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CENTER ON POVERTY and INEQUALITY

INITIATIVE ON GENDER JUSTICE & OPPORTUNITY

Case Study: *Restorative Empowerment for Youth* Pilot Training Program for Girls of Color

Project Overview

The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity partnered with Restorative Empowerment for Youth (REY), a community-based organization in Houston, Texas co-led by Dr. Anita Wadhwa and Udoro Ekpin-Gatewood, to offer and evaluate a pilot online restorative justice program developed for girls of color to support more inclusive, culturally responsive, and connected learning environments in Fall 2020. The 3-month long program was taught by REY Youth Facilitators (YFs), all of whom were girls of color, and integrated social-emotional capacity building with pragmatic skills associated with facilitating restorative circles.

The core foundation of the program consisted of monthly workshops led by REY YFs. The curriculum of the program was grounded in an active learning praxis that integrated theory, practice, out-of-session exercises and homework, and follow-up individual sessions between students and YFs. The three workshops were designed to address issues central to the lived experiences of girls of color, such as the need for self-care, the importance of resilience building practices, peer connection, and safe spaces to engage in critical conversations about intersectional oppression. During the capstone of the program, students wrote their own "scripts" to lead restorative circles and, in some cases, lead circles with their peers with the support of a YF.[1,2]

What is Restorative Empowerment for Youth?

REY is a Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprise co-founded in 2016 by women of color.[3] REY was born out of the belief that restorative justice practices can be practiced by anyone who is apprenticed to community members and familiar with the philosophy – one need not pay for hundreds of hours of training or have a professional degree in order to facilitate circles. REY is committed to the growth of restorative practices designed not only to repair and build relationships among community members, but to repair what is wrong in the world at large and to tip the scales of justice so that our systems serve and value all young people. Its work is grounded in the belief that youth are the most effective and essential ambassadors of its mission. REY offers apprenticeships to youth and adults through the practice of circles, a community-initiated space of deep listening where participants sit in a circle and pass a talking piece to designate one speaker at a time, with the goal of building relationships and repairing harm.

All REY trainings and programs are designed to address a range of students from diverse backgrounds.

[1] This Case Study was compiled by Rebecca Epstein, Thalia González, and Rhea Shinde, of the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity. Generous support for this project was provided by the Grantmakers 4 Girls of Color Foundation.
[2] This program prioritized compensation to the youth who were involved in leading this program. We are grateful for the generosity of the Grantmakers 4 Girls of Color Foundation in making this program and its assessment possible. Co-PIs of this project were Thalia González and Rebecca Epstein.
[3] REY recognizes that the land on which it operates was originally inhabited by the Karankawa, Atakapa-Ishak, Akokisa, and Sana people.

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REY's Model for Youth Empowerment

REY's YFs are trained through a youth apprentice-based model (YAM) of restorative justice that is based on three pillars of practice:

1. **R***estorative:* Repair relationships not only among individuals in schools, but students' relationship with the institution of schooling itself;

2. **E***mpowering:* Allow youth to see their own agency in the world and to transform the education system to allow for student voice and community input); and

3. **Y***outh-led:* Allow youth to be the true levers of change for educational justice, as the people who can present the most compelling case to convince educators of the long-term power of restorative justice.

The transformation of systems and people through relationships is a key goal of the REY model.

REY's Belief in Youth-Led Restorative Practices as Critically Important for Girls of Color.

Restorative practices (RPs) provide a set of resilience-building tools for girls of color. They promote positive and supportive peer relationships; teach, practice, and build social emotional skills; value and strengthen girls' voices; and encourage them to lean deeply into their power.

Restorative justice circles, and the philosophy on which they are based, provide safe spaces for girls of color to speak, listen, heal, and transform. By participating in and leading circles, girls of color act as agents of change who can transform their own experience in school and beyond.

Youth-led RPs also acknowledge the realities that girls of color face, including gender stereotypes, toxic masculinity, and social and emotional pressures associated with existing predominantly-white educational spaces.

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Successful Outcomes [4]

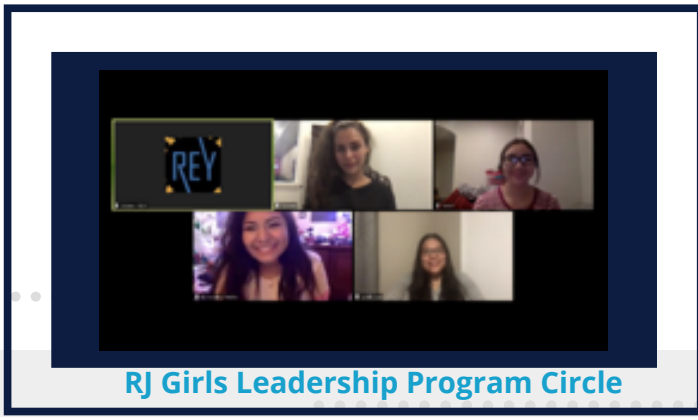
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

The training program provided girls of color with a safe space to strengthen peer relationships and engage in active listening and cooperation. The scaffolded workshop-session design promoted positive self-esteem and self-identify through YFs' mentorship and peer networks. YFs observed positive outcomes that included increased self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, mutual appreciation and respect, and cooperation. The use of circle practice as the foundation of the program reinforced positive participant experiences in the form of shared histories, stories, and experiences as girls of color.

