Character, Leadership, and Community: A Case Study of a New Orleans Youth Program

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Character, Leadership, and Community: A Case Study of a New Orleans Youth Program

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Urban Studies
Applied Anthropology

by
Candace Colbert
B.A. Northern Arizona University, 2016
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Abstract

Youth outreach programs use innovative and community-based activities to fill in gaps of education, provide creative outlets, create access to opportunities, and empower youth.¹ This research investigates, records, and compares the ways in which staff and youth participants perceive the experience at a New Orleans youth program. The purpose of the research is to provide insight towards potential program improvement. The participants of this study are from Compassion Outreach of America’s summer program Project Reach NOLA in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana. There are twenty-nine participants, between the ages of fourteen and fifty years old. The participants are directors, staff members, and youth enrolled in the program. The mixed-methods utilized are: focus groups, interviews, surveys, and observation. The study emphasizes the inclusion of participant voices and their positioned expertise.²

Keywords: New Orleans, African American, youth, participatory action, applied anthropology
INTRODUCTION

Youth (see footnote 1) outreach programs are designed to enhance the academic and social development of youth outside of a school setting. Youth outreach programs are often bound to communities and neighborhoods, lending them the opportunity to address the issues that are present and utilize community collaboration (Outley et al. 2011:60). In the context of New Orleans, Louisiana, a continuous history of structural racism, poverty, failing school systems, and Hurricane Katrina has contributed to poor academic achievement and a lack of economic opportunities. Black and/or low-income New Orleanians have responded to these issues through grassroots efforts like social clubs and second-lines, and education and neighborhood coalitions. These grassroots coalitions can be found in churches, housing developments, and recreation centers (Breunlin 2006:746; Dixson et al. 2015:293). This research investigates, records, and compares the ways in which staff and youth participants perceive the experience at a New Orleans youth program. The purpose of the research is to provide insight towards potential program improvement.

This case study focuses on Compassion Outreach of America’s (COA) summer program Project Reach NOLA (PRN). COA was founded in 2008, by Robert and Sherdren Burnside. It is in the St. Claude neighborhood of Upper Ninth Ward, New Orleans. COA works “with individuals, organizations, and faith communities to implement strategies that reduce gun violence and homicides, increase academic achievement, and provide economic opportunities for all.”³ Compassion Outreach of America has six programs (Project Reach NOLA, School Adoption, Fathers Matter, Project 450/15, Faith Alliance, and Stop Killing People (SKP)), focusing on areas of youth development, parental-child relationships, community beautification, faith, and anti-gun violence. In 2012, PRN began as a tutoring service. It has since evolved into a
youth employment and leadership development program. Project Reach NOLA provides job readiness training, academic support, personal growth, and leadership development opportunities through career mentorship, class curriculum, and community service to youth between the ages of fourteen to nineteen (see footnote 3). The program seeks to empower youth in the areas of character, leadership, and community.

My research with Project Reach NOLA took place in July and August of 2018. There are twenty-nine participants, between the ages of fourteen to fifty years old. The participants are directors, staff members, and youth enrolled in the program. The methodology employed within this study adheres to qualitative methods as “research to interpret and document an entire phenomenon (whole of human experience) from an individual’s viewpoint or frame of reference” (defined in MacDonald 2012:35). I utilized the mixed-methods of focus groups, semi structured in-depth interviews, surveys, and observation. The data was documented through audio recordings from which rough transcriptions and field notes were made.

My research assumes that the inclusion of all participants voices and positioned expertise will identify and suggests a space for improvement for the program. By “inclusion” I am referring to what is discussed in participatory action research as, involving people to explain their practices and enabling them to describe their own situations (see MacDonald 2012:39,42). The research addresses, the applied anthropology and postmodern position on the importance of cultural indigenous narrative and emic (insider) perspective (see Lamphere 2004:431). When discussing “positioned expertise”, I am alluding to Paulo Freire’s empowerment theory of “people as the subjects of their own experiences” (quoted in Lamphere 2004:432). The analysis encompasses literature on youth outreach and education, focusing on themes of program evaluations, education of empowerment, adult-youth relationships, resource accessibility, and
community collaboration. The theory applied to the data includes psychological engagement, critical youth empowerment (CYE), adaptive leadership model, community-based participatory research (CBPR), and participatory action research (PAR).

There are a variety of theories that discuss how to determine program effectiveness or impact such as interest theory, fidelity and retention, and implementation. For example, both Cass Morgan and Sherer Royce argue that traditional program evaluations primarily record participation levels, whether objectives are met, and outcome achievement (Morgan 2016:67; Royce 2009:3). Descriptions of satisfaction are often measured in ratings and observed engagement levels are equated to effective experiences (Morgan 2016:70; Royce 2009:3). This study aims to add to youth empowerment literature by using the focal point of perception about a program experience as a precursor to any evaluation of program outcome achievement. This study considers descriptive participant perspectives on an experience as a valuable tool for program improvement.

The mission and curriculum of Project Reach NOLA aspire to respond to issues of poverty, academic achievement, and social development affecting low-income youth in the St. Claude neighborhood and surrounding areas of New Orleans. The program’s mission provides for unique documentation of how staff and youth participants perceive program efforts of empowerment in character, leadership, and community. My analysis is based on a comparison of participants’ perspectives to one another and to the program’s curriculum, in order to both identify and suggest solutions for program improvement.
LITERATURE REVIEW

New Orleans in Context

Throughout the literature on youth outreach, the communities served by programs are characterized by systemic issues of poverty, crime, and racism. But each of these issues is uniquely shaped and experienced differently across communities. The social, political, and economic context of a specific place determines the needs a community considers most pressing to address through outreach programs. It is thus not only important to give an overview of New Orleans because it is my research setting, but because New Orleans, being a 300-year-old predominantly black city in the South, a tourist hub, and a post-natural disaster policy experiment has a unique intersectionality of issues that its youth experience.

The Racialized History of New Orleans’ Education and Economy

The New Orleans education system and economy have a heavily racialized history with a long-lasting impact. During slavery and Jim Crow, the state of black education in New Orleans was limited and tumultuous. As explained by Nghana Lewis, in 1838, John McDonough, a millionaire slave owner, left half of his estate for the education of every poor child and free youth of color. The first private school for black children was opened in 1847. However, backlash from white Redeemers eradicated most black schools in New Orleans (Lewis 2007:175). In Brown vs. the Board of Education, the Supreme Court of the United States (1954) ruled for desegregation, but New Orleans schools did not start the process until 1962 and were not fully desegregated by as late as 1970 (Lewis 2007:183–185).

Kent Germany asserts that as a result of Jim Crow, “In the mid-1960s, New Orleans was one of the most impoverished, most unequal, most violent, and least educated places in the United States” (2007:744). He explains that three out of every four black residents lived near the
poverty line, one of every two lived below it, and the bottom fifth of the population survived on only four percent of the city’s income (Germany 2007:744). By the time desegregation was underway, only three out of every ten black men age twenty-five to forty-four had gone beyond middle school, and the traditionally all-black public schools of New Orleans were overcrowded (Germany 2007:744). According to Kristen Buras, the history of “slavery, state-sanctioned segregation, ongoing racism, and white flight were all forms of strategic state neglect and disinvestment in African American livelihood” (2010:57).

In the mid-1960s several grassroots organizations arose to address these socioeconomic issues. Kent Germany defines these efforts within the national “War on Poverty”, as a variety of programs which tried to reshape the market in the interest of poor people and governed how black citizens took part in the local economy (2007:746). In New Orleans, organizations such as the Ninth Ward’s Southern Organization for Unified Leadership (SOUL) helped get black community members politically involved, Upward Bound linked high schoolers to opportunities for higher learning, and the Black Panthers emerged in the Desire Projects of the Ninth Ward (Germany 2007:748). Rachel Breunlin illustrates that some of the oldest and most recognizable black New Orleans traditions, social clubs and second-lines are “a long-standing sociopolitical tradition of self-help, mutual aid, and resistance to structures of oppression” (2006:746). This racialized transition from no education to legal segregation, to white flight and economic divide, and non-governmental response has visible remnants in post-Katrina New Orleans.

The Neoliberal Reconstruction of post-Katrina New Orleans

Post-Katrina neoliberal policy has redefined New Orleans’ education, housing, and economy. By “neoliberalism” I am referring to the ideology that suggests individuals should have autonomy and be free from the intervention of the state, and as policy that deregulates
markets and reallocates public capital to private spheres (e.g., education, housing) (see in Perez and Cannella 2011:48). According to Michelle Perez and Gaile Cannella, “neoliberalism ideology expects people to be self-motivated citizens, actively participating in the market, keeping the private sector competitive, and balancing the economy” (2011:48). Post-Katrina neoliberal reform has been classified as “disaster capitalism” which has redefined the education system, affected the return rates of black New Orleanians, and reshaped the economy. Disaster capitalism is “the notion that catastrophic events are foreseeable and strategically devised to allow for corporate profiteering at the time of disaster and during the recovery efforts that follow” (Perez and Cannella 2011:53-54). Social theorists have argued that private entities (e.g., developers, corporations, etc.) saw post-Katrina New Orleans as a natural clean slate for “exciting market opportunities” (ibid 2011:54).

Buras asserts that the biggest transformation in New Orleans education was the post-Katrina charter or “choice” movement. The discourse around this issue addresses choice education, school success (its link to race-based lines), and private interests. In November of 2005, the state legislature passed Act 35, which redefined “failing schools.” Subsequently, 107 out of 128 schools were deemed failing and put under a state-run Recovery School District (RSD) (Buras 2010:22). As a result, in January 2006, Orleans Parish Public Schools terminated 6,939 out of 7,000 teachers, many of whom were black and unionized veteran teachers (ibid 2010:22). In the 2012–2013 academic year, 72 out of 90 public schools in New Orleans were operating as charter schools, and 84% of students were attending them (Dixson et al. 2015:290). According to Perez and Canella, charterization is a neoliberal movement with a market-based approach to education that views students as human capital and parents as consumers, that will inevitably take money from public schools and feed the business sector (2011:58–59).
According to Buras, charterization in New Orleans was based on three premises: there is a failure in government-run public schools (Orleans Parish Public Schools had low test scores, low graduation rates, and poor buildings), public education can be saved with innovation and high-quality educators, and families will be provided with a choice (2013:128). One of the main points of opposition from community members, educators, and social scientists is that there was in fact no “choice”. Laws were passed and plans were made while most residents remained displaced (Buras 2013:128). During the shift to post-Katrina charterization, groups like the Frederick Douglass Community Coalition (a group consisting of educational, cultural, and political organizations in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward) and the Fyre Youth Squad (a group of students from John McDonogh High School) organized for the community to be a part of the decision-making process (Dixson et al. 2015:293). A few years after the laws were passed, the state and charter boards held discussions with community groups but decisions of school closings and charter transformations were already made (Buras 2013:143). As argued by Dixon et al., the change in the demographics of teachers, along with the closing of beloved schools, and paternalistic decision making has transformed New Orleans public education to represent the views, beliefs, and desires of a white minority (2015:289).

