

Generator Z Evaluation Report

Evaluation Team

Dr. Thomas Akiva¹, Dr. Josefina Bañales²,
Debralyn Woodberry-Shaw¹, Alfred Rodriguez²,
Tracy Medrano Gonzalez¹, Dr. Sharon Colvin³,
Dr. Beth Sondel⁴, Sofina Shekhar¹

¹ University of Pittsburgh School of Education

² University of Illinois at Chicago

³ University of Maryland

⁴ Consultant

Contents

- Introduction 4

- Part 1.**
- The Teen Generators 6**
 - Analytic Approach 8
 - 1.1. Who participated? 9**
 - 1.2. What did teens reimagine? 12**
 - Background Stories 13
 - Afterschool Aspirations 15
 - Spotlight Codes 15
 - Identity* 16
 - Overcoming Obstacles (subcode of identity)* 19
 - Sanctuary* 21
 - Connection* 23

- Part 2.**
- How Generator Z Unfolded 25**
 - 2.1 What Infrastructure Enabled Generator Z? 26**
 - Project Leadership & Teams 26
 - Reaching youth 28
 - Paying Youth 30
 - 2.2 How did youth experience voice, decision-making, and leadership? 31**
 - Generator Z as Youth Philanthropy 31
 - Levels of Participation 32
 - Leadership Opportunities 32
 - How youth were supported 33

Part 3.	
Afterschool Providers	34
3.1 How did Generator Z Support the Adults Who Support Youth?	35
3.2 To what extent did proposals reflect youth voice and the aims of Generator Z?	36
How proposals built from Generator Stories	37
What ideas did providers take from Generator Stories?	38
3.3 What Challenges and Successes did Afterschool Programs Experience?	40
Challenges	41
Successes	41
Part 4.	
Project Impact	43
4.1 What did Providers' think of the Experience?	44
4.2 How did Providers Learn and Grow?	44
What did staff learn?	44
4.3 Youth Voice and Participation in Funded Programs	47
Voice	48
Decision-making	48
Leadership	49
Emergent Strategies	49
4.4 How did programs change?	50
4.5 What was the impact of Generator Z?	53
No Other Opportunity Like This: Youth Voice Matters	54
Experiences Were Accessible and Relevant	55
Recommendations and Conclusions	57
Recommendations	57
Conclusions	58
Appendix A. Technical Information	59
Appendix B. Strategies from grantees	63
References	66

Introduction

Young people in **the Generation Z cohort**, or those born after 1996, were born into a strong United States economy with record low unemployment rates, as compared to people in previous generations (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Generation Z’ers in the U.S. are more racially/ethnically diverse than young people in previous generations and are more likely to have access to college. They are generally described as endorsing attitudes that promote social justice (with important variability; see Bañales et al., 2021). Young people in Generation Z are described as “digital natives” because they were born into a society with established smart phones and booming social media platforms. However, in their adolescence and early adulthood, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered their access and relationship to school and work. The Generator Z project was designed to embrace this generation, listen to them, and provide an avenue for their voices to shape youth programs.

Generator Z launched in 2020 as a platform and process for teens across Southeast Michigan and Western New York to **“reimagine afterschool in ways that matter to them.”** This document provides an evaluative look at Generator Z, a project of the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation. Generator Z invited youth to publish stories online, followed by grants for youth program projects inspired by those stories. This mixed-methods evaluation views Generator Z through a critical youth development lens, rooted in the context of the global pandemic—which augmented standing racial and class-based inequalities. We sought to understand the impact of this project on teens, youth programs, and adults.

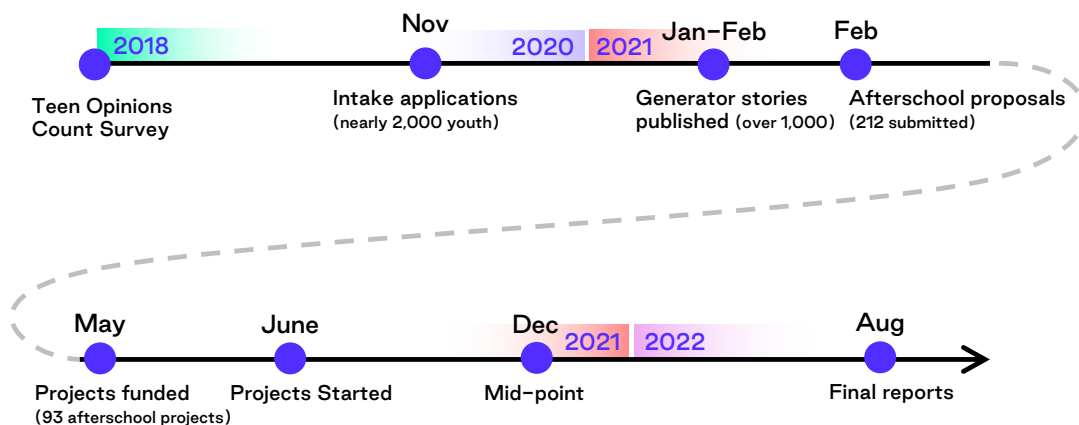
The report contains four main parts. Part 1 focuses on teen Generators and their stories; the second part focuses on the infrastructure that supported the Generator Z project; Part 3 summarizes the afterschool ideas and projects led by providers; and Part 4 addresses the overall project impact on youth and adult stakeholders.

Origins of Generator Z

Years before Generator Z, The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation saw a need to elevate youth voice in grant-making, youth programs, and in everyday life. They initiated a series of projects and activities to advance this idea. In 2018, the foundation led **Teen Opinions Count**, a project that surveyed youth in Southeast Michigan and Western New York. Young people completed the sentence, “Where I live or work, one thing teens want when they are not in school is...” Their responses led to the ten theme areas used in Generator Z. In 2020, the foundation sponsored a series of **Design roundtables** with adults and teens, which established many of the elements of Generator Z.

A timeline of key events throughout Generator Z appears below. As you can see, several internal and external processes occurred prior to 2021 that ultimately led to over 1,000 youth stories published on generator-z.org at the beginning of 2021 and \$4 million of afterschool program proposals funded in May 2021.

Figure 1
Project timeline



A powerful and accessible space during challenging times

The **Generator Z project occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic**—teens published their ideas for after-school and providers constructed project proposals all while youth programs were experiencing remote or limited in-person operation. Therefore, the Generator Z project and this evaluation are rooted in this historical time and all that goes with it.

At the start of this report, we wish to emphasize the care and intentionality given to making sure that **Generator Z was accessible to youth** across social identities and experiences. This was true from the recruitment phase through to the last project activities, which engaged young people in reviewing completed grant projects. The questions youth answered in their online forms offered context on how their access to resources and experiences informed their visions for afterschool. For example, the team asked youth, “Where does your American story begin?” Youth also did not have to be citizens of the United States or enrolled in high school to participate in Generator Z. Such questions and requirements signal to youth that the initiative was not solely focused on one type of young person—white, middle-class, U.S. citizens, who are often the young people considered and centered in mainstream youth program development. This equity-focused approach allowed more youth with different social identities and differential access to resources to participate in Generator Z and contributed to a climate of trust between the individuals in the Generator Z initiative and youth. The intentional recruitment of young people with diverse social experiences and backgrounds contributed to the likelihood that conceptions of afterschool programs would be relevant and responsive to the lived experiences of youth, particularly those who are minoritized in society.

To facilitate this, the Generator Z program team took a trauma-informed, youth development approach; that is, one that meets youth where they are, honors their pain, and celebrates their talents and resilience. The adults who guided this approach included experts in mental health, youth development, creative arts, and storytelling. Including adults with this trauma-informed, equity lens throughout the entire Generator Z process (e.g., during the roundtable design, application question development, approach to youth storytelling, feedback, and evaluation) contributed to a culture that allowed youth to be authentic and vulnerable throughout the Generator Z process.

This Evaluation

This evaluation arose from a 2020 call by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation team, and was conducted by a team led by Dr. Thomas Akiva and Dr. Josefina Bañales¹. We aimed to shape our evaluation approach to align with the spirit of the overall Generator Z initiative. This included rooting the evaluation in **adolescent and youth development research**. That is, we’ve tried to take a developmental, contextual, and critical perspective to understand youth statements in their historical and developmental context, especially during a time in which the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted communities of color, low-income communities, and undocumented immigrants. This report provides mixed-methods, evaluative analyses of the Generator Z process, with an emphasis on youth stories. We consider not just whether Generator Z “worked” in the traditional evaluation sense, but what Generator Z may have meant for those involved, and what it may mean for afterschool opportunities and education in general. Our team of researchers took a deep dive into Generator stories and reviewed multiple additional data sources. We prioritize elevating youth voices—often using their own words—throughout this report.

¹Dr. Thomas Akiva is an associate professor and youth development researcher at the University of Pittsburgh. Akiva spent years as a youth development practitioner before his scholarly career, and he has published dozens of articles aiming at understanding and improving out-of-school learning program experiences for children and youth. He also has practice and research expertise in youth-adult relationships and youth voice. Dr. Josefina Bañales conducts community-engaged research with youth of color in schools and community organizations. She brought strengths in participatory research and evaluation methods and a focus on critical consciousness development. The evaluation team also included a cadre of exceptional graduate students and consultants: Alfred Rodriguez, Tracy Medrano Gonzalez, Dr. Sharon Colvin, Dr. Beth Sondel, and Sofina Shekhar.

Part 1.

The Teen Generators

Part 1 focuses on the first phase of Generator Z, the period from 2020–2021 in which teen Generators were recruited, completed in-take surveys, authored stories, and provided feedback on the selection of provider proposals. Part 1 focuses on the following evaluation questions:

1. Who participated?
2. What did Generators reimagine?
3. What was the impact?

Figure 2
Detailed Generator Z 2020–2021 Timeline

	<p>Teen Opinions Count Design roundtables Marketing to teens</p>	<p>In 2018, the foundation led Teen Opinions Count, a survey project that established 10 theme areas used in Generator Z. Design roundtables were a series of regional group discussions with a set of 19 teens and a set of 15 adults conducted in Aug 2020. Marketing to teens occurred across multiple social media platforms including Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook, and Spotify—part of a concerted effort to “meet teens where they are”.</p>
Nov 2020	<p>Intake applications (nearly 2,000 youth)</p>	<p>Nearly 2,000 youth completed in-take application forms, indicating their interest in becoming Generators.</p>
	<p>Initial selection of Generators Storytelling workshops Payment to Generators</p>	<p>For initial selection, a team worked to identify 1,000 Generators to invite. Eventually, several rounds of invitations beyond the original group occurred. In December, Generator Z offered 5 storytelling workshops for teens to attend and receive guidance as they completed their stories. Payment to Generators was managed across CashApp, Venmo, Paypal, physical check, and e-check—bypassing the need for adult involvement and considering underbanked teens and families.</p>
Jan–Feb 2021	<p>Generator stories published (over 1,000)</p>	<p>Over 1,000 youth became published “Generators”, with their personal Generator stories and visions for reimagined afterschool. A cohort of about a dozen adults assisted with coaching, copy editing, and other associated activities.</p>
	<p>Information sessions for providers</p>	<p>The Generator Z team offered 5 information sessions for providers in Jan 2021. These were co-led, including a teen facilitator, and focused on the importance of innovation (not just proposing the same old thing), rooting ideas in Generator stories and youth interest, and using jargon-free language.</p>
Feb 2021	<p>Afterschool proposals (212 submitted)</p>	<p>212 Afterschool providers submitted project proposals, with Generator stories as inspiration (189 eligible, 128 invited to submit finalist forms).</p>
	<p>Generator feedback Community review</p>	<p>All Generators were invited to provide feedback on afterschool ideas. Specifically, they were offered \$250 to attend a 1-hour workshop then comment on 5 proposals, publicly, on the Generator Z website. Over 800 youth completed this feedback. The community review process was a bit more involved: 14 invited Generators received \$1,000 stipends to: (a) attend a 1-hour training, review 127 afterschool ideas (finalists) over two weeks, and attend a 2-hour debrief in early May. This resulted in a sorting of proposals that was used to make final decisions.</p>
May 2021	<p>Projects funded (93 afterschool projects)</p>	<p>93 afterschool projects funded (\$4 million)</p>

Figure 2 provides a detailed look at the key activities that occurred throughout the first phase of the Generator Z project—the phase in 2020–2021 in which youth actively prepared and wrote their stories, through to after-school project funding.

Analytic Approach

Five members of our team created a codebook in which we described the themes we found in the stories. In April 2021, the research team convened to start the qualitative coding. We began with regular team meetings where we shared observations and preliminary themes. Over the course of the month, we agreed on preliminary codes. One teammate created the preliminary codebook and the team informally tested it with randomly selected stories. Through this process, we were able to tightly define codes and organize them into parent and child codes.

We grouped codes into two sections— background story questions and afterschool aspirations. In the Generator form, background stories contained 45 long-answer prompts and afterschool aspirations included three. In the coding process, we treated each response as an excerpt; that is, we coded every response. Throughout this document, we primarily report whether a Generator story received a code rather than reporting the number of excerpts that received a code. A given story may have received a given code multiple times across excerpts.

We employed both inductive and deductive methods and met regularly to define codes, discuss emergent codes, and to come to agreement on definition and application. During the summer of 2021, the coding team expanded to include 8 people – the research team plus two undergraduate research assistants. Two researchers took the lead in creating the coding protocol and overseeing the undergraduate research assistants. Training included two weeks of practice coding, meetings, and reflection. In August, the entire team successfully completed coding training using Dedoose, a qualitative software package.

The stories were split randomly between the 8 coders for the first round of coding. Then, the two lead coders double-checked the coding for half of the stories for consistency. During the coding process, we added flags for Media, Interesting Quotes, and Stress. We limited coding to the text and words spoken in video/audio recordings and did not analyze images. Final codes were attached to entire prompt responses rather than to smaller quotes.

Locality: We include in our analyses two locality variables. First, youth self-reported whether they are from the sixteen counties across Southeast Michigan and/or Western New York served by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, and we used these directly. Second, urbanicity or locality variables came directly from student responses in the in-take survey. Locality variables were used in reference to the National Center for Education Statistics <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/maped/LocaleLookup/>.

Gender: Youth were not asked to define or describe their gender identity; however, the forms included preferred gender pronouns. We therefore used gender pronouns as a proxy to infer youths' gender. Youth who listed more than one pronoun or used the gender neutral they/them pronoun were collapsed into a category we call *gender expansive*, which includes non-binary as well as transgender. Youth who used exclusive binary pronouns He/Him or She/Her were represented in binary gender categories of *young men* and *young women*. We recognize that inferring gender from preferred pronouns is imperfect; for example, youth who use pronouns she/her or he/him may also identify as transgender.

Race/Ethnicity: The in-take form allowed young people to check multiple options for race and ethnicity and thus the original dataset contained over 88 unique race/ethnic combinations for youth Generators. The team identified 6 unique race categories, and through a recoding process we narrowed it down to 30 unique combinations. Three additional ethnic categories were created (Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous Peoples), using inductive approaches to better represent the qualitative stories that were presented. *Latinx* is an ethnic category which includes other racial background not including those who identify as Indigenous. *Middle Eastern* is an ethnic category which includes other racial backgrounds but all who are included identified as Middle Eastern. *Indigenous Peoples* is an ethnic category which includes other racial backgrounds but all who are included identified as an Indigenous person. *Bi/multiracial* are youth who are not Latinx, Middle Eastern, or Indigenous but who listed multiple racial backgrounds.

1.1. Who participated?

What teens completed in-take form and Generator stories?

The goals for outreach—first, for youth who completed the in-take form (N=1925) and later the Generator teens (n=1012)—were to achieve balanced representation across youth with different demographic characteristics, across the two communities of Southeast Michigan and Western New York, and across levels of urbanicity (i.e., city/suburban/rural). After in-take forms were completed, the plan was to invite applicants to be Generators based on the merit of their applications and in a way that ensured balance and diversity across several demographic characteristics. However, as many youths who were initially invited to be Generators did not complete stories, ultimately all youth who completed an in-take survey were eventually invited to be Generators. Nevertheless, the Generator sample closely reflected the in-take sample.

Table 1 provides an overview of demographic information (i.e., gender, race, age), region and locality information, and afterschool involvement. In general, the Generator sample **was not substantively different** from the in-take sample with two small exceptions:

- The Generator sample had a higher proportion of young men and smaller proportion of young women than the in-take sample (37% vs 31% young men; 57% vs 64% young women).
- The Generator sample included a smaller proportion of 13-year-olds than the in-take sample (23% vs 12%).

Otherwise, we found no differences in race, locality, urbanicity, afterschool theme selection, or afterschool participation, which suggests that the Generator sample is likely to be representative of the total sample of youth who were initially recruited. Given the similarity of samples, in the next section we provide more detail about the Generator sample.

Table 1

In-take applicants vs Generators

	In-take (N=1925)	Generators (n=1012)		In-take (N=1925)	Generators (n=1012)
Gender*			Transportation school		
Young women	64%	57%	Bike	4%	4%
Young men	31%	37%	Public Transportation	6%	7%
Gender expansive	5%	6%	School Bus	7%	6%
			Scooter	0.05%	0.1%
Race/Ethnicity*			Someone driving you	64%	66%
Black/AA	37%	36%	Walking	8%	6%
white	34%	33%	You driving yourself	8%	8%
Asian	8%	11%			
Latinx	6%	6%	Region		
Middle Eastern or Arab	5%	6%	Southeast Michigan	60%	56%
Indigenous Peoples	5%	4%	Western New York	40%	44%
Bi/multiracial	4%	4%			
Unknown	1%	0.3%	Locality		
			City	47%	49%
Ancestry			Suburb	44%	43%
First Generation	27%	27%	Rural	6%	5%
Second Gen. Forward*	40%	41%	Town	3%	3%
Immigrant/Refugee	8%	10%			
Native American	3%	3%	Theme		
Enslaved Peoples	14%	15%	Creative Arts & Culture	13%	13%
			Excellence in Learning	6%	7%
Age*			Friends & Community	8%	9%
13	23%	12%	Fun & Games	8%	8%
14	18%	18%	Growth & Wellness	13%	7%
15	19%	19%	Identity & Acceptance	12%	10%
16	23%	23%	Jobs & Careers	11%	11%
17	20%	19%	Life Skills & Balance	6%	8%
18	9%	8%	Mental, Soc & Emo Health	13%	14%
			Play & Sports	14%	13%
People in household			Afterschool participation		
1	1%	1%	Currently attend	38%	44%
2	8%	8%	Attended before COVID	75%	79%
3	18%	16%			
4	28%	29%	Moved in last three years		
5	19%	19%	0	64%	67%
6	10%	11%	1-3	29%	27%
7	5%	5%	4-6	3%	2%
8	2%	3%	7-9	0.4%	0.6%
9	1%	2%	NA	1%	0.8%
NA	2%	1%			

*Please see Appendix A for details on coding of all demographic characteristics. Gender variables were derived from youths' selection of their preferred gender pronoun. Gender expansive youth indicated "they/them" as pronouns and may include transgender and gender non-binary youth. The race/ethnicity category was derived from a re-coding of a longer list for analytic parsimony. For people in household, NA's were re-coded by those who selected blanks and O's. For people who moved in the last three years, those who left blank were recoded as NA's. In the ancestry category, those who selected "second generation" and any generation beyond, were coded as Second Generation forward.

