

Youth Voice Programming at the Bridge Project

Since the summer of 2012, Dr. Yoli Anyon has partnered with the Bridge Project to strengthen middle school students' engagement and prepare them to be active decision-makers at their Bridge site and in their communities. Through two youth voice programs, currently facilitated by GSSW graduate students, Bridge participants gain experience and skills in youth leadership, research and advocacy.

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL). At all four Bridge sites, middle school participants lead action research projects by gathering information about pressing community issues, creating products that outline their findings, and then sharing their work with local stakeholders. Throughout this process, students learn key competencies necessary to understand issues of inequality, develop recommendations that target the root causes of social problems, and take action to implement their ideas. Specific skills that youth develop include teamwork, active listening, critical thinking, planning, problem solving, data analysis, and public speaking. Approximately 40 youth have completed the program each year, with a majority of participants continuing their involvement across multiple years. The program is offered once a week for 90 minutes throughout the school year, with extension projects over the summer. During the 2015-2016 year, products included a documentary video about islamophobia, a photo exhibit about cultural bullying, a video diary about why people join gangs, and a presentation on human trafficking. Past projects have focused on topics such as police brutality, the need for urban gardens, and discrimination against the LGBTQ community.



Youth Action Board (YAB). Two YELL representatives from each site were selected for the inaugural Youth Action Board. The board is responsible for making program improvement recommendations, aligning YELL projects, coordinating advocacy efforts, and planning collective actions across the four sites. As part of this work, the YAB will organize an annual city-wide youth leadership summit in which YELL participants will share findings and recommendations from their site-based projects with each other and local stakeholders. The primary objective of the YAB is to strengthen Bridge's capacity to incorporate youth voice into organizational decision-making. In addition to furthering the competencies they developed in YELL, YAB members will also develop skills in program evaluation and planning, event coordination, and advocacy.

Research Findings. Analysis of pre- and post-test surveys comparing YELL participants to other adolescents at Bridge have demonstrated that youth involved in the program are significantly more likely to report:

- **Increased Opportunities for Voice and Choice:** Planning and leading activities, making rules, and being in charge of doing something to help the community.
- **Improved Adult Relationships:** Caring and supportive relationships with program staff who listen, show respect, and are interested in youths' ideas.

	YELL Participants	Other Adolescents at Bridge
	Pre- to Post- Mean Gain	Pre- to Post- Mean Gain
Youth Voice	.30	-.03
Adult Support	.42	-.16

The positive impact of YELL was replicated in statistical analyses that accounted for pre-test score, age, race, gender and site.

Recent Developments: Two grants have been secured to support and expand youth voice programming at Bridge:

- Public Good Grant from the University of Denver
 - \$19,000 to support YAB facilitation, incentives, and the youth leadership summit.
- Healthy Living Advocacy Grant from the Colorado Health Foundation:
 - \$90,000 to scale both programs with a full-time Youth Voice Coordinator, incentives, and new equipment.