



An Assets-Based Response to the Digital Divide: Success for One Summer Youth Employment Program Serving a Minoritized Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the impact of the digital divide on student success in the United States. With almost zero preparation, programs serving young people completely restructured moving from face-to-face engagement to entirely virtual platforms. This study details discoveries made during a 2020 summer youth employment program for adolescent-aged interns that quickly pivoted to virtual program delivery. The study reveals an assets-based philosophy applied to the practice of the program and how that approach mitigated consequences of the face-to-face to virtual switch. Highlighted are ways that Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework describes how the program staff created success in the unexpectedly virtual workspaces. Lastly, recommendations for facilitating virtual summer youth employment programming are provided.

Keywords: Community cultural wealth, COVID-19, digital divide, summer youth employment program, virtual learning, virtual work

INTRODUCTION

There is an underlying assumption that communities of color do not possess the cultural and social capital necessary for social mobility (Yosso, 2005). Communities of color do in fact have assets that contribute to their advancement. This article sheds light on these assets by examining a Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) in an urban city in the Southwest through the lens of the program director and an educator/site supervisor during the summer of 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Applying Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework to the SYEP operation reveals the assets the two program staff drew on to create success in launching and implementing a virtual SYEP within a three-month timespan. A brief history of SYEPs is given to reveal how many SYEPs in the past have demonstrated what Garcia and Guerra (2004) describe to be a deficit thinking approach to serving young people. A description of the community served by the studied SYEP is provided to shed light on their disparities faced which prompted the SYEP to offer a virtual work experience for interns. Next, an explanation of the study's theoretical framework is provided, the study's research methods are discussed, and both researchers' narratives are shared to shed light on the process in creating/facilitating the virtual SYEP. Lastly, recommendations are discussed for utilizing an assets-based framework in building and facilitating future virtual SYEPs.

Background on SYEP

SYEPs now part of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) passed in the Nixon Administration were built from the Neighborhood Youth Corp program authorized by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. In 1964, the goal was to provide youth from low-income backgrounds the funds needed through summer employment to be able to remain full-time students during the school year (GAO, 1977). With the shift to CETA authorization came a shift in objective to "enhance their [youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds] future employability" by developing "good work habits such as timely and faithful attendance and learning to work with others" (GAO, 1977, p. 6). Later the program responded to concerns that "economically disadvantaged youth need to improve their basic skills as well" and required that "participants have their reading and math skills assessed...[and] be provided with basic and remedial education" (Barnow, 1993, p. 87). Eventually many United States locales turned to their SYEPs for youth violence prevention, "the motivation was to keep youth off the street and out of trouble during program hours while improving "soft skills" such as self-efficacy, impulse control, and conflict resolution

(Modestino, 2019, pp. 600-601). The SYEP examined and discussed in this article recognized this trend of a deficit orientation in the history of SYEP objectives and made a purposeful turn toward assets-based thinking to respond to the inequitable circumstances that youth interns, their families, and community faced in the summer of 2020.

Challenges Faced by the Demographics SYEP Serves

The studied SYEP provides paid employment and jobsite work experience to young people, ages 14-18 years old, who are also referred to in this article as interns, from across a large city in a southwestern state. Traditionally, the program predominantly serves a large population of young people who identify as Black and/or Latinx, and who receive free/reduced lunch at school. During the summer of 2020 many interns' families experienced severe hardships, both economic and medical, making participation in the SYEP simultaneously more challenging and more vital. Unfortunately, in the United States COVID-19 has disproportionately affected Black and Latinx communities, referred to as communities of color, at significantly higher rates than White communities. Both COVID-19 and the accompanying economic devastation have visited a vastly disproportionate share of food insecurity, housing insecurity, disease, and death on Black and Latinx communities (Galea & Abdallah, 2020; Gil, Marcelin, Zuniga-Blanco, Marques, Mathew, & Piggott, 2020; Poteat, Millett, Nelson, & Beyrer, 2020). These disparities rise in part from inequitable systems that result in many essential workers being of Black and Latinx descent, and often paid low wages. Data drawn from the census bureau demonstrate that the majority of essential workers in residential care facilities as well as the food and agriculture industry are people of Color (McNicholas & Poydock, 2020). Writing in May of 2020, McNicholas and Poydock (2020) sound alarms that many workers in "industries deemed 'essential' during the pandemic...include health care, food service, and public transportation, among others are not receiving the most basic health and safety measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus. Essential workers are dying as a result" (para 1).