Who are the Generators?

Generators are roughly divided by youth who live in a city (49%) or suburban (43%), with smaller numbers in rural (5%) and town (3%) areas. About half (56%) are from Southeast Michigan and half from Western New York (44%). Generators self-reported to be 57% young women, 37% young men, and 6% gender expansive

(i.e., youth selected they/them pronouns). As shown in the pie chart below, it is a racially and ethnically diverse group, with the largest proportions being Black/African American (37%) and white (34%).²

Note that we recoded the race/ethnicity variable described in the technical appendix for practical reasons, i.e., to make summaries and analyses possible. However, it should be noted that the original dataset contained 88 unique race/ethnicity combinations. Data reduction, by definition, reduces complexity and nuance, and does not alter the reality that this is an extremely diverse sample of young individuals.

This applies to our gender variables as well, which we inferred from youth selected gender pronouns (an imperfect but usable proxy). With 6% of the Generators selecting “they/them” and many describing gender expansive identities in their stories, the diversity of the Generation Z youth in this sample is clear.

As would be expected based on residential patterns, race/ethnicity is highly imbalanced across locality. That is, we see a much higher number of Black/African American youth in city areas, a high percentage of white youth in rural/town areas, with suburban roughly in the middle (other race/ethnicity categories did not show striking locality trends like this).

Theme Selection

We found a few patterns when we examined themes by youth characteristics. First, a larger proportion of rural teens (51%) selected “mental, social, emotional health” as their afterschool theme than youth in other localities (24% of town/rural youth selected this vs. 15% suburban and 10% city).

Second, for Generators who identified as gender expansive, “identity & acceptance” was, by far, the most chosen theme (39% of gender expansive youth selected this theme). Third, theme selection reflected socially constructed gender norms: young women selected themes on “socioemotional health” more often than young men (17% vs 8%); young men selected “play & sports” more often than young women (22% vs 8%).

Figure 3
Race/ethnicity of Generators

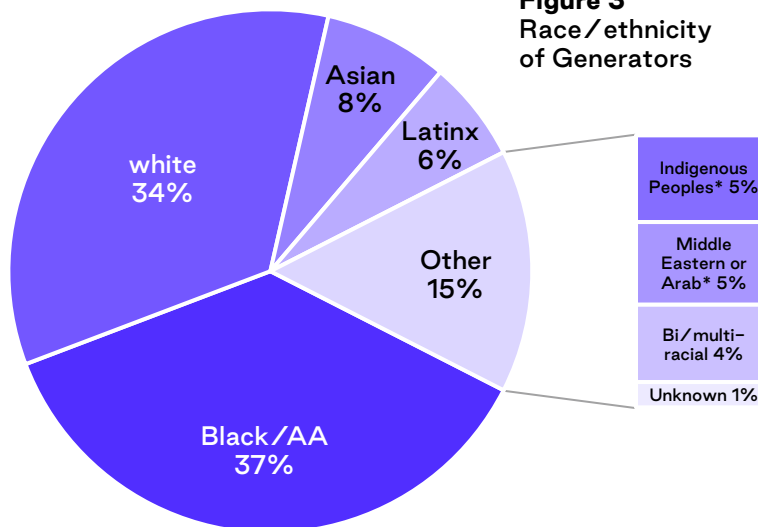
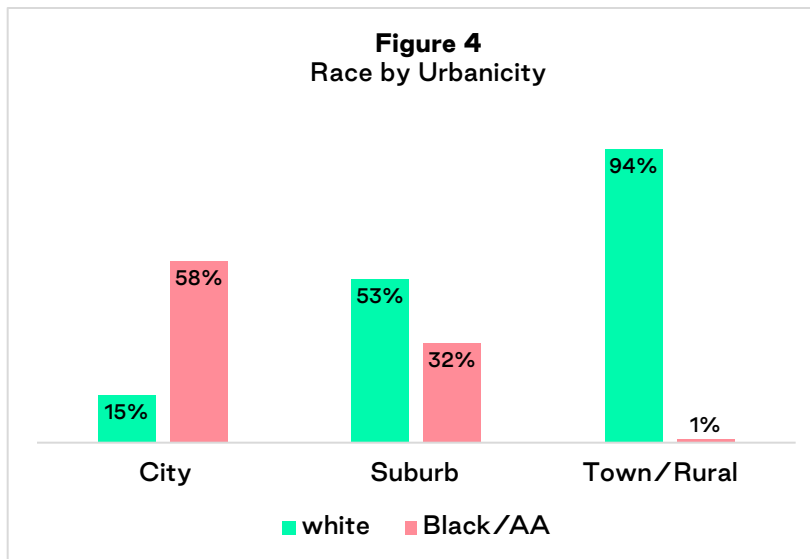


Figure 4
Race by Urbanicity



² In this report, we capitalize Black and other race/ethnicity labels but do not capitalize white, consistent with the Associated Press (AP) style. Although strong arguments exist both for and against capitalizations, we chose to leave it uncapitalized as a way to decenter whiteness and delegitimize white supremacist hate groups (See [Bauder, 2020](#)).

1.2. What did teens reimagine?

In this section we present primarily qualitative analysis of the Generator stories. Before describing our analytic process, we start by sharing the topical afterschool themes. These were selected by Generators (they could only select one) during in-take applications. These ten topics were originally established with the Teen Opinions Count survey, and they give a general idea of the topics that young people wrote about in their stories. Efforts were made to have relatively even representation across these topic areas.

Table 2

Afterschool themes (selected by teens applying to become Generators)

Topical Theme	Number of Stories	%
Mental, Social & Emotional Health	137	14%
Creative Arts & Culture	133	13%
Play & Sports	132	13%
Jobs & Careers	114	11%
Identity & Acceptance	100	10%
Friends & Community	89	9%
Fun & Games	84	8%
Life Skills & Balance	78	8%
Excellence in Learning	75	7%
Growth & Wellness	70	7%
Total	1,012	100%

Prompt: What afterschool theme (and related ideas) will you address if you are selected as a generator?

The findings in the rest of this section result from an in-depth, iterative coding process (see technical appendix for details). Our coding scheme is rooted in youth development and adolescent development research and designed to work in tandem with the afterschool themes selected by Generators. Where the Generator-selected themes provide the topical area for their afterschool idea, our qualitative coding provides insight into youths' meaning making around their visions for afterschool programs/activities. That is, we draw from research on development and out-of-school learning to attempt to get at key drivers *behind* the topical areas. **Ultimately, we hope that the results of this coding process will provide valuable insights for youth program leaders that wish to create programs that meet youth needs.**

We coded each story in two parts— background story questions and afterschool aspirations—in order to understand both what young people proposed to reimagine and how their ideas might be rooted in their own background and life experiences. The table below lists the proportion of occurrences of our main codes³ in the sample of 1012 stories.

³ The table on this page primarily presents top-level codes; most of which are made up of multiple subcodes. In total, our scheme included 92 codes. The one exception is that overcoming obstacles (which we go in-depth on in the next section) is a subcode of identity. Other subcodes of identity are religion/spirituality, self-love, LGBTQIA+, race or ethnicity, and immigration status.

Table 3

Developmental/Life Themes coded by the Evaluation Team

Background Stories	% of stories	Afterschool Aspirations	% of stories
Identity*	81%	Connection*	78%
Hobbies/clubs/afterschool	79%	Learning environment	69%
Academics	72%	Play/expression	66%
Family	65%	Sanctuary*	64%
Friends/supportive people	60%	Planning for the future	37%
Stress	57%	Making the world better	24%
Overcoming Obstacles*	56%		
TV/computers	51%		
Sports/exercise	44%		
Mental health	37%		
Work	32%		

* Indicates codes we explore in more depth in this report

Section 1.2 is organized as follows. First, we provide a summary for each of the codes, first in background stories and then in afterschool aspirations. We then go in-depth with “spotlight” codes, the four with asterisks in the table above: identity and overcoming obstacles for background stories, followed by sanctuary and connection for afterschool aspirations. We chose these four codes to spotlight not only because they were mentioned often by Generators but also because they were compelling, important for youth development, and helpful for considering what youth programs should offer. The four spotlight codes are connected to each other: overcoming obstacles were often described in the context of difficult experiences youth faced based on their social identities; connection and sanctuary are highly correlated and closely related concepts because youth often feel a sense of connection in spaces deemed sanctuaries. Our in-depth exploration of these codes provides a starting place for a picture of some key ideas youth program providers should consider for program development and design.

Background Stories

Youth shared their background stories in response to the questions below:

- Your story, short & sweet
- What is one of your favorite things in the world to do?
<OR> What’s the song (or movie, book, poem, or piece of art) that means everything to you?
- What was the hardest thing you’ve ever done?
<OR> What is something you could use help with right now?
- It’s 3PM, what’s up?

Paying attention to youth background stories is critical, as their background shapes what youth want from afterschool experiences. Whereas the topics youth selected tell us about their ideas, the responses to background questions hint at what may drive young people’s interests.

Over 8 in 10 youth referenced **identity** or identity development in their background stories. These mentions were in stories across topic areas and included references to particular identities such as religion, race, or LGBTQ+ experiences, as well as more general descriptions of identity development. For example, one Generator (age 14, Western New York [W-NY]) wrote,

“There are a lot of ways that I’m special, different and even peculiar. But what really makes me me is that I’m creative, adventurous, caring, helpful, and brave. What makes me all of these things is that I never give up even if things are difficult or there are things that I don’t want to do, I do them because it is the right thing to do.”

The above quote provides a good example of why it’s important to pay attention to youth background stories. Our finding that 81% of youth referenced identity—the most frequently used code—means that, consistent with research, identity is important to most young people. Afterschool programs should recognize this as an important characteristic and likely driver of program attendance. For example, the Generator who wrote the quote above might not design an afterschool program around identity development but might really appreciate or benefit from program activities that focused on confidence building or making sense of identities that are salient and central to them. Programs that honor and recognize the importance of identity development are likely to be able to support youths’ positive development.

In background stories, youth also frequently mentioned their **hobbies, clubs, and previous afterschool experiences**, and school and **academics** came up frequently. In addition, family is important to many Generators—mentioned even more frequently than friends. For example, Generator Jannat (age 17, Southeast Michigan [SE-MI]) wrote: **“One of my favorite things to do is spend quality time with my friends and family. My family has always been my biggest support system through everything. They encourage me to never give up and have always been there for me.”**

Generators also frequently mentioned **friends and supportive people** across topic areas. For example, kami-g (age 15, W-NY) went on to say, **“My favorite thing in the world is to spend time with my friends, no matter what we are doing I love being in the company of them...My group of 12 could stay up for hours laughing at nonsense or have such deep conversations we all end up in tears, they inspire me to be the best version of myself each and every day and I could not do life without them.”** This kind of comment about the importance of friends or supportive adults was common across Generator stories.

Several other ideas came up relatively often across topic areas. Many young people mentioned **stress** or stressful experiences in their background stories, often in response to the question about the hardest thing they’ve ever done. For example, Generator saber (age 16, SE-MI) described a stressful school presentation:

“I knew the PowerPoint was going to be a big part of my grade, so I wanted to do a good job. I have always had really bad stage fright, so I practiced doing it for weeks and tried to memorize everything. The midterm day finally came, and I froze when I started presenting. My heart started beating fast, my head went blank, I thought everyone was looking at me, and I wasn’t able to speak [but] I clenched my sweaty hands and forced myself to speak. I somehow finished and scurried to my seat...If anyone is in a similar situation, my advice is that people don’t care as much as you think they do. Don’t be scared, it’ll be okay.”

Youth descriptions of **overcoming obstacles** were touching and inspiring and we explore this code in depth in the next section. Many Generators mentioned **TV or computers** (including video games) as ways they relax or connect with friends. **Sports and exercise** mentions were certainly more common in afterschool stories in the sports topic area (every story in the category of “play and sports” mentioned sports/exercise, of course), but this code appeared across every other topic area, suggesting sports and exercise are important to a wide range of young people.

Afterschool Aspirations

Our coding scheme allows for exploration of Generators afterschool visions and to identify commonalities across topic areas. We provide in-depth analysis of the two most interesting codes—**sanctuary** and **connection**—in the next section. Here we'll briefly summarize the other themes.

Many Generators (69%) mentioned the **learning environment** in their descriptions of what they want from a reimagined afterschool. This included visions in which youth described youth-led programs. For example, Generator London K (age 16, SE-MI) wrote, **"The after school program would be run by teens for teens. Everybody would just be able to be themselves for the time being."** Some talked about the structure (e.g., small groups, a homework help time or space, guest speakers). Many emphasized that their afterschool program should be interactive. And many noted the importance of resources for learning, both in terms of an adequate, appropriate space, as well as materials and, for some visions, technology. For example, in a description of an LGBTQ+ afterschool club, Generator River (age 13, W-NY) wrote: **"It would be a large, but cozy, space, with carpets and beanbags and chairs and couches and computers. There would also be (best part!) a closet, with binding and packing devices, wigs and padded bras, and all types of clothing, so they could be who they are. Free for the taking, free for the giving."**

The idea of **play and expression** was common across stories. This was present in all "creative arts and culture" topic areas as well as all "play and sports" stories; but it was present throughout all topic areas. This is a component that can be incorporated into almost any afterschool program. Besides art and sports, many Generators described games. For example, a Generator (age 15, W-NY) wrote, "If I were to create the perfect afterschool experience it would probably be me and a bunch of friends playing games together, probably Minecraft. It would be very inclusive and we would just have fun doing whatever... I believe if it is set up well, it would be a very good and easy way to make new friends for people who are more socially awkward or have social anxiety. For people who are already generally good with people, it would just be a great way to interact and have fun with others."

Over 370 youth mentioned afterschool program features or activities that involved **planning for the future** in their stories. Several Generators described having guest speakers come in and talk about future career possibilities. For example, William R (age 15, W-NY) wrote, **"It would be cool if an after school program had different guest speakers come in and help a group with hands-on job-related experiences. For example, a lawyer could lead kids through a mock trial, or a doctor could show and perform an exam to show what they truly do on a daily basis."** Youth also described a desire to learn life skills or leadership skills to help with their future. For example, Participant S (age 15, SE-MI) wrote, **"[Youth participants] could learn things like how to manage time and how to prepare for life after school."**

Finally, nearly one out of four Generators described afterschool programs that were geared toward **making the world better**, a heartening finding. These ranged from a program built around **"helping people if they need help"** (Oryan, age 17, W-NY), to an environmentally focused program where youth would **"learn about how bad we are treating the planet and how everything we throw out or recycle impacts our earth"** (PopArt, age 15, W-NY). These inspiring stories involved working in and with communities, learning about other cultures, social justice, altruism, and giving back. These young Generators were focused not only on creating a good afterschool experience but a meaningful one in which they could improve their communities and/or the world.

Spotlight Codes

In the next few pages, we provide in-depth analyses—both qualitative and quantitative—in four coding areas. Two were codes identified in background stories: **identity** and **overcoming obstacles**, and two were things young people valued in afterschool spaces: **sanctuary** and **connection**. We present these spotlights as they offer important insights both into what youth reimagined for afterschool and about youth themselves.

Why these spotlights? We selected these codes for more in-depth exploration primarily because they connect to areas that youth development research has identified as important⁴ and have potential to help us learn more about how to shape afterschool to better support youth. They also have relatively high occurrence rates and substantively interesting excerpts. In other words, among all the codes shown in Table 3, these seemed to have the most potential to help us learn from the Generators.

The other 13 codes are important for having a holistic perspective of the Generators' stories, however, these 4 codes provided rich information for what teens reimagined for afterschool programs and why.

The most mentioned theme was **identity**, with over 810 Generators referencing identity in their stories, including social identities (e.g., race, LGBTQIA+), religion or spirituality, the development of confidence, and general identity development. Generators described **overcoming obstacles** (a subcode of identity) in over 560 (56%) stories, painting a picture of resilient and dynamic young people. **Sanctuary** is an important factor for many Generators' visions of afterschool, it is an important concept for youth development, and it is present in well over half (64%) of the stories. **Connection** was present in nearly 8 out of 10 stories and analyzing this code helps us see the drive for connection that would likely be present in any era but may be heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In each coding area, our qualitative analysis helps uncover the prevalence and nuance of these important developmental ideas and quantitative analysis helps identify trends across Generators.

Identity

Identity development is salient during adolescence, in many cases more so than any other time in the lifespan. In other words, "who am I" is a key question that most adolescents ask over and over. As Generators are adolescents, they wrote their stories while involved in the decade-long project of developing their own beliefs, opinions, feelings (i.e., identity) in relation to peers and their caregivers. Adolescence is a time of tremendous brain development and development of self in relation to others. As the title of one of the best books on adolescence indicates, it's best characterized as an age of opportunity (Steinberg, 2014). We expected descriptions of identity to be prevalent throughout stories and they were indeed, present in over 810 stories.

Identity development infuses Generator Z as stories of struggle, acceptance, and celebration. Young people are coming to terms with many overlapping identities, some more socially acceptable than others. Some Generators described themselves in general identity terms such as Dakarai Y (age 17, SE-MI) who said, "**So far in my 17 years of life, I've been able to have a lot of unique experiences that have shaped who I am today. I am a very adventurous person who is always willing to try new things and go outside of my comfort zone.**" Kaelynne-h (age 15, W-NY) described herself similarly, "**What makes me, me is what I've been through. Even though I'm young I've dealt with a lot of difficulties in my life, but it has made me a stronger person. I'm a very funny and generous person.**" Identity-based excerpts in Generator stories related to being a student, family member, community member, and being an individual.

We wanted to capture some specific identities as described by Generators. We chose to code Region/Spirituality, Immigration Status, LGBTQIA+ identity, Race/Ethnicity, Other Identities, Self-Love, and Overcoming

⁴ **Identity development** is a key task in adolescence (Steinberg, 2014). **Overcoming obstacles** is a task all young people practice during adolescence (Nagaoka et al., 2015) and one that can be particularly important for marginalized youth, given the obstacles associated with systemic oppression (e.g., Albright et al., 2017). **Sanctuary** is defined as a safe and brave space in which identity is celebrated (Akiva et al., 2017). **Connection**, described by generators as positive relationships with other young people, adults, and cultural communities, reflects what researchers have called the "active ingredient" in afterschool programs (Li & Julian, 2012; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2009).

