

# **A Young Person's Perspective on Youth-led Action Research, Planning & Evaluation (Youth REP) as a Vehicle for Service-Learning and Community Change**

[Tee J. Tagor, with assistance from Sergio Cuellar, Youth In Focus (YIF)]

## **Abstract**

This article provides a young person's perspective on the role of youth-led action research as a valuable way to engage youth in their communities. It discusses the impact this form of intervention has on youth and the impacts it can bring to the larger community using the case study of a project in San Francisco that utilized youth-led action research as a way to carry out service-learning.

## **Introduction**

Youth In Focus (YIF) is a non-profit organization serving the San Francisco Bay Area and Central Valley regions of California with offices in Oakland and Sacramento. YIF consults and trains youth and adult partners in community-based organizations in the methods of youth-led action research, evaluation, and planning (Youth REP). YIF teaches these research methods to under-represented and socio-economically disadvantaged youth including youth of color and formerly incarcerated youth. Its mission focuses on helping to amplify the voices of youth to empower themselves and improve their communities using academic research skills and tools. The Youth REP process provides young people with academic research skills that are applicable in their future educational and career goals, as well as their future work in their communities.

This article shows how youth-led action research can be a valuable and influential way to engage youth in their communities. It also focuses on the impact this form of intervention has on youth and the impacts it can bring to the larger community from the perspective of one of the youth leaders of a project in San Francisco.

## **Overview of the Youth In Focus Youth-Led Action Research, Evaluation, and Planning (Youth REP) Model**

YIF trains youth through its *Stepping Stones: Youth-led Research and Evaluation Planning (REP) Institute* curriculum, which incorporates an eight-step process:

- Stepping Stone 1: Getting Ready (project plan development; securing on-site staff; hiring the youth team);
- Stepping Stone 2: Orientation and Team Building (including critical thinking skills development and community asset mapping);
- Stepping Stone 3 – Research and Evaluation Design (including developing research and evaluation questions, research methods, and evaluation instruments; and developing data collection action plan);
- Stepping Stone 4 – Skills Development (skill-building in the areas in Stepping Stone 3 using such techniques as role-plays for observation, surveys, interviews and/or focus groups);
- Stepping Stone 5 – Data Collection & Documentation (using the identified research methodologies);
- Stepping Stone 6: Data Analysis and Documentation of Findings (including developing recommendations);
- Stepping Stone 7: Final Report, Presentation(s), Celebration (including evaluating the project process); and
- Stepping Stone 8: Action Planning and Taking Action! (including developing an outreach and media strategy).

The curriculum is taught using a style that allows youth from diverse backgrounds and different levels of formal education to use their life experiences and voices as key sources of inspiration, knowledge, and wisdom, in addition to the formal research skills they gain through the training.

Using the Youth REP *Stepping Stones* curriculum, youth formulate their research question and research goals, and conduct qualitative and quantitative research to discover what their peers' desire and want to see improved in their communities. Some areas that recent YIF projects have focused on include: building safer neighborhoods with decreased drugs and violence, improving services for homeless youth, and creating more inclusive sexual health education in schools.

After the research is performed, the young researchers present their findings, recommendations, and next steps to the public, which includes other young people, policy makers, funders and representatives from the educational system, youth correctional facilities, and community-based organizations. Having a diverse group of stakeholders present to hear and reflect together on the research findings and recommendations allows next steps in the action phase of the research process to be developed.

Since the young people shape the specifics of each step of the *Stepping Stones* curriculum, they have a voice in each phase of the research. Youth select one or more research methods for their projects including surveys, focus groups, observations, interviews, and/or photo-voice. They then receive training through a series of interactive activities on such topics as how to conduct interviews and focus groups professionally, conduct observations, and/or develop surveys. The interactive activities play an important part of YIF's curriculum and are beneficial for youth in numerous ways.

First, these teaching methods insure that youth with different learning styles can all benefit from the experience. Full participation in all aspects of the participatory research project is a requirement of each project. The research positions for youth on the teams are treated as jobs and participating young people receive stipends for their work. YIF has successfully used this approach to Youth REP to individuals as young as 12 years old and as high as their mid-twenties, as well as to youth from many different backgrounds, including youth with learning differences. For the most part, this approach has allowed all participating youth to accomplish the objectives of their projects.

Second, by assessing themselves, their communities and society, youth learn to understand how systems of oppression work. This increased understanding and the participation in projects help youth to become powerful change agents in society.