In March 2020, the state where the SYEP is located issued a stay at home order requiring all non-essential businesses to close due to the uncontrolled, rapid spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. As the summer months quickly approached it became evident that there would be limited safe options for young people to participate in including summer employment. A virtual work experience was the obvious answer, but this presented special challenges. The digital divide highlights the community the SYEP serves'

inequalities in access to and use of information, communication technology, and most specifically access and use of the internet (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017).

The Digital Divide

What was once a simple measurement of those who did and those who did not have access to the worldwide web (McConnaughey, Nila, & Sloan, 1995), is now recognized by researchers as a much more complex phenomenon. The digital divide is now understood in layers of access, skills, use, and outcomes (Scheerder, van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2017). Physical and material access continues to be a pointed concern highlighted by public virtual schooling during the pandemic (Lieberman, 2020). The Federal Communications Commission advises that access to broadband networks are necessary to support even moderate use by multiple internet users in a household, however Broadband availability highly correlates with income, education level, and population density (FCC, 2020; Whitacre & Gallardo, 2020). Researchers discovered a socioeconomic status divide causing technological maintenance differences thus impacting their academic outcomes based on students' families' accessibility to maintain their devices and manage technological disruptions (Gonzales, McCrory Calarco, & Lynch, 2020).

Digital inequalities result in opportunity gaps for groups experiencing the divide, and “it stands to reason that historical legacies of racism manifested in the built environment, likewise, hinder internet access and prevent equal engagement with web-based content” (Carpio, 2018). Researchers detected in census and survey data a strong correlation between race and likelihood “to have a home computer and access to the Internet” at the dawn of the millennium (Nakamura, 2007). More recent research explores different ways that communities of Color engage with the digital world adding nuance to the digital divide story. Smartphone use has shrunk some pieces of the digital divide between Black and Latinx Americans compared to White Americans, though other elements persist (Fairlie, 2017). COVID-19 has only “intensified the challenges that come with the lack of internet access” (Lai & Widmar, 2021). However, the picture is complex. Ellison and Solomon (2019) challenge common narratives about the digital divide by offering descriptions of digital literacies among Black families that have been overlooked, and Carpio (2018) discovered the strength of combining digital technology with resistant capital in Black and Latinx communities. Similarly, for many young people with disabilities technology simultaneously offers needed support and poses overwhelming challenges (NCII, 2020).

Problem Statement, Purpose, and Significance of Study

SYEPs have proven to be especially beneficial to young people from minoritized communities. A study conducted by Grant, Bennett, and Crawford (2016) found that SYEPs “deeply affect the lives of youth, helping them make connections to positive adult role models, learn workplace dynamics and dialogue, and enter into areas of the workforce that have historically been preserved for the more privileged working and middle class” (p. 193). While SYEPs can be utilized as a tool for social mobility for young people from minoritized communities to break cycles of familial poverty, SYEPs also benefit the United States as a whole. SYEPs preparing and connecting young people to the workforce promotes the development of skilled workers who contribute to and strengthen the nation’s economy (Choudhry, Marelli, & Signorelli, 2010). The purpose of this study was to capture the experiences and perspectives of two SYEP staff who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, rapidly transformed an in-person SYEP to a virtual SYEP serving close to 500 interns from minoritized communities for the duration of their summer employment. The study’s findings can inform the future practice of SYEPs as many will take on the task of preparing the next generation of young people for a twenty-first century workforce that is moving in the direction of virtual work (Blanchard, 2021).