How was identity important to Generators?

Identity was the most frequently used code across stories. Youth described numerous aspects of identity and identity development, including religion, spirituality, immigration status, LGBTQIA+, race, ethnicity, confidence or self-love, and other areas. Youth also commonly described obstacles in their lives and how they overcame them.

Obstacles (note – we summarize overcoming obstacles in the next section because it was such a common theme). The common thread through all of these ideas is that Generators were establishing identities and grappling with how they fit into their lives.

Religion/Spirituality: Generators described religion and spirituality as an important aspect of their identity in 10% of stories. These stories referenced many religions including Christianity, Islam, and Native American spirituality. The vast majority of these stories were about Generators finding joy in their practices. For example, Cj P (age 16, W-NY) wrote, “After school, I usually do some bead work, paint, listen to music, and practice the Thanksgiving address. It is said in Seneca at all important get-togethers. It’s said at long house and at any large gathering. It is our prayer to the creator and gives thanks for everything he gave to us.” Mariya (age 18, W-NY) described the centrality of religion in their life, writing, “I decided to fully give my life to following God so it consists of praying, studying, singing, praise and worship, and just knowing him completely. I know a lot of people would find that boring but it’s so much fun.” Similarly, Ishaq H (age 17, SE-MI) wrote, “One of my favorite things to do in the world is reading and listening to the Quran...Reciting the Quran is really special to me it, is more than just joy to me.” For these Generators, religion and spirituality was an important activity in their life and part of their identity.

Immigration status: Generators disclosed their immigration status in 9% of stories. This included youth who identified as refugees, first generation and children of immigrants. Many of these Generators described struggling to assimilate into American culture; for example, Dewah-s (age 13, W-NY) wrote: “One of the hardest things I have ever done is leaving Afghanistan. Although it was a very dangerous place it was still my home and all of my relatives lived there.” Some of the stories that reference immigration focused on the strength of their identities and culture. For example, Psawku (age 17, W-NY) described the importance of peer relationships: “The hardest thing I have ever done was coming to America because I had to leave my homeland, family and friends behind. I got through by meeting new friends. They made me feel better and that no matter where I go, I will always make new friends. My advice for someone in a similar situation would be if you lose someone or something, trust me, it will get better. You will meet new people and be in better place.”

LGBTQIA+: Generators mentioned having an LGBTQIA+ identity in 5% of stories. These stories often involved struggle and hardship. Brandon C (age 16, SE-MI) described the challenging aftermath from coming out to his parents: “During all this unexpected devastation I had no one at school, didn’t even know how to bring it up to my friends, and no one I trusted to turn to. I had never felt more alone. I wish there were outwardly LGBT+ supportive groups I could have turned to.” Other stories were about acceptance and pride. Generator Mia M (age 16, W-NY) wrote, “I am very privileged. I am white, I am cisgendered, I live in an area where most people have been very accepting of the fact that I am a lesbian. I recognize not everyone has that same privilege. My goal for the past few years has been to use this privilege to lift up those who need it. I want to help the voices of minorities be heard in order for acceptance and tolerance to become more widespread.” The desire to make things better for other LGBTQIA people was common as well, as Kirakennac (age 13, SE-MI) described: “These times I don’t feel normal. I want everyone to feel normal, if they have a mental illness or don’t fit societal norms or if they aren’t straight. I want to make life normal again.”

Race or ethnicity: Generators mentioned their race or ethnicity in 12% of stories. Some Generators expressed pride with regard to their identity; for example, NK (age 18, W-NY) stated, “I am a very generous and respectful person and I’m proud to call myself a Muslim black woman.” Another Generator, Josiah R (age 14, W-NY), wrote, “I am proud of my Italian, Black, and Puerto Rican heritage, and love the diversity of Buffalo.” –Others expressed more struggle; for example, Elis M (age 17, W-NY) shared, “I was born and raised in Northwest Indiana in a city where there’s a lot racism towards minorities. Because I’m mixed, I was darker than many of the other students which caused me to be bullied.” Finally, in a longer passage, Generator Krys (age 15, SE-MI) described the challenges and ultimate acceptance of growing up Black in the U.S.:

“Self acceptance. It’s a hard pill to swallow when you realize you’re this person now and this is who you are. I struggled with my racial identity the most. I grew up in a predominantly black low-income neighborhood. I was

what they would say “whitewashed” but I was just raised to not act a certain way because I had a disadvantage in life. I wouldn’t want it harder than I already have it. I was the fat shy kid who would always have their head in a book and be the teachers pet so most of my peers didn’t like me and I wasn’t “black” enough for them. As I grew up and moved away I learned that it was a ridiculous statement, and to not care about what anyone had to say to me because I know who I am and your race or self-worth is determined on a way you look or act.”

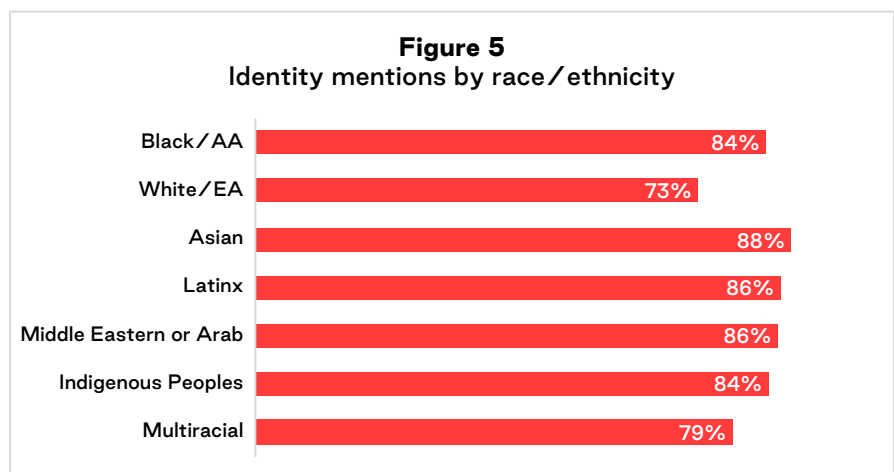
Self-identifying other: We created this category to capture other aspects of identity that were important to Generators but not included in the other sub-codes. Generators mentioned this theme in 12% of stories. Some of these stories were related to a strong family identity; for example, Kashfi (age 14, SE-MI) wrote about age and birth order: “I mostly just spend my time with my family, to be honest, and the reason for that is because when I am in school they don’t see me for eight total hours so I feel like since I am the oldest in my family it’s my responsibility to keep my family happy and filled with joy.” Others described hobbies and self-expression; for example, Generator Saran (age 15, SE-MI) shared, “I am a fashionista. I love clothes and mixing and matching and layering. I love putting something on and feeling like a different person.” Maddiec (age 14, SE-MI) wrote about several identities: “I am a student, a dancer, daughter, friend, sister, and an athlete.” Another Generator, Khyiana (age 16, SE-MI), described an important intersectional identity: “I’m proud to be black, deaf and a young woman. My family is hearing. My family can sign to communication with me.”

Self-love: Generators described self-love (i.e., confidence, positive self-regard) in 17% of stories. Some of these stories were about self-love in the face of hardship. Lanaya N (age 14, SE-MI) wrote, “The hardest thing I have had to face was accepting that I am important, and I am one of a kind. It was hard to face because I was always brought down by some of my old peers. Then I learned that no one can have a say in me.” Generator Tyra (age 17, SE-MI) also wrote about the process of coming to greater self-respect: “Throughout my life I’ve been told that I wasn’t “black enough” or I’m not Hispanic because I’m not fluent in Spanish. I’ve been through a lot of criticisms, racism, and bullying. But one thing I learned from all of that is that I am good enough and I am who I am for me and me only.” Generator Bells112 (age 17, W-NY) wrote about how life experiences led to a sense of self-love: “What makes me who I am is having to grow up before I was supposed to. my father left when I was very young and trying to help my single mother with everything has made me more mature. It has taught me so many life lessons and showed me that the world isn’t all sunshine and rainbows. people struggle and fall but with hard work and determination we rise and we succeed. I am very proud of the person I am today and I thank my mother greatly for it.”

Identity across youth characteristics

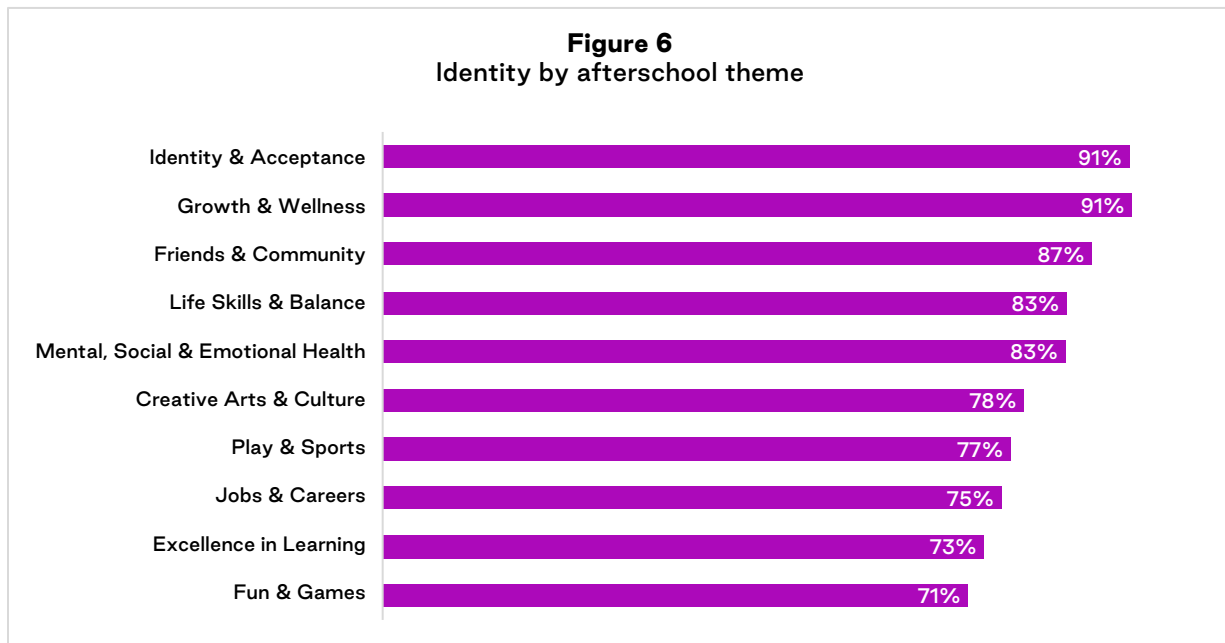
Generators mentioned identity relatively consistently across all age groups in the sample. Regarding gender, about 84% of Generators who identified as she/her referenced identity in their stories and 86% of those that identified as they/them; and those that identified as he/him mentioned identity less frequently, at 74%.

Regarding race/ethnicity (see chart to the right), mentions of



identity were mostly consistent across groups, with one exception. Those that identified as white mentioned identity least often (at 73%), relative to all other groups, which mentioned identity around 80% or higher. Although this analysis of identity is broad, such that it does not parse apart which aspects of identity youth mentioned (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity), this difference, or the fact that the white students mentioned experiences related to identity less than youth of color, likely reflects the reality that white students are socialized to not reflect on their racial identities as white people. Youth who have social identities that are minoritized or disadvantaged in the U.S. (e.g., youth of color), and who hold these identities central to their sense of self, might be more eager to envision afterschool experiences that center their minoritized social identities. However, because our coding of identity included so many components, we can assume that, overall, social identity is generally important to most Generators.

The chart below shows mentions of identity by afterschool theme. Unsurprisingly, the two themes in which identity was mentioned most often were “Identity and Acceptance” and “Growth and Wellness.” Perhaps also unsurprisingly, identity was least mentioned in “fun & games” afterschool visions; however, even there it was mentioned 71% of the time. Identity is important to many youth, across characteristics, and across their afterschool topics. The importance of identity and identity development is clearly something that practitioners should take into consideration when developing and providing youth programming.



Overcoming Obstacles (subcode of identity)

The overcoming obstacles code—a subcode of identity in youth background stories—is about coping or dealing with life’s obstacles in both positive and negative ways. 53% of Generators described overcoming obstacles as a part of their life experiences. We chose to code this as part of Identity because Generators described these as key aspects of their identity and their coping mechanisms. These excerpts were among the most authentic, vulnerable, and brave statements from teens across all the data we reviewed. The obstacles that teens described ranged from getting a bad grade in class

How did Generators describe Overcoming Obstacles?

Just over half of Generators described overcoming obstacles. Obstacles described ranged from ordinary to deeply personal. Older youth described overcoming obstacles more often than younger youth. Young women and those who identified as non-binary/transgender mentioned overcoming obstacles more often than young men.

to deeply personal issues of family illness and loss. For example, the quote below gives a flavor of the power of some of the overcoming obstacle excerpts:

“The hardest thing that I’ve ever done was seeing my grandma in the hospital. My grandma was really sick and had to stay in the hospital for about 2 weeks. I was very devastated and was so angry that I didn’t even want anyone near me. I got through it by talking on the phone with her and making sure that she was alright and safe. The advice I would give someone is to keep having faith and never give up and think lightly of the situation.”
—Sunshine (age 14, SE-MI)

Another story, from a youth named Ra (age 16, SE-MI), described the experience of being an immigrant in a new place:

“The hardest thing I have done is adapt to a new place and environment. I was born in Yemen and moved here at 8 years old. Coming into the third grade, seeing everybody my age speak [sic] a different language, wear different clothes than back at home, and all the different foods and cultures. I was amazed and, of course, scared. It was a whole new world ahead of me. I had to overcome my fears and go to school every day, learn new things, pick up on the language, make new friends, and most importantly, find a place to call home.”

Not all stories were about deep loss and struggle, though. There were examples of typical teen stress such as this story from Deja S (age 13, SE-MI): **“The hardest thing I ever done was getting on stage for a Christmas play. I was nervous because I was concerned about what people would say. I made it through because I thought positive and it felt good when I got on stage. I hope to help people one day to overcome their fears by being positive.”** The overcoming obstacles theme also included stories of how Generators coped with distress; for example, Javvy (age 15, SE-MI) wrote, **“I LOVE playing games. It brings me to a different world from my own. It shows me that anything is possible if you try hard enough. It brings people together and can make you overcome difficult challenges. That’s why I love playing video games.”**

Occurrences of **overcoming obstacles** were similar across racial/ethnic groups (50%–57%) except bi/multiracial teens who mentioned it more often (67%). One bi/multiracial teen, Destiny (age 17, W-NY), described dance as a coping activity: **“One of my favorite things to do is dance. I have been dancing since I was 4 and I don’t think I will ever stop. When I am dancing all of the stress and tension of the day goes away and I can really relax. When the music comes on, I feel like it’s my job to tell the story the artist is portraying.”** It is not readily apparent why bi/multiracial teens described obstacles they faced more than other racial/ethnic groups, particularly because there were no apparent themes, or patterns, in the types of obstacles these youth described.

Regarding gender, young women and gender expansive teens have similar occurrences (58%, 59%) of overcoming obstacles, with young men mentioning this idea less frequently (45%). Overcoming obstacles appeared to have a linear trend with age such that older youth were more likely to mention it. Youth across all afterschool themes mentioned overcoming obstacles, ranging from 39% for jobs & careers to 64% for mental, social, and emotional health.

Sanctuary

The idea that afterschool programs can serve as sanctuaries—safe, affirming spaces in the lives of young people that are not home or school—has a long history and has been documented in research for decades. We didn't expect Generators to use the word sanctuary but, based on previous research, we expected the idea would be a salient component to many of the afterschool visions. We chose to code for sanctuary, rather than the more common idea of psychological safety because sanctuary is about more than just creating an afterschool program that feels safe—it's about a space in which teens feel they won't be judged and where their identity is affirmed and celebrated. Sanctuary is important for all people, but particularly so for youth during the period of adolescence where you are undergoing a host of psychological, social, and biological changes.

We found the idea of sanctuary to be present in 64% (nearly 650) of the stories. The high incidence of this code indicates that many young people seek an afterschool space in which they feel safe and celebrated. This quote from Adara L (age 16, SE-MI), sums up the idea of afterschool as a sanctuary: **"I'd want it to be a safe space where people would be able to feel like they can really be themselves here."** To Keayla Grace (age 16, SE-MI), the idea was so important she named her program after it: **"Doorways to acceptance. I would name it that because everyone wants to be accepted in the world and for us to accept our self."**

Calm/Low Stress: Generators described a desire for the afterschool program to be calm and/or low stress in 35% of the stories. We defined this code as wanting a space that was low/no pressure or a "chill" space. The idea of relaxation was surprisingly common; for example, Macy Y (age 17, W-NY) wrote **"The vibe here will be spectacular and fun, but also a place where you can relax after a long day at school."** Another Generator, Cate (age 18, W-NY) **"I imagine a Safe Place, one that breaks the normal look of a classroom or gathering. I would want this experience to feel more like relaxation than 'another thing to do today'...I imagine the place to be comfortable, with blankets and natural light."**

A Place to Be Yourself: Many Generators described sanctuary as a place to be; i.e., a space to try out identities and explore themselves (25% of, or over 250 stories). One youth, Ari (age 15, SE-MI), wrote, **"My after school dream name is Becoming you...[it] would be a place where you could discover what you will become in life without the judging."** Another, Nadia E (age 14, SE-MI), framed her afterschool dream around this: **"I would give my after school dream the name YouBYou. This represents inclusiveness which means no matter who you are or what you come from you are welcome."** Kiana M (age 16, SE-MI) described a space for trying new things: **"the space would be a safe place for teens to go and try things out of their comfort zone ... their space to unwind and explore themselves."**

No Judgement: Many youth (24% of, or over 240 Generator stories) specifically noted that they wanted a safe afterschool space, free of judgement. Gend, a 15-year-old (SE-MI), wrote, **"I would want a big party where teens could be themselves and be free of judgement. The people who would be invited are the ones who are willing to be open-minded, anyone who needs a break from reality and those who need to be surrounded by people who are like them. I want this place to be a happy and safe place for all teens."** In another passage, Bells112 (age 17, W-NY) summed up the desire for afterschool to be a judgement free space: **"This place will be for teens of all races, sexualities, and sizes to come and get their stress and anxiety out. this is a safe place for everyone to feel accepted and loved. everyone here is accepting and loving. they don't judge you for anything. you're fully safe here. because I know exactly what it's like to not feel accepted. so everyone here will feel like they matter."**

What is sanctuary to Generators?

64% of Generators included sanctuary as an important component in their afterschool visions. To them, it meant:

- Calm, low-stress spaces
- Places where they could be themselves
- "No judgement" spaces

Sanctuary was salient for older youth even more than for younger. Sanctuary was mentioned across themes but particularly common in identity & acceptance, and mental, social, & emotional health.