Third, the activities in the *Stepping Stone* curriculum are closely connected to or drawn from the youth's personal experiences, which motivates commitment to the project, but also lays the foundation for the research question and project goals.

Fourth, the activities in the curriculum encourage youth to use their voice, take charge, and at the same time, learn new skills in a safe environment they create for themselves. One of the activities is called BOB WOW, which stands for Best Of the Best and Worst Of the Worst. Through role-plays the young people enacts the best case scenario and the worse case scenario of the participatory action research process as it is carried out in a community or school. Based on this activity the youth can then examine the components of the worse case scenario and plan what they ought to change it.

As they move from one Stepping Stone to the next, the youth research team selects and obtains skills to carry out their research methods, (which Youth In Focus refers to as research tools), and they then youth plan outreach to the community – which may be their schools, local recreational centers, or the neighborhoods identified as part of the research.

After this phase, the research team conducts focus groups, interviews or implements the other research methods they selected to gather their data on their research question. The data are collected and analyzed with more interactive activities, which allows each youth to participate and understand the analytic process. This is also often a time where the youth research team takes full ownership of their project, because they have collected their data and become excited about what the results might be. They also get the opportunity to formulate their initial findings based on their analyses and present their recommendations for solutions that they and other members in their community can enact.

During this phase of the research there is an especially high demand for teamwork because the findings and recommendations are presented in a written final report that is presented to the community, other key stakeholders, and decision makers. This report writing and recommendation development phase also encourages the youth to determine who on the research team is most skilled at the various tasks involved in the project

Youth REP challenges youth to learn skills that broaden their personal and professional development. However, this goal is always approached from the perspective that with appropriate support and training, young people have the ability to know what they want to see changed in their communities, to get the answers to the questions they raise, and can be trusted with the wisdom they have in voicing their perspectives, concerns, and recommendations for change. The entire approach of the *Stepping Stones* curriculum is one of self-empowerment, where youth are asked to find their own answers and encouraged to ask others for help and resources, if needed.

The final written research report is typically accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation developed by the youth and other multi-media resources, to present at the public meeting. YIF trainers, adult site facilitators of the projects (who co-facilitate the projects with YIF staff), and the young people engage in an exchange of knowledge during this phase of the project. The public presentation to the community is often an exhilarating experience for the team, the facilitators, the YIF staff, and the community after a long, exciting and challenging learning process.

## **CASE STUDY: ACTIVITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

One of YIF's recent research projects was the Youth Empowerment Team (YET, 2005) a project in collaboration with the San Francisco LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and

Transgender) Community Center. The Youth Empowerment Team (YET) initially consisted of six researchers between the ages of twelve and twenty-four who researched the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged and homeless LGBTTTQQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-Spirited, Queer, Questioning, and intersex) youth in San Francisco. Two of them did not complete the process, leaving a total of four who carried out each step outlined in the Stepping Stones. The participating youth researchers were recruited from locations and community-based organizations where youth accessed services for homeless and socio-economically disadvantaged youth. The researchers were selected by the project facilitator based on their activism in the community, team and leadership skills, and sharing a high motivation to change the circumstances for their fellow homeless LGBTTTQQI peers and themselves.

One of the authors of this article (Tee J. Tagor) was one of the YET team members for this case, and the remainder of this article summarizes his (my) personal experiences and reflections that emerged over time. As I see it, the integration of our life experiences and the research tools created an empowering experience both during this project and well after. Focusing on topics such as homelessness, LGBTTTQQI youth, and the political-analysis of why we found ourselves in certain circumstances, helped us stay dedicated to the project. The topics along with the opportunity to be able to change realities in our communities and gain skills that gave us a voice were powerful.

Through the research process we were able to address different systems of oppression and explore solutions. Both YET's mission statement and our research question were inspired by our personal life experiences, and we chose to focus our research on these experiences.

At the beginning of the YET project, our team formulated their mission statement in this way:

We are a team of youth organizing to empower socio-economically disadvantaged lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, heterosexual and intersex (LGBTQQHI) youth in San Francisco. Through outreach, advocacy, and community organizing, we assess the needs of youth by collecting hands-on information to propose solutions to better meet these needs and ensure adequate resources and equal treatment for LGBTQQHI youth, while building leadership skills and empowering youth and their families.

