

**Participant Perceptions of Their Experiences with the East Palo Alto YMCA Youth  
Institute and Its' Effects: A Qualitative Exploration**

**Julie O'Donnell, Ph.D. MSW  
Professor & Director of Research  
Child Welfare Training Centre  
School of Social Work  
California State University, Long Beach**

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## **Introduction**

The YMCA Youth Institute, an intensive, year-round program that uses technology as an integral mechanism for promoting positive youth development and enhancing the academic success and career readiness of low-income, culturally-diverse high school students. The goals of the Youth Institute are to : (a) improve the technology, career, leadership and decision-making skills of these youth to promote readiness for higher education or career entry after graduation, (b) improve academic achievement and stimulate interest in higher education among low-income, culturally-diverse, urban high school youth, and (c) promote bonding to pro-social adults and community attachment among urban youth to ensure that they remain engaged in their schools and communities. The program is divided into two components, the intensive summer technology program and the year-round academic support program.

### ***Intensive Technology Summer Program***

Incoming participants participate in a full-time (35 hours per week), eight-week summer program. The first week is spent at a wilderness retreat at Kings Canyon National Park and focuses on team building, cultural diversity training, decision-making and life sciences. Participants are assigned to project teams that are maintained throughout the summer so there is an ethnic and gender mix. Initiative games and a low-ropes course are used to promote group cohesion and leadership skills while improving problem-solving and communication skills. Activities designed to increase cultural awareness and tolerance are integrated into the week. Life sciences are introduced using the outdoor education model. This week is critical to program success because it helps participants to develop the group and problem-solving skills they will need to successfully work in groups to accomplish their summer tasks.

During the remaining weeks, the program uses project-based learning to teach information technology skills. Projects include: (a) digital story telling/ movie making, (b) graphic design, (c) web site creation, (d) presentation and office software, (e) 3D animation, and (f) use of peripheral hardware (scanner, DV cameras, etc). A wide range of the latest software is used including Cinema 4D, Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, I-Movie, Final Cut Pro, Power Point, Keynote, Pagemaker, Flash, Extensis InDesign, Garage Band and Macromedia Dreamweaver. Participants also learn how to connect, troubleshoot and use computer networks. All classes have a curriculum description that identifies the pedagogical approach and the skill sets to be learned while linking the content to school content standards. Products include animated logos, five to ten minute movies, a magazine focused on teen issues and a website. All projects are designed to help participants gain literacy, math and higher level thinking skills, are linked to school content standards and completed in teams. Participants are paid a \$400 stipend for the summer.

The East Palo Alto Youth Institute (EPAYI) was the first effort to replicate the model outside of Long Beach and the program is its second year of operation. Similar to the first year, two of the staff had previously worked for the YI in Long Beach, and were themselves, graduates of the YI. The third EPAYI staff member came from the local East Palo Alto community, had worked for the YMCA and with the school district, and was staff for the YI summer and year-round program in the preceding year. The East Palo Alto cohort, along with an alumni group from EPA, attended the wilderness retreat along with the Long Beach and Community Build groups, and then continued for seven weeks in East Palo Alto at the YMCA. In addition to traditional YI activities, they also went on four field trips to various locations around San Francisco, including a recreational park San Mateo, a train trip to the Bay Bridge where they

participated in a photography scavenger hunt, a sports facility with trampoline activities in Santa Clara, and an aquatics center in Morgan Hill. This report presents, in their own words, how the youth viewed their experiences with the EPAYI and their perceptions of the outcomes resulting from their participation.

## **Methods**

### ***Data Collection***

Data was collected through focus groups using a structured interview schedule. Both parents and youth signed consents to participate in the research prior to the start of the data collection. To help maintain confidentiality during the focus groups, youth were assigned a number to identify themselves. The youth were also told they could refrain from answering any questions. The focus groups lasted about one hour each. Four youth were unable to participate in the focus groups due to school and other commitments. All of the information shared was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Although many of the youth actively participated, some were hesitant to share, but, over the course of the interview, all were able to voice their thoughts at some point.

### ***Sample***

Ten of the 14 (71%) EPA Youth Institute youth who completed the 2011 summer program participated in the study. As shown in Table 1, these youth ranged from 14 to 17 years of age, with the vast majority being 14 (80%). Sixty percent were male. Latinos (90%) were the largest ethnic group, followed by African-Americans (10%). Eighty percent of participants were in 9th grade when they started the EPAYI summer program.