Today so-called unification is yet another change to the New Orleans school system. In 2016 the state of Louisiana passed Act 91, unifying twenty-four Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) and fifty-two Recovery School District (RSD) schools, into a single system of schools under the governance of the Orleans Parish School Board. As stated in the Center of Reinventing Education report, this makes OPSB the first school system in the country comprised solely of autonomous schools. Orleans Parish School Board states one of their goals is to have an education strategy rooted in the community (Center on Reinventing Education 2018:4). Act 91
preserves charter autonomy in curriculum, materials, HR decisions, and budgeting, but it also claims to be moving forward in equity and accountability across schools. The unification process is still being carried out in 2019.

Harvey et al. described the massive influx of nonprofits and volunteers into post-Katrina neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward (which endured major devastation) as, “communities that had little to offer under for-profit recovery and were forced to rely on the surplus of private non-profit organization aid” (2015:131–132). According to Fussell, the return rates of certain New Orleanians after the storm revealed the racialized topography of the city and the underlining neoliberal motives for redevelopment. Housing damage was the major factor slowing down the return of displaced New Orleans residents, particularly among black residents and those with low-income status (2010:38). Residential segregation in the city concentrates black residents in lower-lying areas that endure more flooding. These areas, like the Lower-Ninth Ward, also experienced extreme levee failure due to the disinvestment in infrastructure and levee maintenance (Fussell 2010:4). Fourteen months after the storm, 51% of black residents returned and 71% of white residents returned (Fussell 2010:29). The damage from the storm also created the opportunity to dismantle public housing. Marc Perry asserts that neoliberal policies such as the demolition of the city’s “Big Four” public housing projects, led to massive displacements of black New Orleanians, slowed down native return rates, and simultaneously opened the door to private redevelopment (2015:98).

While neoliberal policy has contributed to an economic resurgence in the city, many workers are stuck in low wage jobs (Nelson 2015:1). Kent Germany argues that poverty in New Orleans has been socio-politically accepted based on the “distances between the poor and the rest of society, whether geographical, psychological, or institutional” (2007:750). According to
Andre Perry’s Data Center report, in 2015, 63% of those earning income in New Orleans earned less than $35,000 and 39% earn less than $17,500. In that same year, 36.9% of Orleans Parish children under eighteen years old lived in poverty compared to the state’s 28.4% and the nation’s 20.7% (Perry 2016:7). The socioeconomic concept of “concentrated poverty” discusses low wage jobs in the context of wage deserts. Nelson defines wage deserts as census tracts where at least 80% of all earners in primary jobs are earning less than $39,000 a year (2015:4). There are forty wage desert tracts in Orleans Parish, and 83% of workers in these wage deserts are African American (Nelson 2015:4). Tourism in New Orleans is also the creator of many low wage jobs. The city’s tourism industry is heavily based on black New Orleanian culture. Marc Perry argues that black working class New Orleanians are either valued as cultural commercial assets or deemed as dangerous criminals (2015:95). He states that the socioeconomic neoliberal policy in post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrates both a racialized exclusion in education and housing, and a racialized market driven inclusion in tourism (2015:95). Compassion Outreach of America has prioritized implementing programs to address these systemic issues in local youth’s lives. Project Reach NOLA is partially a youth employment and job readiness program, providing youth with an income while exposing them to various professions and curriculum for academic assistance. Compassion Outreach of America and Project Reach NOLA, both strive to provide opportunities to combat and overcome issues of poverty, violence, and lack of educational achievement through youth employment, school adoption, and anti-violence initiatives.

Youth Outreach Theory

Engagement Theory

Throughout youth outreach literature, program engagement is linked to youth participants interest in the program’s activities. As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, engage
means to participate or become involved in. Youth outreach literature argues a correlation between the engagement of youth and the potential impacts that follow. As defined by Dawes and Larson, psychological engagement is being “motivated to a degree in which your attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges of an activity” (2011:259). Three motivational theories of psychological engagement are: (1) flow theory (a person experiences challenges in an activity as matched to their skills), (2) interest theory (a person must gain a base of knowledge about the activity and develop positive thoughts towards it), and (3) self-determination theory (SDT, a person identifies with, internalizes, and integrates the activity’s goals into the self-system (as a unique collection of experiences that are used to shape your personality)) (Dawes and Larson 2011:260). Through a qualitative study with ten different youth programs, Dawes and Larson found that youth engagement developed when youth identified with, internalized, and integrated the activity’s goals into the self-system (SDT) (2011:260). They argue that youth do not have to enter the program already motivated by the activities, but “psychological engagement emerges from youth’s experiences” (Dawes and Larson 2011:266).

Other theorists suggest positive youth engagement is a result of relationships with high-resource adults (community members or mentors). Project Reach NOLA uses career mentors to present youth with information and skills to help them reach their career aspirations. Sullivan and Larson (2009:107,109) suggest adult-youth relationships in mentoring and apprenticeship programs help youth gain resources through presentations by experts (exposing youth to careers and interest) and collaborative activities (youth are given roles to foster and practice skills). Robert Halpern’s instrumental relationship model states that even if adults and students do not build a close relationship, adolescents are kept engaged with “developmental task” consisting of “exploring and consolidating identity and gaining experience” (2005:12).
Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is discussed along with adult-youth relationships, youth engagement, and youth empowerment. Youth outreach literature argues CBPR has the potential to engage students by empowering them to be involved in their own development process. Farrah Jacquez et al. define CBPR as “an orientation to research that values the role of community members and academics as equitable partners each contributing unique strengths to the research process” (2012:176). CBPR focuses on practical problems of importance to the community and partners with the community to analyze and address the problem. Although CBPR literature addresses youth outreach, not much of the literature includes studies partnering with youth. Even so, Jacquez et al. found that youth who participated in analyzing their own programs highlighted major themes about the factors that make the program valuable (connection, resources, and support), and could identify areas of concern (2013:184). The documentation of staff and youth’s perspectives on Project Reach NOLA can identify and address possible areas of concern.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is a common theme through most literature discussing youth or community outreach. Melissa Pearrow defines power as “the ability to access and influence control over resources” (2008:510). Also, according to Pearrow, empowerment is “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power to individuals, families, and communities so they can take action to improve their life situations” (2008:510). Critical youth empowerment (CYE) is a critical social theory framework based on the integration of youth empowerment processes and outcomes at both individual and collective levels (see Jennings et al. 2006:32; Pearrow 2008:509) The six key dimensions of critical youth empowerment are: (1) a safe environment, (2) meaningful engagement, (3) equitable power between youth and adults, (4)
engagement in critical reflection of self and sociopolitical processes, (5) participation to effect change, and (6) integrated individual and community level empowerment (Jennings et al. 2006:32; Pearrow 2008:512). Louise Jennings et al. evaluated four youth empowerment models to create this framework: the adolescent empowerment cycle (AEC, adolescent psychological development and self-esteem), youth development and empowerment program (YD&E, empowerment through community service), the transactional partnering model (TP, transactional partnering between youth and adults), and empowerment education (EE, Paulo Freire liberating education) (2006:34). The aim of CYE is to support and foster youth contributions for positive community development and sociopolitical change (Jennings et al. 2006:40).

Participatory action research (PAR) is a methodological approach to research which encourages those being studied to participate in the design and conduct of all phases of research affecting them. According to Cathy MacDonald, PAR assumes participants are ready to take action to improve their situation or create social change (2012:35,38). It connects an action researcher and community member with the belief that the pooling of knowledge will define and resolve an issue (MacDonald 2012:36). A study by Sherer Royce applied a PAR framework to understand young people’s perspectives on youth empowerment. During her research, she partnered with youth program participants to investigate how young people are empowered within programs. The study population consisted of youth enrolled in various programs. The findings revealed youth empowerment occurs: (1) when youth can express themselves without censorship, (2) have opportunities to expand their social networks with fellow students and adults, and (3) when adults observe and value youth contributions (Royce 2009:10). CYE and PAR are similar in their positions on collaboration and empowerment on individual and
collective levels. CYE is a theoretical framework for the purpose of evaluating youth empowerment programs, while PAR is an approach to qualitative research focused on inclusion and empowerment of participants in the research process to create social change. Youth participatory action research (YPAR), such as the study done by Royce, can contribute to defining empowerment in critical youth empowerment and be used as a tool for youth integration. CYE can work as a critical guide for whether empowerment is a part of the Project Reach NOLA experience.

Project Reach NOLA is partially self-defined as a leadership development program, which strives to develop students’ leadership skills through a variety of activities. According to Max Klau, Heifetz’s adaptive leadership model explores youth leadership education that focuses on promoting positive psychological development. The Heifetz model makes a distinction between authority and leadership; authority means holding a formal position, while individuals without authority may still have leadership (see in Klau 2006:61). There are two different challenges leaders encounter, technical and adaptive. Klau states that technical challenges “are straightforward problems that we already know how to solve”, while adaptive challenges “have no clear solutions and require frequent changes in values and behaviors of the group” (Klau 2006:61). The Heifetz model pedagogical tools made for youth programs are: (1) case-in-point learning discussing “real-time dynamics of the class itself”; (2) below-the-neck learning that creates a safe space for youth to exercise leadership; (3) and reflective practice, in which “students are provided with opportunities to reflect on why they have made choices” (Klau 2006:62). The adaptive leadership model will help analyze how students perceived the leadership activities within the Project Reach NOLA experience.