> *"Many people think of Restorative Justice as a way to heal a relationship with someone else and to create a community, all which is true; but the most important thing is the relationship with yourself. Being able to do this with young girls reminded me of the importance to forgive yourself and love who you are." - Leslie, YF*

Virtual Reach and Technology

The virtual format bolstered the YFs' capacity to provide personalized support for participants during and after sessions and participants' ability to be heard, through the use of breakout-rooms. The technology also created broader access to REY's program, allowing girls of color across the country to participate.



RJ Girls Leadership Program Circle

[4] Data for evaluation of this program included review of written materials developed by REY and qualitative interviews with REY co-founders and REY Youth Facilitators.

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Successful Outcomes

Growth mindset

The opportunity to lead circles promoted a growth mindset for participants as they challenged themselves to learn new skills and engage in a practice that was outside of their "comfort zone".

"You could see her grow. I'm all about seeing – when you can see it, you can feel it. You could see the breakthrough she had on her own. We guided her, but she led on her own, in her own way. That, to me, means she felt it. She could see herself becoming a leader. She has it, every girl has it, they just have to tap into it. Do you have that guidance, do you need that guidance? If you do, we're here to guide. You have it in you. Seeing that break through, they know it and they feel it."
- Kasandra, YF

Leadership Skills

Taking an active role in planning and leading a circle supported girls in making their voices heard and in developing leadership skills in a supportive, respectful, and trusting space. The capstone project – drafting a script for a circle they then led – created the opportunity for girls to put into action the ideas and skills learned. In the process, they gained skills in public speaking, organization, and communication.

"In our [typical school] class, boys dominated. It's just how it was. They talked the most, they volunteered the most. But when a girl led it [circles], it's like, 'Okay, so can I.' A girl of color's voice is never heard in the real world, so when you see it, it's powerful.'"
- Esme, YF

"I'm glad to be here and witness a 14-year-old girl of color leading. That's when you [students] see … the bigger picture: if a 14 year old girl of color can do it, you can do it too. It's not just us saying you can do it. You're seeing a girl your age, of color, who goes to your school, doing it. She can do it, you can do it, we can do it."
– Kasandra, YF

Peer Connectedness

The intentional youth-led design of the program facilitated the opportunity for increased participant connection with peers, because it eliminated power dynamics that can occur when adult are present or take leadership roles.

"It's important for everyone, but for girls of color in particular, [it's] even more impactful because they're predominantly excluded; shut down; oppressed. Freedom to discuss these topics, and say, 'No, I was a victim of X, or I saw X happen' are conversations that help people grow."
- Leslie, YF

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Program Challenges

Virtual Environment

The virtual format presented challenges in building connection, as it inhibited sustained community-building and interfered with the ability of YFs to interpret social cues. For example, YFs reported that they found it more difficult to "read the room." YFs also sensed that participants felt less engaged and connected with each other than during in-person programs.

YFs also expressed difficulty working within the limited time frames allotted for each session, which was due in part to the confined, contained nature of online sessions.

REY leaders and YFs also experienced difficulty communicating and connecting with Educator Liaisons (partners in the schools who had agreed to serve as a link between the training program, the students, and their schools), especially by email.

"Usually we can say, 'We're both on this ground together – we're both human' – but we don't have that [when we're working] remotely. We're in different states, on different ground. We all have a voice, but we're not standing together – we're talking through a screen."
- Kasandra, YF

"The sessions should be longer. Even though they were long, once you got started talking, we kept running short of time. We had so many good responses, each student would put themselves in a vulnerable position, and sometimes cried... It became a place of security. I wish we'd had more time so I could hear them out."
- Yancey, YF

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Program Challenges

Outside Work

YFs reported difficulty tracking submissions and ensuring completion of homework assignments. In large part, they attributed these challenges to the format of email, which proved to be an ineffective communication tool with students. This challenge made it difficult to build on skills learned in the workshops, as the assignments would have allowed more comprehensive feedback on the development of circle scripts.

Program Management

Overall evaluation of the program revealed a lack of uniformity in communication among participants, YFs, and ELs, as well as language-accessibility issues, which may have contributed to uneven engagement.

