagogical strategies that programs used to unpack workplace discrimination are featured here:

- + **have youth research workplace discrimination**
- + **invite professionals to share their experiences with workplace discrimination**
- + **teach youth how to self-advocate in the workplace**

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ As he pursued various jobs, he also began to experience workplace discrimination, and became reflective on the ways he passes or does not pass as certain identities, and how this, in turn, impacted the discrimination he was facing.

And so, I was able to then think about what do I think that our students are gonna need, going into the professional world, that maybe is not as intuitive to think about when we're hopeful about our future careers.

QUESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS



What steps is your program taking to help youth:

- + Research workplace discrimination?
- + Learn how professionals have experienced and navigated workplace discrimination?
- + Understand how to self-advocate in the workplace?

UNPACKING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION HAVE YOUTH RESEARCH WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

What did we see?

In the program Bold Futures, youth pursued a progressive sequence of research steps to unpack the relationship between their own identities and workplace discrimination.

In the first research step, youth reflected on their own intersectional identities, focusing on who they are, how they show up, what they carry outwardly, and what they pass for. In the second step, youth surveyed issues around access, representation, and identity safety in the professional fields they were interested in. In the final research step, youth connected their own identity work to workplace discrimination issues, to better anticipate whether a given field may be a hostile work environment for them based on their intersectional identities.

At each step of the process, youth engaged in extended discussions about their research around their own positionality in relation to issues of diversity and inclusion in various workplaces. This research culminated in a project in which youth created public service announcements to address workplace discrimination.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ *The first thing we did was identity work: Who are you, how do you show up, what do you carry that you outwardly show versus what you pass?*

We...had them do individual research about diversity and inclusion within the field that they're the most interested in, and then to take that a step further...how do we see discrimination in those fields?

The last step is, knowing what you know about your identity and thinking about how you might be in that workspace, what are some possible pitfalls with your specific identity and people around you who maybe are equally or more vulnerable than you? What are some things that are going wrong? What are some things that are trying to be fixed and what are some things that are going right? And how do we grow to protect our most vulnerable population at any given time in these fields?

UNPACKING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION INVITE PROFESSIONALS TO SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

What did we see?

Bold Futures hosted a career panel that reflected youth's intersectional identities and invited panelists to share their personal experiences navigating hostile workplace environments.

The panelists spoke to explicit and implicit acts of discrimination they faced in the workplace, and explained issues around gatekeeping and retention at a historical and systemic level.

One female panelist who traveled often for work shared that she was asked by a colleague, "Who's going to take care of your baby when you travel?"

Another panelist explained that in the field of law, the "people who are most likely to leave those jobs are people of color and women," and that this process "continues to filter such that the ones that are left over, that are getting invested in, are not as diverse as the class they started with." She then laid out how this issue of retention gets whitewashed at multiple levels. "[The] issue is the buck gets passed around." If you, "point out there aren't enough black partners..they'll say law schools aren't passing enough good candidates." Then, she noted, law schools pass the buck to universities, claiming that they are "not sending us high caliber women or people or color."

Finally, panelists shared an array of strategies for navigating workplace discrimination, such as seeking resources and mentors, organizing in solidarity, and breaking the silence.

YOUTH

“ Chat: Do you ever encounter microaggressions or any other type of discrimination in your workplace? And how do you deal with it?

Chat: How has your ethnicity impacted your career?

Chat: How do your company mission and your values align? How do your values influence your everyday work?

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“ So when we got to the panel, they were able to ask some of the questions that had been jogged by that research and thinking not only about what the pitfall is in general, but if I'm looking to be in this field, I can now ask you an authentic question of: What's gonna happen to me? What has happened to you? How can I see myself in this work? What do we need to be aware of? And how can we make it better?

UNPACKING WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION TEACH YOUTH HOW TO SELF-ADVOCATE IN THE WORKPLACE

What did we see?

Tech Possible, a program in our study that serves youth with disabilities, provided a two-hour session to develop youth's self-advocacy skills in the workplace. The session covered workers' legal rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504).

Throughout the session, youth learned about the legal precedents that provided protections for workers with disabilities, as well as their options around disclosing a disability to their employer. They were given specific advice for when and how to disclose if they so choose: "Do it after you are hired and all legal contracts are signed," and "Do it in private with your boss."

Accommodations were framed as "specific changes that remove barriers and provide people with equal access," rather than as "unfair advantages." Specific types of reasonable accommodations in the workplace were given, such as frequent breaks, specific monitors, keyboards, and desk configurations, as well as levels of lighting and noise.

Youth were prompted throughout to make connections to accommodations they had received in school, and to imagine accommodations that they felt would help them succeed in the workplace.

PROGRAM DIRECTOR

“The thing about self-advocacy was really eye-opening. We talked about the ADA... Students don't talk to you and say, "Hey, I have a disability." They completely shy away from it, they don't wanna talk about it at all. And so having them understand what their rights are under the law, I think was helpful.

I also ask them if they have any accommodations in school and some of them will say, 'Yeah, I get time and a half for tests,' and I'm like, 'Well, that's an accommodation.' Or, 'Someone reads me the test aloud.' 'That's an accommodation, great, that means that on your IEP, someone, maybe you, or your parent, or your teacher has advocated for you so you can get those important things which will help you succeed.'