Evaluations: Theory and Implementation
Youth program evaluations typically assess and demonstrate outcome achievement. According to both Morgan et al. (2016:67) and Royce (2009:3), evaluations primarily record participation levels, meeting objectives, and outcome achievement. Within traditional evaluations, descriptions of satisfaction and observed engagement levels are synonymous with participants interest and are measured by ratings then equated to effective experiences (Morgan 2016:70; Royce 2009:3). My study does not subscribe to traditional frameworks of formal evaluations. Instead, I use the focal point of perspective, interests, or beliefs about a program experience as a precursor to any evaluation of program outcome achievement and/or impact.

In 1992, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development task force on the state of evaluations of youth serving organizations identified the limitations of program evaluations. These limitations include: (1) gaining full participation and tracking youth, and (2) problems in designing ways to capture youth movement in and out of programs (Roth and Brooks-Gunn 1998:429). Youth outreach theorists have suggested providing more in-depth evaluations for program improvement by evaluating the implementation process and utilizing youth as evaluators. Morgan et al. discuss implementation as concerned with how a program’s goals and activities are executed. Implementation evaluation looks at the process of program execution through “fidelity”. Fidelity is the adherence to curriculum and program model, and quality is how a program is delivered (2016:67). Implementation evaluation focuses on the execution that produces an effective outcome, but it does not explore how participants think about fidelity or quality of the program experience. Royce’s study uses youth participatory action research as a tool for program evaluation. It suggests that it is best to partner with youth as researchers in the evaluation process. Through an evaluation of several programs, the study’s youth researchers concluded that “the more active and engaged youth are in a program and the more dimensions of
meaningful participation employed, the more likely outcome achievement is” (Royce 2006:4). While discussing my research with PRN’s directors, they were interested in understanding how the participants perceived the experience before any type of formal evaluation. My focal point of participant perception was influenced by empowerment literature and limitations found in traditional program evaluations.
METHODOLOGY

My research is a case study using mixed methods to investigate, record, and compare the ways in which staff and youth participants perceive the experience at a New Orleans youth program. This study is inspired by the methodological approach to research called “participatory action research” (the pooling together of knowledge through collaboration to improve a situation). This case study focuses on Compassion Outreach of America’s (COA) summer program Project Reach NOLA (PRN). There are twenty-nine participants, between the ages of fourteen and fifty years old. The participants include directors, staff members, and the youth enrolled in the program. The research took place in July and August of 2018.

When deciding on a research topic I was interested in using an applied anthropology action-based approach to analyze the field of youth outreach. I wanted to know what the participants of a program or organization’s staff, youth, etc. think about the services provided, thereby investigating whether the goals and purposes of the program are what the participants believe they are receiving. I decided to do a case study on one specific program in order to document the meanings and thoughts participants ascribe to the experience. The creators and directors of COA (Robert and Sherdren Burnside) and I attend the same church. Through conversation, I learned that they had dedicated themselves to the people in the Upper Ninth Ward, specifically the St. Claude neighborhood. They established themselves through their church and program services, building relationships across professions, economic class, race, and faith. Their programs “Stop Killing People” (SKP) and “450/15” (see footnote 2), are the direct results of community members sharing their desires, needs, and concerns about the neighborhood.
I chose Project Reach NOLA as the “case” in my study because of my pre-existing relationship with the directors, and the program’s status as a local organization with the goal of being a “for the community, by the community” collaboration. In their own words, the directors see community members as experts of their own environment and consider them to be assets with whom to partner in order to create positive neighborhood change. Since PRN seemed to be a program bred out of community collaboration, I was interested in exploring how the participants think about the experience in comparison to one another and the program’s goals. I decided to investigate the perspectives of the staff, directors, and youth participants for a more inclusive documentation of the program experience. When I spoke with PRN’s Executive Director Sherdren, she was excited about me documenting both perspectives and suggested being able to use the findings for program improvement. This is where I thought to include a description of a “phenomenon” for the purpose of applied-action.

According to Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, a case study is an investigation from multiple perspectives on the complexities of a particular project, policy, program, or institution. The purpose is to understand and generate knowledge towards professional practice and community action (2011:256). In my research, the case is focusing on an experience at a youth outreach program (Project Reach NOLA). The multidimensional participant data within this study was collected using mixed- qualitative methods (focus groups, in-depth interviews, and observation) and the quantitative method of surveys (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011:257). This case study is both descriptive and exploratory, describing how the participants think about the experience. It explores the experience in the context of the program’s goals and the larger social issues in the city affecting youth. This inquiry describes participants’ perspectives to provide insight towards potential program improvement.
The mixed-methods applied in this research were used to yield the most time efficient and well documented positioned expertise of the participants. The questions I used to collect the staff and youth data, were inspired by topics discussed in youth outreach literature and various youth program mission statements. The first day of research in July was a one to two-hour staff focus group. I prepared six questions for the focus group discussing: the field of youth outreach, the context of New Orleans, community collaboration, and Project Reach NOLA goals. To identify the demographic characteristics of the focus group, I passed out name plaques with spaces for their name or pseudonym, position, and the number of years working with the program. Focus groups are defined as an informal discussion among a group of selected individuals about a particular topic (Liamputtong 2011:3). As stated by Pranee Liamputtong, the purpose of a focus group is to “describe and comprehend the meanings and interpretations of a select group of people to gain an understanding of a specific issue from the perspective of the participants in the group” (2011:3). According to MacDonald, participatory action research focus groups strive to give all participants an opportunity to communicate and recognize each viewpoint as valuable (2012:42). Focus groups are thought to be the most effective when running between one and two hours and including six to twelve people (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2009:3). Typically focus groups are used as a “follow-up” to surveys and other forms of data collection, to further clarify and describe findings (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011:176). Given my research timeline, the first day of research was the best time to hear from all staff members. I chose to use a focus group as my primary research method with the staff to produce an overall group narrative on the purpose and goals of the program experience from the implementer perspective. This data is a starting point for understanding what happens within the space of Project Reach NOLA.
As a follow-up to the staff focus group, my last day of research in August was an in-depth interview with the directors of COA and PRN, Robert and Sherdren Burnside. The purpose of this interview was to provide depth to the initial conversation with the other staff members. The six questions addressed how and why Compassion Outreach of America and Project Reach NOLA were created. According to H. Russell Bernard, both focus groups and in-depth interviews are considered semistructured interviews, relying on a certain set of questions but allowing the conversation to flow naturally (Bernard 2006:212; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011:102). My second day of research was a five-question survey and interview with twenty-one youth participants. I decided to use surveys as my primary form of data collection with the students because of the limited time to build rapport. I opted to use a group interview as a secondary form of data collection to capture the importance of youth voice. As stated by Hesse-Biber and Leavy, within mixed-method research, surveys are distributed first and focus groups or interviews are used to interpret and analyze results (2011:176). Most of the youth surveys contained one-word answers or were unfinished. My group interview immediately followed and was used to retrieve and analyze the survey results. On my last day of research in July, I observed the program experience and reflected on the activities and interactions between staff and students. The purpose of the observation was to see the lived experience and compare it to what was shared through the other data. The focus group and interview data were audio recorded and later transcribed. All observations were documented in short-hand field notes.

This research employs mixed-methods, inspired by an applied anthropological and participatory action research approach. According to Louise Lamphere, applied anthropology approaches qualitative research with these concepts in mind, increased collaboration with the people we study, outreach and accessibility of the field for public knowledge, and efforts to
influence public policy (2004:432). Participatory action research is a systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of identifying something and taking collaborative action (MacDonald 2011:35). Both of these methodological approaches value the inclusion of participant voices as experts and subjects of their own experience. My research applies the methods discussed above to document staff and youth perspectives for potential program improvement.
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

An Examination of Perception

My research examines how the participants understand, interpret, and think about occurrences and activities at a New Orleans youth program. This study considers multiple participant perspectives on the experience, as a valuable tool for potential program improvement. The mission and curriculum of Project Reach NOLA aspire to respond to issues of economic opportunity, academic achievement, and social development, affecting low-income youth in the St. Claude neighborhood and surrounding areas. My analysis is a comparison of participants perspectives to one another and to the curriculum.

Staff Focus Group

Project Reach NOLA is held in two locations in the Upper Ninth Ward: (1) a school classroom (where day-to-day PRN occurs) and (2) Compassion Outreach of America’s office. On my first day of research, I met the staff at the school as the program day was coming to a close. I asked five out of the six prepared questions during the focus group. It was my first-time
meeting about half of the staff members. Most of the staff members were young adults. All the staff members except one were African American. This racial demographic similarly reflects the youth population of the program.\(^9\) I introduced myself and had all seven participants fill out a paper nameplate. The nameplate included spaces for their name or pseudonym, position, and the number of years working in the program. We sat at a long rectangular classroom table, and I placed my cell-phone (as the recording device) in the center. The focus group consisted of three teachers Kevin, Troy, and Robert; two teachers’ assistants Karry and Joe’Nee; the lead program manager Jasmine; and the Executive Director Sherdren. The questions included in the focus group discussed defining youth outreach, creativity, missions and goals of the program, New Orleans context, and community involvement.

Focus Group Data and Analysis

The staff responses describe how they perceive the PRN experience and what they expect the youth to receive from the program. Before my research, I created a general definition of youth outreach programs based on youth development literature and common language used across programs. I first asked the staff to situate their work into the larger public serviced-based career field to see if it revealed anything about Project Reach NOLA or their own motivations. The answers provided to the question, “How would you define youth outreach?” were ones I commonly found throughout literature. Staff described it as a space to provide access to resources and opportunities, as well as engaging and empowering youth to better themselves and their community (see Appendix B question one). One of the teachers Kevin, summed up the group responses best when defining youth outreach as “engaging youth to enhance or provide resources they might not have access to otherwise.” The conceptual model of critical youth empowerment theory (CYE) includes six key dimensions, five of which correlate to the staff
responses of youth outreach. These five dimensions include: safe youth-centered environments, meaningful engagement, participation to effect change, skill and leadership development, and individual-community level empowerment (see Jennings et al. 2006:32). The staff definitions of youth outreach are synonymous with themes of youth empowerment. From their responses, we may conclude that empowerment is an important element in youth outreach. By discussing PRN’s goals and activities, I investigated whether the staff thinks the program experience is empowering to students.