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How can Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework help in understanding how two SYEP staff approached the creation and facilitation of a virtual SYEP serving youth from minoritized communities?
2. How can the narratives of two SYEP staff inform best practices for in-person, SYEPs working to shift to serving youth from minoritized communities virtually?

The next section provides the theoretical framework for the study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Having been first born of critical legal studies (see Crenshaw, 2011), Critical Race Theory (CRT) has offered scholars in the field of education “an analytic tool” for understanding inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT explores issues with the understanding that racism is foundational to society’s systems – including education systems – and is continually enacted through the policies and processes that grow from and continue to support those systems. Yosso (2005) positions her CCW framework within the stream of CRT as it challenges the deficit view of communities of Color as bereft of

cultural capital. CCW examines the assets that communities of color possess that are not typically viewed by the hegemonic society as assets contributing to their advancement and for this reason this framework has been selected to serve as a lens to this study. The tenets of the framework can shed light on how the SYEP utilized its staff and interns' CCW to push the virtual work program forward.

The components of the framework that make up CCW are: aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, resistant capital, and linguistic capital (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital consists of the ability to remain hopeful through oppression even when odds are against the community. Aspirational capital aids one in not giving in to discouragement and continuing to push forward. Familial capital is the knowledge of one's family members that is passed down through generations. Familial capital also creates a connection with families and the community essentially merging the community as an extension of one's family and placing importance on the understanding of caring about the community's well-being just as one would his/her family. Social capital consists of the "networks of people and community resources" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). These social networks aid one in connecting with support and resources that contribute to one's advancement. When searching for a job the phrase "it is not what you know but who you know" is often used meaning that if one knows someone who is already connected in some form with the desired job that that connected person can help secure the job. This is an example of social capital. Navigational capital is the ability to navigate institutions and systems that were not initially created for communities of color. An example is students of color pursuing higher education in institutions where they would historically have been banned from attending and that still have multiple barriers in place to hinder access and achievement. Resistant capital is the capacity to challenge and resist oppression. Resistant capital describes the skills rising from practice in making the conscious decision to not conform to the inequitable systems the hegemonic society has set. Lastly, linguistic capital refers to the capacity of speaking multiple languages as well as having varying communication styles. Having the ability to utilize storytelling as a tool for expression and to convey life experiences/lessons is an example of linguistic capital. Next a description of the methods utilized in this study to respond to the research questions is provided.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section states the research questions guiding the study, discusses the study's qualitative research design of autoethnography and the reasoning for its selection, introduces the study's participants and provides clarification on the researchers' positionality to the study. Data collection procedures are reviewed and the section concludes with a discussion of the study's acknowledged limitations.

The study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How can Yosso's (2005) CCW framework help in understanding how two SYEP staff approached the creation and facilitation of a virtual SYEP serving youth from minoritized communities? 2) How can the narratives of two SYEP staff inform best practices for in-person SYEPs working to shift to serving youth from minoritized communities virtually? The study utilized an autoethnography research design (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography calls for "researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon" (Méndez, 2013, p. 280). The autoethnographic design allowed for data collection to simultaneously occur (Chang, 2008) while the SYEP transformed from in-person programming to virtual programming.

Context of Study and Participants

The context of the study is a SYEP located in a large city in a southwestern state that prior to the pandemic served almost 800 interns from Black, Latinx, and low-income backgrounds, referred to as minoritized communities, yearly. The SYEP serves young people with the opportunity to gain career awareness, exposure, experience, and a paycheck. The SYEP builds young people's job readiness skills, teaches them about the expectations of the professional work setting, and demonstrates how to rise to these expectations. The SYEP especially benefits young people from minoritized communities as the employment program can offer them their first job opportunities and help them solidify plans for after high school. Often young people from minoritized communities are faced with the dilemma of having to choose between participating in extracurricular activities or working a job. SYEP straddles both worlds as it offers a hearty enrichment opportunity during paid employment. Many students who participate in SYEPs use the money they earn to assist their family. The study's participants consisted of two members from the SYEP staff who are also the researchers of this study: the program director and youth educator/site supervisor. Both were selected because of their on the ground work with transforming the in-person SYEP to virtual.