Our team's research questions were: *"What are the needs of socio-economically disadvantaged LGBTQQHI youth? How can the community empower youth by ensuring adequate resources and equal treatment?"*

None of the team members had gained any research skills through middle school, high school, college, or employment, so we invited YIF staff to work with us to give us the appropriate skills and methods. There was a brief period of hesitation from the YET team towards the YIF trainer during the initial sessions. The team feared that their voice would not be heard, as they had previously encountered many adults using them as tokens or trying to silence them. It took several training sessions to gain trust and full anticipation. However, as soon as the YET team members understood from experience that their voices and experiences were the core of each step of YIF's training curriculum, we let our guard down and became full participants in the process.

After a few team-building trainings, the team presented what we had identified the most prominent problems faced by homeless LGBTTTQQI youth in San Francisco. We also showed a map that they created and where they could find most homeless youth. The map showed that homeless youth frequently hang out near non-profit organizations that provide them with services.

Our team then selected focus groups, surveys, and interviews as the research methods to gather data on our research question. The next steps of YIF's curriculum taught us research techniques including focus group design, including how to develop focus group guides, and survey and interview question development.

The YET report was released in January 2006 and described YET's methodology in detail, as well as presented findings and recommendations. The team collected 93 surveys, held two focus groups for youth and one for service providers, and conducted four additional interviews with service providers. The YET team learned to analyze the data using YIF tools. We compiled findings and formulated recommendations and next steps. The recommendations and next steps were based upon the collected data and the findings, but also were relevant to the team's experiences and the needs of queer and transgender youth. Some of the findings included:

Finding: The four largest issues low-income LGBTQQHI youth face in San Francisco in order of importance are: housing/homelessness, jobs/income, substance use, and education. Supporting data:

- 85% youth listed housing as the biggest issue for LGBTQQHI youth
- 70% youth listed jobs/income as the biggest issue for LGBTQQHI youth
- 65% youth listed substance use at the biggest issue for LGBTQQHI youth
- 41% youth listed education as the biggest issue for LGBTQQHI youth.

These findings were not a surprise for the YET team, but were not expected by the adults. They had assumed that the biggest issues of homeless youth were drug abuse and that homeless youth chose to be homeless. With the support of these data, we demonstrated that LGBTTTQQI youth encounter many other obstacles, such as discrimination based on race, sexual and/or gender identity, age, and other areas. We asked funders and non-profit organizations to follow up with possible solutions.

Finding: Many LGBTQQHI poor youth experience a cycle of homelessness, to depression, to substance use, to participation in unsafe sex. Supporting data:

- 37% of youth said that they get high because of housing/homelessness
- 55% youth listed depression as the biggest reason for getting high
- 50% youth said they were more likely to feel depressed when getting high
- 44% youth addressed said they were more likely to have unsafe sex when high
- 31% youth addressed said that they were more likely to feel suicidal when high.

Finding: Almost all of the youth surveyed want to make a difference in the community and are willing to participate/organize to improve their situation, but don't do so because they do not feel empowered to do so. Supporting data:

- 96% youth surveyed said they would make a difference in their community if they could:
  - be taken seriously (61%)
  - know people are really listening to them (56%)
  - be truly involved in decisions affecting their life (54%)
  - be considered a leader more than a trouble-maker (46%)
- 88% youth surveyed would undertake action to improve their situation:
  - 56% would get involved with a youth organizing group
  - 53% would come to a protest or rally

Some of the recommendations from the YET report included creating independent youth councils or advisory boards to improve conditions and create client-centered policies. They also included having a designated space for youth to organize, set up a peer mentoring program, and have case management.

The public presentation was an amazing experience because we got to share the research results and recommendations with many different people: policymakers,

service providers, funders, LGBTTTQQI youth, and even a representative from the mayor's office of San Francisco. It is a very empowering experience when your voice is heard and when you can share your view on the needs of your peers. Since most of the issues affected us personally, it became an even more powerful presentation. The audience seemed especially impressed with what they heard because it came from young people who had experienced the circumstances they researched.

Later, the YET team continued its work by turning our research into action steps. They created a Zine for the youth with self-sufficiency skills and several community-based organizations received grants totaling \$750,000 from the San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Family. This money allowed a night meal to be provided on each day of the week at different service locations. There were even other benefits for homeless LGBTTTQQI youth in San Francisco. For example, based upon the YET report, San Francisco Supervisor Bevan Dufty established a funding package "Community Partnership for LGBTQQ[TI] youth. The Bay Area Reporter (Baiko, 2006), a local paper, wrote:

The funding closely matches the programs that queer youth wanted as part of the [San Francisco] LGBT Community Center's Youth Empowerment Team report issued in January [2006]...