The second question addressed student’s engagement within outreach programs, “Is there a certain level of creativity or innovation needed to create youth programs that engage people?” As described by Buras, the charter movement often used terms like innovation, new, and excellence to describe its advantages to traditional public schools (2013:133). Youth outreach programs are sometimes used to compensate or supplement for what youth experience at school or home. This question also investigated whether the supplementary components within youth programs correlate or differ from themes of engagement in charter policy. Overall, the staff believes that creativity and a variety of activities are better for youth engagement. But equally as important are building relationships, including youth in the process, and deeper analysis of things previously taught (see Appendix B question two). The staff responses are consistent with theories of psychological engagement and youth empowerment. The two psychological engagement theories of interest and self-determination (SDT), suggest a person must gain knowledge about an activity, develop positive thoughts towards it, and then integrate the activity’s goals into their self-system (Dawes and Larson 2011:260). According to the staff, new and creative ideas capture youths’ interests and in turn keeps them more determined and engaged in the program. Paulo Freire’s education of empowerment model (EE) argues the importance of
critical reflection and dialogue of complex issues or subjects, or in Sherdren’s words, “deeper understanding and analysis.” The transactional partnering model (TP) considers partnering between adults and youth as a necessity for mutual empowerment, and as a staff member stated, “building relationships is important for youth engagement.” This discussion of engagement suggests the extent to which youth are involved reflects how they think about the experience and what that may reveal in an examination of impact.

The third question discusses how staff perceives PRN’s mission, “What is the mission or goal of Project Reach NOLA?” The goals for PRN are to have a year-long program creating opportunities and learning experiences for professionalism, leadership, community involvement, and self-awareness (identity or character). Project Reach NOLA seeks to empower youth in the areas of, as their tagline states “character, leadership, and community.” PRN’s mission is to teach job readiness and professionalism, and provide academic support, personal growth, and leadership development opportunities to youth (see Appendix B question 3). It can be argued that Sherdren’s comment on students “irresponsibility with money” reflects neoliberal ideals of lack of self-initiative equating to irresponsibility. Also, that the program’s emphasis on professional skills corresponds to the neoliberal philosophy of being self-motivated and participating in the market (Perez and Canella 2011:49). But the staff’s responses are also consistent with Kent Germany’s description of grassroots responses during the “War on Poverty”, as programs to help Black and/or low-income communities enter the market for their benefit (2007:746).

When assessing the staff’s missions and goals with the adolescent empowerment cycle (AEC), PRN’s activities are supported as meaningful opportunities for empowering skill development through community service, professionalism activities (résumé writing and mock interviews), and career mentors (Jennings et al. 2006:34). Similar to the Heifetz Adaptive
Leadership models’ “below-the-neck learning” (see in Klau 2006:62), Project Reach NOLA creates a safe space for youth to exercise leadership which positively engages youth’s psychological development and empowers students’ self-awareness. Positive recognition from staff and community/career mentors can promote self-awareness, and create a safe-space to generate leadership skills and promote character building. According to staff, students get to grow in the area of character and leadership by gaining professional skills from résumé writing and having professional guests. Staff members also suggest that students grow in character and community from program experiences such as visiting the city’s historical collection, thinking critically about race, and participating in community service activities (e.g. painting schools).

The fourth topic of staff discussion examines the purpose or necessity of Project Reach NOLA in its social environment: “What about New Orleans sociocultural context makes programs like PRN necessary?” This question was inspired by the participatory action research approach to, “incorporate the reflection of historical, political, economic, and geographic contexts in order to make sense of issues and experiences requiring action for changing or improving a situation (MacDonald 2011:38).” The systemic problems described by the staff were the continuity of inequitable race relations, poor education, and a disparity of socioeconomic opportunities (see Appendix B question four). PRN’s mission and goal are to provide opportunities in the program experience to improve some of these issues for youth participants. Sherdren reflected on the 300 years of New Orleans history and states “During Reconstruction, there was time for equity but then retaliation. There is a similar pattern now in the Trump Era.” She argued that the retaliation of the Trump Era (“taking back” what was lost in the Obama years) resembles that of Reconstruction Era (white redeemers “taking back” what was lost after emancipation). During this discussion, the two youngest staff members (teachers’ assistants) and
a young teacher who grew up in the community reflected on their experiences with these issues. The two teachers’ assistants Joe’Nee and Karry addressed the poor education system and lack of opportunities or role models. Interestingly, Joe’Nee and Karry experienced most of their education during the charterization movement (after the label of failing schools was assigned to the pre-Katrina Orleans Parish Public School system), but they still characterized their education as deficient. Joe’Nee believed one of her teachers made racial assumptions about her capabilities. As similarly discussed in Buras’ work (2010:23), Joe’Nee’s situation could be a result of charter policy and the influx of teachers without any shared cultural affinity with the students or familiarity with New Orleans. Both Karry and Troy stated COA and College Track exposed students to more opportunities and success stories, helping youth realize their potential. The staff suggested PRN and programs like it affect youth’s learning process (e.g. essays based on critical reflection like Troy’s “Social Location” essay), self-esteem, and goals (e.g. employment) by supplying an experience that fills in the gaps of education and provides mentorship.

Collaboration theories of action research, adult-youth relationships, and empowerment traditions inspired the final question of the staff focus group: “Should youth outreach programs incorporate the needs and desires of the community they serve?” This question examined whether the staff thought this type of collaboration was essential to the program’s goals and experience. The staff found it necessary to establish relationships with the community, recognize the assets of a community, include youth in the process, and empower the community through partnership (see Appendix B question 5). All the staff members except one are from New Orleans or surrounding areas and have spent some amount of time living in the Ninth Ward. A couple of the staff members addressed the issue of “do-gooders” from the outside coming into a community, identifying a problem, and establishing their own solutions. As Harvey et al.
discussed, two major problems with the influx of nonprofits in post-Katrina was a lack of understanding of the racial dimensions of the disaster (and the city as a whole) and the devaluing of local knowledge (2015:1040–1041).

Lamphere (2004:432) explains the two collaboration traditions within applied anthropology, “the North” and “the South” (meaning methodological collaboration traditions found popularized in North America and South America). Project Reach NOLA is consistent with the spirit of the “South” based on Paulo Freire, by recognizing people as subjects of their own experiences (assets) and having critical consciousness of their situation. PRN practically employs the “North” by solving problems through planning and action to address issues in the workplace and school environment, such as deficient education and limited economic opportunities. The staff’s desire to establish relationships with the community and include youth, resembles the collaborative approaches of participatory action research (PAR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR). PAR and CBPR promote collaboration to identify and address issues by including community members in the research process. According to MacDonald, PAR recognizes the need for local people to participate meaningfully in the process of analyzing their own solutions (2011:40). Although PRN staff are not researchers, their mission and goals focus on practical problems of importance to the community, and work in partnership to address them. Sherdren desires to have youth input shape the year-long program. Youth participatory action research is a tool for youth integration, which uses youth participants as evaluators to identify areas of concern and provide solutions. Throughout this topic’s discourse, the staff agreed with each other strongly about collaborating with students to create a meaningful experience for Project Reach NOLA participants.
The results of the staff focus group demonstrated how they define the program’s experience and what they expect it to do for youth participants. The staff interpret the curriculum and activities to have a positive influence on the students’ lives academically, professionally, and socially. The focus group produced an overall group narrative from the perspective of an implementer (the person creating and/or facilitating a program), which represented the purpose and goals of the program experience. The data from the focus group, interview, survey, and observation demonstrates how participants perceive the program’s efforts towards empowerment in character, leadership, and community.

![Figure 2: Ending the staff focus group with a snack.](image)

**Director Interview**

On August 17, I went to Compassion Outreach of America’s office to interview the Co-Executive Directors Robert and Sherdren Burnside. The purpose of this interview was to follow-up and provide breadth to the initial conversation with the other staff members. Chronologically this interview occurred after my discussion with the youth participants, but this section is presented here to continue the staff perspective. There were six questions addressing how and
why the program was created. The questions were primarily directed at Robert since he created the program and was not in the focus group, but both director responses were recorded.

1. **Why and how did you create COA/PRN?**

Robert considers Compassion Outreach to be a part of his ministry. It is, for him, the plan and purpose that God has given him to demonstrate unconditional love to the community. He explains that COA was a ministry out of their church and then evolved into “serving our community in different capacities.” After Hurricane Katrina, Robert and Sherdren established their church in the Upper Ninth Ward and began observing the needs of their community such as house refurbishment, drug and violent crime, and schools without basic resources. Through outreach with the community, and a conversation he had with one man, Robert believed God was leading him to demonstrate unconditional love and care for the community. Robert stated:

Then I had a conversation with a guy that really changed everything for me. I went to a store to get some Arizona iced tea, and I had it in a brown bag, so it looked like a beer. Some guy (who came to some of our outreach) asked me “What you got in that bag?” I said, iced tea, man. “Okay, I just wanna make sure you’re good. In the same manner I checked on you, you have the right to check on me like this.” God showed me the accountability, and it is more than them coming on Sundays.

Robert and Sherdren worked with Total Community Action (TCA), Urban League, and other organizations to make their church an asset to the community. After the church closed, the Burnsides focus shifted towards teaching and training others how to engage their communities. In 2011, Project Reach NOLA began as a tutoring service at Frederick Douglass High School. In 2016, the COA building opened, operating several programs: Project Reach NOLA, Stop Killing People (SKP), Fathers Matter, Project 450/15 (neighborhood beautification) School Adoption,
and Faith Alliance (see in footnote 3). Robert explained that, “The programs that you see are offshoots of things we were doing through our church. PRN came from a tutoring service we were doing at Douglass in 2011 to 2012.” The programs that mean the most to him are Project Reach NOLA and Project 450/15 (see footnote 3) because he believes they are “birthed from God.”

![Figure 3: Map of COA/PRN creation](image)

2. What made you go the nonprofit route and what is the process?

Sherdren indicated that the decision to become a federally recognized nonprofit, gave them greater capacity to meet social needs and partner with local government and businesses. She stated:

Being a 501-c3 gave us greater capacity to seek funding and partnerships and address social needs that aren’t tied to the church. As pastors, we do that instinctively, but people don’t have to be of faith to receive our services.