Positionality of Authors

The first author identifies as an Afro-Latina who grew up in a city in Texas, and is from a background with a low-socioeconomic status but wealthy in love and support. The author is the second in her family to earn an undergraduate degree and the first to be a doctoral candidate. With the philosophy of reaching as she climbs the author has devoted her career to empowering the next generation of diverse leaders with college and career readiness and access. Enyioha currently serves as program director for the studied SYEP.

The second author identifies as a single, White mother of three who also cares for her aging parents. Cotman researches school policy, particularly safety policy, from a critical perspective and with an eye toward remedying inequities. An experienced teacher with an M.A.T., she is now a doctoral candidate in School Improvement at Texas State University studying the training curriculum for School Resource Officers and other school policing policy documents. Cotman currently serves as a youth educator/site supervisor for the studied SYEP.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interactive introspection (Rodriguez & Ryave, 2002) and self-reflective data collection (Chang, 2008) were utilized in the study. The study provided triangulation by including two participants each with multiple sources of data. The researchers each maintained a field journal (Chang, 2008) of their observations, thoughts, and feelings. To share insights, challenges, and track the experiences in real time, the researchers met twice a week for 15 weeks (between May 8, 2020 and August 21, 2020) during the 2020 virtual SYEP experience. A total of 32 journal entries were recorded. The continuous meetings, comparison of notes, discussions, and reflections supported the reliability of the two participants' data to not solely be reliant on their memory. After completing the 2020 program, each researcher wrote a reflective narrative about their respective experience creating the virtual SYEP. The researchers then traded essays and met several times to clarify each other's stories and consider the ways experiences overlapped, aligned, and stood alone. The category construction data analysis technique (Merriam, 2009) along with descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2012) were utilized to analyze the data from the field journals and narrative essays. The CCW framework was consistently referenced during data collection and analysis. The themes that emerged from the data are discussed in the findings section.

Limitations

Because of the emergent nature of both the pandemic and the SYEP's response to the crisis, time did not allow the researchers to gain the permissions necessary to use student and parent evaluation feedback data about the 2020 program. Therefore, in order to investigate this unique experience we chose an autoethnography design to dive into our own experiences creating/facilitating the virtual SYEP. Future research engaging the perspectives of youth interns and their families regarding their experiences with the virtual SYEP is recommended.

FINDINGS

This section provides a description of the key themes. These findings revealed key points of concern that had to be addressed as the virtual SYEP was created: completing the onboarding process, creating virtual jobs, first day of virtual work job orientation, creating a curriculum plan, technology, and connecting.

Anticipating traditional, in-person work experiences, the interns had completed applications before COVID-19 severely impacted the United States. Suddenly they were sent home from school indefinitely, their parents were facing job insecurity, and no one knew how to face this new disease. Summer 2020, it seemed clear, would truly be the one summer that the community needed the program the most. Knowing the economic background of the SYEP interns, and aware that these students were likely to have family members serving as essential workers, helped keep me, the program director, focused on pushing the program forward. With my aspirational and resistant capitals shining through I knew that the SYEP had to pivot to continue to facilitate an internship experience for young people in a safe manner.

The SYEP went completely virtual offering a work experience that allowed interns to safely telework. Virtual job sites were quickly created and workplaces reoriented to offer a safe online workspace in which the interns were able to develop valuable professional skills and gain work experience. When the SYEP secured funding for the summer of 2020 and received approval for hosting a virtual, summer work program, the SYEP team had less than 5 weeks to help young job seekers finish the onboarding process, create and ensure a virtual job for each eligible student to work, and launch the program.