Sanctuary by Teen Characteristics and Afterschool Theme

Youth across race/ethnicity groups had similar frequencies of stating sanctuary, ranging from 60–70%. Regarding gender (which we infer from preferred pronouns selected by youth), the frequency in which gender expansive teens described sanctuary in their stories (77%) was substantially higher than the frequency both young women and young men described it. Gender expansive teens—those that selected they/them pronouns—may especially yearn for afterschool spaces that are safe and affirming, as they might feel marginalized or less supported at school and home than cis-gender young men and women. In addition, young women mentioned sanctuary far more often than young men (69 vs. 52%). These differences might reflect societal gender norms and socialization. For example, young women—because gender norms expect women and girls to be invested in social relationships and the nurturing and caregiving of others—may be more inclined to note relational concepts like sanctuary.

We found a linear trend in mentions of the need for sanctuary by age such that youth were increasingly likely to mention their need for afterschool spaces that have characteristics of a sanctuary (see above) the older they become. This has clear implications for afterschool programs—providing safe spaces for connection and identify development are perhaps increasingly important in the later years of high school and the transitions to work or college—times in which youth have increased demands on their time.

Occurrence rates for sanctuary differed by afterschool theme (see bar chart below). The two themes with the highest occurrence of mentioning sanctuary were teens that selected the Identity & Acceptance afterschool theme (91%) and those that selected Mental, Social, & Emotional Health (88%). As with connection by theme, this makes sense as themes associated with relational interaction tended to include mention of sanctuary. This contrasts with stories in the job & careers theme, where sanctuary was only evoked in 38% of the stories.

Figure 7
Sanctuary by Gender (reported pronoun)

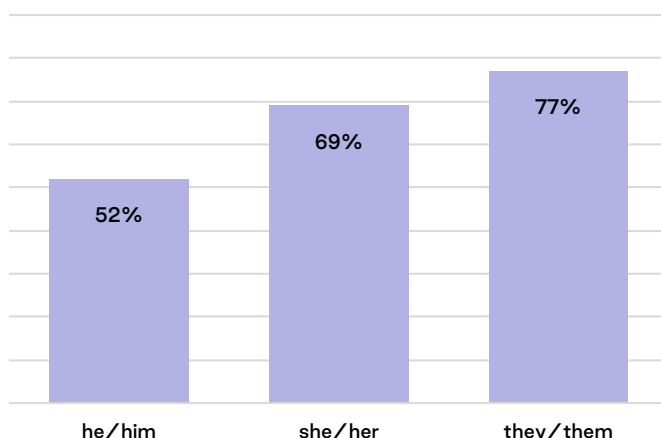
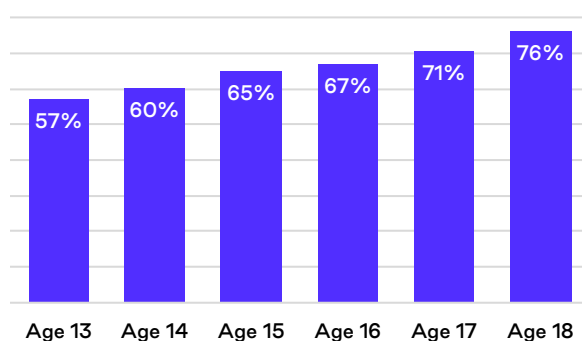
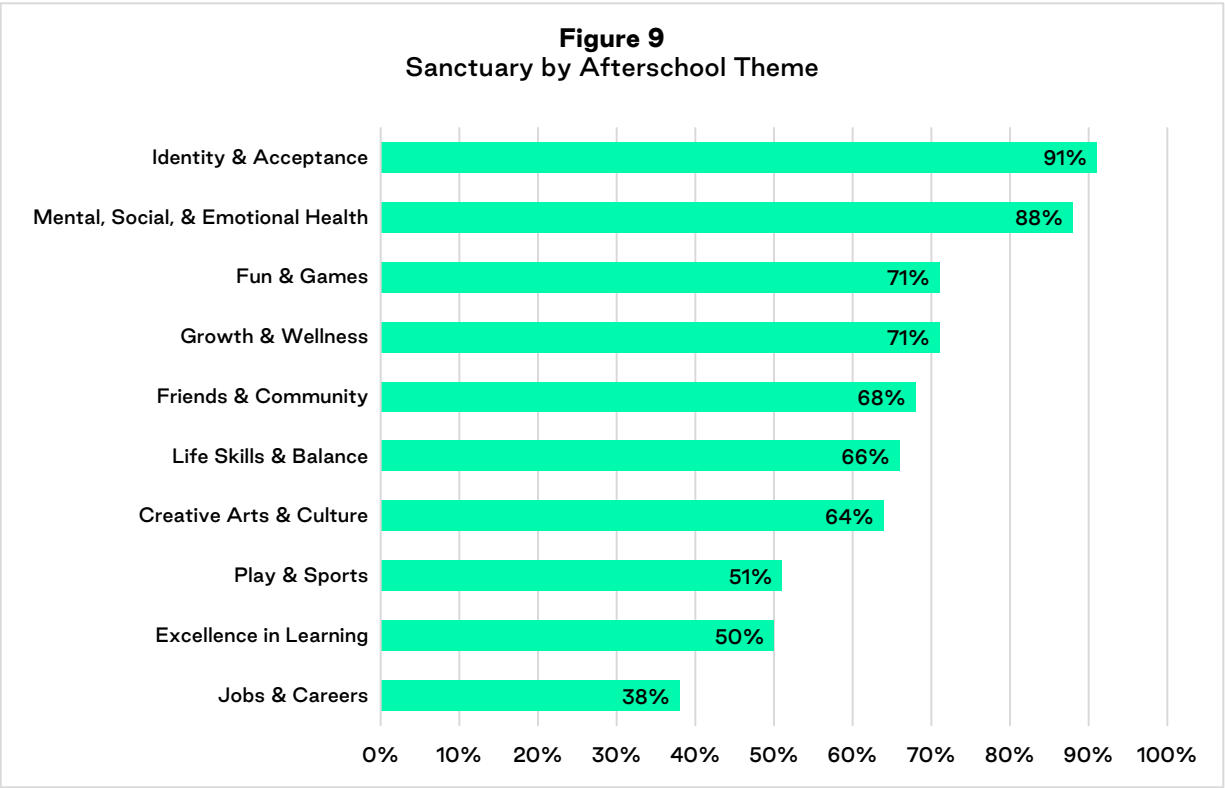


Figure 8
Sanctuary by age





Connection

Connection was the most common aspect of Generator plans for afterschool activities, with 78% of Generators mentioning some form of connection in their descriptions of redesigned afterschool. In other words, **a large majority of Generators want connection with their peers, adults, and other cultural groups in afterschool spaces** to be an important aspect of their reimagined afterschool programs. Connection correlated highly with Sanctuary; that is, 591 excerpts were coded both for connection and sanctuary.⁵ Generators were specific about wanting to create warm, welcoming spaces where bullying was not tolerated, and everyone was respected. Generators described connection with peers, with adults, and across cultural groups, as des.

What is Connection to generators?

A large majority of generators (78%) mentioned that they wanted to connect with people in their stories. This included peer relationships, mentorship, and cultural connections. Generators were interested in connecting with peers in an open, safe and welcoming way.

Generator desires for afterschool programs that emphasized connection were consistent across race/ethnicity, gender, and across afterschool themes.

Peer Relationships: Generators mentioned peer relationships in over half (56%) of their stories. We coded excerpts for peer relationships any time youth mentioned interactions or desires for social interactions with peers. These were often tied to suggestions that an afterschool space should promote a sense of belonging. For example, Salman A (age 16, W-NY) described his program as one in which **“the feeling they would get there is saying this is a place where I belong and feel safe.”** Dae (age 14, SE-MI) wanted to be sure that his program included students from many schools: **“It wouldn’t just be kids from one school or district. It’d be welcome**

⁵ We treated each long answer on the Generator forms as an excerpt—so every Generator story had 7 excerpts (see technical appendix for more information).

to any kid that could make it...this is a good way to make new friends and people that you'd need later on in life." Generator Mohamed A (age 14, SE-MI) stated, "Without your friends, you got no one to support you when you need it, and without your community, you got nothing to represent as your home."

Mentorship: Generators mentioned mentorship—a form of youth–adult connection—in 21% of stories. We coded stories for mentorship when youth described wanting adults to be present and to provide support in afterschool programs. Excerpts about mentorship related to learning about careers, academic support (like homework help or tutoring), and general life skills. Tina (age 15, SE-MI) described this in her proposed afterschool entertainment club: "There would...be a lot of famous and talented people who are going to mentor the upcoming stars. This club would be dedicated to training students not just physically but mentally to be able to handle all the hustle." Generator Angel-n (age 15, W-NY) described mentorship as part of a career exploration program: "A perfect after school experience for me would be a building where there would be adult mentors for each career path and things that comes with adult life." Sam (age 19, W-NY) described mentorship in the context of a STEM program: "mentors would be situated to assist newcomers, working to ensure competence with machines and on standby to answer questions."

Cultural Connections: Cultural connections were mentioned in 9% of Generators' stories. This code encompasses space for minoritized populations as well as exposure to new cultures. Youth expressed a desire to connect to cultures. For example, Halimo (age 17, W-NY) wrote, "the best teens are those who respect other cultures and don't make fun other people's beliefs. What we love for ourselves should be what we love for our sister and brother." Mia M (age 16, W-NY) described her program as an inclusive and welcoming cultural exchange: "one student gives a presentation on a celebration from their country of origin. Another student brings in a plate of food that is incredibly important in their culture that everyone can try. Someone else shows a news article on what's currently going on foreign countries involving LGBT+ rights. Another student decides to show a short film that perfectly describes their life living with autism. It is incredibly broad and welcoming."

Connection Subcodes by Teen Demographics and Afterschool Theme

We analyzed connection themes by demographics (e.g., across age groups, race/ethnicity, gender) and did not find noticeable differences across groups in their desire for connection in after school spaces, suggesting that all youth, regardless of their social identity backgrounds and experiences, yearn meaningful connections with their peers and adults in mentoring roles.

Part 2.

How Generator Z Unfolded

In this section of the report, we detail the “behind the scenes” processes that allowed Generator Z to function. The ways in which youth voice was centered throughout the Generator Z process will be highlighted throughout this report. Specifically, we address the following evaluation questions:

1. What was the infrastructure that enabled Generator Z?
2. How did youth experience voice, decision-making, and leadership?

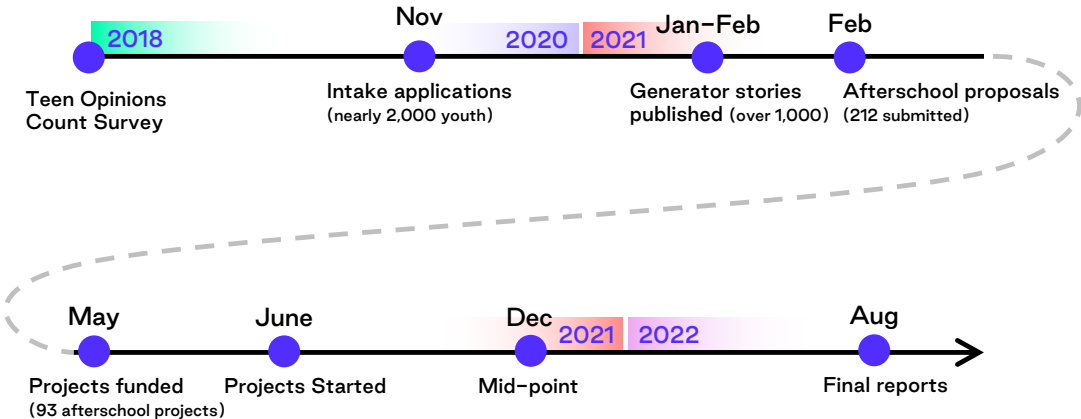
2.1 What Infrastructure Enabled Generator Z?

Generator Z was an unusual (and large) project for a traditional foundation to engage in. In early conversations with foundation staff, they emphasized this, telling us it was necessary for them to “let go how you think of the foundation to let go and think about your audience.” They went on to describe a process of adults shifting from the positions they’re used to. They noted that they did this by continually asking themselves: “Is this in service of teens? Is this familiar with teens?” In the end, Generator Z processes and webpages look very different from traditional foundation processes and web tools. In this section, we share the infrastructure that was built to enable such a non-traditional project to flourish.

Project Leadership & Teams

The figure below highlights important touchpoints throughout the main project implementation, from November 2020 to August 2022. In this section we share analysis of the infrastructure that enabled these touchpoints to occur.

Figure 10
Generator Z Timeline



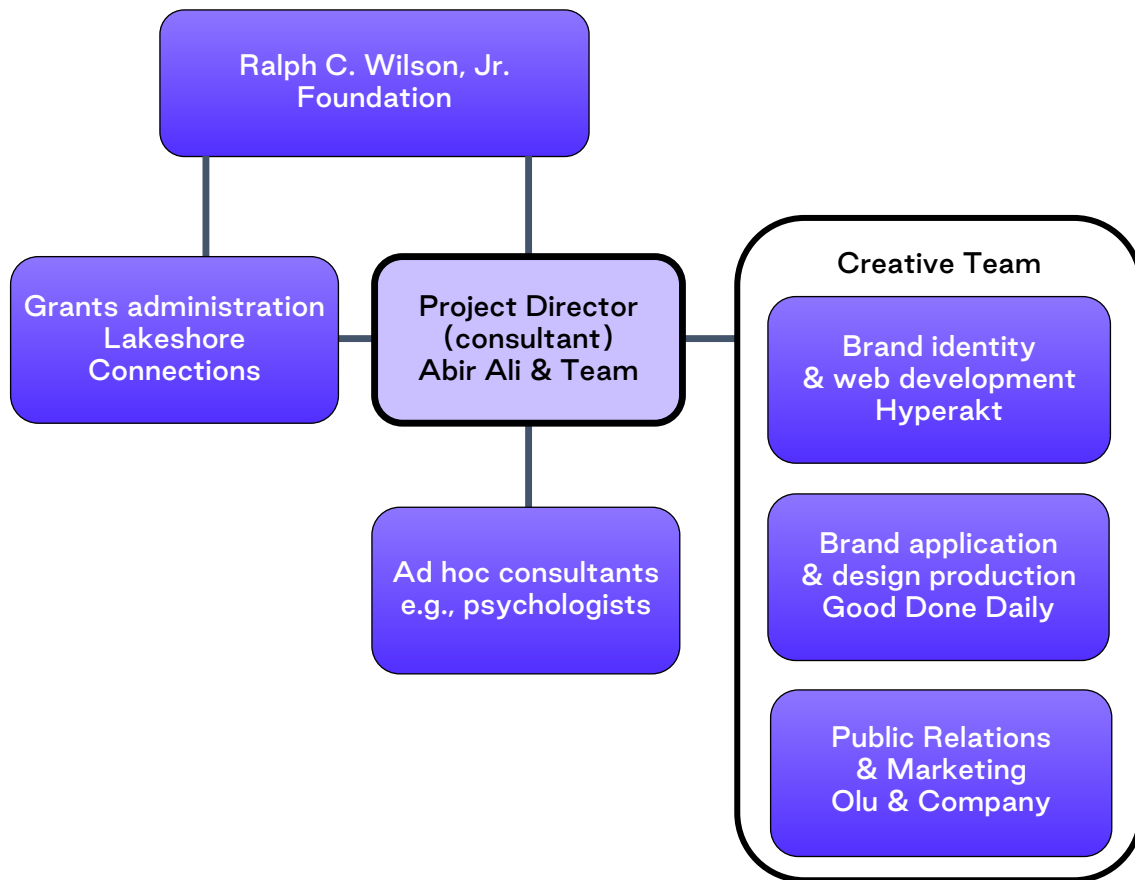
For Generator Z to come together and be enacted as successfully as it was, it involved considerable resources, including human, financial, and time—and organization. Four findings stand out related to this infrastructure:

First, the team was large and amply supported. Over 100 adults had a hand in the development and operation of Generator Z, with multiple organizations and strong central coordination (see figure below). As evaluators and researchers who work in the youth development field, when we began to evaluate this project, we were struck by the size and scope of the infrastructure built for Generator Z. At the start of this section, we wish to emphasize this feature, which is atypical in the youth development field. The project operated with substantial attention and resources devoted to establishing a web presence, a responsive communications team, and powerful supports for youth throughout the project.

Characteristics of Generator Z Project Leadership

1. **A large and amply supported team**
2. **Diverse and inclusive leadership**
3. The infrastructure supported **youth voice**
4. The design prioritized **transparency**

Figure 11
Organizational structure for Generator Z



The figure above summarizes the broad organizational structure of the project. The project director coordinated all aspects of the project and served as a liaison to the foundation (though foundation staff were also actively involved in communication with many of the team-members and grantees). Grants administration, including pre-award, award, and post-award activities, was conducted by an outside firm. A creative team, made up primarily of three companies, worked together to create the brand, website, public relations, and marketing. Throughout, the project director hosted regular meetings and regularly brought young people into the process.

Second, the leadership was diverse and inclusive. Generator Z’s focus on recruiting and hiring a diverse team of individuals (diverse based on age, race/ethnicity, geographic location, and affiliation with the Generator Z’s idea lab) allowed it to create and implement unique ideas that reached a diverse group of youth across South-east Michigan and Western New York. This was especially apparent in the teen and young adult consultants hired to facilitate training workshops.

Third, the infrastructure supported youth voice. As Generator Z was a project about enabling youth voice, this was part of the project implementation as well, with opportunities for young people to have voice, decision-making, and leadership throughout the project phases.

An excellent example of the leadership structure, which included youth leaders, of Generator Z was apparent in the Staff and Community Review of Afterschool Provider Proposals. The core group of adults that reviewed proposals included staff from the grants management organization and the Generator Z project team. A large and diverse team of individuals were involved in the selection of afterschool school providers who received grants. Both groups completed a one-hour virtual training on how to provide feedback on proposals, reviewed 127 afterschool ideas, and attended a 2-hour virtual debrief session that led to the decisions of the community review.

Decisions for the selection of afterschool proposals were informed by the scoring of the individuals from the Community Review team and the conversations they had during team meetings informed the selected.

The community review team included staff members from a marketing agency; an environmental program; a science gallery; an apprenticeship program, and a lesbian, gay, bi-attractual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ+) youth, and young adults, with an emphasis on young people of color, experiencing homelessness or other challenges. It also included seven youth with various roles and associations with Generator Z.

Including a diverse group of adults and youth who are different in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, area of expertise, and age better ensured that unique perspectives were brought into the review and selection of afterschool provider proposals. In these sessions, individuals were walked through which proposals were likely to be funded, were considered “maybes”, and those who would not be funded.