The three areas COA’s programs focus on are strong education, local environment, and strong economics. The directors described a good local environment as physical (beautification), safety, and the ability to create opportunities. Sherdren stated an important aspect of PRN is that everything is different each year. Since she has been involved, Project Reach NOLA has had more of an academic approach, but in the past the program has focused on music, dance, multimedia, and community beautification; “Each summer is based on felt needs and capacity.”
3. **How did you get the program to be a job (work status) for the kids?**

Sherdren explained after Hurricane Katrina the city received money for two areas of youth engagement, (1) summer/after school programs and (2) the City of New Orleans for youth involvement. One summer the city committed to provide jobs to 3,000 students. For two summers Project Reach NOLA had nearly 100 students in the program. Sherdren explained that:

As the money went away, there were external evaluators, which grandfathered us in. Even now the money has dwindled. They only have enough for 200 students that they have set aside for college students and younger kids (NORDC camps). In the program we always apply for, we get ten students and they pay us $415 per kid, and they pay the kids stipends, $100 a week.

To reach more of the youth in their own community they decided to commit to ten more students, twenty in total, to create more opportunities for youth employment. In summer 2018, Project Reach NOLA received a funder who wanted to invest in workforce development and helped with the student’s stipends. Sherdren believes that when kids have money and a job they can grow in financial literacy, participate in the local economy, and have a head start towards their future career.

4. **How did you form relationships with the community?**

Robert began a new approach to engaging and connecting to people by loving others despite personal bias and striving to demonstrate God’s unconditional love. They both tried to maintain a presence in the community whether at church, work, or walking through the neighborhood so people could have continuous access to them. They hired people from the community and encouraged others to participate in outreach and service efforts. Robert explained:
We learned early on to address murder, the need that was most affecting the community. SKP is a program everyone could participate in, that’s why we have the shirts, people participated in the movement even by wearing the message. We included people in the process.

Sherdren stated they also formed relationships through problem solving by connecting with police and city government. They both recognize the importance of grassroots movements, identifying community assets, and collective action.

5. How do you establish relationships with PRN parents?

Their efforts to connect with youth participants’ parents have been limited by the cities sign-up process. The city conducts an orientation, and the Burnsides thought another one might be too much for families. Sometimes they do not know who PRN is getting from the city until the day before the program begins. They get to meet some of the parents during the screening process (filling out paperwork). It is easier for them to establish relationships with the parents who are from the community because they are likely to have more interactions. The majority of parent-staff relationship building comes through the day to day pick up or drop-off, and during the end of summer celebration.

6. What are your future goals for COA/PRN?

Robert and Sherdren would like to see Project Reach NOLA as a year-long program including the fall and spring. Ten students would be involved in a more in-depth internship. They believe PRN can help remove the barriers of economic and educational roadblocks, create a space for practice, and help youth reach meaningful opportunities. Sherdren desires PRN to work
as a bridge helping youth foster skill sets that employers desire. For Compassion Outreach, they would like to further train churches to engage their communities.

Interview Analysis

The purpose of the interview with the directors was to document the origin story of the Project Reach NOLA and Compassion Outreach, in order to have a more in-depth explanation of the program’s approach and methods. As was discussed in the staff focus group, COA primarily focuses on providing services through collaborative efforts based on the identified needs and desires of the community. The directors believe the program components of COA and PRN reflect unconditional love. The Burnsides decided to operate as a non-profit because it further bound them to the community, helping to create partnerships and increased access to resources.

The major critique of nonprofits is the perpetuation of neoliberal privatization of social services and the lack of accountability to communities (Harvey et al. 2015:1031). Harvey et al. assert that the national and local governments employed neoliberal free-market responses to Katrina creating a need for the permanent presence of nonprofits (2015: 1031). Despite Compassion Outreach being subject to this critique as a private nonprofit, community collaboration has been at the forefront of the organizations’ mission. As Robert stated, one of the church’s and organization’s earliest initiatives SKP (Stop Killing People), started because of community members discussing the need with them.

Harvey et al. assert that the influx of volunteers and nonprofits took away from local labor markets (2015:1037). Through COA, the Burnsides hired people from the community to work with them in their programs (PRN, 450/15) and encouraged others’ service initiatives. In question three the directors illustrated how Project Reach NOLA became a youth employment
program. In 2015, “18.8% of New Orleans young people age sixteen to twenty-four were unemployed compared to 15.2% in Louisiana and 13.3% in the United States (Perry 2016:17). Research also shows, 36.9% of Orleans Parish children under eighteen lived in poverty (Perry 2016:7). The Burnsides think it is important to put money in youths’ hands and teach them financial literacy to address these statistics in their neighborhood.

The directors’ responses indicate that they believe the program experience addresses issues affecting local adolescents and can create positive change through empowering opportunities. As defined by MacDonald, participatory action research is “an active approach to improving social practice through change, congruence on authentic participation, collaboration, establishing self-critical communities, and involving people in theorizing about their practices” (2011:39). The Burnsides strive to have relationships within the community to collaborate and improve social conditions. As with Paulo Freire’s collaboration tradition of the “South” and education of empowerment model, Compassion Outreach and Project Reach NOLA see the community as subjects and assets of their own experiences, and can use collaboration and critical reflection to create change. Robert and Sherdren have employed methods similar to participatory action research by identifying community needs through building relationships, discussing issues, and creating practical programs to address each issue. Pearrow defines empowerment as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power to individuals, families, and communities so they can take action to improve their life situations (2008:510). The study by Harvey et al. found that the most enduring post-Katrina organizations were coalitions led by residents and supported newcomers who remained in the city (2015:1041). The Burnsides leading premise of unconditional love through COA strives to empower the community to engage with one another for the better. The directors believe the program experience positively
affects youth participants in the following ways: paying students is expected to meet the need of income and financial literacy; career mentors are expected to foster the character and leadership aspirations in youth, and community service is expected to give back to the community.

**Youth Survey and Group Interview**

My second day of research consisted of the youth survey distribution and group interview. It took place at the beginning of the program day in Project Reach NOLA’s classroom. There were twenty-one students between the ages of fourteen to eighteen. The survey session turned into a group interview when it seemed like the youth participants would rather discuss the questions than fill out a survey. I planned on using surveys as a primary form of data collection and interviews as secondary, but most of the youth surveys contained unfinished and/or one-word answers. My group interview immediately followed and was used to retrieve and analyze results. There are five questions addressing the student’s thoughts on education, the process of joining the program, and their perspective on PRN.

The Student Participant Perspective

1. *How old are you?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14-15</th>
<th>16-18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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</table>

   Table 1: Age groups of the twenty-one participants

2. *How do you feel about school?*
Table 2: How students think about school, “necessary” categorizes those who neither liked nor disliked but described school as a necessity.

3. **How did you join Project Reach NOLA?**

Table 3: This table depicts the four ways youth participants joined PRN. Note: Job 1 is a city-based program connecting youth with job opportunities related to their interests.

4. **What do you like about Project Reach NOLA?**

The responses to this question differed drastically between the surveys and discussion. On the survey students wrote one-word responses such as: “everything”, “nothing”, “staff”, or “teamwork”. When I asked them the question out loud, they not only provided me with full answers, but explained why they felt a certain way. The three things youth participants liked most were: getting paid, making friends (keeping busy), and meeting career professionals (job readiness). These three responses were frequently mentioned by participants. Some other things students liked were: the staff, teamwork, Lil Rob (Robert, teacher), making videos (SKP), and community service.

5. **What would you change about Project Reach NOLA?**
Like question four, the students provided more complete responses to this question during the group interview. I asked what they would change instead of what they dislike to have a better explanation of their reasoning. Also, wanting to change something is not synonymous to disliking the state it was in before. The three most mentioned things youth participants would change are: too much academics (too similar to school), not enough/good food, and not enough field trips. Some of the other things students would like to change were: they want more community/career mentors, more opportunities to do community service, more leadership and teamwork activities, they want to learn something different each week, take fun and educational field trips, play sports, and have more community events (BBQs, car washes, and bake sales).

Survey and Group Interview Analysis

The major difference between the staff and youth participants perception of the program experience is from the position of executing versus participating in an experience. The students’ responses to the last three questions suggest they expect to gain something positive from the experience within the program whether it be getting paid, meeting career professionals, or community involvement. The latter three questions of this youth survey address the purpose of this study (to investigate the ways staff and youth participants perceive the experience), my research assumption (inclusion of participant insight to identify space for improvement), and to compare how both participant groups think about the experience to each other and the program’s goals.

The first question operated as a demographic descriptive marker. I asked question two in reference to how staff and literature defined youth outreach (as a place to fill in gaps in education and provide creative outlets). The third question I asked the students was one of the written survey responses with succinct valuable information. The question addressed program
accessibility and established rapport with the community. The ways students enrolled in the program, may have influenced their expectations of the program experience. Youth participants were introduced to the program through family members, Job 1, PRN staff members, and College Track. As a youth employment service, Job 1 allows youth to list types of jobs they would be interested in, in order to match them with employment based on desires and availability. Students who were referred by College Track might expect an academic focus from PRN, while students enrolled through Job 1 may expect to meet a career mentor from occupations of their interests. As discussed with the executive directors of Compassion Outreach and Project Reach NOLA, they make a concerted effort to be present and form relationships in the community. Most of the family members who recommended youth knew them personally through church, school, and outreach events. The students who were enrolled through Job 1, did so because of PRN’s relationship with the city’s youth employment initiative. The Burnsides discussed the importance of building relationships across the community and the local government. This sentiment is reflected in the youth participants’ enrollment process.

Questions four and five investigate how the students think about the PRN experience through program activities, curriculum, and implementation. The “likes” in question four, indicate having some sort of positive thought or interest towards something. The participants primarily liked getting paid, making friends, and meeting career professionals. In addition, they liked the staff, teamwork, and community involvement. The students’ “likes” correlate to one of the goals mentioned by PRN staff, providing them with resources and opportunities like earning an income and the practical skills of maintaining those earnings. As well as, combating the statistical predisposition towards unemployment and low-wage work in students’ lives. According to Halpern, the developmental tasks of community service and teamwork may help
youth explore their identity and gain experience (2005:12). The students admired staff, community service, and teamwork. The transactional partnering (TP) youth empowerment model suggests a mutual transaction of empowerment between youth and adults occurs when they partner with one another and build relationships (Jennings et al. 2006:36). The students’ “likes” reflected their interests. Dawes and Larson’s psychological engagement interest theory suggests when students gain more knowledge in a particular area, they develop positive thoughts towards them (2011:260). Ultimately, the fact that students like the program staff, mentors, and fellow participants suggests Project Reach NOLA has successfully created a safe environment for student engagement and empowerment.