Completing the Onboarding Process

The SYEP team contacted families who had applied for the program prior to the pandemic to inform them that the program was moving forward

virtually. After completing their application students are required to attend an I-9 verification session. Students and families are asked to bring applicable documents to the session to verify their identity and eligibility to work in the United States. Three I-9 verification sessions were held in a two-week span. To complete the I-9 verification process the SYEP's twenty staff met to meticulously plan each session to help facilitate the process for families in a safe environment. Each staff member played an instrumental role in providing a safe environment for families to register: providing masks and enforcing mask wearing, ensuring families maintained social distancing, temperature checking, verifying I-9 documents, and distributing water to those in need as they waited in line outside in 100 degree weather to enter the SYEP registration event. Young people who completed the application, job readiness training, and the final onboarding step of the I-9 verification were eligible to be offered a job. Approximately 500 families attended at least one I-9 session. This demonstrated a wealth of aspirational and familial capital as they dedicated the resources needed to make time and travel accommodations to attend the sessions, often using public transportation during this frightening time.

Creating Virtual Jobs

Tasked with providing enough virtual job positions where interns work twenty hours per week for five weeks, earning \$7.25 per hour, the SYEP reached out to their previously in-person, job sites to inquire if the job sites would be interested in hosting interns virtually. Twelve out of the previous 150 job sites expressed interest hosting interns virtually resulting in close to 200 internship opportunities. To maximize the SYEP's quota in a transitory year 250 more jobs for young people were needed. I quickly planned to connect with my network of educator colleagues. I first reached out to a colleague who leads a college and career readiness program. He historically facilitates summer programming for another organization; tapping into this partnership provided SYEP additional resources including staff to facilitate the job site and work experience for interns. When we connected, I learned that his summer program organization was willing to host a virtual leadership skills program but due to the pandemic the program did not have an audience to serve. SYEP was able to provide them with 30 interns to host.

Prior to serving as the program director for the SYEP, I was an educator who worked in public middle and high schools. Utilizing my social capital I strategically decided to reach out to my educator colleagues to recruit them as SYEP site supervisors hosting their own virtual job sites for up to 40 interns. A virtual job site requires a curriculum. With only one month to

prepare for the interns I knew that the best people to bring in to create curricula quickly would be educators who are experts at teaching and working with students. Five educators, including Cotman, were hired temporarily by the SYEP to each host individual job sites and serve as the site supervisor.

A challenge that presented itself while the SYEP transitioned to virtual programming was the digital divide. Ten percent of the interns set to work virtually over the summer did not have access to a personal technology device needed to engage with their job site. I reached out to the principals at each school the interns attended to ask for support in supplying the interns with a district-issued laptop. Every principal contacted happily committed to reaching out to their students to issue them a laptop in support of their participation in the SYEP. Interns were also encouraged to make this connection and given specific names and numbers at their campuses to call. This use of navigational capital was key to success for some of our most vulnerable interns.

First Day of Virtual Work Job Orientation

The SYEP job orientation before the COVID-19 pandemic always took place on the first day interns reported for work. Four hundred interns would gather at a recreation center where orientation was hosted to receive all final details regarding their job placements and expectations. In lieu of having the interns gather in-person for one large job orientation event facilitated by the SYEP staff it was decided that each job site would host an individual orientation specifically for their interns over the virtual ZOOM platform. To ensure that all interns received the same information, the SYEP staff created an orientation video to share with each job site to introduce the SYEP team, review program expectations, and provide details such as the calendar with interns' paydays. In the orientation video I opened with my story as an AfroLatina from a low-income background raised by a single parent in the same community the SYEP served. I shared my firsthand experience of my first job at 15 years old serving as an intern in the same SYEP I now lead. My SYEP mentors and work experiences contributed to my success today as the SYEP director and a doctoral candidate, and it could do the same for them. I shared with the interns how odds were essentially against me coming from a low-income background and being a woman of color however, I was able to achieve success through determination and with the help of SYEP. I intentionally tailored my diction to the interns to aid them in relating to the story and banked on their linguistic capital as I went between different language styles and techniques during the orientation video.