The Generator Z team was intentional in creating a climate of joy at each milestone of the project. Members celebrated people and the project’s progress. At the same time, the Generator Z initiative—like all projects—had challenges, which were often related to its youth-centered approach. For example, foundations often have hierarchal structures, wherein men, often white men create the foundations processes and structures. Often, these decisions are not youth-centered in that processes are not created with youth in mind or are not developed in collaboration with youth. These “business as usual” approaches to foundation work that aims to serve youth removes foundation members from the youth and communities they aim to serve. Generator’s Z youth-centered approach, such as collaborating with youth in the community review of afterschool proposals, better ensures that the people foundations aim to serve, in this case youth, remain at the center of decision-making processes that impact their lives.

Our fourth and final observation about project leadership is that **the design prioritized transparency**. The team worked to make the process open and public, following an open-source approach. Generator Z teen stories are public. Grantee proposals and their interim and final reports were mostly public (a few parts were kept confidential). The project was designed to make philanthropic practices much more viewable than is typical and that transparency really shaped the implementation of Generator Z.

Reaching youth

To reach the goal of 2,000+ youth to complete in-take forms, the project team utilized direct contact as well as several social media platforms. First, they put considerable effort into developing brand identity.

Brand and Website Development

Almost a full year of engagement went into the planning and marketing of the Generator Z initiative. From the start, the team set out to build a recognizable brand that included tools that were accessible and user-friendly for teens. As the project director noted, they aimed to create a consistent identity and tools that were “accountable to teens”. Online grantmaking systems used by philanthropic foundations often do not have this level of user-friendliness, so they built the entire system for Generator Z (which now includes a searchable database of stories and provider projects, as well as grantmaking functionality) from the ground up. Generator Z also ensured the site was highly mobile compatible, assuming many would access this through their phones.

The Generator Z team wanted consistency and accountability to teens from pitching, to commenting, to reporting. In the development phase, they conducted a series of “design roundtables” with multiple stakeholders, including teens (described more fully in section 2.2). Specifically, 19 teens were invited to participate in three teen-only roundtable sessions and one session with adults (the adults also met separately once). The team also invited youth to complete follow-up surveys with questions like “Close your eyes and imagine the brand ‘Generator Z’. What words or images come to mind? And “Which tagline do you prefer for Generator Z?”

Marketing strategy

The marketing strategy was designed to reach 40–50,000 youth. The strategy focused on direct interaction with youth. Thus, they connected with teens through Instagram, Spotify, and Snapchat, with the hope that youth would, in turn, share information about Generator Z with their peers. This structure aimed to remove adult gatekeepers. Furthermore, to reach a diverse group of youth, the language, media advertisements, and in-take forms were written using language that would be accessible to teens.

Online and Social Media Outreach

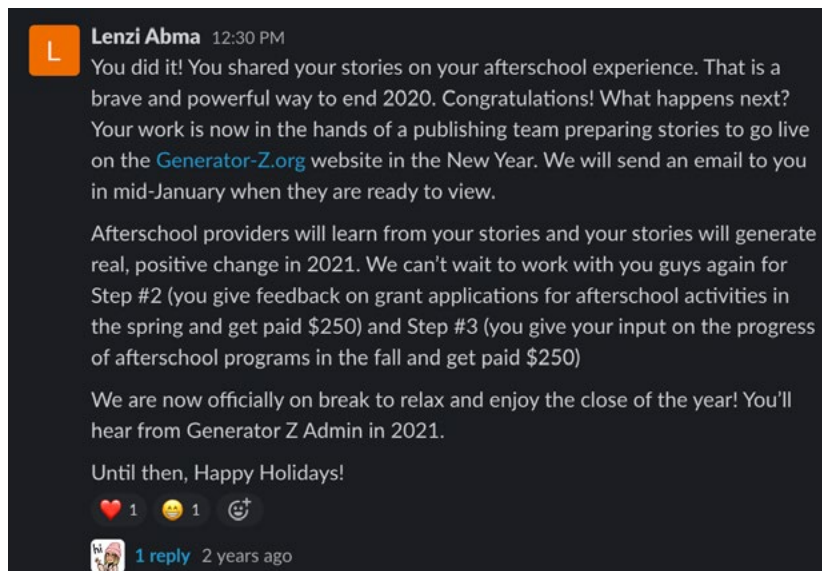
Given that youth in the Generation Z cohort—or young people born into a thriving age of social media access and use—are more likely than other generations to use social media in their everyday lives (Dimock, 2019), the Generator Z leadership team was intentional about centering online and social media platforms in its interactions with youth. Using social media platforms for youth to engage with one another and with Generator Z staff is a developmentally appropriate form of communication that has the potential to increase youth's sense of connection with the Generator Z initiative, as online spaces have been associated greater reports of social ease among youth (Allen et al., 2014).

Several online platforms were used; namely, Slack, Instagram, and YouTube.

Slack—an online chat platform—was used to communicate information about the program with youth and served as a medium for youth to interact with one another. Generator Z was most active with Slack during the story creation phase. For example, the leadership team provided detailed instructions and reminders on how to receive compensation for story submissions via Slack. Other posts included reminders on the steps of youths' involvement in the Generator Z process. Such a post is provided here:

Figure 12

Example Slack post



Instagram—The project director noted, “the primary goal of [use of Instagram] was legitimacy to youth and building trust.” As Instagram was the most used platforms by teens during Generator Z, it was an important platform for communication. However, efforts or resources were not spent to intentionally build up followers; rather, it was one of many ways to communicate with youth.

Figure 13

Example Instagram posts



Figure 14

Instagram post about Lil Nas X



The Generator Z account posted 347 times (Oct 2020 – August 2022). The posts by the Generator Z account were primarily used to share excitement of Generator Z and highlight teen and program stories (49% of posts). See examples at right. Other uses of Instagram were sharing current events and relevant celebrity news (18%), memes (15%), information specific to the Generator Z process (10%), and tips (e.g., summer self-care; 6%).

The Generator Z account was tagged in 70 posts and had 709 followers as of August 31, 2022.

Instagram was particularly utilized by LGBTQ youth in the Generator Z initiative. The Generator Z team worked to make this a safe space for LGBTQ youth; for example, see the Lil Nas X post above. On social media, youth had the opportunity to express the fluidity of their gender identities by writing their gender pronouns in their account name or discussing their social experiences around being queer or gender fluid in the comments of posts, such as the one to the left.

YouTube was also used to disseminate informational videos on the Generator Z initiative.

Paying Youth

Compensating youth in a fair and inclusive way is an issue in youth development, with many arguing that youth should be paid for their involvement in research and youth development programs—like anyone who brings expertise and lived experience (e.g., Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2012). Paying youth for their time and expertise is a critical part of inclusivity because some teens need to work and by paying them it allows youth to participate these types of extracurricular activities (Seller, 2017).

A common way for adults to compensate youth is through the form of checks. Checks are often used because they are convenient, and systems are in place for it; e.g., foundations are used to submitting payment in this way. A major downside of this payment approach is that many youth—particularly low-income youth—do not have bank accounts or access to information on how to engage with banks (Junior Achievement, 2018), the

money is processed slowly, or the bank account is not youths' own account, as it is connected with an adult's bank account, limiting youth's full access and use of the payment.

To circumvent these barriers, the Generator Z initiative set out to compensate youth using a wide variety of methods including Check, eCheck, Cash App, Zelle, and Venmo. This approach was not without challenges. eCheck (i.e., electronic check), for example, required youth to print and take to bank—so they stopped using this method after the first payment.

Overall, these youth-centered processes made Generator Z inclusive of youth from marginalized backgrounds and developmentally appropriate. The following payment schedule applied:

- \$500 stipend for published story
- \$250 stipend for feedback on provider proposals
(youth were paid to attend a workshop and comment on 5 proposals)
- \$250 stipend for feedback on provider progress reports.

The Generator Team worked to limit stipends to \$500 in a single calendar year to reduce tax liability for participating youth. Youth (and adults) who took part in the community review panel that helped make grant-making decisions were paid \$1,000 (for reviewing 127 “finalist” afterschool ideas and participating in a 2-hour prioritizing meeting).

2.2 How did youth experience voice, decision-making, and leadership?

Generator Z as Youth Philanthropy

Generator Z is an example of youth philanthropy, though different in size and structure from most youth philanthropy or grantmaking programs. Youth philanthropy started to become more common around the mid-1980s and is defined as providing “young people money and mentorship to directly fund nonprofit organizations” (Seller, 2017, p. 1). In most cases, this consists of small groups of young people learning about community causes and making funding decisions for small grants with adult support. According to the website, youthgiving.org, which serves as a hub for youth philanthropy, as of August 2022, there have been over 600 youth philanthropy grantmaking programs in the United States (see ‘programs’ section of website).

Youth participants in Generator Z did not make grant decisions alone but were important members of intergenerational teams who made important decisions around funding. The Generator Z team put structures in place to increase youth voice throughout every step of the project, including hosting multiple teen design roundtables, Generator stories serving as inspiration for afterschool ideas, substantive youth participation in making funding decisions, and substantial youth involvement in reviewing progress reports and final reports.

In addition, the size and transparency of Generator Z sets it apart from most youth philanthropy. According to a report written by Youth Leadership Institute (2001), the average grant size made by youth in 2000 was \$2,252. This statistic is relatively old, and it reflects somewhat different processes than those in Generator Z, as grants were made by intergenerational teams. But individual grants in the Generator Z project ranged from \$10,000 to \$100,000, showcasing the real change they hoped to see from the investments not just for show. And the Generators' stories, the program proposals, and the updates are all accessible online—a feature uncommon across youth philanthropy.

Levels of Participation

Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation, pictured at right, is a commonly used conceptual framework in youth–adult partnership practice and scholarship. Starting at the bottom, with forms of non–participation, the ladder progresses through greater youth participation. For a project like Generator Z, avoiding the non–participation “rungs” of the ladder—particularly, tokenism, was hugely important and the project was quite successful in doing this. That is, a grantmaking project that invites, say one or two youth to help make decisions runs the risk of treating those youth as tokens—youth participation for show rather than having a legitimate place at the table. On the contrary, our view is that Generator Z tended to hover near the top of the ladder, with most activities reflecting rung 6 – adult–initiated, shared decisions with youth. Garza and Stevens (2002) identified youth–adult partnerships like this as a best practice in youth philanthropy meaning youth must make authentic decisions in the process.

Generator Z provided a spectrum of opportunities for youth voice, input, choice, and shared leadership. Youth provided feedback to programs on their proposals and 6–month progress. They responded to the questions for their stories in whatever format they wanted – video, audio, pictures, writing – and they decided which programs to provide feedback for. Generator Z provided opportunities for youth to make authentic decisions that had real impacts (e.g., granting money to organizations) with the support of adults.

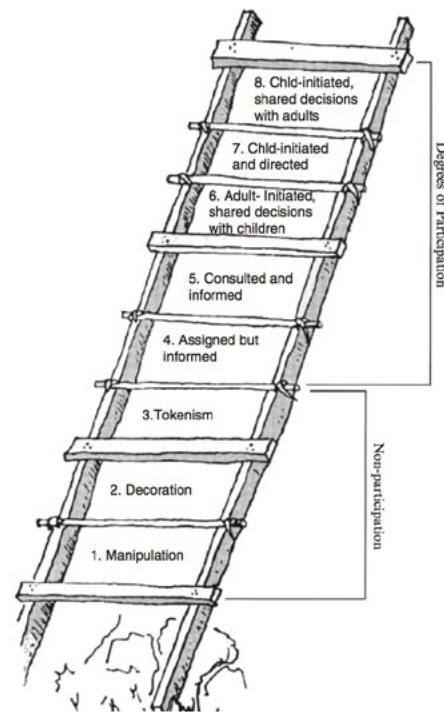
Youth were significantly involved as partners—not tokenized individuals—in the decision making of Generator Z processes. To do so, **intergenerational team structures** were created to ensure youth had a voice in decision making, as well as leadership opportunities to impact Generator Z process. In terms of leadership positions, youth served as outreach assistants in contacting prospective afterschool providers, served as co–facilitators alongside adults in trainings for youth to develop their afterschool ideas and in trainings to prepare afterschool providers to create strong grant applications. Youth were also reviewers in deciding which afterschool providers received funding. In the context of the information sessions for youth on how to provide constructive feedback on afterschool provider proposals, teen facilitators provided encouragement and perspectives on how to “be themselves” in order to inform authentic engagement with proposals. A key success of an intergenerational team structure was that the success of youth in leadership roles was facilitated by youth already having long–standing relationships with the adults of the team and youths’ feedback on the content and flow of presentations was taken seriously.

Leadership Opportunities

Throughout Generator Z, there were numerous opportunities for youth to engage in partnership, learning, and leadership activities. Opportunities that include youth as collaborators in decision–making processes alongside adults is a form of learning for adults and youth. Meaningful opportunities, such as these, can help prepare youth for young adulthood, such as preparing them for working in leadership positions and working with diverse teams as adults (Zeldin et al., 2013).

A large group of Generators participated in workshops that providing training on how to contribute to the Generator Z process, such as providing critical and constructive feedback on grantee’s initial proposals, and feedback on grantee’s success and challenges with their afterschool programs. In addition, select youth served as outreach assistants and co–facilitators. Youth were provided leadership opportunities during the following activities:

Figure 15
Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation



1. Provider Information Sessions (5 session) – Youth co-facilitators (2 youth) answered questions and co-moderated the Q&A session. Shaped afterschool provider proposals by explicitly telling them to write without jargon and to speak to teens directly.
2. Community Review of Proposals – Youth Generators (4) and other youth (3) were included as reviewers to select the afterschool providers who received funding to implement their afterschool visions (4 Generators). Four Generators reviewed afterschool provider applications to inform the selection of funded afterschool programs. These Generators had multifaceted roles: One Generator served as a coach and three served as co-designers for the project. To be a member of the reviewer team, individuals, including youth, had to complete Reviewer Training.
3. Afterschool Idea Workshop (8 workshops) – A workshop that trained youth on how to provide feedback to grantees on their ideas for afterschool activities and programs for youth.
4. Involvement in Generator Z Book Writing – In 2022, a team prepared a book to showcase the Generator Z project. The bulk of the content were weaved together by adults of generator stories. The team then invited 20 youth to be involved in writing and editing chapter introductions. The Generator Z team provided scaffolding and online workshops to pair writers and editors and ensure that the development of these chapter introductions was youth-led.

How youth were supported

Given that many youth do not experience shared leadership in other areas of their lives, such opportunities could have been overwhelming without ample guidance. As Akiva et al. (2013) note, “For youth voice to work you must maintain a delicate balance between helping youth feel power and control, while still providing youth with safety, structure, and support” (p. 2). The Generator Z provided ample guidance, breaking processes up into steps for the youth and provided them with support throughout.

Youth, including youth facilitators and the larger group of Generators, were provided **scaffolding** in order to prepare them for their tasks. For example, in the Reviewer Training workshop in the Afterschool Idea Workshop, youth were provided guidelines on how to give constructive feedback. They were told to “think about...[writing] to the afterschool provider (not [the Generator Z staff]) ...and to “be constructive in [their critique].” Youth were given multiple examples of what constructive comments do and do not look like, which youth could apply to own feedback on grantee applications. Within this workshop, youth were also provided technical skills on how to navigate the Generator Z website, specifically on how to find the afterschool ideas and how to comment on them. Examples of the feedback youth offered on afterschool providers’ proposals are below.

“I like that this program talks about racial injustice which is a problem that we face currently they also created a safe place for the teens to share their experience and have a role in the club they will feel a part of the program itself instead of just being a participant.”

“Such a needed thing. A space where teens will feel alright to just be themselves. Love it.”

“I like how this idea incorporates students getting to think of what their path will be later in life... I honestly think meeting one time a week is enough, though. Unless I’m confused and the 5 days a week meeting would be split up between different groups of students.”

Opportunities for scaffolding to prepare youth to engage meaningfully in Generator Z were provided during multiple and different days of the week, which included weekdays and weekends. For example, the workshops that prepared youth on how to write clear and impactful stories on their visions for afterschool were repeated multiple days after school. This flexibility likely contributed to high youth attendance at workshops, which included 1,246 youth participants. In the Eventbrite sign up form that was used for workshops, youth were asked if they needed accommodations. Three youth indicated a need for accommodations, such as needing an American Sign Language Interpreter. **Impactful scaffolding means meeting youth where they are at** in order to best promote their success.

Part 3.

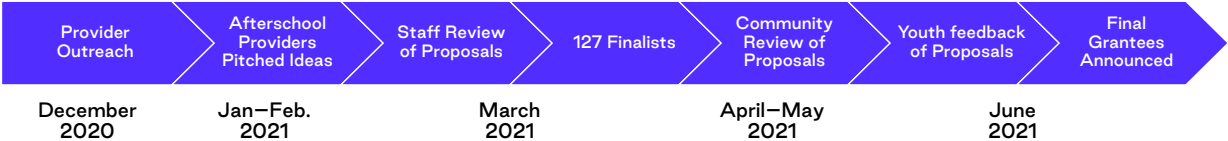
Afterschool Providers

Part 3 addresses afterschool providers, the proposals they developed inspired by teen stories, the projects that were funded, and the six- and twelve-month reports on these projects, submitted by providers. Specifically, we asked the following evaluation questions:

- 1. How did Generator Z support the adults who support youth?**
- 2. To what extent did proposals reflect youth voice and the aim & feel of Generator Z?**
- 3. What challenges and successes did afterschool programs experience?**
- 4. How did Providers Learn and Grow?**

As seen in Figure 17, Generator Z engaged in a multi-step initiative to recruit a diverse group of afterschool providers to apply for funding. Youth voice and intergenerational collaboration remained at the center in the selection of afterschool providers who would implement Generators’ visions.

Figure 16
Timeline for afterschool projects



3.1 How did Generator Z Support the Adults Who Support Youth?

To ensure the development of inclusive and responsive afterschool programs that centered youth, the Generator Z team worked to support adults in afterschool school provider roles. Efforts to recruit a diverse group of afterschool providers to participate in Generator Z began with outreach to organizations across Western New York and Southeast Michigan with specific recruitment efforts in rural areas. Table 4 provides an overview of the outreach efforts and support given to afterschool provider applicants, and the number of individuals who participated in these opportunities. As seen in Table 4, afterschool providers were offered many opportunities that offered information about the Generator Z process and support on how to write a competitive and impactful application.

The Generator Z team’s aim in this phase was to offer multiple, diverse forms of information sharing and engagement. This would allow providers to access information in ways that work for their schedules, control the amount of information they receive (many are inundated with requests and tasks in their organizations), and to develop strong applications that were tailored to their needs. In particular, the team aimed to reduce barriers to application by **offering accessible, online workshops on how to complete competitive grant applications**. This strategy for inclusion may have increased the number of grant applications from youth-serving organizations with limited human and financial resources. Overall, adult providers were offered support with the intention to promote best practices on how to center youth voice in afterschool programs.

