HEALING, SELF-CARE, AND YOUTHS' CIVIC LEADERSHIP

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> "CARING FOR MYSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT IS SELF PRESERVATION, AND THAT IS AN ACT OF POLITICAL WARFARE.
>
> -AUDRE LORDE"

BACKGROUND

In the past decade, a growing number of youth organizing and leadership groups have engaged low-income youth of color to address social disparities through grassroots organizing, advocacy, and public education. Many youth organizing groups across the state have increasingly incorporated healing and self-care practices to promote the well-being of their members as they work toward positive community change. These self-care practices aim to address some of the emotional trauma, stress, and other challenges that contribute to poor mental health among young people of color. Groups' efforts often reflect a recognition of how social inequalities negatively impact mental health outcomes for young people, as well as a concern that engaging in grassroots organizing or other efforts to improve community conditions can actually exacerbate emotional stress. As such, organizations have sought to incorporate activities that alleviate negative mental health outcomes while at the same time empowering their members to create positive social change. Summarizing findings from surveys, focus groups, 180 in-depth interviews with youth leaders, and over three years of participant observations, this report shows how and to what extent TCE-supported youth organizations across California engage their members in a range of healing and self-care practices. It also explores how these healing practices are associated with an array of self-reported leadership, health, and other developmental outcomes.

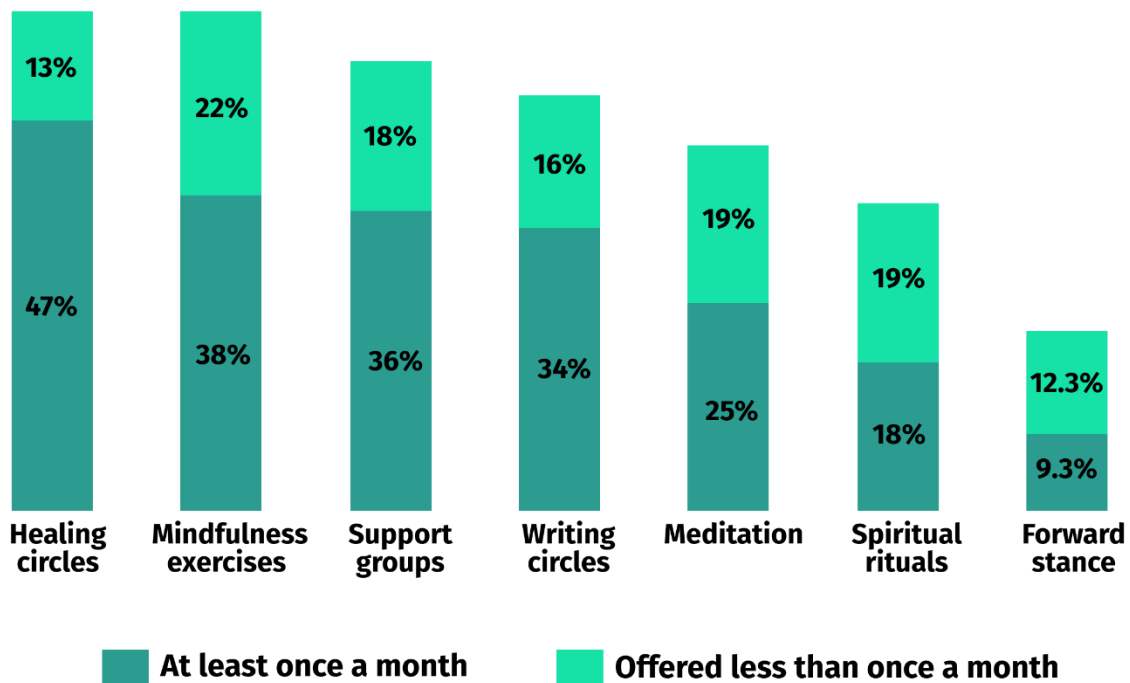**Contextualizing Healing Work & Organizing Within Academic Research**