Figure 4: Career Mentors

The results of question five revealed more things students would change about the program than what they definitively like. However, they mostly desired to change the implementation of activities and curriculum, by frequency and amount. The youth participants developed positive thoughts towards certain activities and wanted to engage in them more often. The top three things students would change are: too much academics (like school), not enough
food, and not enough field trips. Additionally, they want more career mentors, leadership activities, variety in curriculum each week, sports, and community events. From further discussion with youth participants, some of the things they desired were activities found in typical summer programs like field trips and sports. Some students had different expectations for the Project Reach NOLA experience based on how they enrolled. The majority of youth participants just wanted more of what PRN had to offer.

![Figure 5: PRN Field trip to the Louisiana Supreme Court.](image)

According to the psychological engagement theories of interest and self-determination (SDT), youth prefer programs that reflect their interests, motivate them, and have an impact on their lives. The job readiness component of Project Reach NOLA includes wearing professional attire, being on time, writing résumés, doing mock interviews, and meeting career professionals. Students had a chance to learn from mentors who were professors, counselors, poets, dancers,
and mayoral candidates. During the staff focus group, Sherdren, Troy, and Karry described the importance of providing youth with mentors and role models from similar backgrounds (race, socioeconomic status, neighborhood) to demonstrate possibilities. The youth participants were primarily interested in learning from career mentors from occupations they desired to have in the future. As discussed in the literature, a key component of youth empowerment is skill and leadership development. This is a goal of PRN, but the youth and staff have different expectations of employing these concepts. The adaptive leadership model suggests there is a distinction between authority and leadership; authority is a formal position, while individuals without authority can still have leadership (described in Klau 2006:61). Leadership according to PRN staff is consistent with the adaptive leadership model’s below-the-neck-learning, meaning creating a space to exercise and gain leadership skills through activities (Klau 2006:62). But youth stated they were looking for opportunities to experience a position of authority whether in teamwork or other activities.

When I explained to the students that I was documenting their perspective for potential program improvement, several of them exclaimed “Why didn’t you come earlier?” or “Why didn’t you come at the beginning?” Many of them believed that their desires and input were not being heard by program staff. One student who was signed-up by Job 1, wanted to attend a program where he could learn to be a chef. Once he enrolled in Project Reach NOLA, he was disappointed to learn that none of the career mentors were chefs. From my interviews with the staff, it was clear they desired to include youth in the program development process. The problem, stated in the staff focus group, was figuring out how to include youth input that correlates to the theme of character, leadership, and community. For instance, in the student group interview, some participants wanted field trips to amusement parks and laser tag, or to
play sports, but these desires do not address the more complex needs Project Reach NOLA strives to meet. According to Royce, critical youth empowerment theory and youth participatory action research suggest, that including youth in the process towards positive change and program evaluation empowers them and presents solutions from participants undergoing a program experience (2009:10). The youth participant responses indicate that they are interested in Project Reach NOLA experience but believe some changes are needed to meet more of their desires.

**Observation: The Last Full Day of PRN’18**

The data from the youth perspective differed from how the staff interpreted the PRN experience. But my observation days, illustrated participants’ perceptions that were left verbally unexpressed. An analysis of these differences and observed realities will add more breadth to the participants’ description of the Project Reach NOLA experience.

Survey and Group Interview

I arrived at the school at around 9:15 am to distribute the student surveys and observe a day at Project Reach NOLA. This turned out to be the last normally scheduled program day of the summer. The large classroom is located on the second floor of the school. When I came into the room, I greeted the staff members whom I met the day before. A couple of students looked at me inquisitively but most were seated at multiple tables engaged in lively conversation. After everyone arrived, they would typically be dismissed to their classes but today they waited for instruction. Karry first passed out a superlative worksheet to the students, then Sherdren (Executive Director) introduced me, and I distributed my surveys. It was clear the students were not interested in the survey by the short remarks written in the response sections. After getting some of the surveys back, I asked Sherdren if I could ask the questions aloud. I went to each table and asked them about question four and five. I knew two of the participants and their
families personally, so they were eager to talk with me. The students erupted in conversation, speaking both at and to me. I quickly scribbled down notes of their responses.

Researcher to Editor?

After completing the group interview, Executive Director Robert came and dismissed the students for various community service projects. Some students moved boxes, other boys and girls were sent to pass out flyers, and others painted the building. The rest of the students floated between community service and working on writing projects. Sherdren then recruited me to edit the students “Social Location” essays and “Outside Looking In” booklets. I considered this to be a chance for reciprocity, and I agreed to maintain the privacy of the students’ assignments. I worked with one of the staff members Tanesha and a volunteer. I felt extremely privileged and equally uncomfortable learning so much about these students through their writing. Through letters, poems, and raps students wrote about culture, character, identity, and community. I helped two male students, one of whom I knew, finish their essays. After this, the students came back from community service and the day ended at 1:00 pm. I got information about the closing ceremony and said goodbye to the staff and students.

Analysis

Through this observation, I gained a glimpse into the relationships between staff and youth participants, as well as the implementation of the activities during a program day. The projects of self-awareness and community service, demonstrated the program’s emphasis on developing positive youth character. The youth development and empowerment model (YD&E) suggest community service helps develop youth’s personhood and empowers themselves and their communities (Jennings et al 2006:34). These projects allowed them to exercise leadership skills and community engagement. Staff and students constantly joked and laughed with one
another, and everyone seemed to enjoy each other’s company. The staff went out in partnership and facilitation during community service activities. The staff members’ partnership with youth is consistent with Halpern’s instrumental relationship model whereby students’ relationships with adults keep them engaged in developmental task. From my observation, Project Reach NOLA seems to offer a safe and lively environment for youth engagement.

**Observation: PRN Ceremony**

The Venue

![Figure 6: PRN Ceremony](image)

The PRN ending ceremony took place on July 13 from about 11:30 am to 1:30 pm. The ceremony was in the school’s cafeteria. I arrived at 11:00 am and went to the classroom to look for the directors. In the classroom, students dressed up in formal attire preparing for their presentations and performance. I then went down to the cafeteria to wait for the show to start. At the front/right of the cafeteria, was the stage with a podium, mic, projector, and screen. The parents started arriving between 11:30 am and 11:45 am. At 11:45 am the students came in and
the ceremony was on its way. The cafeteria tables were set-up in a typical lunchroom layout behind the audience chairs and were reserved for the students, volunteers, and extra parent seating.

One Mic

![Figure 7: PRN Ceremony-student reading a letter](image)

The ceremony started with Robert Burnside welcoming the families and inviting them to move closer to the stage. Kevin (a PRN teacher), was the main MC of the ceremony. Students were called up one by one to read their Social Location poems, essays, and raps. Some of the student’s pieces were especially moving, discussing the realities of violence and poverty, eliciting breaths of concern and applause from the audience. They also recited a “calling card” that described positive affirmations and character traits of themselves. Students proudly recited things like “I am a leader”, “I am strong”, “I am creative”, “I will be a doctor”, and “I will help change my community”. Robert Jr. or Lil’ Rob (a PRN teacher) presented the public service announcements SKP made against abuse, bullying, and gun violence. Although the subject was
serious, the students could not help but laugh at each other’s acting. After the SKP presentation, there was a brief intermission for lunch. During the lunch break, I introduced myself to some of the parents who were interested in my research.

The performances started after the lunch intermission. Two boys performed individual raps and then teamed up for a collaboration. A group of girls, with the help of the lead program manager Jasmine, performed a dance routine, which inspired some of the other students to join in the dancing. The rest of the ceremony continued with more readings of essays and poems. The ceremony ended with all the staff thanking the families and sending encouraging words to the students. Families visited with one another and then started to leave. Before parents and students exited the cafeteria, Sherdren yelled “One” and all the students responded “Mic”, she told them how much she loved them and enjoyed their summer together, and hugs ensued.

Analysis

Although the responses from students and staff differed in perception towards the program curriculum, the students’ presentations at the ceremony demonstrated the positive effects of the program experience. The students’ calling cards listed meaningful perceptions of their character and identity, which correlated with Project Reach NOLA goals. During the group interview, the students stated they were tired of academics and learning things too similar to school. Even so, the Social Location essay allowed the students to deeply reflect on their identity within the context of New Orleans, and express these thoughts in creative forms (e.g. raps and poems.). The students’ writing discussed beloved New Orleans traditions like gumbo and second-lines and the harsh realities of gun-violence and broken familial relationships. The students’ writing supported Sherdren’s hopes for the curriculum to promote deeper analysis. The interaction between students and staff reflected a safe, supportive, and engaging community (see
Jennings et al. 2006:32; Pearrow 2008:512 “CYE”). Both days of observation permitted me to see the programs missions and goals in action. My observations seem to suggest students engaged in meaningful activities during the program experience. Even so, the difference in staff and student thoughts towards program activities, curriculum, and implementation created a space to discuss potential program improvement.
CONCLUSION

A Perception of Character, Leadership, and Community

Summary

It is pertinent to understand Project Reach NOLA within the socioeconomic context of New Orleans since it has influenced the program’s creation and has shaped the lived experiences of PRN participants. The city’s continuous history of structural racism, poverty, and natural disasters was reshaped through post-Katrina neoliberal policy, which further exacerbated disparities in the education system, job market, and black communities. Project Reach NOLA subscribes to several themes discussed across youth outreach literature such as youth engagement, empowerment, and leadership. But the program’s emphasis on “character, leadership, and community” directly responds to the needs of their youth by providing a paycheck, working towards academic achievement, implementing career readiness and meeting professionals, and cultivating leadership development through community service. The staff and youth responses capture their thoughts on the program experience in comparison to the program’s goals and each other.