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Assessment: Key Findings & Lessons of the Youth Pilot Training Program

Findings

- **Youth-Led RPs Provide Important Skills and Opportunities for Girls of Color.** When restorative programs are led by girls of color, girls learn leadership skills, feel empowered in their identity and voice, build community, and connect with peers.

- **Single-Gender Opportunities Allow Girls of Color to Flourish.** Safe spaces for girls of color to lead and build community through RPs can help establish trust, encourage risk-taking, and develop self-esteem.

- **Online RP Instruction Presents Unique Opportunities and Challenges.** Online programs can offer greater access to restorative justice, as well as "live" mentoring and guidance, and a farther geographic reach. At the same time, the remote environment can interfere with meaningful connection and engagement.

Lessons Learned for Future Work

- **Prioritize Communication.** Clear, regular, and universalized communication with a video component can overcome some of the challenges of online learning. To facilitate consistent communication, a project manager should be assigned to serve as a liaison among all participants, whose role it is to ensure the goals of communication and full participation are met, as well as enforcing accountability mechanisms, including eligibility for compensation for participation. In addition, YFs should have regular team communication to make consistent changes in practices that increase effectiveness based on the observations about challenges.

- **Establish a Broad Scope.** Plan tiered sessions of sufficient length and depth to ensure commitment to the program and consistency of practice, enhance learning opportunities, and facilitate ease of communication.

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Assessment: Key Findings & Lessons of the Youth Pilot Training Program

Lessons Learned for Future Work

- **Intentionally Engage the Issues of Race and Gender.** A curriculum that is narrowly tailored to speak the interests, needs, and experience of girls of color will make the program more accessible and deepen learning and growth experiences.

- **Obtain Commitments, Set Expectations, Establish Accountability.** Written requirements, expectations, and accountability mechanisms that are accessible and applicable to youth facilitators, parents, students, and teachers, can help overcome some of the challenges in creating and sustaining an online program, and they are important means of fulfilling engagement and learning goals.

- **Establish Flexible Opportunities for More Personal Engagement.** To overcome the challenges of connection during online programs, create uniform and flexible communication practices, including Zoom office hours and routine Zoom check-ins. This could be combined with self-care and check-in opportunities to prevent or address YF burn-out and help time management.

- **Provide Opportunities to Put Skills into Practice.** RPs focus on learning by doing; to learn to lead circles, students should be given meaningful chances to practice, with a consistent feedback mechanism for youth facilitators to help develop skills.

- **Include Movement and Mindfulness Practices.** Online instruction on restorative justice should include a robust continuum of practices that support the health and wellbeing of students and YFs.

- **Work with Schools to Implement Practices.** Trainings should work closely with teachers to ensure that students bring the skills they have learned, and the opportunities they promise, into school.

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Assessment:
Key Findings & Lessons of the Youth Pilot Training Program

"This was an unprecedented undertaking for REY, but after hearing from our YFs, I knew that all the hard work around convening young women from different parts of the country in order to be vulnerable, heal, and strengthen one another was well worth it. I am hopeful that the lessons learned will help us grow as an organization, and build our capacity to apprentice girls of color nationwide in future endeavors."
– Dr. Anita Wadhwa, REY Co-Founder

"I continue to see power in our young people, especially our girls of color. The journey from applicant to participant, their sense of self, was the main attraction. No more silencing their voices or diminishing their light."
- Udoro Ekpin-Gatewood, REY Co-Founder

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Appendix A
Timeline and Description of Events

September 5, 2020:
Planning Session 1 with YFs
Goal of session: Incorporate ideas and materials needed to address the "Self-Care" theme, as chosen by YFs.

September 9, 2020:
Family Orientation Night
Introductory informational session. Goal of session: Welcome students and families to the training program and Georgetown Center on Poverty partners and set expectations..

September 12, 2020:
Session 1 with Students
Theme: Self-love and community building.Goal: Establish ground rules for all sessions.Homework: Write about one act of self-love, the significance of students' personal talking pieces, and the definition of a talking circle.

September 12, 2020: Debrief After Session 1 with YFs
Goal: Reflect on first session and offer space through vulnerability.

September 24, 2020: Debrief after Session 1 with YFs and Education Liaisons
Goal: Discuss first session, provide input to improve students' experience.

September 19, 2020:
Planning Session 2 with YFs
Goal of session: Incorporate ideas and materials needed to speak to "Oppression" theme, as chosen by YFs.

October 10, 2020:
Session 2 with Students
Theme: Oppression.Breakout rooms were utilized to form more personal connections.Homework: Write a talking circle script on a topic of interest.

October 10, 2020:
Debrief after Session 2 with YFs
Goal: Reflect on second session and practicing restorative justice in a virtual space.

