

Lessons Learned for Improving Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion from Y-USA's Out-of-School Time Programs

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Youth development program practitioners, policymakers, and funders are increasingly interested in how out-of-school time (OST) programs can effectively reach and engage diverse populations of young people. Indeed, research indicates that participation in high-quality OST activities and programs is associated with improved social, academic, and physical outcomes (Moore et al., 2014; Redd et al., 2012), so it is critical that they assure equitable access and inclusive engagement. While a small but growing body of literature has focused on efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in OST programs (Hill & Vance, 2009; Summer, Turner, & Burrow, 2018; Smith, Witherspoon, & Osgood, 2017), few systematic OST research and evaluation projects have included DEI as an area of focus. From 2017 to 2020, Child Trends served as the evaluation partner for the YMCA of the USA's (Y-USA) Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI); through that work, we learned about efforts to improve DEI in afterschool, summer learning, camps, and other OST programs during site visits to more than 100 YMCAs around the country. In this brief, we summarize lessons learned from that research for OST programs seeking ways to be more intentional in their efforts to strengthen DEI.

Y-USA has a dedicated department—Diversity, Inclusivity and Global Engagement (DIG)—established 14 years ago to support an intentional operational and programmatic shift in the organization in response to demographic changes. Simply defined, the DIG group defines its focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the following way: Diversity is ensuring representation, equity is ensuring everyone is considered and no one's perspective is missing, and inclusion is making sure all who are included are engaged.

About the CDLI: In 2016, the YMCA of the USA (Y-USA) developed the Character Development Learning Institute (CDLI) with funding from the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation to enhance youth character development by intentionally focusing on the adult practices of youth development workers in the Y movement. Adult practices include the small, day-to-day interactions that staff and volunteers have with youth. The CDLI also focused on hiring, training, and pedagogical approaches. Y-USA chose to deliberately focus on the professional development of adults working at YMCAs because youth character is deeply influenced by interactions with adults. The five domains of focus were emotion management, empathy, personal development, relationship-building, and responsibility. The CDLI had the opportunity to change how social and emotional learning (SEL) was addressed at the Y through its wide reach. Specifically, over four years and after engaging hundreds of YMCAs across the nation, the CDLI reached thousands of participants, and prompted a positive self-assessed change in 96 percent of staff and volunteers in youth development programs.

As a resource to YMCAs, DIG aims to support their capacity to operationalize the Y-USA “commitment to inclusion” statement: *“The Y is made up of people of all ages and from every walk of life working side by side to strengthen communities. Together we work to ensure that everyone, regardless of ability, age, cultural background, ethnicity, faith, gender, gender identity, ideology, income, national origin, race or sexual orientation,*

has the opportunity to reach their full potential with dignity.” A 2017 Y-USA brief¹ provides a detailed overview of the broad dimensions of diversity that Y-USA considers.

At the organization level, DIG supported the work of YMCAs by developing and identifying resources for YMCA staff to be trained on topics like implicit bias. Y-USA and individual YMCAs also share a focus on improving staff diversity and representation, particularly at the leadership levels. At the program level, YMCA staff shared approaches they used to work with students, including 1) offering DEI training opportunities to staff, 2) improving diversity across staff levels, 3) emphasizing the CDLI practice of empathy in programming, 4) designing programs that celebrate cultural differences, 5) promoting equity as opposed to equality, and 6) increasing access to high-quality programs. Below, we share examples from the Y-USA and YMCAs that describe ways in which OST programs can promote DEI.

OST programs can support DEI by offering training, technical assistance, and coaching opportunities to their staff.

While acknowledging room for improvement, YMCAs offer several examples of how OST programs can operationalize DEI in their work. For instance, concrete changes included shifts in written and spoken language with consideration of diversity, establishing some accountability metrics around equity for participating youth and staff engagement with youth, and placing a heavy emphasis on training and capacity building. The director of diversity and inclusion at Y-USA describes DIG as a “conduit, connector and sharer of information” connecting local YMCAs across the country. DIG also promotes a series of trainings for advancing equity. One such training navigates bias within the organization—acknowledging that everyone holds biases and identifying ways it may manifest at work through favoritism or discrimination. This training series takes people on an individual journey, examines impacts at the organizational level, and unpacks the effects on society.