Table 4
Efforts to reach and support afterschool providers

Outreach/Support Effort	Total Number
Email List Sign-Up	1,419 registrants
Calls to Interested Provider Applicants	685 calls
Information Sessions with Providers	476 attendees
Emails with Providers	115 emails
Information Session Follow-Up Emails	15–20 emails
Q&A Session Registration	36 registrants
Slack Members	33 members
Questions Asked on Slack	4 questions
Information Sessions Reviewed on YouTube	30 views

Key forms of outreach included an active email list that offered information about Generator Z, calls made directly to interested provider applicants, and Information Session with providers.

The Information Sessions had multiple goals (e.g., walking applicants through the application), but a unique goal of sessions was to encourage adult providers to develop applications, and thus afterschool programs, that

centered youth and their needs. Providers had eight total sessions to receive support on their applications, which included: 1) information sessions (5 total that occurred at different times throughout the week), 2) a Slack channel, 3) Website coaching Tips, 4) Live chat and email, and Q&A sessions (3 sessions).

The information sessions were co-led by adult and youth facilitators and were well-attended. **Involving youth—the very group to whom youth afterschool providers serve—to answer questions and share their thoughts about project ideas emphasized the importance of youth-centeredness in the project.** Attendees were asked to reflect on the “why” behind their work and what sparked their interest to apply for funding with Generator Z. Attendees were told that strong applications were 1) Relevant, 2) Experimental, 3) Courageous, 4) Collaborative, 5) Understandable, and 6) Fundable. They were told that a relevant application, or project, was one in which youth and the visions Generators shared are centered in the project. Sessions also included a collaborative component, in which providers were given opportunities to discuss their applications with other providers, particularly the ways in which Generators inspired their ideas and how youth will be centered in the work.

Internal notes from Generator Z staff noted that direct email communication with afterschool providers was a key outreach strategy, since it allowed applicants to receive direct 1:1 feedback in the context of their unique needs and visions for afterschool. As explained by one of the program’s leaders during an informational interview as well as notes on the afterschool provider experience, one lesson leaders took away was that afterschool providers did not necessarily connect with one another in sustained and meaningful ways that allowed them to utilize one another as resources. This lesson was learned in the context of the Slack channel, which was the least used form of communication with Afterschool Providers. This might be due to various reasons. First, afterschool providers have their own web-based forms of communication within their organization, so downloading, using, and learning another platform, such as Slack, might have been less desirable, potentially explaining its minimal use. Secondly, connecting afterschool providers with another to create sustained relationships was not a primary aim of Generator Z. Thirdly, afterschool providers may have felt that other afterschool providers were competitors, not collaborators, in the Generator Z application process since all applicants were applying for funds.

3.2 To what extent did proposals reflect youth voice and the aims of Generator Z?

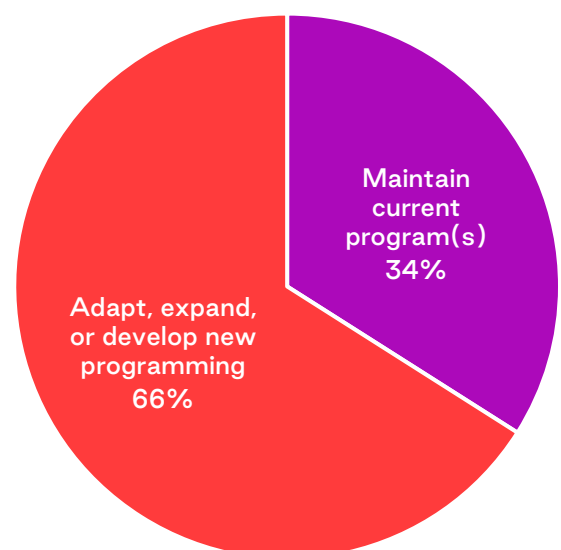
In this section we address the extent to which projects reflected the aims and feel of Generator Z, particularly as related to youth voice. To do this, we present qualitative analysis of the proposals submitted by providers. The findings in this section result from an in-depth, iterative coding process. Our coding scheme is rooted in the initial themes identified in the analysis of Generator Z stories (Part 1). That is, in analyzing the degree to which proposals reflected youth voice, we specifically looked for evidence that providers included the aspirations identified in Part 1. We then focused primarily on program providers answers to the following two questions:

1. *What is your Generator Z afterschool idea?*
2. *How did Generators inspire your idea?*

We present analyses that address these questions and offer illustrative quotes from providers that reflect key themes extracted from responses.

In brief, we found that proposals responded to youth voice to varying extents and with varying intents. That is, 34% of

Figure 17
New programs versus old



program providers indicated that they felt validated by the Generator Z stories to maintain the programming they were already implementing, and 66% reported being inspired to adapt, develop, or expand their programming to incorporate specific aspirations perceived in Generator Z stories. In addition to reflecting youth voice in so far as program providers incorporated youth’s aspirations and feedback into their program design, about 20% expressed explicitly creating more opportunities to incorporate youth voice into their program design.

How proposals built from Generator Stories

We first analyzed the extent to which proposals used Generator stories, which fell into four categories: validation, program design, and new program. The table below lists the proportion of occurrences of these three codes. Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive as some programs both felt validated by Generator Z stories and adapted, expanded, or developed new programs.

Table 5
Proposal categories

Providers used Generator Stories to...	%
Validate what they already offer	74
(only validation)	34
Adapt exiting programs to do different things	32
Expand existing programs to do more	20
Develop new programs based on Generator ideas	30

Validation of what programs already offer: The most common response to Generator Z stories, with 74% of respondents, was a feeling of validation. That is, program providers expressed that the stories reaffirmed for them their preexisting focus or approach from their response to COVID-19, the content focus, the staffing structure, the culture created, and the population served:

The Generators did not so much inspire our ideas as much as they confirmed our ideas. Their ability and willingness to articulate their conditions and circumstances confirmed for us that what we were doing was on the right track. —Southeast Michigan Provider

It was beautiful to read through these stories and see that we are actually creating WHAT THE YOUTH WANT. This is not what we think they need, but exactly what they are asking for. We are excited to finally be able to build our sports spaces for the youth. —Southeast Michigan Provider

A subsection, about 15%, of these proposals specifically reflected on how the Generator Z stories validated the ways in which they were already listening to young people, allowing young people to lead, and creating space at the table for youth to be decision-makers.

We were blown away by the student stories... We are inspired by their compassion, courage, and vision. For 17+ years [our program] has worked to create programs in which youth feel heard, learn about needs in their communities, and take action. We are encouraged by Generator Z to continue innovating and piloting new programs that align with student interest and put youth voice at the foundation/center of our work. —Southeast Michigan Provider

While 74% of proposals described feeling validated by Generator stories and ideas, only 34% of proposals stopped at validation. The remaining expressed validation as well as a plan to shift their programming in response to stories by either adapting or expanding existing programming or creating new programs.

Adapt: About a third of program providers expressed that reading Generator Z stories inspired them to adapt their current programming or informed the design of the program. Many, like the following two examples, reflected on how the stories shaped their design of programming they had already begun conceptualizing:

Since we are currently building the Youth-Driven Community Center, we will be utilizing some of the ideas Generators shared to ensure the space is youth friendly and creative. Ideas like Arrow's "Zen Den" in their Path to Discovery and Acceptance project has helped us think through centering young people's mental health. —Southeast Michigan Provider

A "Safe Place" seemed like an easy thing to visualize, but the Generators and our youth gave us a clearer vision of "their space... The fact that many of the Generators' wishes and our youth's wishes were more alike than not, was the validation that our grant idea will not only provide a "Safe Space," but an answer to our youth's call for help. —Southeast Michigan Provider

As we will describe below, most proposals that adapted based on Generator Z feedback were those that increased their focus on creating sanctuary, increasing mental health support, opportunities for youth voice, and a focus on future planning.

Expand: In addition to adapting their current programming to meet the needs of youth as gathered from their stories, other program providers were inspired to take programming that already existed but expand it to reach additional young people. In some cases, this meant developing new sites and partnerships to reach additional youth:

Generators inspired us to come up with an idea that will reach more teens... Our idea is to create an extension of [current programming] ...that will go out into local neighborhoods. Currently, we can only teach students that come from schools that contract with us. This program will open the program up to teens in the community who are interested, regardless of schools or contracts. —Western New York Provider

In other cases, expansion meant addressing barriers (i.e. transportation, schedule, site) to ensure accessibility of their programming to reach additional youth:

There are many LGBTQ+ identified youth in the Western New York area who are looking for a safe and accepting space to connect with others, but experience barriers that keep programs [our organization] currently offers difficult for them to access. Many of the youth noted transportation, unaccepting families, and strict school environments as being barriers to accessing or creating the programs that would provide them with the support and acceptance they identified as being critical to an afterschool program... these youth stories inspired us to expand and reach the youth in communities that have limited options. —Western New York Provider

Develop new programs: These were program providers who reported designing entirely new programs in response to the Generator Z stories after realizing that youth needs and aspiration fell outside the scope of the preexisting programming:

Several generators discussed how they would like to have help to construct a plan for success after high school. Some generators wanted SAT/ACT prep while others were looking for career counseling. Our Scholars Plus program offers all of those and more, it would be a one stop shop for those needing help moving to the next step after high school. —Southeast Michigan provider

What ideas did providers take from Generator Stories?

In addition to analyzing the extent to which proposals were shaped by Generator Z stories, we also analyzed the specific ways in which programs responded to the stories and how the youth stories inspired program providers to shift the intent of programming. These largely reflect the categories we identified in the first report. Most commonly program providers picked up on the following youth aspirations 1) sanctuary and safe space, 2) support with mental health and self-care, 3) opportunities for youth leadership and decision-making, and

4) programming that helped youth prepare for their future. Like those above, these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Table 6

Types of Generator stories used for proposal inspiration

Intent	%
Sanctuary/Safe Space	46
Future Planning	31
Mental Health/Self-Care	28
Youth Leadership/Decision-making	20

Sanctuary and Safe Space: The most common theme that program providers reflected on was youth’s aspiration for sanctuary or, safe, affirming spaces where teens won’t be judged and where they can build relationships with their peers and where their identity is affirmed and celebrated. A total of 46% of program providers reflected on how the stories inspired them to create safe space for youth, many of them reflected on the particular need for this in the context of the isolation caused by COVID-19. The popularity of providers shaping their proposals around this idea likely reflects both (a) the frequency of sanctuary in Generator stories (x% see page x) and how do-able it is for sites. Examples:

The underlying elements that they all shared was having a community where they could lift each other up and have a space where they can grow into the best versions of themselves. At this highly influential time in their lives, they are also looking for help in reaching their full potential and finding out who they really are...Originally, we were more focused on filling time with exciting outdoor recreational activities. However, after Hahashipem’s comments, we’ve added teaching journaling skills and reserving quiet self-reflection time during the day into the program. —Southeast Michigan provider

Many of the proposals, like the following, explicitly named a shift away from the targeted content of their programming to ensure a culture where young people feel safe:

While our proposal builds off of a past 4-H program, the focus of this new idea is much more on building confidence and safety in the group. Instead of rushing into projects, our proposal puts the importance of creating a space for teens to understand themselves and each other front and center. Equally important are program components that allow them to explore their identities and take care of their emotional health. —Western New York provider

As seen in these quotes, program providers both adapted their pre-existing programs and created new programs to meet this need.

Future Planning: The second most common theme program providers identified and incorporated into their proposals were the youth’s desire to learn how to plan from their future, from career options to college applications to financial planning and more. In the following two examples, providers explain their rationale for creating new programs in response to this youth aspiration:

The generators expressed their want for information and guidance about employment, exploring careers, building self-confidence, and social connections. The purpose of this project is to increase youth’s knowledge of STEM career options, provide access to career professionals, college students and magnify the exposure to and the benefits of having mentors in their lives. —Western New York provider

We saw that many young people were looking for more opportunities to explore potential career paths and to connect with professionals doing work they might be interested in... [Our program] responds directly to these ideas...Young people will be given the opportunity to do some self-reflection about what careers they are interested in and take a leadership test at the start of the program. Then they will spend 7 months working with their peers and mentors

to learn about and practice doing the work that they are most interested in. —Southeast Michigan provider

Mental Health and Self-Care: Another common theme program providers incorporated into their proposals were the stories that illustrated young people’s request for mental health support and self-care practices.

As we were reading some of the Generator Z stories their request for help with stress, anxiety and depression surfaced. [Through our partnership with] the University of Michigan we will be able to bring professional mental health workers on site to address the needs of the teens. —Southeast Michigan provider

The Generators opened our eyes to the extent that teens are struggling with their mental, social and emotional health. To quote Asher Quinn, “Suicide rates have gone up so much during the pandemic for various reasons.” Teens need a support system; one that includes their peers and those who understand their needs most. —Western New York provider

In many cases, program providers recognized the need for mental health support, especially in light of COVID-19:

The pandemic has clearly taken a toll on the mental, social, and emotional health of young people. Not being able to see and spend time with friends and being unable to separate online school from home life is mentally draining. Reading numerous stories that reflect this desire for more support and community inspired our seasonal activities, individual care packages and learning healthy coping skills together... —Southeast Michigan provider

Youth Leadership and Decision-Making: About 20% of program providers stated that reading Generator Z stories inspired them to create more opportunities to listen to youth input and put youth in leadership and decision-making roles. Perhaps most interestingly, a few providers specifically created new programming to incorporate youth voice even before funding was awarded.

The Generators inspired [our organization] to make Saturday Cafe even more student-centered by establishing a Teen Council to help guide and develop the program...The Teen Council will formalize [our organization’s] longstanding commitment to student-led programming and ensure that Saturday Cafe is meeting participants’ needs. —Western New York provider

We were most drawn to Generators’ ideas about building community and having ownership of time after school, rather than fitting into a school’s program or agenda. This vision inspired us to go ahead with our own dream of creating a youth-run production studio that would truly empower young voices and offer a place for youth to learn different skills related to digital media arts. —Southeast Michigan provider

Youth expressed a desire to be treated like the young adults they are. They wanted to have a voice in the activities offered and to be able to choose what they want to do. Thanks to the Generator Z grant opportunity, [our organization] has reimagined teen programs as Y In-flenc-Zers. They will have the unique opportunity to create, sample, and make changes to activities and resources shaping what their after school, weekends, and summertime experience looks like. —Southeast Michigan provider

3.3 What Challenges and Successes did Afterschool Programs Experience?

In this section, we discuss the key challenges and successes grantees had in implementing their projects, based on the 6-month grantee reports. Specifically, we analyzed responses to the following question:

- *Discuss the joys and challenges of bringing your idea to life so far.*

Challenges

The main challenge afterschool providers discussed in bringing their afterschool ideas to life was the COVID-19 pandemic. Some specific COVID-related challenges providers mentioned was the shift to remote or virtual participation required for program participation, youth fatigue from participation in remote or virtual school and afterschool program participation, limited staff and resources dedicated to the program, delayed programming due to financial, shipping of equipment, and staff related issues, connecting with new youth in virtual environments, and the recruitment and attendance of youth. Some key quotes from afterschool providers below highlight the challenges COVID-19 had on programs:

Our main challenge thus far has been finding the time to consistently meet with the teens to move the project along. COVID emergency closures, conflicting afterschool activities and other factors have gotten in our way several times this fall.

Our challenges have been re-connecting with youth during/after the pandemic to engage in these programs. In addition, we are working to fit everything in (both virtual and in-person) in a tight timeline that we created.

Although COVID exacerbated many common challenges of programming, other challenges were apparent regardless of COVID. For example, programs struggled with **teen schedules and attendance** due to other factors such as jobs, families, and other activities. Additional challenges included **program implementation and development**. For example, providers questioned how to successfully apply their ideas, engage bored students, and utilize funding to maximize the best outcomes. Other challenges providers discussed related to youths' **access to afterschool spaces**, such as how youth would travel to and from school to the afterschool environment. Examples of these more general challenges, or challenges that already existed before the pandemic, are highlighted below.

Our major challenges arose during our early planning stages. To ensure interested teens could take advantage our idea, we needed (a) to quickly get the word out on our program and (b) to quickly cement plans that met each teen's transportation needs.

Once kids reach middle school and high school, they can be quick to tune you out if they're not interested. I have to balance the night out, giving them time to socialize and goof off, and then bringing them back to focus on the night's topic. It's not perfect. There have been instances where I realize the activity isn't exactly clicking with them and I'll make some quick adjustments to keep their attention.

Although less common in comparison to the other challenges previously mentioned, another key challenge mentioned was the **shift from typical, adult-centered practices to youth-informed practices**, such as developing new youth voice committees that informed afterschool programming content and processes. One afterschool provider said:

An unexpected challenge we experienced was to "let go of the reins". Staff needed to unlearn the ways we were used leading, teaching, intervening, and supervising roles in our regular education programs. We worked as a team to catch each other when we attempted to "program" and "fix" and worked with a team building and self governance facilitator to provide the skills and language for Teen Council participants to be able to govern themselves".

Successes

The main successes afterschool providers mentioned were that they were **functioning and doing the activities they planned to do**, especially during the pandemic. Within these activities, providers emphasized that they knew their afterschool programs or activities were succeeding because students were developing socioemotional skills and other skills relevant to projects. One provider stated:

We are successful when participants experience personal and artistic growth, have opportunities to share their ideas and voices with the world, connect to the greater arts community, and take active ownership of the program through leadership opportunities. Our sessions have supported identity exploration, social-emotional learning, and student artistry through diverse topics, artists, and works. Public performances, open mics, and writing workshops have connected participants to the arts community and provided diverse platforms to amplify their voices.

Although described less frequently, some organizations highlighted their successes through a lens of **youth engagement**, indicating that youth defined what success looked like for them as individuals, success was defined based on youth voice from advisory committees, or success was evident because new youth-driven programs were formed. In other words, for some organizations, remaining youth centered was the key barometer of success. Comments from one provider who explicitly asked their youth participants what success looked like for them are presented below.

[Our program] acts as a platform, elevating young minds to think creatively beyond their own expectations. We still maintain that while we have our own definition of success, it is important to hear what success has meant for some of the current apprentices:

- I learned how to express my emotions without words. Through dance I can express different emotions.
- Healthy ways to replace my darkness into happiness through the arts.
- Learning how to pursue my dreams and to celebrate my accomplishments even when I haven't met my dreams.
- Recognizing skills that I didn't realize I already possessed and growing them confidently.
- Learning how to become the best version of myself.