Table 1  
Description of Summer 2011 East Palo Alto Youth Institute Participants  
(N = 10)

	%	N
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	60%	6
Female	40%	4
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Latino	90%	9
African-American	10%	1
<b>Age at Start of Program</b>		
14	80%	8
16	10%	1
17	10%	1
<b>Grade</b>		
8 <sup>th</sup>	10%	1
9 <sup>th</sup>	70%	7
11 <sup>th</sup>	20%	2

***Instrument***

The interview schedule consisted of ten questions which explored youth's experiences with the EPAYI and their perceived outcomes. The questions covered a range of topics including: (a) how they learned about the EPAYI, (b) the summer activities, (c) technology and job skills, (d) benefits of participation on themselves and others, (e) program participation and school attitudes, (f) how participation will help them in the future, (g) their relationships with EPAYI staff, and (h) suggestions for program improvement.

## *Analysis*

Both focus group sessions were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. A focus group approach was adopted since it allowed for an in-depth scrutiny of the youths' experiences and views (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1998). This approach also allowed for the efficient yet exhaustive collection of data regarding the youths' experiences with the EPAYI, their subjective perceptions of these experiences, and how their lives have been impacted by these experiences. The transcripts were combined and analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the themes emerged, the researchers repeatedly returned to the data to ensure that they adequately explained the wide diversity of experiences of all the youth.

## **Results**

### *Program Recruitment*

The vast majority of youth who participated in the program this year were recruited at the school, either through a flyer or by a school staff member who also worked for the EPAYI program. A couple of youth learned about it through family members (sister, aunt).

Moreno works at Cesar Chavez [school]. We had an elective after our classes. He was there and showed us videos the alumni made last year and it caught our attention. It looked fun so I decided to try.

We learned about it from fliers from school.

My aunt works for the YMCA. She found out about the program so she figured it was a good way for me to get accustomed to this side of the bay and the people.

I found out about the program because my sister came here last year.

The reasons as to why these youth joined the program varied somewhat. Most youth joined because they were interested in computers and technology (movie making, graphic design) but a couple thought it would be fun or that they had nothing else to do in the summer. One joined because he/she really liked camping.

What interested me was about computers and the different programs.

Well, I thought it'd be fun to be with the YI.

Instead of doing nothing at home, I wanted to learn new stuff and have new experiences so I decided to join.

As suggested last year, the use of “word of mouth” recruitment and sharing the products of the previous EPAYI were good marketing tools to attract new youth.

### ***Program Activities***

The primary activities noted by participants were learning technology and completing projects (movies and magazine) and the wilderness retreat. A few youth also mentioned other activities such as presenting their family history projects and the field trip.

There were three big things. First, was the retreat, a camping experience for us to get to know each other more. Then there was getting used to the software: learning how to use them, figuring out what to do, and how we were going to use them for our projects. Third was the articles that we had to write, and the movies that we are making and everything else is everyone working on it.

What we learn here is how to make movies, and projects. A month ago we did a project about your family. We went to San Francisco to walk around. Tomorrow we are going to Sky High where they have trampolines, and we went to camping.

An additional question asked the participants to identify which aspects of the program taught them the most. The highest percentage of youth thought they had learned the most from the wilderness retreat including how to work with others. It also appeared the retreat had helped some to expand their horizons. A few thought they gained most from making the movies or writing stories and designing the magazine. A couple said the skills they learned when making presentations would be really helpful to them when completing school projects.

Camping [wilderness retreat] was where I learned the most. We had to be responsible, respectable and learn to take care of ourselves.

At the wilderness retreat, everybody barely knew each other. Once we got together we did a bunch of activities like the survival course. I had never used a compass before or

had to use a stick to tap on rocks for snakes. It expands your mind more because you are not in your usual place. Going over there and doing new things opens your eyes and you realize there's more for you out there than being here.

Making the movies gets a little frustrating because you don't know how to do it. You learn to get along with your teammates to fix the movie.

I liked the presentations, because it's going to help us in high school. I liked learning how to speak in front of people.

The computer programs helped me because it seems like we are going to do a lot of this in high school and I will already know how to use it.

### ***Technology and Media Skills***

Youth were then asked to share the technology and media skills they had learned during the summer and how they might have shared their knowledge with others. The responses indicated that these youth could now use a wide variety of computer programs including garage band, iMovie, Photoshop, Inspiration, and PowerPoint. About 40% of the youth had shared their skills with others including their siblings, cousins, aunts, and program donors; one said, "I helped my sister fix her computer."