As one of the researchers and leaders of the YET team, I was offered the opportunity to lead a new project for Youth In Focus (YIF). As the trainer and facilitator of the BALYHS (Bay Area LGBTTTQQI Youth Health Care Scan), I was inspired by the YET project to focus on the health care needs of LGBTTTQQI youth. The BALYHS project also presented me with the opportunity to apply my previously acquired research skills and teach them to a new team of LGBTTTQQI youth researchers. In addition, my new role allowed me to further develop personal and leadership skills. Simultaneously, I was able to obtain a B.A. degree with the research skills that I had learned during the YET project. This was a huge accomplishment for me, especially since I had gone to several colleges and had not been able to reach my fullest potential because of learning difficulties. Through YIF's training curriculum, I was able to apply the research skills in my college assignments, as well as my thesis.

I learned professional research skills that I can use in the academic world and at work, more skills for working in a team, and conflict resolution to help solve problems in this project and subsequent projects and life experiences. I have also learned more about what's happening in the community regarding youth and their needs, and increased my ability to contribute to the community through research as an avenue to service-learning. Another youth participant said she learned how to speak to officials or those

in positions of power, and having research to back up what we see and observe in the community allows us to more powerfully advocate for changes. All of these were great benefits for me and the other participants in this project.

The learning experiences from YIF helped me to formulate my analyses of different systems of oppression that I have experienced throughout life. It had been enormously difficult for me to write about and verbalize my analyses before, in traditional educational systems.

During the Youth REP process, we were challenged to look at ourselves and society in order to come up with a radical analysis. This, in turn, gave me the belief that I can change my life circumstances, and have an impact on my LBTTQI community and beyond.

My service-learning experience with Youth In Focus (YIF) has allowed me to enter a world where other community activists are committed to making positive change. One of the most outstanding parts of YIF's curriculum was that it was taught in a popular education style and that both the facilitator and trainer truly let the team do the work. Most importantly they trusted us. This meant they made space for mistakes, silence, frustration, and patience. At other times they encouraged us to trust our own voices and experiences. Being given the opportunity to speak freely and incorporate our own insights into a research project was truly empowering beyond words.

**REFERENCES**

Bajko, M.S. July 6, 2006 *Supes Approve Queer Youth Funds*. Bay Area Reporter. San Francisco, CA.

<http://www.ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=975>

Tee, Calenda T., Rodgers, J., Tyler, C. December 2005. *Findings and Recommendations from the Youth Empowerment Team (YET); a Youth Led research project from the San Francisco LGBT Community Center*. San Francisco, CA.

[http://www.issuelab.org/research/findings\\_and\\_recommendations\\_from\\_the\\_youth\\_empowerment\\_team](http://www.issuelab.org/research/findings_and_recommendations_from_the_youth_empowerment_team)

## AUTHORS

**Tee J. Tagor** was the primary author of this article. Tee coordinates and facilitates the new youth-led Bay Area Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth Health Scan, a project of the Health Justice Initiative (HJI) at Youth in Focus. In the past two years, Tee was one of the leaders of the Youth Empowerment Team (YET) at the San Francisco LGBT Community Center. Tee worked with YIF and the rest of the YET to develop findings and recommendations that led to several improvements in the lives of homeless LGBT youth in San Francisco. As a visual artist and community activist, Tee fights for equal rights, believes in empowering youth and helps them use their voice and resourcefulness to create social justice. Tee recently received a BA degree in interdisciplinary humanities (Political Science and Leadership) and is currently working towards a MA in Psychology.

**Sergio Cuellar** (Senior Program Manager, Central Valley Initiative) supported the writing of this article though he was not a participant in the project. Serg is a native of Patterson, in the heart of the Central Valley. Sergio received his bachelor's degree in History from California State University, Fresno. As a former Social Science teacher and commissioner of Patterson's Recreation Board, Sergio weaves together his understanding about the principles of youth development and empowerment with a strong community development framework. Sergio is on the Executive Committee for the California Fund for Youth Organizing as the Movement Building Committee Chair, and represents the Central Valley on the Fund.