Healing approaches in youth organizing spaces seek to uproot structural inequality by both transforming society and addressing the psychological harms caused by oppression (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015; Ginwright, 2009, 2015). This approach is necessary because racism, sexism, poverty, violence, and lack of resources negatively impact the overall well-being of youth of color (Brown, 2003; Ginwright, 2015; Ortega-Williams, 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013). Yet youth of color also experience barriers to mental health, including lack of access to health care, institutional mistrust, and stigma (Broman, 2012; Brown, 2003; Cheng et al., 2013). As such, youth organizing spaces can offer alternative forms of support for youth of color. Dr. Sean Ginwright (2009, 2010) has argued that aspects of grassroots organizing and leadership development help Black and Brown youth heal trauma caused by injustice. For example, youth can develop empowered collective identities and conduct critical analyses that counter damaging stereotypes or self-blame. Furthermore, engaging in campaigns and leadership development can help young people feel empowered, rather than hopeless, to rectify legacies of health disparities, poverty, and structural harms against their bodies and communities (Mosley, 2019). Healing-centered approaches to youth organizing encourage youth to engage in self-care, restorative justice, meditation/mindfulness, cultural healing, and other practices that focus on internal transformation (Chavez-Diaz & Lee, 2015).

HEALING AND SELF-CARE PRACTICES AMONG YOUTH ORGANIZING AND LEADERSHIP GROUPS

To understand the extent to which TCE-supported youth organizations incorporate healing and self-care practices, we draw on 2018-2019 survey data collected from 171 groups that involve adolescents and young adults in collective efforts to improve their schools through grassroots campaigns, policy advocacy, and narrative change efforts. In our survey sample (representing 100% of the TCE-funded youth-serving groups that we identified), just under two-thirds, or 63%, of groups reported engaging their members in some kind of healing and self-care practices. (See Terriquez, 2019, for more information about the survey data.) Survey results shown in Figure 1 demonstrate the frequency with which these organizations involved members in different activities to improve their well-being.

Figure 1. Frequency of Healing Activities Offered by Youth Organizations

(N=171)

	Healing circles	Mindfulness exercises	Support groups	Writing circles	Meditation	Spiritual rituals	Forward stance
Offered less than once a month	13%	22%	18%	16%	19%	19%	12.3%
At least once a month	47%	38%	36%	34%	25%	18%	9.3%

At least once a month   **Offered less than once a month**

Survey results demonstrate that TCE-supported youth organizations most commonly engage their members in healing or talking circles, with nearly half (47%) hosting such activities at least once a month and another 13% doing so less frequently. Implemented in various ways, healing circles invite members to share personal experiences in a safe space, receive affirmation from their peers, and build relationships and bonds within their organizations.

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Unlike group therapy settings, healing circles often are culturally centered and offer a ceremonial-like atmosphere for youth to reflect on their experiences, process difficult emotions, and find emotional relief in a collective environment. Guided by a mentor or youth facilitator, healing circles often incorporate cultural components such as creating altars, burning cleansing medicinal herbs such as sage or copal (tree sap from the copal tree native to Mexico), as well as practicing grounding exercises involving meditation or breathing. Healing circles can be restricted to affinity groups (e.g., women, male, trans, or queer youth), while some incorporate formal rite-of-passage curricula (such as *Xinachtli* and *Joven Noble)*. In some organizations, healing circles have been practiced within indigenous sweat lodges. Meanwhile, some are more informal, with young people simply reporting how they are feeling while other participants actively listen and offer positive affirmations.
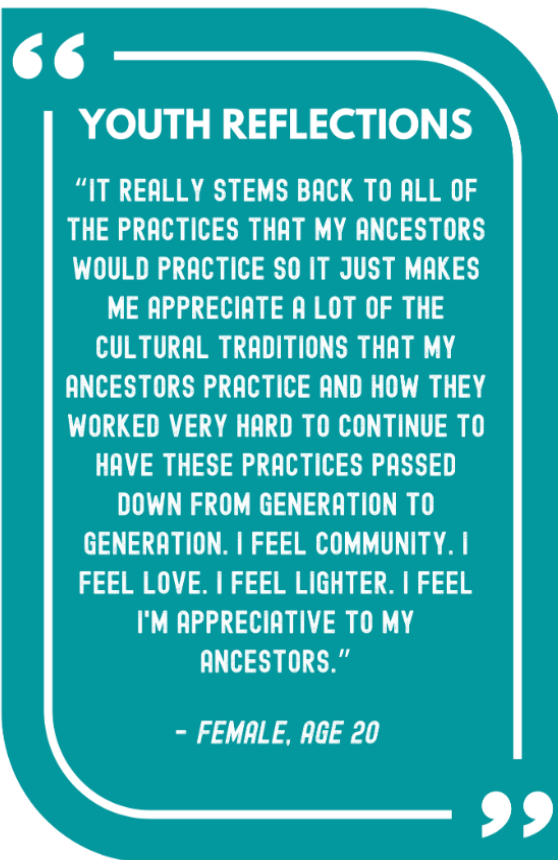
While healing circles are a fairly common practice among some organizations, survey findings also demonstrate that many organizations (38%) also incorporate mindfulness exercises at least monthly. These can include practices such as meditation, breathing exercises, yoga, and aromatherapy. A similar percentage of organizations, 36%, offer support groups that focus on specific needs, for example by providing safe spaces for femme-identified and LGBTQIA youth. In addition, support groups are sometimes offered after a community tragedy (such as the death of a community member, a fire, etc.). Meanwhile, 34% of organizations implement writing circles that incorporate creative writing, poetry, and journaling as a way to process emotions. One in four practice meditation with their members at least once a month, and another 18% incorporate spiritual rituals, many of which draw on ethnic cultural traditions (e.g., sage burning, sweat lodge ceremonies, and libation pouring). Finally, another 9% involve their members in forward stance, a form of tai chi that links mind and body and seeks to help practitioners embody positive social change.