I learned how to use garage band and iMovie. In garage band you can make different kind of tones and music tracks. iMovie it helps you how to make a movie. I have shared it with my cousins.

The big one was Photoshop. Everybody's worried about how they look. I have a lot of young aunties, so when I got use to it, they tried to get me to teach them how to use it.

I've learned on iMovie how to edit, which is pretty easy.

Inspiration software helps to set up your ideas, and bubble them, separate them and keep them organized.

We did a presentation about our family with PowerPoint. We all learned how to use it so we can present better. They taught us to give more detailed presentations. We presented in front of our groups and some donors came and watched us do it.

### *Additional Skills and Benefits*

Several questions explored other skills the youth learned and how they had changed as a result of their EPAYI participation. Some of the major areas of improvement were in teamwork and interpersonal skills, and respect and responsibility. The comments suggested that many youth had struggled in these areas before but now had new confidence in their abilities.

#### *Teamwork and Interpersonal Skills*

The majority (60%) of participants noted that they had developed better teamwork or interpersonal skills as a result of their participation. These comments included the ability to develop trust, to speak one's mind, and to work with all types of people. A couple noted that groups needed to trust and depend on each other, something that is not always easy when people are new to each other or have different styles and personalities.

We were put into groups of all sorts of people; people who like to mess around, serious people, and quiet people. We all opened up with each other and started to work more with each other. Now we have more confidence with each other. We have grown an ability to rely on other people.

In teams it worked the best because we all depended on each others' strengths and weaknesses. We helped each other, and we were able to develop more.

I have been more outgoing and, honestly, I have been happier with myself. I started hanging out with people that I wouldn't have been with before. I only saw one thing and now I see many things. This program has really helped me out a lot. Without it I would have probably been stuck up.

I was always able to speak to people but I have become more motivated too. Instead of just being able to do it, I'm pursuing it more.

#### *Respect and Responsibility*

The importance of respect and responsibility were embedded throughout the comments. Many said they had learned to be more respectful of others whether teammates, friends or family

members. They also learned that they needed to be accountable and responsible for their actions, particularly in the job setting.

I learned how to be more respectful to my friends and family.

Everybody came in here with a mask that we had picked up from everyone else in the community. We learned in this program what we need to do to respect other people, how they want to be treated, and basically, instead of being something that you need to be in the community that is supposedly so dangerous, you change yourself so you can change people around you.

I learned for a job you have to come early because I'm sometimes late. They told me that if you're late for a job, they take money. Before I went camping, I always used to be irresponsible. After we went camping, it helped me be more responsible.

We had to show compassion and respect to others in our group and be responsible for our own actions. I wasn't like this before. I wasn't respectful or responsible when I joined this program. Almost half way through I started to change. They showed me to respect my team mates, and take care of my stuff.

A smaller number of youth each reported improved attitudes, increased motivation, or that they had established positive relationships with others or found a safe place in the EPAYI.

As two said, "Throughout the summer it has united us. We are there for each other and feel like a small family," and "I used to be in the streets, and now I come here and it's better for me."

Many of the youth made comments that spanned multiple areas noted above.

All of the skills we have learned here so far are relevant for our future. We've learned a lot of things here. Some things that we've never thought we were going to do. It's going to help us go so far because we know what we are capable of doing and what we're not, Even if we fail, we know we can try again because we know we are then more likely to succeed.

I've learned ever since I joined this program how to be self-confident, more responsible, and more respectful. It's ok to trust people and it's ok to be outgoing because people expect that of you. You could be shy but it's better if you speak your mind.

### ***EPAYI Participation and School and Career***

The majority (70%) of the youth made comments which indicated that participation in the EPAYI would benefit them in school. Some reported that they felt more committed to education whether that meant having a better attitude and trying harder or that they were now planning on going to college.

My attitude [toward school] before was indifferent. I used to always mess around. Now that has changed. In the program they teach you how to have good manners and to speak right. Here they talk about your future, going to college. I want to go to college, have a job and make money.

My attitude changed because it used to be all negative and now it's more positive. They get you prepared for high school too because it's different than middle school. In high school you don't talk back to the teachers because you can get kicked out. It influenced me because I want to go to college and make something of myself. Instead of having any kind of job, I want something more.

I've taken up more. I'm trying to take college classes while in high school because I want get farther ahead and be done with school. It does boost the motivation to pursue what you want to be in life. I had an idea of what I wanted to be when I came here, but it boosted my motivation to pursue it.