OST programs can improve diversity among staff at all levels by identifying areas for improvement and assessing progress.

The Y-USA diversity and inclusion director noted gaps in leadership-level staff diversity, particularly among the most senior “C-Suite” staff. “There remains a racial leadership gap across the nonprofit sector... and the afterschool sector is no exception.” Many organizations are in the early stages of addressing this gap in leadership diversity (Russell & Butler, 2020). Some have started making shifts to be intentional about diversity in their leadership; this is also a focus of YMCAs.

A program leader from a North Carolina (Charlotte Metropolitan Area) YMCA stated:

Our association is doing some intentional effort around all of those. We are a global center for excellence site, so diversity and inclusion is one of the earmarks that our association takes very seriously. When I say very seriously, we've always done it, but it's more intentional now. When you were talking about the hiring process ... I would say be intentional about making everyone feel included. No matter whether its LGBTQ, whether its physical disability, whether it's different ethnicities ... particularly where [we] are now. This is [a very] diverse branch association. Across my membership base ... there [are] probably 73 different spoken languages among the families that come here. A policy shift in our association is that our leadership staff have diversity and inclusion goals on how to make sure our boards reflect the neighborhoods we serve, how do we make sure our staff reflect the neighborhoods we serve. That has become a lens in our hiring focus now—I want to be very intentional on having a woman and a male, a Latino, and someone who is in the LGBT community and looking for advancement in their career. We're very intentional in looking for a diverse pool of applicants—we're going to give [the role] to the most qualified person, but we want to have a diverse pool.

¹ YMCA of the USA. (2017). All together better: The many dimensions of diversity. Chicago, IL: YMCA of the USA. Available at: <https://ymca-snoco.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Diversity-Wheel.pdf>

Focusing on empathy can support inclusive attitudes and behaviors.

Within the CDLI model, empathy is one of the focal domains. YMCA program staff who participated in the CDLI reported increased capacity to foster the development of empathy in the young people they served (Lantos et al., 2020). Staff noted that the increased focus on empathy facilitated young people's understanding and appreciation of differences and commonalities. As youth development leader at a YMCA in Boston explained, *"For us, it's trying to understand that everybody's different, it's not just a skin color thing. We have different cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, different pasts that got us to where we are today. [It's] walking away with being understanding and open, and not being judgmental."* Similarly, a local Ann Arbor, MI YMCA staff member noted that participants explore, *"... how can you use empathy to have a better understanding of your world but the world other people are living and how it bleeds into everything you are doing. Our staff is really intentional about having that conversation using empathy."*

OST programs can support DEI by acknowledging cultural differences and uplifting typically silent voices.

The increasing racial and ethnic diversity of youth in America requires OST program practitioners to provide "organized activities that are responsive to youth's culture and everyday lives (Simpkins et al., 2016)." OST programs serving children from immigrant backgrounds should also assure that they reach and communicate effectively with families by translating resources, among other strategies (Torres et al., 2016). OST program staff can model willingness to participate in activities, discuss ideas, and celebrate traditions that are different from the dominant culture.

A youth development leader from a Metropolitan Boston YMCA described how they adjusted their music program to better reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds and interests of the young people served:

We do definitely implement diversity in our program. Especially with music, we try to implement every [type] of music to the program. That way one doesn't feel favored [over] the other. We do a lot of discussion about what we should do for that day, what kind of song we should do for that day, or what emotion we're trying to express through the song. So, I think we're very inclusive about everyone's ideas. Usually, we write everyone's ideas down and go down the line and figure out what we're going to do. I don't think anyone feels excluded from the project.