Comparison of Participant Perception

The differences in the participants’ perceptions were from the position of executing versus participating in an experience. The questions used for the staff focus group discussed the field of youth outreach, the goals and components of PRN, and the context of New Orleans. The in-depth interview with the directors addressed the process and purpose of creating Project Reach NOLA. Their responses describe how they perceive the PRN experience (activities, curriculum, and implementation) and what they expect the youth to receive from the program.
The staff interprets Project Reach NOLA’s curriculum and activities to have a positive influence on the students’ lives academically, professionally, and socially. First, the staff defined youth outreach programs as spaces to provide access to resources and opportunities to engage and empower youth to better themselves and their community. According to the staff, the best way to engage students is to capture their interests and establish relationships. The program’s mission is to provide job readiness and professionalism, academic support, personal growth, and leadership development opportunities to youth. The staff’s goal is to implement this mission as a year-long program. In order to meet these aspirations, the staff considers it essential to establish relationships with the community, recognize the assets of a community, include youth in the process, and empower the community through partnership. Even so, the staff believed that they need to do a better job of including youth desires in the PRN experience. The staff perspective describes what they expect students to receive from the program curriculum, and how it addresses the youth’s and community’s needs.

The youth perspective describes what they think about the specific components within the Project Reach NOLA experience. The youth survey and group interview consisted of five questions addressing the student’s thoughts on education, the process of joining the program, and their perspective on PRN. The students’ responses reflected what they expect to gain from the Project Reach NOLA experience and how they thought about the implementation of certain program activities. The way students enrolled in PRN influenced what they expected from the program. Students enrolled via Project Reach NOLA staff, family members, Job 1, and College Track. If students joined through Job 1, they may have expected career professionals who matched their career interests. If they joined through College Track, they may be interested in opportunities towards academic achievement.
The last two questions of the youth survey and interview investigated the ways students think or interpret the PRN experience through program activities, curriculum, and implementation. The “likes” in question four, indicate having some sort of positive thought or interest towards something. The “changes” is question five reveal the reasons for “disliking” something or wanting to alter some part of the program experience. The participants primarily liked getting paid, making friends, and meeting career professionals. In addition, they liked the staff, teamwork, and community involvement. Even though the students had a lot more things they would change than what they definitively like, students mostly desired to change how often they participated in activities and curriculum. The top three things students would change are: too much academics (like school), not enough food, and not enough field trips. Additionally, they want more career mentors, leadership activities, variety in curriculum each week, sports, and community events. The youth participants’ “likes” and “changes” related to Project Reach NOLA’s goals (defined by the staff) such as providing resources and opportunities of youth employment, professionalism (career mentors), and leadership. The youth participants’ perceptions of “changes”, as well as the staff’s responses in the focus group, indicate a space for program improvement.

Implications

The perceptions of staff and youth participants of Project Reach NOLA are mostly consistent with each other and the goals of the program. Yet, the staff’s remarks on collaboration and the students’ program desires indicated space for program improvement. The youth participants desired to change the implementation of activities and curriculum by frequency and amount. They wanted to engage in more of the activities that caught their interest. For instance, students primarily wanted more opportunities to learn from career mentors in jobs they desired to
have. They also wanted opportunities to have a position of authority instead of learning leadership skills theoretically. During the group interview when I explained to the students that I was documenting their perspective for potential program improvement, several of them exclaimed that I should have come sooner. Many of them thought that their desires and input were not being heard by program staff. In the staff focus group, participants acknowledged the importance of collaborating with the community at large and the youth participants in the development process. But they stated that the difficulty lies in figuring out how to include youth input that correlates to the theme of character, leadership, and community. The inclusion of staff and youth perspectives implies that Project Reach NOLA has space for improvement in adult-youth collaboration. This collaboration can ensure that students get what they desire and need in relation to the program’s goals.

Project Reach NOLA participants indirectly mentioned a variety of collaboration methods found in action research and youth empowerment literature. The Executive Director Sherdren wants to have youth input shape the year-long program. The objective of action research such as: youth participatory action research, critical youth empowerment, and community-based participatory research is to collaborate with participants to identify and address an issue. Youth participants of the summer program can evaluate their own experience through an assessment and diagnosis, report the feedback, and partner with staff in implementing areas of concern into the year-long program (process found in Jacquez et al. 2013:179). Jacquez et al. found that youth who participated in analyzing their own programs highlighted major themes about the factors that make the program valuable (connection, resources, and support) and could identify areas of concern (2013:184). Prior to the start of the summer or year-long program, staff can inquire about the jobs students were interested in with Job 1, or have a
discussion with the youth participants discovering their needs and desires in the areas of job
readiness/ professionalism, academics, and leadership. Staff can find a way to practically align
student’s desires with PRN ‘s goals of character, community, and leadership.

My study uses the focal point of perception, interests, or thoughts about a program
experience as a precursor to any evaluation of program outcome achievement or impact.
Evaluations primarily record participation levels, meeting goals, and outcome achievement
(Morgan 2016:67; Royce 2009:3). My research goes beyond the documentation of moving from
“point A to point B” or objectives to results. Rather it illustrates how the participants perceive
and interpret the process. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development task force
identified the limitations of program evaluations as difficulties in gaining full participation and
tracking youth, and problems designing ways to capture youth movement in and out of programs
(Roth and Brooks-Gunn 1998:429). According to Morgan, implementation evaluations attempt
to go deeper than traditional evaluations by assessing the process of program execution by
fidelity (adherence to curriculum and in the model) and quality (how a program is delivered)
(2016:67). While implementation evaluations observe the execution that produces an effective
outcome, it does not explore how participants interpret or think about fidelity or quality of the
program experience. By using youth evaluators through YPAR (see appendix A), evaluators
would have full access and/or participation in the program. In a YPAR-based case study, youth
researchers found that “the more active and engaged a youth is in a program and the more
dimensions of meaningful participation employed, outcome achievement is more likely” (Royce
2006:4). By empowering youth participants to evaluate the program, Project Reach NOLA could
address the “lack of accountability” critique of nonprofits and meet their program goals towards
youth leadership and character development (cf. Harvey et al. 2015:1031).
The director (Sherdren) was interested in an immediate participant perception because Project Reach NOLA’s program activities and curriculum change each summer. Traditional evaluations that measure program attendance, or assess whether all the assignments are completed, do not describe how all participants internalize, perceive, or are potentially affected by a program. How the participants think about the experience can, in turn, reflect their engagement levels and the potential program impact (cf. Morgan et al. 2016:76). Traditional program evaluations may measure whether a program meets its goal but they do not describe why a program experience matters to those receiving the service. If I merely assessed the curriculum implementation at PRN such as whether students participated in community service, worked with career mentors, or wrote résumés, I would not have captured the staff’s interest in adult-youth collaboration or the students’ desire to be heard. By focusing on how the participants perceive (think or interpret) the Project Reach NOLA experience, the responses not only described the process but by comparison were able to find a space for improvement.

Future Studies

As a case study researched towards the end of the program’s yearly operations, there is a lot of opportunity for improvement. To expand upon the staff perspective, I would suggest holding individual in-depth interviews where teachers explain their specific curriculum and describe the day-to-day Project Reach NOLA experience. Even though the focus group was an open space for dialogue, there was still an existing power dynamic due to participant positions as directors, teachers, and teachers’ assistants. An individual interview would create the freedom to express all perceptions without group influence. The youth’s questions used within this study were based on limited time to establish rapport and simplified to be understood by any age group. This tactic may have limited my data. Because the youth participants were eager to
discuss the questions aloud rather than a survey format, I would suggest having multiple focus
groups with in-depth questions discussing various program activities. For the inclusion of all
positioned expertise, I would include the parents or guardians of the youth participants to further
understand how those within the community perceive PRN’s efforts.

To improve future findings, I recommend conducting a longitudinal study with the staff
and youth from the beginning to the end of the program. This would indicate if perceptions
change at any point during the experience, and generate a more descriptive documentation of
overall participant perception. For a more participatory action-based approach, I suggest having
former students create the research questions, and have each participant group create questions
for one another. My study is not a formal evaluation. Instead, it was a documentation of
perspectives on a program experience as a precursor to an evaluation of program outcome
achievement. As the Project Reach NOLA program experience is different each summer, the
next steps would be to address students concerns in the following years’ session and consider a
YPAR evaluation before a formal evaluation of outcome achievement or impact.

This case study demonstrates the value of including participants’ voice and positioned
expertise in investigating, recording, and documenting their experiences. Their responses
illustrated the importance of participant perception to a program’s goals. The data highlighted the
differences in perception from executing a youth outreach program to participating in it. This
study documented how Project Reach NOLA’s goals of youth empowerment in character,
leadership, and community were perceived by the program’s participants. Data within this study
described how the staff and youth participants perceive the state of collaboration at Project
Reach NOLA, and it was determined pertinent to positive youth engagement and empowerment.
Notes

1. By “youth”, I am referring to individuals between the ages of thirteen to eighteen years old.

2. Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine (2015:46), use the term “positioned expertise” in reference to Freire subjects as experts of their experience and Harding’s term situated knowledges, experts or knowledgeable within their particular settings/positions.


4. Michelle Alexander defines “Jim Crow” as “By the turn of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life lending sanction to a racial ostracism that extended to schools, churches, housing, jobs, restrooms, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, and homes.” (2012:35).

5. Michelle Alexander defines “white Redeemers” as “dominant whites on a quest for a new racial equilibrium, a racial order that would protect their economic, political, and social interest in a world without slavery” (2012:32).


7. “Second-line parades are organized and paid for by social and pleasure clubs, the contemporary descendants of 19th century benevolent and mutual aid societies, which provided health, unemployment, and burial insurance for their members. The term second line refers to a rhythm, a dance step, and a performance tradition said to have originated in 18th-century Congo Square on the margins of the colonial city” (Breunlin 2006:746).

9. In questions three through four of the staff focus group, participants make racial identifying statements such as, “With African American youth I want to put African American professionals and college students in front of them in front of them (Sherdren, 26)”, “When I came back here, I could read. The lady, my teacher, didn’t think I could read, because I was black (Joe’Nee, 27)”, “I think African American students get the short end of the stick and they are defeated before they even get to start (Troy, 27)”, and “I can tell you white people think that all the time, we always think we know the answers to the black community without ever listening (Kevin, 28-29).”

10. Key-words-in-context pays attention to words uttered by multiple people in the group central to the development of the context, theory, or theme of the research (Onwuegbuzie 2011:6). In this study the keywords reflect the answers of each participant.