A few youth also mentioned that the technology they had learned would help them to complete assignments and get good grades in high school.

Most of the computer things we learned are going to help me in school with projects. I am more prepared for high school.

It's going to help in school because you're going to be one of a handful of people in the classroom able to present your projects. You're going to be ahead in spokesmanship and will be able to use your words to influence other people into liking your stuff.

One of the goals of the YI is to help youth gain workforce development skills. While many of the skills noted earlier should prove useful for future jobs, a few youth provided specific examples of how what they had learned would help them in the workforce. While a couple noted

that the computer skills would prove beneficial in the workforce, others said they had found the motivation to work toward their career goals or new goals.

It will help me in the future to get a job. If I get a job and have to use a computer, I'm going to know more about it and have more skills.

I'm pursuing to be a lawyer and real estate agent. If I'm going to present something to somebody, I can do it a lot more fancy and catch their attention instead of just telling them.

I've grown up here. I've seen a lot of people who think they have nothing to go for. At camp, I saw many people come together. We're all different, but we still strive for the same thing, to get out of where we come from. I realize that I have become more motivated to pursue what I want even despite the struggles I'm going to have to face because I know it's worth it. I want to be a judge or an FBI agent.

I want to come back, not to just be in the program again, but when I grow older so I can also reach out to other young kids.

### ***EPAYI Participation and Culture***

One of the key beliefs of the YI is the importance of teaching cultural tolerance and understanding so that youth can positively function in a multicultural environment. Only a few youth shared what they had learned about culture, perhaps because almost everyone in the group shared the same ethnicity, and a few did not think their involvement made a difference in this area. Comments included, "The presentation about the family tree helped us with the backgrounds of others, even though we aren't the same culture we all have things in common," and "The YI didn't really show our cultures because we had too much in common to show differences; we pretty much felt the same."

### ***EPAYI Participation and Family Relationships***

Half of youth noted relationships with their families had improved as a result of their EPAYI participation. Youth were more likely to be responsible and help around the house or to show more respect for their parents or family members.

Before going camping, I never used to clean my room. My mom and dad used to always yell at me. After camp I started cleaning my room and my parents' room too when I'm in a good mood.

I started to be more respectful and responsible to my parents and almost all of my family.

I have learned how to have more patience with my family. I've been helping them out more and we have been getting along more.

### ***EPAYI Staff***

All of the youth were positive about their relationships with YI staff. Youth described staff as helpful, thoughtful, and supportive. Some recognized that, in addition to teaching them technology skills, staff had also helped them to make changes in their behaviors and attitudes.

They taught us everything we know about computers. They are really thoughtful because they don't have to be here, but they spend their time here and help mold our futures. The relationships are good.

My relationship with the staff is good. They helped me when they talked to me aside from the group. Their words get in my mind and make me change. They have helped me change my attitude.

They are cool. They teach us about the programs, how to create our articles and movies. They helped us out on a lot of things.

It's good because they support us in everything. They cheer us on so it's easy to go out there and do what we want to do.

### ***Suggestions for Improvement***

The final question asked the youth to make suggestions on how the program could be improved. While some thought the program was "perfect," a few wanted more trips, more and better equipment, and, with the addition of the alumni group, more staff. Youth were interested, as well, in coming back as alumni, as one said, "If I have a chance to come back next year, I would like to learn new stuff, different than we learned this year. The experiences will help me more to succeed."

I liked the program a lot. I'd say more trips, but we would have to earn them. You have to do what you have to do in order to receive something back. We have to get everything done.

Better cameras so we can make our movies better. They look good, but compared to what they have in Long Beach, it's like 'Wow!' over there and we are just beginning.

They say there's a big difference to what there was last year. If it keeps growing, they might need more staff members. We had at least four groups and the staff member was trying to help individual groups, and go back and forth between groups.

### **Discussion**

The overall findings reported here, similar to last year, provide evidence that the EPAYI summer program was effective in meeting many of its primary goals. It is clear that these youth learned diverse technology skills, developed team work and interpersonal skills, and became more respectful of others and responsible for their actions. In addition, a large proportion believed that their participation would lead them to be more committed and successful in school, that they would pursue higher education, or that their family lives had improved. Participants also frequently noted that what they had learned during the summer would help them in many ways in the future. As was noted last year, many of these youth appeared to enter the program with challenges in some area (home, school, community, negative peers) of their lives, yet all reported benefitting a great deal from the summer program. Thus, it appears the program effectively served youth in need of support and intervention.