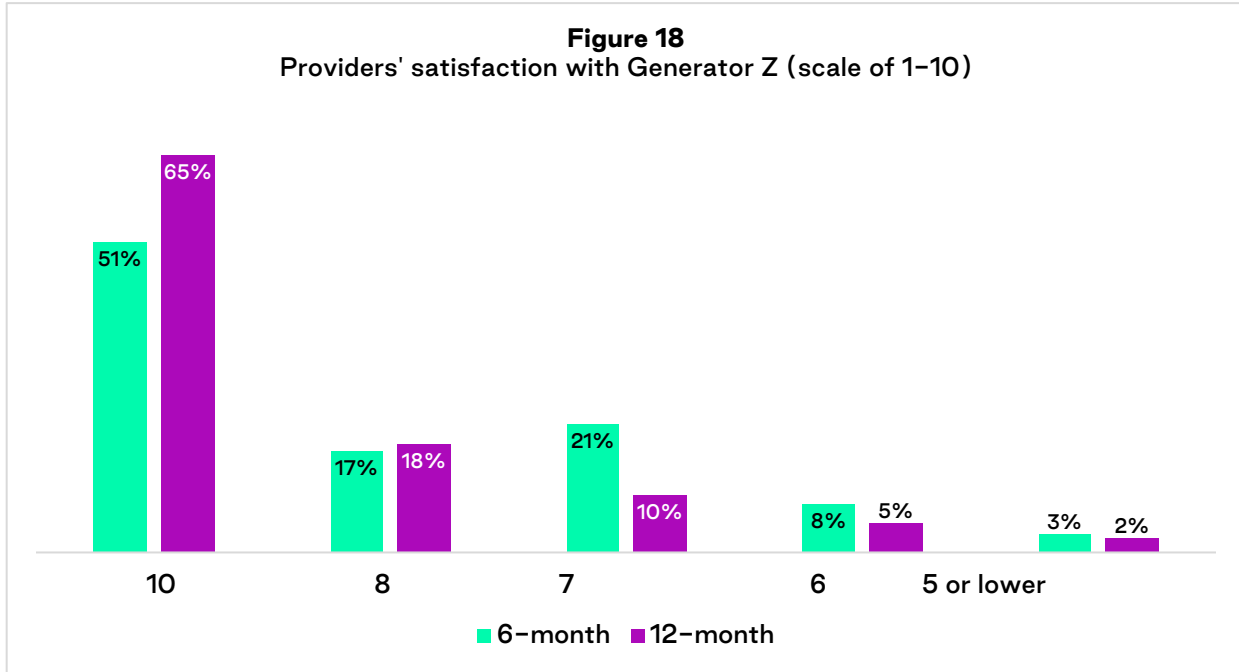
Part 4.

Project Impact

In this section, we present analyses of numerous data sources to infer the overall project impact on stakeholders, including youth, program providers, and others.

4.1 What did Providers' think of the Experience?

In their 6-month and 12-month grant reports, organizations rated their experience working with Generator Z on a scale of 1-10 (1 = terrible, 10 = awesome). Ratings averaged 8.50 at 6-months and 9.05 at 12-months. Results appear in Figure 18, suggesting that the vast majority of providers had a positive experience with Generator Z and that experiences only got more positive over time.



4.2 How did Providers Learn and Grow?

In this section, we address what providers stated they learned and how they grew through the process of participating in Generator Z. To do this, we analyzed the following questions from the 6-month report and then the 12-month report:

1. *What are you and your staff learning through your participation in Generator Z?*
2. *Has your organization changed because of Generator Z? Explain.*

In brief, we found that providers reported having a much **better sense of what youth want, need, and are capable of** and found innumerable **ways to incorporate more youth voice** into their programming.

What did staff learn?

In answering the question, "What are your staff learning?" in the 6-month reports, program providers reported the topics listed in Table 7. We provide analysis from 12-month reports at the end of this section.

Table 7

What staff learned from participating in Generator Z

Topic of learning	%
Benefits of Youth Voice	43
Youth Needs and Interests	36
Youth Capacity and Potential	24
Affirming/Reinspiring the work	18
Staffing Needs and Challenges	15

Benefits of Youth Voice: The most common reflection, representing 43% of respondents, was that the Generator Z experience helped program providers learn about the true benefits of listening to young people. In the simplest of terms, it helped them see how much youth voice matters and benefits youth programming:

Engaging in the Generator Z project has been beneficial for [our] students and staff. The biggest lesson gained by [our] team is the Importance of Youth Voice. The project provided awareness around what is possible when student voice is given a chance. From the level of engagement by the student authors and the quality and types of works produced, it was evident that students were empowered and felt invested in their own learning. —Southeast Michigan provider

Providers reflected specifically on learning the degree to which listening to young people and giving them opportunities to lead, improved the overall quality of the programming they were able to provide:

We knew that when developing an idea into a program, it's always great to have input from participants before and during implementation. However, giving our youth space to take complete ownership and lead the program has been incredible on a new level. Every day, we witness the commitment, innovation, and initiative the youth take in ensuring the program is a success and that they are benefiting their peers and themselves. Once the program launched, youth mentors were engaged and took initiative in researching and planning the monthly workshops, activities, sending out reminders, following up, and keeping an open communication channel with students so they feel supported. They are ensuring everyone is being heard and the participants are achieving the objectives they set during enrollment. —Western New York Provider

More specifically, many reflected on how centralizing youth voice increased engagement:

We have experienced firsthand that youth voice matters, they do want and enjoy designing programming. We found and experienced that their ideas produce enriching, fun, programs that are attracting engaged and expectant participants. —Western New York Provider

Youth Needs and Interests: Next, we found that 36% of program providers reported that this process helped them develop a better sense of what it is that youth need and want. For some, like the following, this meant identifying specific areas of interest among youth to inform their programmatic goals:

Through our participation in Generator Z, we are learning the pride our students have in their cultural family recipes and their desire to share them with their peers...We have found that many students are not given the voice and choice to cook within their family unit. Generator Z helps to guide student chosen meals with an intentional healthy option. —Western New York Provider

For many others, like those following, this process helped them understand the specific needs that youth have in light of the COVID-19 pandemic:

GenZ has provided our organization with research-like data that better shows us what students want to learn now versus five-or-ten years ago. It has helped us see how much more

they need to develop because of two years without face-to-face learning, and how we can better adjust our instruction. —Southeast Michigan provider

We are learning that the needs of our youth are very high, especially during the pandemic. Many of our youth come from homes/environments that are not accepting of LGBTQ+ youth – the isolation that comes with social distancing takes a toll on their mental health and makes them feel even more unaccepted. —Western New York Provider

Youth Capacity and Potential: In addition to learning about youth needs and aspirations, 24% of respondents reflected on how this process helped them see what the youth they work with are truly capable of, like in the following quote:

We have learned quite a lot through this program. I think first and foremost, it is apparent that as a society we do not give this generation enough credit. In meetings with the committee I have been impressed with their insight, their maturity, their empathy, and really their understanding of the social and emotional issues of today. —Southeast Michigan provider

More specifically, providers reflected on how this process helped them see youth's capacity as leaders and advocates:

We've learned that youth love to lead conversations and often ask the most relevant and probing questions of each other. —Southeast Michigan provider

We are learning that students are more passionate about things we might consider "adult issues", and that they really want to work on addressing them and not just let the adults handle it...we learned they are really interested in getting more involved with the community and tackling big issues such as school violence, food in the cafeterias, and the sometimes harmful effects of technology and social media. —Southeast Michigan provider

Affirming and Re-inspiring their work: Providers also reflected on how this process reaffirmed and re-inspired their approach to the work. This was particularly the case for those organizations that were already centralizing youth voice:

Our commitment to exercising youth driven leadership and our ability to best exercise such program outcomes for youth has grown. We are excited to continue partnering with our youth partners to provide the best experience for [youth]. —Southeast Michigan provider

[We] appreciate Generator Z's commitment to youth voice and leadership. These were existing priorities within our organization and we had sought professional development to do a better job of fostering these areas... Providing the resources to put many of the ideas we have been developing into action has been a tremendous opportunity. Through this process, we have been seeing first-hand the expanded role that students can play to make this organization as great as it can be. —Southeast Michigan provider

Staffing Needs and Challenges: Finally, about 15% of respondents reflected on what they learned from this process about hiring, training, and managing staff to implement programs that are responsive to and inclusive of youth voice. More specifically, there was learning related to hiring and training processes, especially when hiring teens:

The hiring process for our Youth Organizer's really reminded us of how important it is to ensure that youth voice and youth leadership are at the forefront of all we do. As we met candidates who did not share that value, it continued to solidify the need to transform the spaces we touch to be youth driven. This has also reinforced how we are training our new Youth Organizers, one of which is a youth herself. —Western New York Provider

We are learning that we need more training to help us engage teens in a meaningful way and that we also need to provide training to teens to empower more youth to take on these roles in the production studio. —Western New York Provider

A few other providers reflected on learning to let go of control in order to allow the youth to lead:

Our staff is learning to release the reins, to listen more and delegate responsibilities and ownership to youth and trust the process. —Western New York Provider

Sometimes the most difficult part is for adults to let go of control and trust that young people can take the lead. —Western New York Provider

Analysis of 12-month Report on Learning

In the 12-month reports, respondents remained reflective about how the process of Generator Z taught them about youth's needs and capacity. In other words, the topics in the 12-month reports were largely parallel to those in the 6-month reports. The one primary difference between the two datasets was that in the six-month report, providers reflected primarily on what they had learned about **the importance of incorporating and centralizing youth voice**; whereas, in the final, 12-month reports, providers reflected on what they learned about **the process of incorporating and centralizing youth voice**. This more nuanced reflection is illustrated by the following two quotes:

We continue to learn the art of cultivating youth-adult partnerships. While youth need the freedom to design, create, and run with their own ideas, even the most independent youth also need support and coaching. We continue to practice deep listening, taking cues from our young men, and honoring their insights while also anticipating obstacles and offering guidance as needed. Different youth need different levels of support, so individual relationships are key to hitting the right balance. —Western New York Provider

We are now building a much more integrated planning process that incorporates Youth Leadership Council members and feedback is more regularly shared throughout the year in a way that shapes and improves our efforts. —Southeast Michigan provider

As was the case at six months, many of the responses at the end of the year continued to be situated in the context of COVID-19, including those about learning the process of incorporating youth voice:

Our staff and I are ever learning what it means to live shoulder to shoulder with today's teens who have experienced the pandemic, social isolation, learning loss, loneliness, identity crisis, loss of direction, societal cynicism and the regular challenges of growing up. —Southeast Michigan provider

4.3 Youth Voice and Participation in Funded Programs

In this section we explore the implementation of youth voice and participation described in final provider reports. The term "youth voice" was found more than 40 times in the reports. To understand the variety of ways providers implemented youth voice and participation, we referred to a few existing models (Hart, 1992 [see section 2.2 of this report]; Wong et al., 2010). Most models present a linear or hierarchical process involving youth and adult involvement (e.g., youth decision-making comes after and is considered a higher level than youth voice). However, we instead found that providers added or strengthened their youth participation in varied legitimate ways—they started with or deepened any of three elements: voice, decision making, or leadership.

Figure 19 at right illustrates the model that emerged from our in-depth analysis of grant reports. Depending on where an organization is in their growth and process, some elements may be more important or accessible than others. Some organizations may engage in all three elements, but others may engage in one or two. And these elements certainly overlap conceptually (e.g., involvement in an advisory board can involve voice, decision-making, and leadership for young people).

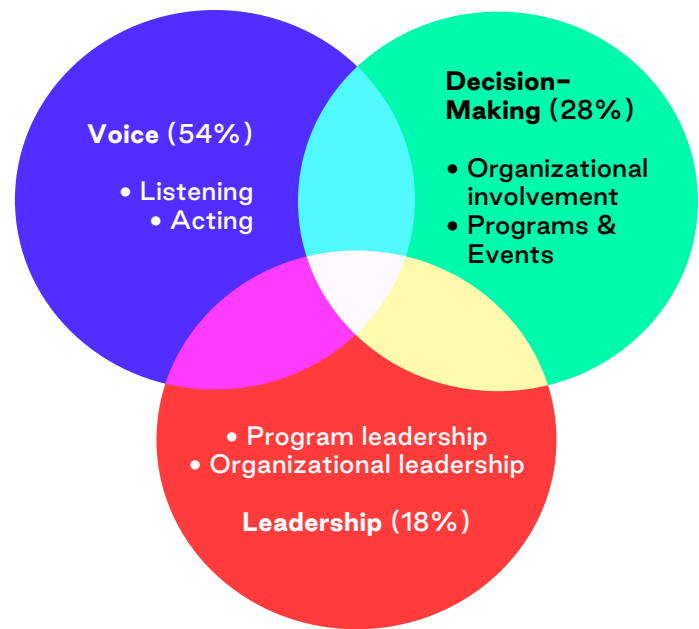


Figure 19
Model of Youth Voice,
Decision-making, and Leadership

Voice

Of the 90 organizations, 68 (54%) described youth voice as we have defined it here: Explicitly listening to and incorporating youth ideas, suggestions, and feedback. We noted two related components: (a) listening to youth (which often involves soliciting ideas & feedback), and (b) acting on youths’ voice.

Listening is defined as surveying youth or gathering information to understand where teens are or what they’re interested in. Listening to youth is something that new organizations do to get to know their communities but is also something that established organizations should do to keep up with community changes and trends. For example:

“We made explicit efforts early in the program to talk with the teens about what they were interested in and how hands-on they wanted mentors to be” —Anton Art Center.

Acting on youths’ voice is the second component, and it involves responding to youth feedback or ideas. Action could be illustrated by implementing some of the youth ideas or by making changes to existing programs in response to youth feedback. The example below shows how one organization used youth feedback to make continual improvements.

“It was very helpful to interact with the Generators on your website to spark innovative ways that we could improve our program to better meet the perceived needs of the youth we’re working with. This spilled over into us building in more youth involvement in the evaluation, improvement, and future curriculum planning. Part of this process required us to be very flexible as we took youth feedback, implemented it, and made continual changes as we did assessments of the changes we were making as we went through the year. It was really exciting to see, for both the youth and our adult staff, the ideas of our youth actually come to life” — Five Loaves Farm

Decision-making

We defined decision-making as involving young people in real decisions that affect an organization or program. Decision making can be scaffolded by adult leadership or by existing structures. We saw two kinds of decision-making: Organization involvement and involvement in programs or events.

Organization Involvement: Creating an advisory board or a planning committee was a common way to involve youth in organizational decision-making. Advisory boards can allow youth to inform organizations of community needs and create space for them to affect change and improvement—as well as introducing to the inner workings of a program. For example:

“The YADT (Youth Advisory Design Team) also provided input on places to visit for design and building usage inspiration, and took the lead of their final presentation to The Yunion’s staff, parents, community members, building architect, and interior designer.” —Yunion

Involvement in Programs or Events: Another way that organizations can make space for youth decision making is to have youth make decisions on a program level. These decisions can be as simple as choosing from a set list of options for a space or program or as complex as making an idea come to life. For example:

“From the very beginning, we worked with the teens at the HERO Hartland Teen Center to brainstorm ideas for the grant. Teens helped us grow the plants and then sell them prior to Mother’s Day. They also gave input to the gaming equipment and outdoor play equipment we purchased through the grant.” —HERO Hartland Teen Center

Leadership

We defined leadership as youth leading others (adults or peers) in some activity associated with program or organizational operation. In Generator Z projects, youth took leadership positions in programming as apprentices, volunteers and as experts. They led planning initiatives for spaces, programs and other organizational changes. We saw two forms of leadership: program, and organizational.

Program Leadership can be on a large or small scale and involves youth running programs largely on their own. The program itself could be created by youth or by adults but the actual program is run by youth. For example:

“The final weeks of our program, we had the Abafundi (which means “students” in the African language, Xhosa*) plan and run a workshop of their own! They chose to do a Wakandan-themed Jeopardy game, an interview segment called “Wakanda Korner”, and one of the students performed a song and a freestyle session...Over the year, we also let them take autonomy for certain classes, where they made interactive social games to learn more about each other.” —Galactic Tribe

Organizational leadership: Youth can also take on leadership roles on an organizational level. This kind of leadership can involve marketing, hiring and fundraising and can give youth a look into the inner workings of the organization. For example:

“We worked with a committee of teens who decided the programming they wanted to see take place. ... During GO ART! Festivals, they ran face painting booths to raise money for the program. They also started a podcast. In addition to coming up with programming, the teens also worked on marketing the program through social media platforms, which they ran themselves.” —Genesee Orleans Regional Arts Council

Emergent Strategies

Our analysis identified several common strategies grantees implemented that may be helpful to other organizations. We present each theme briefly here, and provide multiple excerpts, directly from grant reports, in Appendix B.

Strategy 1: Be flexible.

Several organizations reported that through this project they came to the realization that they need to be flexible to better serve youth. Many organizations discussed logistical challenges, especially those related to COVID-19. Even without a pandemic, there are always logistical issues like staffing, scheduling, resource allocation and access to materials. Organizations reported that they adjusted their expectations and altered their plans. Many organizations wanted to give advice to future grantees to be flexible; for example, one wrote:

“Ask youth what is most engaging to them and BE FLEXIBLE. It is very important to be able to change up the plan to meet people’s needs. Whether it’s providing transportation, moving your time slot, or switching up the material altogether, sometimes the best thing to do is take a step back and ask the youth what they need.” —Highland Clubhouse

Flexibility was not only about logistics. Many grantees noted the importance of being flexible in their response to changing youth interests and needs. For example:

“We have found that we have the most success when we give youth the flexibility to work on the projects of greatest interest to them, as their schedules allow. We also found that creating a supportive space where youth can collaborate and share their ideas allows people who might be initially reticent to become more comfortable taking risks and being creative.” —Detroit Creativity Project

Strategy 2: Emphasize Relationships

Many grantees reported that relationships were critical to the success of their programs. Some described the importance of youth–adult relationships and others described youth connecting with peers. In some cases, the grant funding allowed for more adults and a lower youth:adult ratio. Creating a supportive and connected environment allowed for more participation and responsiveness. For example,

“Our organization hasn’t changed in our values or ways of being/doing, but our relationships have deepened through the leadership of teens driving the project. Collaborations grew and community support was expansive! It has been an INCREDIBLE YEAR! Generator Z investment was an affirmation of what we do and how we do it, and we are stronger because of it!”
– Youth Arts Alliance

Strategy 3: Reach out to new groups

Another consistent theme was reaching new populations. The Generator Z grant allowed organizations to engage with young people they had not yet reached. In doing so, these organizations learned how to tailor their programs to new youth and to make these programs sustainable. For example:

“This grant has also helped us engage a much broader range of youth and not limit our outreach to just in-person services in the Buffalo/Niagara region. Finally this grant has allowed GLYS to better understand the needs of youth in rural areas throughout Western New York and create more sustainable long-term goals for providing the support and leadership opportunities our youth are asking for.” —GLYS Western NY

4.4 How did programs change?

In answering the question, “How has your program changed because of Generator Z?” in the 6-month reports, program providers reported the types of changes listed in Table 8.