11. College Track is a national program that commits to providing academic, financial, and social support for students from ninth grade through college graduation.

http://collegetrack.org
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Appendix A

Table 4: Terms and Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERMS</th>
<th>ABBREVIATIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent empowerment cycle</td>
<td>AEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community based participatory research</td>
<td>CBPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion Outreach of America</td>
<td>COA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical youth empowerment</td>
<td>CYE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment education</td>
<td>EE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans recreation and development centers</td>
<td>NORDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish School Board</td>
<td>OPSB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orleans Parish Publics Schools</td>
<td>OPPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory action research</td>
<td>PAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Reach NOLA</td>
<td>PRN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recovery School District</td>
<td>RSD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-determination theory</td>
<td>SDT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stop Killing People</td>
<td>SKP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Community Action</td>
<td>TCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transactional partnering model</td>
<td>TP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth development and empowerment program</td>
<td>YD&amp;E</td>
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Appendix B
Responses: Staff Focus Group

1. *How would you define youth outreach?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Answer/Keyword</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Empowering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Engaging/ Resource accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>Organizing, Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karry</td>
<td>Exposure to opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherdren</td>
<td>Access/ Holistic Services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Keywords summarize the answers to question one by each participant.10

Jasmine: I think it means empowering youth and bettering our future.

Kevin: Engaging youth to enhance or provide resources they might not have access to otherwise.

Troy: I would say organizing, because if you’re going to outreach it takes a lot more than sitting in a classroom to reach a student. You have to move beyond classroom walls to organize students and rally them up, to get them prepared for participation. The best way to reach students is in the community, to be part of the community.

Karry: A program to show students what type of opportunities exists and help them grow so they can be their best selves in the next chapter of their lives.

Sherdren: For me it’s about going to someone. Intentional engagement of that specific group. Also access and exposure presenting opportunities that may not otherwise be afforded to students. Schools have made choices to cut certain thing out of schools, so I think outreach can provide holistic services.

2. *Is there a certain level of creativity or innovation needed to create youth programs that engage people?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Answer/Keyword</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Relational connections, creativity is more effective, uniqueness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>Different types of learning, including youth in the process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherdren</td>
<td>Deeper analysis instead of new material</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Keywords that best summarize the answers to question two by each participant.
Kevin: I think there are a lot of opportunities in New Orleans for youth to engage in all types of creative programs. But it’s about making those relational connections. The challenge is to not get the same kids, but to get a new demographic that does not get connected as easily.

Troy: It’s difficult because kids learn on so many different levels. But there are creative ideas. What we do here is inviting kids into the discussion. How would you get students to engage in an innovative style?

Kevin: The more innovative and creative the more effective. It is easy to throw together a program without uniqueness. The more you can surprise kids the more engaged they’ll be and the more effective it will be.

Troy: In my class we are talking about social location, like Lil Wayne in New Orleans and James Baldwin in New York. We don’t give students the benefit of the doubt, we don’t let them elaborate on other ideas. But I was afraid that they wouldn’t understand the assignment.

Sherdren: When I hear the term innovation I do often think of “new”, but I don’t necessarily think we always have to put something new in front of young people. Folks spend a lot of time trying to do that, but I think there is value and merit in going deeper. There is innovation in going deeper or thinking differently about something you already know. It makes for successful opportunities. I like the element of surprise, in a low-stakes safe-space, you don’t know what is going to happen. You might need to step up a bit, but it is not going to damage you.

3. What is the mission or goal of Project Reach NOLA?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Answer/Keyword</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Year-long engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>Community involvement/Knowing yourself &amp; community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Professionalism/self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karry</td>
<td>Professionalism/leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe‘Nee</td>
<td>Learning experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Opportunities, leadership, community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherdren</td>
<td>Racial understanding, professionalism, fiscal responsibility</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Keywords that best summarize the answers to question three by each participant.

Robert: The goal is for it to become a year-round program and engage students within their school environment. I’m doing SKP (Stop Killing People) it is an anti-violence initiative; this is my first time forming it and getting more students involved. Right now, we are working on a PSA (public service announcement).

Troy: Reaching students in their circumference, being involved in their community. Students don’t know what they want until you show them. Helping them aim towards higher education.
I’m teaching social location, knowing who you are in the context of your community, and knowing what New Orleans is to them.

Jasmine: We push professionalism, how to carry yourself in interviews, shaping and grooming them with skills for professionalism. Learning techniques, they may not learn at school. Being the one to make change in their community and learning to know themselves. The tools to better yourself and help other people.

Karry: The number one thing is to put money in the youth’s hands and create a space for students to gain professional skills. We create the space for them to make mistakes and learn from them. A space to be themselves and guide them to be leaders.

Joe’Nee: The mission is for children to gain learning experiences, since I’ve been here, I’ve learned a lot. When we took trips, I gained a lot that I did not know. The Historic New Orleans Connection, taught things I really didn’t know, I gained a lot of knowledge, and how to be aware.

Kevin: The goal of PRN is to engage young people from the community in ways that provide them with resources and experiences they may not have normally been exposed to. Over the six years we have done cultural opportunities, entrepreneurship, professional guests (Latoya Cantrell, now mayor of New Orleans), SKP, and exposers to writing. What’s been consistent is leadership development, leading from the inside out, defining integrity - working hard to identify who they are on the inside to help find their purpose. Another is service, PRN is service to the community.

Sherdren: I like the idea of creating an intentional space to talk about race. In their writing the kids created a rap, many are dealing with race and racism consciously and unconsciously. With African American youth I want to put African American professionals and college students in front of them. Economics is important, the whole practice is fiscal responsibility, talking to them about money while they have some. Last year we had Hope Credit Union come in, and almost every student knew they were irresponsible with money. Having practical experience and seeing the aspirations in front of them. I believe these experiences will go with them, and they can refer back to it. No future is sealed, but their future gets expanded.

4. What about New Orleans sociocultural context makes programs like PRN necessary?
Sherdren: Tri-centennial, the research center brought up 300 years of information and found really depressing data. African Americans are faring worse in some areas than we were in segregation, so that was really frightening. During Reconstruction there was time for equity but then retaliation. There is a similar pattern now in the Trump Era. We can’t get too multicultural to escape what is happening. At PRN, we create spaces for children to talk about this social context.

Jasmine: I’ve stayed here, Florida, and Alabama, and in seeing children here I feel like they don’t know how far they can go (achieve), “All Ima know is here in the streets”. A difference, N.O. reps their city so hard, that type of stuff you barely see anywhere else. PRN and COA are trying to break those generational things off of this city.

Joe’Nee: I’ve been in New Orleans my whole life, for nineteen years. I have changed so much, when I was younger all I knew was to fight, all I knew was the struggle. Since I have grown and had mentors, I have learned to use my brain. I have so much more. During Hurricane Katrina we had left, and we went to California. That was a whole different school system going on, I was around a lot of white children who were ahead of me. When I came back here, I could read. The lady, my teacher, didn’t think I could read because I was black. People think that we can’t do it, I was just getting to the seventh grade! I went home and told my mother.

Karry: For me my mom didn’t graduate from high school. She had a baby at seventeen. I would do good in school, but I didn’t have any motivation. I wasn’t dreaming or striving for these things it just came to me. I didn’t see what could be. After middle school I applied to College Track, this exposed me to many more opportunities and success stories in New Orleans. In high school I was more excited. The biggest thing for me is that I was accepted into a boarding school. I finally realized... back then I thought I was stupid, because school was easy... New Orleans doesn’t set up students to achieve. After I came back, I tried to motivate others to these opportunities. It’s important to have exposure to things like filling out taxes at such a young age.

Kevin: The Post-Katrina milieu, I’m not sure if it’s positive or if it’s still... some would say there has been great innovation but there has also been some failure. But there is a mindset to try new things.
Troy: I’m from this community (Ninth Ward) and this school. College Track came and selected students who applied. I got in and was able to succeed. Mrs. Burnside and I have gone down the street, knocked on doors, and described the program to parents. Students were able to sharpen their skills. I think African American students get the short end of the stick and they are defeated before they even get to start. With COA they see potential. When I was in eighth grade I struggled with illiteracy, then I went to BARD and now I’m at Yale University. COA and College Track show students that they are more than enough. Without programs like this, students will fail. These programs are a benefit to communities. Education is organizing.

5. Should youth outreach programs incorporate the needs and desires of the community they serve?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/Pseudonym</th>
<th>Answer/Keyword</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sherdren</td>
<td>Form community relationships, recognize people as experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Community assets, understanding how to give youth control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>Understanding power imbalance, using your voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Inner community advocates</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 9: Keywords that best summarize the answers to question five by each participant.

Sherdren: Christian community development principle is about the needs of the community and listening. My husband and I try to be present in neighborhoods, form relationships, and understand what is going on, and to know where we can infuse leadership. It is a give and take, I come with some professional expertise, and I can assess. But I also believe that people are the experts of their own lived experiences, so I try to negotiate that in the space.

Kevin: One of the issues for do-gooders is we go into the community and look at deficits that we can somehow fill. The problem is that people rarely believe that there are assets. You’ve got to go in with helping the people themselves identify their own assets. There is a difference between the community at large and the community of PRN (teenagers), we haven’t figured out how to wrap our program around letting them (students) have more control.

Sherdren: If kids have been working with us year-round, they can provide more feedback. I appreciated them getting to see each-others work. I think if we could pay them year-round, they would be more engaged. I do think we could engage the student community more.

Robert: People from outside the community come in with assumptions, so you need inner community advocates. You can’t fix something you have no experience of.
Troy: Getting the people that are there to talk and have control. Most times people don’t know they are taking on imperial thinking. We leave people voiceless and take the power from them.

Kevin: I can tell you white people think that all the time, we always think we know the answers to the black community without ever listening. But we (PRN) did that to the kids all summer. So how do we build student agency?
Candace Colbert was raised in Rio Rancho, New Mexico. She received her B.A. in Sociocultural Anthropology from Northern Arizona University in 2016. She joined the University of New Orleans Master of Urban Studies and Applied Anthropology program and centered her research on youth and community outreach. After she graduates, she hopes to apply anthropological perspectives to a career in youth outreach.