Similarly, a Washington DC YMCA staff member shared the importance of creating inclusive spaces for kids to share their experiences freely. She models a willingness to showcase different perspectives and celebrates everyone's narrative.

So, I started working with kids. Like, "What would you guys like to do? Let's write. Let's do something to create what you have to say." I've always wanted everyone to have an equal voice of equity ... I said, "I want you to talk about whatever you want to talk about." The Hispanic kids did [a project] on immigration. Some of the girls did it on child rape. I had two kids from Sierra Leone. They couldn't speak [English]. They did it on their country ... You can't hear the narrative and walk away. You got to see it.

OST programs can prioritize DEI by tailoring programming to focus on equity rather than equality.

Equality is a concept that means treating everyone the same without discrimination, and it does not factor in what might be needed to achieve equitable outcomes. When a youth-serving organization is focused on equity, program staff seek to understand what each young person needs and wants to be successful. Staff can try to address each group's differing needs by tailoring solutions or programs to fill those needs. A Central Maryland YMCA described how it focuses on equity by responding to youth-identified needs and shifting the power dynamic that assumes adults know what all youth need. To do so, the Y involves youth in decisions about programming, as described here:

What we do ... we're giving them a youth voice at this point. We're saying, "You're supposed to gain from school, what do you not see, or what do you see?" "What would you like to get rid of?" "What do you need that isn't here?" They've already started on their own curriculum. [On the board posted] behind you, you

can see the curriculum they would like to see, like health classes all four years, social media training, college prep, mental health, etc. That's what we're working on: What does the school have and not have from a youth perspective?

Program offerings, including activities focused on community service and social justice, can be used to help young people address social inequities. A social justice activity in Central Maryland, Equity in Action, directly engaged high school students in “creating new projects, creating places and scenes to bring awareness to the inequities that exist in their community.” For example, “... [students] made a video about what equity means to them and led a service-driven project around how to create the community-school strategy [at their high school] interviewing folks and doing research about needs and gaps.”

OST programs can advance DEI by authentically providing access and opportunity to youth.

Specifically, organizations can be intentional and thoughtful about engaging young people from traditionally underrepresented communities and providing a welcoming environment in their programming. Youth organizations are uniquely positioned to model inclusive behaviors and foster opportunities for young people to contribute and belong. A program leader from a North Carolina (Charlotte Metropolitan Area) YMCA reported:

With this program, we have a trans child, but we don't call [the child's transgender status] out nor do we make it a big deal. At the end of the day, we don't care what people choose to identify as, but because we know she's here, so we have to make sure she's comfortable. And, make sure she's not mistreated. It's one thing to see [that the child is transgender] and act like you don't, and it's another to see it and say we're not tolerating certain things that people say under their breath. We have to call it out, and call it out because that is not tolerated here. We have to create a culture from the door.

Specific ways in which OST program staff can intentionally embed DEI in youth engagement and programming include 1) cultivating youth leadership so that youth voice is present and given authority (Zeldin et al., 2016) at all levels of planning and execution of programming, 2) engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in youth advisory councils, and 3) creating various opportunities for youth from diverse backgrounds to mentor others.

Conclusion

A three-year evaluation of Y-USA's Character Development Learning Initiative highlighted common strategies used to support DEI. The strategies include training staff on diversity, inclusion, bias, and other topics; assuring diverse and representative staff at all levels of the Y-USA organization; and embedding DEI in programming through activities focused on empathy, social justice, civic engagement, and cultural appreciation. Similar strategies can be used to enhance the DEI efforts of other organizations that provide OST services. Additional and more systematic research is needed to identify and understand the effectiveness of strategies used to support DEI in OST. Future research efforts should 1) include the voices of young people and staff, 2) examine the extent to which program-level strategies increase engagement and result in young people from diverse backgrounds feeling included, 3) explore how systems can effectively increase access to OST programs across communities, and 4) use data to understand whether efforts helped to achieve more equitable outcomes.

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