Our interviews and observations reveal that youth organizations often contextualize these practices by educating their members about the need to attend to their well-being in order to become effective leaders. Staff and other youth leaders often acknowledge that a history of colonization, genocide, white supremacy, xenophobia, sexism, and/or homophobia contribute to health disparities among people of color and directly shape youths' lived experiences. Thus, attending to one's physical and mental well-being has been, and continues to be, a way for their communities to resist current and historical forms of oppression. To this end, staff and leaders draw on longstanding diverse cultural traditions and non-Western medicine. Learning

about ancestral legacies of resilience, knowledge, and hope further politicizes youth and develops their pride in or knowledge about their own or others' ethnic cultures and health practices. As an act of radical healing, youth re-identify themselves in response to societal assumptions and come to see themselves as front-line actors with agency in creating just and healthier futures (Ginwright, 2010).

Some activities, such as healing and writing circles, encourage members to reflect deeply on their own experiences, including personal challenges, and share them with their peers in a safe environment. Young people, therefore, learn how to express emotions and process difficult experiences, which can help de-stigmatize mental health issues. In interviews, some reported that sharing personal experiences with the group facilitated bonding among members. It also helped develop stronger ties to their mentors. Indeed, these findings align with prior research suggesting that close social networks can enhance health outcomes (Cruwys et al., 2013; Jetten et al., 2012). Importantly, some youth who were interviewed shared that they were encouraged to think more critically about self-care and community care. Staff and youth alike shared that healing practices could help prevent burnout caused by the stresses of activism.

It is worth noting here that our participant observations suggest that organizations have increasingly adopted healing and self-care activities over the past several years. The diffusion of healing and self-care practices appears to have been facilitated by cross-organization, regional, and statewide learning opportunities as well as financial support for healing and wellness programming.

THE LINK BETWEEN HEALING AND SELF-CARE PRACTICES ON YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

> **YOUTH REFLECTIONS**
>
> "WE WERE ABLE TO SHARE OUR KNOWLEDGE WITH EACH OTHER AND GROW FROM EACH OTHER. WE WERE ABLE TO JUST TALK ABOUT WHAT WE WANT TO TALK ABOUT AND THE STRUGGLES THAT WE WERE GOING THROUGH. AND WE'RE ABLE TO GIVE POSITIVE COMMENTS BACK TO EACH OTHER AND JUST HELP EACH OTHER HEAL."
>
> – FEMALE, AGE 17
>
> "THE HEALING CIRCLE, THAT PRETTY MUCH LETS YOU HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE THINGS OFF YOUR CHEST IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT. YOU SLEEP BETTER THAT NIGHT."
>
> – MALE, AGE 18

Survey data collected from youth members suggests that healing and self-care activities positively correlate with members' personal growth and leadership development. In 2016, we collected surveys from 1,396 youth in 96 TCE-funded organizations, achieving a 91% response rate among regular participants. These surveys gathered data from a racially diverse group of youth, with 62% identifying as Latinx, 17% Black, 13% Asian-Pacific Islander, 3% Native American, 4% White, and the remaining as some other race. Fifty-three percent of the respondents identified as female, 46% as male, and 1% as gender-nonconforming. Approximately 63% were adolescents, and 37% were young adults.