Most youth were recruited at school or by direct contact with YMCA staff although some came from word of mouth from their family members. The majority joined the program because of their interest in technology, however, a couple thought it would be fun, they could have new experiences, or they did not have much else to do in the summer. Given that youth joined for a variety of reasons, program outreach and marketing materials should include the range of

activities and potential benefits that may come from EPAYI participation. A few came because they had relatives involved in the program or because they were impressed with the products from last year. This suggests positive “word-of-mouth” about the program is reaching the community and should make recruiting easier. The close collaboration between the EPA YMCA and the local schools also appears to have helped in the recruitment process. While youth liked all of the activities offered by the EPAYI, they seemed to have been most influenced by the wilderness retreat which was seen as building skills and solidifying relationships while opening their eyes to possibilities outside their neighborhoods and daily lives.

### ***Skill Development***

As anticipated, the EPAYI helped youth to develop a broad range of technology skills. Youth reported mastering software programs while completing their movies, magazines and other required projects. These YI participants were proud of the technology they had learned and a few had already shared or were planning to share their new knowledge with others. Most recognized how these skills would put them “ahead of others” at school and in the workforce. In addition to learning the technology required to complete their projects, these youth also developed their presentation, persuasion and goal setting skills. The diversity of projects seemed to allow them to develop technology skills in the areas that most appealed to them.

As hypothesized by the YI framework, youth also reported developing leadership skills such as teamwork and interpersonal skills as a result of their involvement in the program. While the wilderness retreat was a primary catalyst in developing many of these skills, they were further honed throughout the summer as youth worked on projects together. The skill gains identified also included an increased sense of respect for others and responsibility for one’s actions. Some youth also shared they had established trust, improved their attitudes, and became

more motivated as a result of their involvement. All of these things should contribute to more positive educational, workforce and relationship outcomes. Many of the changes noted represented elements of positive youth development which suggests that the EPAYI was able to create an environment that allowed these aspects to grow and evolve. Overall, the findings related to improved technology and interpersonal skills found here suggest the EPAYI was effective in meeting its' first goal.

### ***EPAYI and School and Careers***

Another goal of the YI is to improve academic achievement and stimulate interest in higher education. Since this was only a summer program, there is no way of knowing whether participation will actually lead to better academic achievement. However, there are clear indications that these youth believed the skills they learned would help them perform in the school setting. In addition, a fairly substantial proportion indicated their participation had made them more committed to their education, as evidenced by comments related to working harder in school and being motivated to attend college, something some did not think about prior to program participation. Thus, it appears the EPAYI helped youth to develop skills to complete school assignments and to become more committed and invested in their educations.

These youth mentioned career skills less than some of the other areas. This might be because so many were young. However, a few reported they had learned skills that would be useful to them in their future careers even when their preferred careers were not in technology fields. Although, in particular, these youth said the computer skills would be valuable, some seemed to have gained confidence in themselves and their ability to have meaningful jobs in the future. Given the history of the YI in “growing their own,” it is nice to see that at least one would like to come back and work with youth in the future.

### ***EPAYI and Bonding to Pro-Social Others***

Bonding to pro-social others is a critical protective factor which has been shown to be effective in reducing the likelihood of involvement in adolescent problem behaviors (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). As hypothesized, these youth were clearly bonded to one another and to the EPAYI staff. Their experiences, particularly at the wilderness retreat, helped them to establish positive relationships with others whom they might not have befriended before this experience. Numerous youth mentioned that the YI had become a family and appreciated the sense of trust and safety they had with others. Participants were very positive about the EPAYI staff members who appeared to do an excellent job of mentoring these youth. These positive relationships, according to the youth, helped them to both learn skills and make changes in their attitudes and behaviors. It is worth noting, however, that these participants saw the need for more staff to interact effectively with the groups since there were more youth with the addition of the alumni group.

The findings from this study, in combination with the results of the quantitative study reported earlier, provide strong evidence that the EPAYI was quite successful in meeting its major goals. The program effects noted by these EPAYI participants were quite similar to those found in last year's EPAYI and prior evaluations of the YI, suggesting that this program has been successfully transferred to a new and different community. The youth who participated in the program, at least those who were in the focus groups, benefitted in many aspects of their lives. However, it is important to note that only 70% of the youth participated in this part of the evaluation. If focus groups are held next year, they should be scheduled when more youth are available. The results of the evaluations this year, combined with those from the first year,

strongly indicate it would be extremely beneficial for the Youth Institute to continue at the East Palo Alto YMCA.

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