Creating a Curriculum Plan

My first task was to create a curriculum including learning objectives and lesson plan details. Enyioha shared a resource she identified as useful, a college and career readiness curriculum designed for delivery inside middle schools, and a brainstormed list of potential expectations and objectives. To add to those thoughts I looked for information from other youth work programs. In my research I found a matrix that matches adolescent characteristics with workplace strategies meshed with those characteristics as advantages (Frye-Spray, 2009). Many of the characteristics are framed in assets-based thinking and not only served as practical advice for interns, but also as a great reminder to focus on their strengths by eliciting intern's ideas, exploring and building onto interns' existing skills, and involving interns in project development.

I was also determined to make this experience feel like work and not school, and in particular not like their recent online school experience. However, as an educator with a group of student-aged youth creating a school-like experience would be difficult for me to resist. So again, I tried to approach this challenge from an assets orientation: what about a school orientation process could I capitalize on to create a great program? Cultural responsiveness and differentiated instruction are both foundational to my work in schools, so I deliberately placed those ideas in the foundations of the program curriculum as well. So now in the stew as I planned our work together the following were my priorities: college and career readiness, an assets orientation, work-not-school, cultural responsiveness, and differentiation. As I gathered resources, I deliberately vetted speakers, videos, images and text materials for quality, an assets orientation, and representation of Black, Indigenous, people of color, and immigrant representation.

When I met the other educators, who were also serving as site supervisors, we collaborated by sharing ideas, resources and perspectives which were key in the development of our virtual SYEP. Unlike some other professional communities I have experienced, this group of educators began with the premise that each intern was ambitious and well able to achieve success. Our goal was to support the interns' success during SYEP and beyond and we each built curricula that served the same general goals while allowing for differentiation. I found that our supportive site supervisors' weekly meetings allowed us to troubleshoot challenges and share useful materials as we navigated this new terrain.

Technology

Throughout this planning process I tried not to worry about the potential for technological issues and instead thought of those concerns as the responsibility of Enyioha and the permanent SYEP team of four staff who are primarily in charge of the SYEP's logistics. However, I realized that technological differences were some of the key reasons that interns required differentiation in work assignments. For example, not all students had their own functioning email account. Many students planned to use smartphones to come to work, either because of lack of access to a computer, not being able to borrow a school-issued laptop, or because security features on the school-issued laptops prevented access to important sites and applications. Internet service was quite variable and presented daily challenges for many interns. Familiarity with virtual chat environments and comfort with gathering information from the internet and other digital skills varied greatly among the interns. The reliability of interns' technology such as headphones, webcams, computers, smartphones, and modems varied.

Familial capital was critical to many interns' ability to overcome technical challenges. Families supported interns' work by sharing technology, providing a dedicated workspace, and time to provide technical/moral support when needed. To further aid interns, the SYEP provided a flexible work schedule so that the interns could manage their work time and home responsibilities in ways that were compatible with the family's schedule and needs. I sometimes met with interns via Facetime as they grocery shopped and traveled with their families. Several interns had responsibilities caring for younger siblings, cousins, or ill relatives, so we worked together on ways they could fully participate but with more flexible hours.

Connecting

Getting each intern successfully started in the program took several days. Bounced emails meant reaching out by phone. Sometimes phone numbers and addresses had changed. The pandemic and attendant job losses undoubtedly impacted many families' abilities to maintain consistent housing and cell phone accounts. Language barriers popped up when I called Spanish-speaking homes as I only speak English, but without exception the bilingual interns recognized and supported me in addressing my language gap with their linguistic capital. In order to finally connect with every single intern prior to the first day of work, I had to send multiple emails, call cell phones, call landlines, and utilize their emergency contact information. The wealth of familial capital in the interns' worlds meant that I was able to reach someone who could transmit the message to every single intern.

DISCUSSION AND BEST PRACTICES

Equity Work is Essential Work

From the start, the SYEP 2020 program anticipated and banked on wells of aspirational capital that students could draw on as we helped them “dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” and build their stores of knowledge and tools that could help them make the dream more real (Yosso, 2015, p. 78). The commitment demonstrated by the interns and their families motivated the SYEP team to find a way to offer almost 500 virtual jobs for the summer and this demonstrates the SYEP team’s aspirational and resistant capitals. The 138 job sites that opted out of participating were struggling to figure out how they themselves would operate as an organization during the pandemic and were not comfortable taking on an additional task of hosting an intern virtually. We found that the job sites with whom we had a strong relationship and had partnered with for several years prior were the ones who were most willing to do whatever it took to host interns during the pandemic. This is an example of social capital at work.