In the survey, members were asked to rate the degree to which their involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development: Did it have no impact, very little impact, some impact, or a lot of impact? Such self-reports are subjective and might

suffer from social desirability bias, although the range of responses indicates that participants felt comfortable disagreeing when appropriate. Figure 2 shows the likelihood of youth members reporting that their involvement had "a lot" of impact on different aspects of their personal growth and leadership development. Adjusting for age, gender difference, and how long members had been part of their organizations, the results compare findings for individuals who participated in healing and self-care activities through their organizations (represented by dark green bars) to those who had not participated in such activities (represented by lighter green bars).[1]

YOUTH REFLECTIONS

"IF YOU DO A LOT OF ADVOCACY WORK, IT'S GOING TO BE VERY STRESSFUL. SO YOU NEED TO IDENTIFY A POSITIVE, HEALTHY WAY OF GETTING YOUR STRESS OUT, AND COPING, AND UTILIZING THAT. THROUGHOUT MY TIME WITH THOSE ORGANIZATIONS, I'VE BECOME MUCH MORE AWARE OF HOW MUCH DAMAGE I WAS DOING TO MYSELF PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY WITH NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS, AND LEARNING PRETTY MUCH HOW TO MITIGATE THOSE."

— MALE, AGE 20

Youth members who had participated in healing and self-care activities were more likely to report that their organizational involvement significantly impacted certain aspects of their personal development. Specifically, the likelihood of reporting that their organizational involvement had "a lot" of impact on taking better care of their emotional well-being was 56% among youth who had participated in healing or self-care activities, compared to 36% for otherwise similar youth who had not participated in such activities. These findings reflect how practices such as mindfulness, meditation, hiking, herbalism, and sharing one's story in *circulos* (circles) can offer youth healthy outlets to address stress and challenging circumstances. Youth members reflected that these practices can be cathartic and healthier than turning to other forms of coping mechanisms such as alcohol or drugs. Survey results indicate that the likelihood of reporting taking "a lot" better care of their physical health was 41% among those who had participated in healing activities, compared to 35% for those who had not engaged in such activities. Higher percentages of the healing participants also reported increased exposure to career options, improvements in school performance, and trusting relationships with mentors. These findings align with common themes from our interviews, where youth shared the importance of healing through support systems. Youth stated that they felt safe to share their personal experiences with mentors via one-on-one discussions and in group settings. Queer youth in particular confided that this environment was crucial because of challenges around sharing their identities with their families. Many youth also reported that the sense of community bolstered their feelings of belonging and compassion for each other.
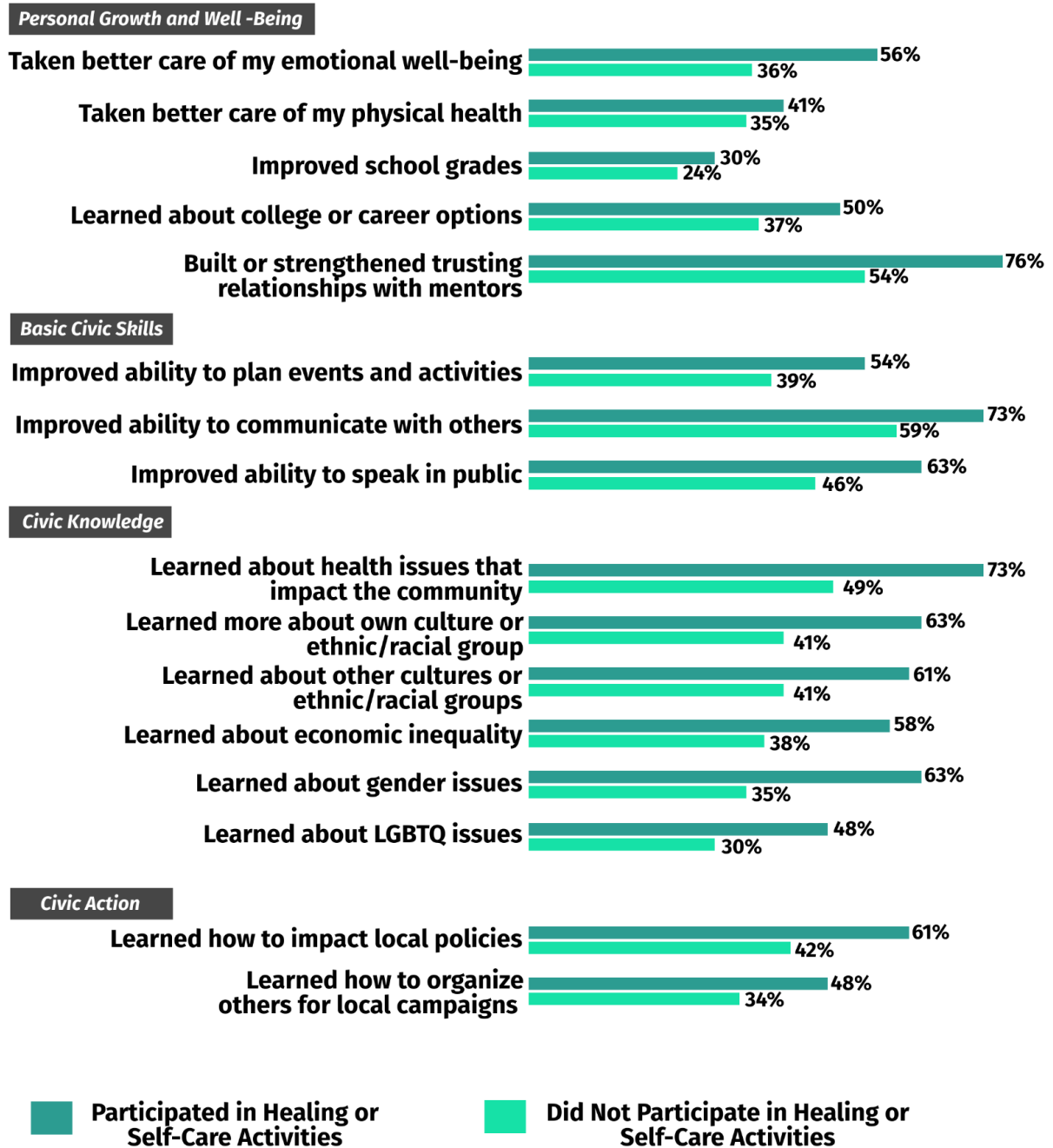
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[1] The findings illustrate predicted probabilities from logistic regression results. The bars shown in Figure 2 reflect statistically significant differences between those who participate in healing and self-care practices and those who do not.

