

LEANING IN: Supporting Black Youth | Part II, Youth-Led Listening Sessions

[FRIDAY, NOV. 22, 2019 | 3-7PM | 85 MOUNTAIN STREET, ASHEVILLE, NC 28801]

LENOIR RHYNE UNIVERSITY COURSE (LEADING THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AND FACILITATION) COMMUNITY MEMBERS SEEKING A CERTIFICATE: Cortina Caldwell, Itiyopia Ewart, and Lauren Rayburn

“LEANING In: Supporting Black Youth - Part II, Youth-Led Listening Session” provided an intentionally curated space for Black youth and youth programs to create a shared agenda to disrupt disparities in Asheville. With a process that was youth-inspired, youth-facilitated, and youth-led -- the gathering included interactivity and facilitated conversation and strategy around mentorship, education + learning, social justice + racial equity, mentorship, culture + resiliency, safety + substance abuse, coping mechanisms, and youth leadership - culminating with a discussion around next steps. At the conclusion of our time together, we hosted space that honored the youth experience, uplifted intergenerational work, created community connections, centered healing, and celebrated Black culture.

To accommodate participants entering and leaving the space and not being able to stay for the entire 4-hours, we structured the convening to have four circuits that shifted at the top of the hour. Between the circuits, there was time for reflection and answering questions at activation stations spaced in the room. At the top of each circuit, Black youth used circle-facilitated questions to spark conversation, build trust, and facilitate learning. We used inner and outer circles where those in the inner circle engaged actively in the conversation and those in the outer circle focused on presence and active listening through one of four lenses (racial equity; disparities; coping mechanisms, and future + action steps). After the circle-facilitated conversation, the collective group viewed a short film, participated in art-based activities, and then reflected on the experience. This general structure was repeated for each circuit. Below is a brief description of each circuit and the activities:

- **3pm - Circuit # 1** - ONE CIRCLE OF ADULTS. Check in Question. FILM - [Prince ED, I Sued the School System](#). PRIVILEGE WALK ACTIVITY. DEBRIEF.
- **4pm - Circuit # 2** - INNER CIRCLE STUDENTS // OUTER CIRCLE ADULTS. Check-In Question. FILM - [Student Six by Jotham White](#). THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED.
- **5pm - Circuit #3** - INNER CIRCLE ADULTS // OUTER CIRCLE STUDENTS. FILM - [How America's public schools keep kids in poverty](#). DEBRIEF TED Talk. FOUR CORNERS - Questions on Student Participation; Education + Learning; Safety + Substance Abuse; Culture + Resiliency.
- **6pm - Circuit #4** - ONE CIRCLE. Collect the Input captured from the 4 Lens. Pull out some to spark conversation with the group. DEBRIEF WITH STUDENTS + ADULTS
- **7pm** - Program concluded with Circle Question: One word that expresses how you feel and an action/next step that is needed.

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Approximately 25 people attended the convening, which was approximately half Black youth and adults working in youth programming.

FACILITATORS' REFLECTIONS

In working with Black youth, our initial intent for holding this convening was to:

- **Hold space** for Black youth and youth programs to create a shared agenda to disrupt disparities in Asheville.
- **Establish priorities** for creating meaningful, inclusive, and equitable programming that serve Black youth -- and especially summer institute, Me2We Summit -- as told by youth.
- **Create accountability and connections** that will provide for holistic wellness [and wholeness] of Black youth and nurture their contributions to our community.

This initial intent to hold space, establish priorities, and create accountability + connections is evidenced by many moments and reflections of the convening. For example, there was a moment during the facilitation where a middle school youth shared something that was deeply traumatizing about a repercussion of an incident that had been blamed on them by the school, and as a collective container, we decided to pause for a moment and be with what was coming up. Witnessing the space that was made for the feelings to be felt as well as the preparedness and courage of the youth to hold boundaries with time along with the flexibility of space was awe inspiring. The design seemed to help facilitate people being able to go deeper, especially after Theater of the Oppressed and the Four Corners activities which both made space for openness and happened at the exact right time to bring wisdom from the individual to the collective. The youth participating seemed to appreciate having their peers facilitating and holding boundaries. There was an ease in how the support of the youth facilitators happened, and the design of it flowed particularly well. It seemed as though youth felt seen and valued. At the checkout circle, it seemed like the overwhelming feeling from the collective was gratitude, gratitude, gratitude! There was a deep notion of change, and the excitement of being a change agent, a ninja, and/or warrior were all words and phrases that came up. The design of this space gave us an opportunity to stop the cycle of disparity by centering youth voices. And as youth were walking out the door, the inspired, empowered, and motivated feeling persisted as they cheerfully asked us when the next gathering will take place. Overall, there was a period right after the convening that called for some time for reflection and integration. Because of the multi-layered experience, many of us expressed that the space felt intense, healing, and restorative...but mostly intense! It felt like an honor to be in the space, especially as the youth voice was so centered and like a space that had potential to foster and facilitate healing.

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For the next iterations of the convening, it may be worthwhile to bring in video/media as a way to capture stories as participants are leaving. Other ideas are to keep the design, but clarify what is meant by lenses earlier on, and throughout; continuing to build the activation stations into the design and time of the convening; additionally there is a need for more setup time, and planned help; and thinking about what it looks like to get the participation of the less-engaged, and mislabeled, problem students.

As we were having a final facilitator debrief, a conversation stuck out around value in the roles, and having the understanding that each role in designing and facilitating a container is both valuable and necessary for the overall success. There were moments where some on the facilitation team named feeling really relaxed and also wanting to participate, and then holding the understanding of being fully present in the roles assigned pre-convening, and how not doing that has an impact on the flow of facilitation and the experience of those attending. This discussion ultimately brought up the necessity of communication tools to check in with one another during the onsite facilitation, especially when there were moments where folks were wanting to participate as opposed to facilitate. Additionally, there was a feeling of wanting to feel more connected from the beginning and really hold ourselves accountable to our best.