We knew that many of our students were facing opportunity gaps that needed leaping, gaps that the pandemic was widening. The COVID-19 coronavirus disproportionately impacted minoritized communities at a significantly higher rate than those from privileged backgrounds. It should not be that some individuals' lives are valued more than others as they have the privilege to safely work from home while essential workers are out risking their lives to support the community as the COVID-19 coronavirus continues to spread. Engaging in adaptive thinking the SYEP team rebuilt the program to meet the needs of the community in response to the devastating impact of COVID-19.

Plumbing the Depths of the Digital Divide

A challenge that presented itself while the SYEP worked to move to virtual was the digital divide. Our teams of interns can be largely credited for being able to create a collegial, online-workspace. The nimbleness with which they could adapt to different communication styles and expectations made inventing and maintaining a virtual workspace possible and interesting. The site drew strength from the interns’ linguistic capital and the navigational capital gained through their experiences with multiple languages, code-switching, and “maneuvering through institutions not created” for them (Yosso, 2015, p. 80). To our technological issues the interns brought important cultural capital to help find solutions. Linguistic capital was key as interns had to use the conventions of a variety of different electronic

communication methods. Sometimes they had to use a less efficient/appropriate means of communication than they would typically have selected because of technological limitations, but they were adept at managing communication difficulties.

While a virtual workspace might suggest streamlined communication, in the case of SYEP communication required sharing email addresses, personal cell phone numbers, and even sometimes social media handles to keep everyone connected. Some traditional professional communication protocols had to take a backseat to making reliable connections with interns' families. This required additional administrative time and effort as we tracked phone calls, text messages, and emails.

Building More Social Capital

Enyioha set the tone for the summer by sharing her own story with all the interns during the day one orientation. Storytelling became a key part of the SYEP internship and each story from a guest, site supervisor, SYEP staff, and intern helped build aspirational capital through example and social capital through networking. Bereft of face to face interaction, storytelling served to build connections with the interns, excite them about the summer internship, and encourage them to make the most out of the opportunity.

Because screens compel our attention in ways it would otherwise wander in a physical environment, the SYEP team paid special attention to the racial representations in the materials we presented at work. The hidden curriculum could not suggest that careers and college preparedness belonged to Whiteness, and perhaps representation helped signal the students to look to their own community cultural wealth embedded in their wide communities. In hindsight we would have done well to ask the interns to recommend people who might address the topics they wanted to explore. It would have opened up an opportunity to practice making use of their social capital and further invest them in the work we were doing together.

Letting the Youth Lead

From the start the interns' aspirational capital was on full display. They had certainly not expected or prepared for a virtual work experience, but they embraced the opportunity to grow skills that would help them reach their future aspirations. Simultaneously, they helped us understand how to make the virtual space work most effectively for them. We had frank discussions about expectations and personal goals for the program beginning with acknowledging that we all, staff included, had as a priority fulfilling our obligations to the organizations who would write our paychecks.

One requirement that had to be abandoned was that of requiring cameras on during our meetings utilizing the ZOOM platform. Prior to the first day of work, the SYEP staff and educators/site supervisors agreed to require camera-facetime as professional behavior. The interns quietly, but profoundly resisted this requirement. Their skills at advocating for themselves and exposing problematic practices had been honed into a resistant capital that allowed them to amply and professionally demonstrate the non-necessity of this obligation. Gradually most SYEP staff accepted this unspoken invitation to reconsider why cameras were needed and decided that requiring cameras had the likelihood of creating inequities among students and hampering relationship building. It was clear there was a divide between interns with and without access to cameras and the bandwidth to reliably carry real-time audio and video. Additionally, there were interns who wanted to protect the privacy of their home environment from the eyes of so many strangers, particularly those who had childcare responsibilities and access only to shared spaces. Lastly, many of the female-identifying interns seemed more hesitant to turn cameras on and were enjoying their newfound freedom from the constant obligation to curate an attractive self-presentation.