Healing and self-care may also enhance youths' civic knowledge, skills, and capacity to take civic action. Survey results indicate that the likelihood of claiming "a lot of improvement" in the ability to plan events was 54% among those who had participated in healing activities, compared to 39% of those who had not. Meanwhile, there was also a notable difference in the likelihood of reporting a significant improvement in the ability to communicate and speak in public based on whether or not youth had participated in healing and self-care activities.
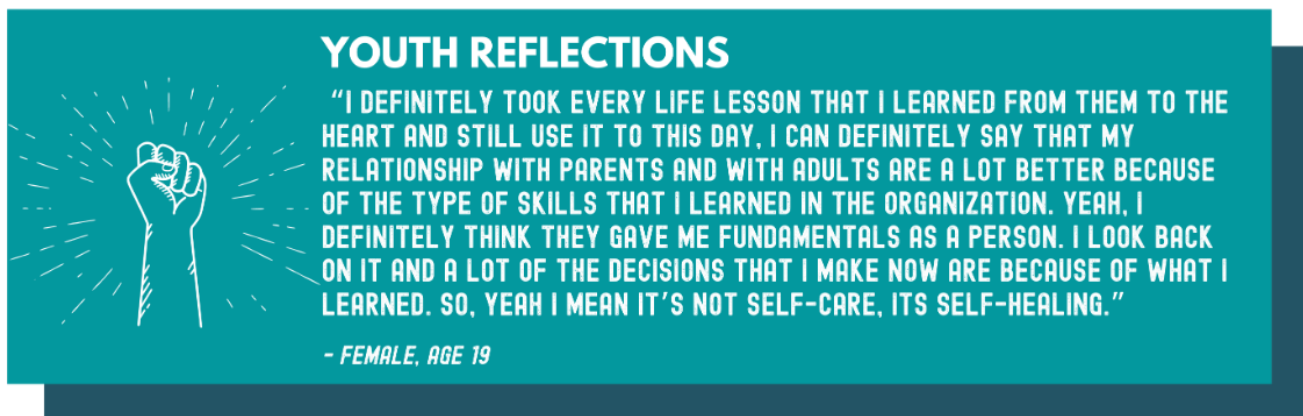
Figure 2. Self-Reported Impact of Participation in Healing and Self-Care Activities on Developmental and Leadership Outcomes