October 26, 2020:
Debrief after Session 2 with YFs and Education Liaisons
Goal: Provide suggestions to improve students' experience.

October 25, 2020
Planning Session 3 with YFs
Goal: Incorporate ideas and materials needed to build on "Student Leadership/Confidence" theme, as chosen by YFs.

November 7, 2020
Session 3 with Students:
Theme: Student Leadership/ConfidenceStudent was selected to led group through talking script. YFs and other students offered feedback on practice session. YFs used breakout rooms to discuss experience and embrace community-building.

November 7, 2020
Debrief after Session 3 with YFs
Goal: Reflect on third session and the training program as a whole.

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Appendix B
Sample Agenda: Session 1

Whole-Group Session: Establish Shared Space: Norms and Community Circle (1-1.15 hours)

Goal of Session: Introduce YFs and identify roles

Session agenda:

- Introduce one another during talking circle
- Provide opening quote - circle keeper
- Establish group norms through talking circle
- Watch short video on self-love ("Love Yourself", Shasparay Lightyeard, TedxYouth@Austin)
- Debrief through round of questions

Breakout-Room Conversations (1 hour)

Goal of Breakout: Support theme of self-care

Session agenda:

- Engage in Icebreaker ("Camera On/Off" Self-Identity prompts)
- Conduct talking circle on relationship between self-care and restorative justice
- Take breaks to support the message of self-care

Whole-Group Close-Out Session (45 minutes)

Goal of Session: Debrief in breakout rooms using guided questions drafted during planning sessions

Share out/Shout out: Express appreciation and encouragement to other participants, provide feedback about experiences

Follow-up plan: YFs to email students during the week to check inYFs to send session synopsis, homework reminder, and links to video used in session and templates to assist with script writing

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Appendix C
Youth Facilitator's Sample Lesson Plan

Whole Group: 1 - 1.15 hours

Introductions

- Group guidelines and Zoom engagement expectations
- Talking piece discussion (one person speaks at a time, when they have the talking piece)
- Name, grade, age and school
- Discussion of mindfulness
- Establish norms and expectations for sharing

Opening: Youth Facilitator:

"Today I'm going to introduce you to a practice we will be using in our session. It's called 'circle' because we are all part of the same community and there are no barriers between us. Circles come from Native American practices—it was a way to get people together and make sure you hear from everyone."

Norms Round: Youth Facilitator:

"Now I would like you to say one norm you would like for the group to follow. I'll start. One norm I think we should do is to be aware of airtime so that we can hear from many people."

The keeper should jot down what each person says, and review the norms that people have said after the talking piece has gone around the circle.
Pass circle around again, and ask whether everyone agrees with what was said, or has anything to add.

Sample list of norms:

- Show up as my true self.
- YFs are responsible reporters.
- Add to the list as each girl offers a norm. END the rounds with a clear and concise list of norms that are most valued and needed. Aim for five key norms that everyone can agree on.

Watch video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9VxIaF0TUM (start at 9:31)

Debrief from the video: (Popcorn round)

How did you feel about the video?What are you taking away from the video?Have you experienced something similar to her story?How has this year helped or challenged you as you think about yourself?What are some questions you have based on the video?

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Appendix C
Youth Facilitator's Sample Lesson Plan

Small Group: 1 hour

Icebreaker

Use the "Turn Camera On/Off" technique to invite students to respond to self-identity prompts.
Turn your camera on if:

- You have seized opportunities this year.
- You are open-minded.
- You tend to judge the actions of others.
- You hold grudges.
- You forgive yourself for things that you are not in control of.
- You trust your gut instincts.
- You are motivated.
- You are self-disciplined.

Script for Talking Circle, Theme of Self-Care through Restorative Justice.

- Idea: *In order to care for others, one must care for self.*
- Opening Quote: "It is not selfish to love yourself, take care of yourself, and to make your happiness a priority. It's necessary. " - Mandy Hale
- Check-in
- Round 1: What does self-care mean to you?
- Round 2: Who do you think practices self-care?
- Round 3: How do you practice self-care? If you don't, how can you start?
- Closing Quote: "Self-care is giving the world the best of you, instead what's left of you" - Katie Reed
- Closing the circle: Allow 7 minutes of mindfulness/reflection in writing.

Questions:

- In light of all that has been happening this year, what are you grateful for today?
- How are you checking or planning to check-in with yourself?
- What are you taking away from today?

Whole Group: 45 minutes

Share out: How are you checking or planning to check with yourself?What are you taking away from today? Mindfulness: Self-worth

Homework:

Write about one thing you did for yourself. How did it make you feel? Write about what your talking piece will be for next session and its significance. (Don't forget to bring your talking piece to the next session.) Brainstorm your ideas about what a talking circle is; write a list of what a script for that circle could look like. Begin keeping a journal.

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