Throughout our weeks together the interns' assets were continually employed to make the most of the learning and earning opportunities. For example, some interns were not at ease with email functions and protocols, but we were able to unpack their discomfort by relating them to linguistic and navigational skills they already practiced in other spaces. Or example, exploring the difference between blind copying vs. copying in an email inspired interesting discussions as they related the functions to managing issues with parents, teachers, and friends. The interns brought so much to the table and recognizing those assets became key to creating a successful virtual internship.

The following section provides recommendations for utilizing an assets-based approach to implementing a virtual programming serving predominantly young people from minoritized communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The first recommendation for utilizing an assets-based approach to implementing a virtual SYEP is having SYEP staff who are culturally appreciative and competent. Enyioha comes from Latinx and African American backgrounds. She drew from her shared cultures with the community to contribute her CCW to building the virtual SYEP. Cotman is a social justice advocate who has dedicated her career and research to empowering communities underserved by many of our social structures. She

understands navigating the world with substantial family obligations and their attendant financial pressures. When serving a minoritized community having staff who are conscious of deficit thinking, culturally competent, and intentionally work to empower the community are key to supporting the community in achieving their success. The next recommendation is staying focused on who we are serving and why. Completely restructuring the SYEP program from in-person to virtual required fast work and creative thinking. The possibility of suspending the program for the year was seriously considered. It was our sincere and core commitment to social justice that led us to know that this year was our test. Equity work cannot be only after the basics are taken care of, equity must be the basis. Our community's teenagers deserved to have the opportunity to work and earn money safely at home during the pandemic and this kept us motivated. All of the required changes would not have been possible without intentionally connecting with all stakeholders. Centering social capital was key in tapping into the program staffs' needs and capabilities. Understanding their safety concerns helped us plan for the safety concerns of all, and they were generous in helping SYEP link to important resources across the city including churches who let us use their parking lots for drive-thru events, such as the one hosted for interns to sign their timesheets, and retailers currently stocking the personal protective equipment we needed. Connecting to worksite partners from previous summers was key not only in identifying those willing to make this leap for summer 2020, but in hearing and respecting the needs of those who could not. As important as summer 2020 was to the SYEP future summers will also be important and keeping all of our worksite partners connected with SYEP will serve the program moving forward.

Tapping into the expertise and skills of each staff member was critical to success. Working together meant no one was reinventing a wheel as time was too limited to not prioritize collaboration. Allowing as much time as possible for the planning phase of a virtual program would have given the SYEP staff more opportunities to identify and address logistical issues, particularly those surrounding technology. Acquiring laptops and internet hotspots that could be lent to interns for the duration of the program would be ideal, though it would also require additional program administration, funding, and organization. Technological differences created the need for significant differentiation in work assignments for interns. Dedicating a portion of the job readiness and on-boarding time to identifying technical needs would help the SYEP work experience to launch more smoothly. In coming years, we will help remove communication barriers by creating SYEP email accounts for each intern and having the intern practice accessing the

account from their own devices prior to the start of their internships. We will also be intentional about hiring more bilingual staff to cater to the needs of the community served.

It is our hope that this study contributes to the development of virtual youth programming nationwide for SYEPs even after the conclusion of the pandemic. Future research is encouraged to investigate how the work done by the studied SYEP can be built upon so that program innovations made during the pandemic can be used to advance the work of all programs serving minoritized communities. Further, the discoveries made can inspire schools and other youth-serving organizations as they continually improve, redesign, restart, or create new virtual or in-person environments utilizing an assets orientation toward their young collaborators. It is critical that the bank of labeled, little boxed faces and names in a virtual meeting not allow today's leaders to pretend that Color and culture have been removed from the lives and identities of those they serve.

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