Percent reporting "a lot" of impact

(N=1,396)

Personal Growth and Well-Being

Taken better care of my emotional well-being
- Participated: 56%
- Did Not Participate: 36%

Taken better care of my physical health
- Participated: 41%
- Did Not Participate: 35%

Improved school grades
- Participated: 30%
- Did Not Participate: 24%

Learned about college or career options
- Participated: 50%
- Did Not Participate: 37%

Built or strengthened trusting relationships with mentors
- Participated: 76%
- Did Not Participate: 54%

Basic Civic Skills

Improved ability to plan events and activities
- Participated: 54%
- Did Not Participate: 39%

Improved ability to communicate with others
- Participated: 73%
- Did Not Participate: 59%

Improved ability to speak in public
- Participated: 63%
- Did Not Participate: 46%

Civic Knowledge

Learned about health issues that impact the community
- Participated: 73%
- Did Not Participate: 49%

Learned more about own culture or ethnic/racial group
- Participated: 63%
- Did Not Participate: 41%

Learned about other cultures or ethnic/racial groups
- Participated: 61%
- Did Not Participate: 41%

Learned about economic inequality
- Participated: 58%
- Did Not Participate: 38%

Learned about gender issues
- Participated: 63%
- Did Not Participate: 35%

Learned about LGBTQ issues
- Participated: 48%
- Did Not Participate: 30%

Civic Action

Learned how to impact local policies
- Participated: 61%
- Did Not Participate: 42%

Learned how to organize others for local campaigns
- Participated: 48%
- Did Not Participate: 34%

Participated in Healing or Self-Care Activities | **Did Not Participate in Healing or Self-Care Activities**

Results show that youth members are obtaining varying levels of exposure to a critical civics education that teaches them to identify the structural causes of community problems, analyze social policies, and understand the experiences of diverse community members. When compared to peers who had not participated in such activities, those who had taken part in healing and self-care activities were more likely to report learning "a lot" about health and other community issues, their own ethnic/racial group, other ethnic/racial groups, gender issues, and LGBTQ issues.

YOUTH REFLECTIONS

"I DEFINITELY TOOK EVERY LIFE LESSON THAT I LEARNED FROM THEM TO THE HEART AND STILL USE IT TO THIS DAY. I CAN DEFINITELY SAY THAT MY RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS AND WITH ADULTS ARE A LOT BETTER BECAUSE OF THE TYPE OF SKILLS THAT I LEARNED IN THE ORGANIZATION. YEAH, I DEFINITELY THINK THEY GAVE ME FUNDAMENTALS AS A PERSON. I LOOK BACK ON IT AND A LOT OF THE DECISIONS THAT I MAKE NOW ARE BECAUSE OF WHAT I LEARNED. SO, YEAH I MEAN IT'S NOT SELF-CARE, ITS SELF-HEALING."

- FEMALE, AGE 19

The extent to which youth members exercise a leadership role in local campaigns can vary across organizations. Nonetheless, many youth members reported enhancing their capacity to take civic action. For example, those who participated in healing practices evince a 61% likelihood of reporting learning "a lot" about how to impact local policies, compared to a 42% likelihood among youth who had not engaged in such practices. Results also show that those who participated in self-care practices were more likely to report learning "a lot" about how to organize others for campaigns when compared to otherwise similar youth who had not participated in such practices.

Healing and Self-Care During the Pandemic

The current global pandemic, climate change, and racial justice uprisings have highlighted or exacerbated existing inequalities impacting youth and their communities. These conditions heightened the need to provide youth emotional support. To address the emotional hardships youth face during the pandemic, some groups transferred their check-ins and healing and self-care practices to virtual outlets. During virtual healing circles, youth sometimes shared their anxieties around issues such as COVID-19, financial hardships, and housing insecurities. Virtual spaces were leveraged to collectively process and grieve tragedies such as the killings of Black and Brown youth by police enforcement and to discuss the resultant uprisings. Importantly, virtual circles sometimes enabled groups to reach more youth, specifically those who may have previously faced barriers due to a lack of transportation.

Despite considerable challenges, some youth organizers developed new ways to stay connected and continue to support youths' well-being while also maintaining a focus on their campaigns. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that organizations sometimes

lost connections to some youth members. Additionally, the pandemic and racial unrest took an emotional toll on some staff and youth in ways that could not be adequately addressed through virtual healing circles and other self-care practices.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Over the past decade, California's youth organizing and leadership groups increasingly recognized healing as integral to advancing social justice. Based on interviews gathered from young people and our participant observations, we identified some promising practices that appear to advance youths' well-being.

Destigmatizing Mental Health Concerns

Destigmatizing mental health concerns helps young people attend to their emotional well-being. To facilitate open discussions about mental health concerns, groups sometimes offer a political education about how mental health issues are rooted in systemic inequalities that contribute to emotional distress in marginalized communities. That is, young people learn that stress and emotional hardships are not individual problems but rather caused by economic, political, and social inequalities that result in trauma, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse disproportionately among marginalized groups. Such an analysis can pave the way for open and safe discussions about how individuals might be negatively affected by the everyday challenges and stresses they face. Outside experts, group staff, and experienced youth leaders play an important role in modeling discussions about their own well-being and mental health challenges that help further destigmatize admissions of emotional distress, hardship, trauma, and/or substance abuse.

Furthermore, through these discussions, young people can be empowered to seek support, whether it be to deepen their engagement with healing-centered organizing or turn to older mentors and staff for individual support. Studies indicate that youth of color are less likely to voluntarily engage in clinical mental health care, due to stigma, cultural norms, and lack of access to providers and affordable care (Broman, 2012, Brown, 2003). Healing-centered practices can therefore serve a crucial role to introduce and demystify mental health support for young people who might not receive this care. Unlike most clinical approaches, healing-centered practices focus on collective peer-to-peer support, ancestral traditions, and relationship building. However, it is important to note that although grassroots approaches to healing and mental health awareness are crucial for young people, at times these practices are not enough to support the multifaceted complex realities that youth from high-poverty communities of color may experience. Therefore, bridges must be built between community-based and professional mental health supports.

Balancing Grassroots Organizing and Emotional Well-Being

As previously noted by Ginwright (2009, 2010, 2015) and Chavez-Diaz and Lee (2015), taking collective civic action to address injustices can advance healing, particularly after young people develop a deepened understanding of the structural causes of poor mental health outcomes. Grassroots organizing gives young people a sense of agency in counteracting the policies and systems that contribute to poor mental health. It also provides young people with a set of skills and capacities to challenge different forms of oppression they experience in their everyday lives.

However, balancing healing practices with other aspects of organizing—such as the time-intensive aspects of campaigns and leadership development—can be challenging for organizations that often have limited capacity and staff. Dedicating time for healing and self-care in youth, staff, and organizational work plans helps ensure self-care doesn't get lost within the overwhelming demands of organizing. Depending on organizing timelines, dedicated healing practices could include short breathing or meditation activities interspersed throughout meetings or longer periods of downtime and reflection once a campaign has concluded. Such a commitment to self-care may require staff to be nimble and change plans to dedicate time to healing after traumatic events.

Centering Cultural Knowledge

Culturally rooted approaches to healing can deepen youths' connection to their families and communities, as well as provide them with new understandings of caring for themselves and others that are not based on Western medicine. By drawing on ethnic cultural practices, youth can reconnect with their own traditions or learn those of others in their community. For youth of color, this can facilitate pride in their racial/ethnic identities, create cross-cultural bonds, and contribute to a sense of collective belonging in ways that resist the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Culturally rooted approaches are inclusive of diversity when they recognize the traditions of the various ethnic/racial groups represented within the organizations.

Building and Maintaining Relationships Among Young People and Their Mentors

In line with prior research suggesting that social networks are good for health (Cruys et al., 2013), organizations can foster strong personal bonds among their members in ways that contribute to emotional well-being. These bonds are facilitated by icebreakers and other interactive activities that allow members to share their own experiences and/or have fun together. Importantly, these positive relationships can be maintained by using restorative justice practices to address internal conflicts that inevitably emerge in any group and during the course of campaigns.

We also find that staff often serve as an important emotional resource for young leaders. Youth leaders appreciate staff who invite open conversation and are non-judgmental listeners. Youth tend to bond with mentors who come from similar backgrounds or communities and who can empathize with the challenges they themselves experience. In some settings, mentors

are slightly older than youth leaders. In others, healing work involves developing intergenerational relationships.

Attending to Trauma

Healing circles and other practices where people are expected to share their personal experiences can trigger memories of trauma and other hardship. Thus healing circles, when not carefully facilitated, can potentially retraumatize young people and exacerbate emotional hardship. This can happen with youth who are survivors of physical or sexual abuse, have experience with the criminal justice system, or have suffered other forms of trauma. It is worth noting that staff rarely have the clinical training to address such trauma either as it surfaces acutely or as it develops over the long term. Moreover, responding to such trauma can be overwhelming for staff.

Given the high rates of trauma among low-income youth of color (Brown, 2003; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration SAMHSA, 2013), staff should be prepared to refer them to culturally sensitive therapists and other trauma professionals. Organizations can also benefit from access to mental health specialists—including on-site counselors, cultural medicine practitioners, or healers—for training and spiritual support. In addition, COVID-19 related stressors have deeply impacted youth of color and their mental health (Penner et.al., 2021). Although healing practices are essential for sustaining young people through their organizing work, such practices alone are not sufficient to address and contain deeper traumas that the youth face.

Offering Supportive Spaces for QTPOC

Overall, youth organizing and leadership groups tend to create safe spaces for young QTPOC (queer and trans people of color). This is important because QTPOC sometimes encounter various layers of marginalization within their own ethnic communities and the broader society. Our research indicates that some groups offer more inclusive healing spaces than others. Inclusive groups tend to avoid healing practices that reinforce gender binaries (such as forcing members to self-select into strictly defined men's and women's groups) and/or heteronormativity (by assuming that members are strictly attracted to those of another sex). Inclusive groups also offer opportunities for members to openly share and receive support around the hardships they experience as queer, trans, and/or gender non-conforming identities. Additionally, they use gender-neutral language, respect non-binary identities and pronouns, educate members about LGBTQ (or two-spirited) identities, and expose members to LGBTQ mentors (Terriquez, Sokol, and Ross, 2020).

Offering Camps and Other Regional and Statewide Opportunities to Engage in Healing and Movement Building

TCE-sponsored regional or statewide camps and conferences offer youth memorable opportunities for healing and leadership development. These spaces typically give participants

the opportunity to explore beyond their local communities, connect with other young leaders, and gain exposure to or deepen their engagement with healing and self-care practices. Additionally, participants expand their networks and become connected to a broader community of young people committed to social justice. As such, camps and other regional and statewide gatherings not only enable young people to attend to their own well-being but also potentially broaden their capacity to fight the injustices that contribute to poor mental health outcomes. Especially for youth from organizations with limited self-care support structures, camps and regional and statewide opportunities have served as important sites for learning about healing practices.

CONCLUSION

This report suggests that incorporating healing and self-care practices within youth organizations can enhance youths' well-being and have positive impacts on their leadership development. These practices include healing circles, mindfulness exercises, support groups, writing circles, meditation, spiritual rituals, and other activities. During the pandemic, some of these activities have moved to online venues as young people seek safe ways to address the emotional distress they are experiencing as a result of the health emergency, economic crisis, and racial unrest. Youth thus established new ways to connect virtually, both within and outside of their communities, in order to support each other and attend to their individual and collective well-being.

In this report, we have identified some promising practices and lessons learned with respect to incorporating healing and self-care practices within youth organizing and youth leadership groups. We should note that the practices outlined in this report are not shared universally among grantees. As evidenced through surveys, interviews with youth leaders and staff, and our participant observations at various statewide and regional gatherings, there is wide variation in programming. We also recognize that there are promising practices that have not been mentioned here. This report, however, highlights promising practices that have repeatedly surfaced through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observations largely conducted before the 2020 pandemic and racial reckoning. New effective healing and self-care practices have likely emerged and evolved as programs adapt to youths' evolving interests and needs. We hope that the promising practices outlined here help practitioners and other stakeholders reflect on, evaluate, and build on efforts to support the well-being of young people who must confront various forms of social exclusion and economic challenges.

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