Table 8

Reported program changes due to Generator Z

Type of change	%
Capacity Building	36
More Youth Voice, Decision-making, and Leadership	28
Program Adaptation	20
Affirming and/or Recommitment	8

Capacity Building: The most common reflection on growth, with 36%, were the ways in which the Generator Z project helped build providers' capacity. More specifically, providers reported on being about to expand their organization further or beyond their previous scope due to participation in Generator Z. In many instances they reported building their capacity to expand and increase their outreach and impact:

We were not reaching as many students or as many demographics as was possible. This has changed. We had no choice but to change our strategies and formats to continue our programs and this then reached more students from areas we had not tapped into in the past. We plan to continue to use our new inclusive and widespread strategies, no matter what the future holds.
—Southeast Michigan provider

Generator Z has...set us on a track to have major impact in our community. We are now utilizing an entire wing of a school building. We are now looking to purchase this building...We are looking at filling the 40,000 square foot building with programs fitted for every school age child and teen...You guys are helping our vision come to fruition. —Southeast Michigan provider

Providers also specifically mentioned building their capacity in terms of hiring more staff or providing additional training:

Because of Generator Z, we have been able to grow in several ways. For example, we have hired a full-time staff member dedicated to developing, implementing, and enhancing [our program]. Additionally, Generator Z has leveraged other financial support. As a result, we have raised additional funds to hire a part-time staff member also dedicated to implementing [our program]. —Southeast Michigan provider

More Youth Voice, Decision-making, and Leadership: Next, we found that 28% providers mentioned increasing and changing their approach to incorporating and centralizing youth voice in their program. The ways in which they shifted their approach to youth voice, reflect what has been described in related literature. In Akiva and Petrokubi's (2016) analysis of youth-adult partnerships, they provide a developmental ecological perspective that includes the following three categories: inviting youth voice, decision making, and leadership. We saw evidence of all three of these categories being employed by providers. First, we found examples of providers inviting youth voice, or asking youth for feedback and allowing them to have say and influence in the spaces they inhabit:

Inspired by the youth testimonials and encouraged by our successes under this grant, we are further committed to elevating youth voice – we have increased opportunities for peer-to-peer expertise sharing and formalized direct feedback channels for our youth to advise our organizational Board of Directors and provide professional development to our Writers. —Southeast Michigan provider

Next is an example of providers learning to provide youth with opportunities to wrestle with and make interesting, real decisions about how the organization and programs are run:

Thanks to this experience, we are now considerably more community-driven and student-driven than in the past. We have even begun taking steps to create a permanent teen council with the help of consultants to ensure that present and future generations have a seat at the table and can advocate for themselves and their peers. —Southeast Michigan provider

Finally, we saw examples of providers increasing and rethinking how they provided youth with leadership opportunities, giving youth a chance to learn about leadership through leading themselves or others:

Generator Z offered us an opportunity to bring to life a program that is by the youth and for the youth...We experienced as well as demonstrated what programs look like when youth take complete ownership of the program and lead it fully. Generators were involved at every stage, from the conception of the idea and design stages to the implementation and facilitation of the program...Through the experience, youth are being empowered and growing as leaders while they learn critical life skills. —Western New York Provider

[Paying youth more] has been a result of a much larger change, inspired by Generator Z, of more carefully inspecting what it means to be a youth driven organization. Teens and adult staff agree that teen participation in our organization is vital. So far, teens have participated in strategic planning and visioning, advocated for their environment, and volunteered to send a representative to staff and board meetings each week. This has been a direct result of teens developing an intrinsic sense of ownership over Growing Hope. —Southeast Michigan provider

Program Adaptation: Next, we found that 20% of providers reflected on their growth in terms of the adaptations they made to their programming. These providers reported that participating in Generator Z shaped the content and approach of their program beyond the inclusion of youth voice. For many, this meant shifting the focus of programming, often because of the feedback they received from youth:

Our upcoming year of programs focuses a lot on self-care and mental health workshops beyond our traditional art programming, we are excited to see ourselves continue to grow as an organization alongside our community. —Southeast Michigan provider

Because of Generator Z we are realizing the importance of building a stronger focus on identity exploration into our programming. Our students who attend the affinity groups are showing up to our larger programming empowered and feeling kinship and connection to others...Seeing this occur as a result of this project informs us to continue these efforts into the future, especially ensuring that students with specific identity demographics are given affirming space to reflect and explore their identities. —Southeast Michigan provider

Many providers, like the two above, realized through youth feedback that youth want less focus on the content area of the programming and more time and attention to self-care, relationship building, and self-exploration.

Recommitment to the Work: As is the case in many other areas of data collection, there was a subsample of providers, 8%, who reported that while participation in Generator Z did not shift their practice or shape their perspective in new ways, it affirmed the work they were already doing:

I wouldn't say that our organization has exactly changed because of Generator Z, but more so that Generator Z has helped us express our best ideals as an organization. —Southeast Michigan provider

Our partnership with Generator Z both confirmed that our concept of connecting teens to brain health through the arts was something teens were interested in, and it helped us with much needed financial resources to help bring it to life. We are deeply grateful! —Western New York Provider

Analysis of 12-month Report on Program Changes

In the 12-month reports, respondents were more likely to mention youth voice than any other category of growth. For some, like the following quote, being a part of Generator Z helped the provider not only centralize youth throughout the process but also convince their constituencies about the importance of doing so:

Yes. In the past it was a challenge to convince our board of directors just how important being youth-driven is (or what exactly that looked like). With [our project] being funded in part by

Generator Z it allowed us to prove that programming for teens can't be successful without teens driving the process. From funding to implementation, teens were involved in every step and major decision along the way. —Southeast Michigan provider

In addition, while there was a similar quantity of reflections on capacity building in the final report, this dataset was less focused on hiring staff and increasing impact and more focused on the partnerships providers built and the ability to secure additional funding:

Yes, we went through a capacity building program via Cullen Foundation in fall 2022 specifically focused on Summer Vibe, have solidified Summer Vibe as a central program of [our organization] and have built new collaborative partnerships, including with Jewish Family Services. Additionally, [our organization] hired a part-time Administrative Coordinator this year to help support...administration. —Western New York Provider

In the following quote from the end of year report, there is evidence of capacity building as well as youth voice, as this program found ways to engage youth not only in providing feedback but also in leading the funding process:

[Generator Z] has also motivated the youth to apply for another grant to improve the well-being of teens. They gained a sense of purpose and power that they did not have before. Eight teens came together, attended meetings, and met with grant writers to assist in the completion of another grant since this one is ending. The teens named the group and listed numerous classes that they wanted to develop, schedule, and facilitate with other teens with a focus on well-being. The Generator Z grant helped them see that they do have a voice and they can make a difference. —Southeast Michigan provider

4.5 What was the impact of Generator Z?

To address this question, we present analyses of the data sources depicted in the figure below. These data—all of which were collected as part of program activities—provide insights into the experience and impact of Generator Z for stakeholders. We relied on multiple data sources collected through program activities, rather than employing evaluation-specific surveys or interviews, in order to minimize intrusion and to respect youths' and other stakeholders' time. That is, the Generator Z project was intentional and careful in limiting what was asked of participants (especially youth) and compensating them for their time. Rather than adding additional tasks, we pieced together evidence for Part 3 with existing data.

What impact did Generator Z have?

Available data suggests that youths' and adults' experience with Generator Z was **overwhelmingly positive**. The Generator Z experience **centered youths' voice** in multiple phases and at multiple levels of the initiative. Throughout the process, Generator Z was **accessible and relevant** to youths' and grantees' lived and professional experiences.

Stakeholders include youth participants, youth-serving organizations, foundations, and adults who serve youth in afterschool settings and youth development spaces. We also present information on how stakeholders made positive impacts on other stakeholders' experiences, contributing to the larger, positive impact of the Generator Z initiative. We conducted thematic analysis with an inductive approach (i.e., not tied to pre-determined hypotheses, and participant focused) to analyze these diverse data sources. **The data sources from which quotes are derived are in parentheses after each section.**

The data we analyzed for this section were collected through program activities and were not necessarily designed for fully evaluating stakeholders' experiences with the pros and cons of their experience with Generator Z. Future planned data collection will allow us further and more systematic analysis in this area. Nevertheless, that caveat aside, our analysis suggests that stakeholders' experiences with Generator Z were **overwhelmingly positive**. This came through strongly and clearly paints a picture of a remarkably successful initiative.

Figure 20
Data Sources

Aug 2020	Roundtable Discussions 3 roundtables with 16–19 youth each, led by adult facilitators. Data includes meeting transcripts, chat room logs and facilitator field notes
Mar 2021	Finalist Forms 129 responses to questions on joys & challenges completed by adult grantee finalists
May 2021	Community Review of Grant Proposals 7 youth and 10 adults in one 2-hour Zoom meeting
2020– 2021	Email correspondence 29 emails from Generators, 13 from grantees, 5 from Foundation staff

Our analysis yielded two main themes, which we present in two sections below. The first theme was how the youth voice aspect of the initiative set Generator Z apart. The second theme was that the initiative was able to achieve accessible and relevant experiences for participants.

No Other Opportunity Like This: Youth Voice Matters

Across data sources, it was evident youth and adults (e.g., grantees; Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation Staff; Generator Z program staff) felt that the Generator Z experience was different from other grant making experiences (from the perspectives of adults) and youth–adult partnership experiences (e.g., school, after-school activities) with which individuals had experience. Many stated that Generator Z diverged from “typical” grant making processes/decisions with youth or adult–youth interactions because youths’ voices were centered, valued, and respected.

For example, youth shared that they felt the process allowed them to have **“a voice”** and a sense of **“freedom”** because the adults were genuinely interested in their ideas—an experience that was uncommon for youth. Having opportunities to have their voices be heard allowed youth to feel like collaborators throughout the Generator Z process, as opposed to superficial spokespersons (i.e., tokenism). To illustrate, a youth stated that **“Even though I’m not an adult, my opinion [in Generator Z] matters just as much as if I was being on the same level.”** Another youth stated, **“you wanted to know about me and what I could do and what I was interested in, the questions were all different and didn’t overlap.”** Overall, centering youths’ voices throughout the project allowed youth to have a **“fun”** and an **“interesting”** experience (Source: Roundtable Discussions). Similarly, an adult grant reviewer expressed that **“you guys [Generator Z] did something really special here, with bringing the teens and a wide variety of people from two different areas: adults and kids. I hope that you are going to share this process...it is awesome. And more grant programs and even schools, need to learn from this experience.”** Some youth agreed that programs should **“follow this model,”** or one in which youths’ voices are taken seriously (Source: Community Review of Grant Proposals).

The importance of youth voice in the grant making process was also underscored by adults at the foundation. For example, Dave Egner—the President and CEO of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation—wrote four letters to youth, thanking them for speaking about their Generator Z experiences at a Trustees’ meeting in November 2021 and acknowledged that **“It is easy for older people to assume what young people need and want...[and**

that]...unfortunately, older people are typically wrong,” underscoring the importance of adults with social power listening to and responding to youths’ needs (Source: Email Correspondence).

The inclusion of youth as collaborators throughout the Generator Z process had positive impacts on the youth, their communities, and the adults involved in the process. One youth voiced that **“having a platform to share my ideas on topics I’m passionate about has always been one of my greatest satisfactions,”** which resulted in joyous disbelief: **“can you tell me is this real cause I can’t believe it...you are all heroes”** and feelings of safety and support, particularly when sharing real struggles with identity, belonging, mental health. For example, one youth explained: **“seeing that 1000 youth were given a voice, made it come out of my comfort zone...It opened my eyes to what I can do – support club [for people with mental health issues like me.]”** Centering youths’ voices had ripple effects in youths’ homes and communities, as the opportunity allowed youth to share the experience with their loved ones. One youth expressed: **“Thank you for being concerned. This story writing helped me open up to my family about what was going on so thank you for letting me be a part of Generator Z.”** (Source: Email Correspondence). Overall, the majority of youth thought other youth serving agencies or non-profit organizations that serve youth should replicate the Generator Z process: **“The process is awesome and important; it was important that Gen Zers and young adults were involved and had control. Other grant providers should follow this”** and **“youth-led grant deciding application process focuses on teens voice, and teens are told they can’t really have a voice”** (Source: Roundtable Discussion)

Underscoring the positive effects of centering youths’ voices on adults’ experiences in youth development work, one grantee finalist explained: **“we believe this process of listening to youth wants and desires...is foundational in any youth-facing program, and unfortunately rare to see.”** Another described the importance of having their own youth participate: **“the teens that were represented in the Generator-Z stories were the stories of our teens...the fact that these were the teens that would be reviewing the proposal felt like a more intimate conversation. This meant that I could write as though I was talking to the teens, and that was such a positive experience for me.”** Furthermore, the application process also led staff to collaborate with teens and other team members. As one participant explains, **“the Generator Z application process has brought me joy, because I have seen collaboration and the act of ‘rallying the troops’ for change”** (Source: Finalist Forms).

Experiences Were Accessible and Relevant

Youth expressed that the more technical process of Generator Z (e.g., sharing their afterschool visions via the open-ended question on the Generator Z application) and opportunities Generator Z provided were easy to use and understand, which demystified the program’s process as well as the larger grant making process for youth and adults (e.g., grantee applicants). The accessibility and interactive nature of the online platforms and supports allowed youth to share their thoughts and opinions about their afterschool visions in fun and creative ways, and also allowed grantee applicants to further reflect on their goals and missions in the field of youth development.

For instance, one youth **“felt that the application was easy to understand,”** while another expressed freedom in the process: **“I feel the questions were not [too] hard, they were very open ended – you could write almost anything about yourself there wasn’t any word limit...”** One youth participant expressed: **“I thought [the Project Z application] was very simple...and there was one open ended question which you could really express whatever you felt you should know to apply what makes you a good co-designer as opposed to my school”** (Source: Roundtable Discussion).

The community review of grant proposals demystified the process of selecting grants for youth and adults and allowed for diverse perspectives to be included in the selection process. This communal opportunity also allowed participants to reflect on the reasons why they scored certain grant proposals in certain ways, and allowed them to rethink their decisions (Source: Community Review of Grant Proposals). Regardless of grantee applicants’ success with receiving funding, grantee applicants expressed that **“the application process itself was very helpful to [them], for it provided a chance to further articulate [their] ideas,”** and **“the**

opportunity to design a program to meet the needs expressed by teens themselves is incredibly unique, and we do not take the responsibility lightly. We are inspired and ready to get to work” (Source: Email Correspondence).

The clear and **“conversational”** format of the Generator Z forms and applications grantee applicants to share their **“real voices.”** Many found the application process to be genuine, which is not usually encouraged in grant applications. One finalist explains: **“[it] was a sigh of relief for once when the presenters said ‘teens will be reviewing your application; leave your fancy words for your foundations’. That was great because I could really take the words of my teens and apply them to the grant application without a lot of modification of their words.”** When asked about challenges, a small number of grantee finalists shared that they found the number of stories overwhelming at first, but they did not consider this a bad thing and they found the website features (like the filter) helpful for navigating. Overall, most grantee finalists found the application process to be a positive experience overall. For example, one wrote, **“The entire process, no matter how difficult it has been, has been a beautiful collective effort that has allowed for so many individuals to connect and work collectively in creating meaning and purpose for youth (and adults) in our region.”** (Source: Finalist Forms)

In addition to voicing that the platform and experiences were accessible, the Generator Z experience was relevant to youths’ lived experiences. Youth appreciated the opportunity to address real world issues into their afterschool visions; for example, one stated that **“[I want] meaningful conversation about the issues going on in this country”** (Source: Roundtable Discussions). At the same time, reviewers in the Community Grant Review expressed that there was some discrepancy in the representation of certain communities in grant proposals. For example, reviewers suggested that the number of programs to support LGBTQ youth was disproportionate to the number of LGBTQ Generators—i.e., there were more stories than project proposals in this area. This might be attributed to the fact that most youths’ afterschool visions did not explicitly discuss the need to create afterschool opportunities for LGBTQ youth, in particular. Youths’ afterschool visions were informed by the TOC data, which might have limited the types of issues youth discussed and the ways in which they discussed these issues. (Source: Community Review of Grant Proposals)

Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations

From our view as evaluators, Generator-Z was extremely successful at achieving its goals. Through published youth stories and philanthropic support for programmatic initiatives centered on youth voice & participation, lives were changed for the better. The project was not initially conceptualized to occur during a global pandemic that moved most schools and youth program activities online or shut them down, but the team quickly pivoted to completely reshape this into a successful pandemic-era project. Although so much of Generator Z was specific to time and place, we can generalize some lessons as well. We provide here recommendations primarily directed toward philanthropic or civic organizations considering implementing similar initiatives and learning from this one.

One element that likely made Generator Z successful was its size and scope. As we detailed in Part 2 of this report, the size allowed for a program team that was large enough to build a powerful, user-friendly website, and to have teams able to deal with the many, often-invisible tasks involved in making Generator Z easy to engage with and welcoming for youth and adult practitioners. A philanthropic project with similar aims that is more limited in scope could certainly be successful, but it would be a different project than Generator Z. As witnesses to the impact of this project, we recommend more large youth voice & participation projects like this that have strong and sustainable infrastructures.

Based on the successes of Generator Z, we also recommend centering youth and practitioners in future philanthropic initiatives. The Generator Z team organized resources and their vision to include youth (and adult practitioners) in meaningful ways through every step of the process. This was not only a powerful experience for participating youth (e.g., the young leaders of the workshops for afterschool providers)—it impacted the adult leaders of the project and, importantly, the quality of the afterschool programs. The facilitation of youth voice and participation shaped the project in myriad positive ways—that is, many aspects of Generator Z were likely improved because of the inclusion of youth voice throughout.

One way to think about how the team centered youth and adult practitioners, was that they made themselves accountable to the people the project was designed to support; they implemented a human-centered philanthropic design. In this case, those people were youth. Or in other terms, participatory grantmaking that provided just the right amount of structure to be successful. The approach was particularly appropriate for a project designed to increase youth voice and involvement—yet would probably be useful in many other types of philanthropic projects as well.

If there's one area in which future initiatives could build on Generator Z's successes, it's in supporting afterschool providers to take their projects further. As we described in Part 3, only a few sites made radical changes. And our analysis of grant reports did not tell us the degree to which authentic changes or youth-adult partnerships occurred. However, in our experience, many practitioners talk about youth voice & participation—it's a fewer group that actually implement it well. A future initiative could add resources in that area to provide professional learning or site-based coaching or even youth-led site visits to help strengthen projects and deepen youth voice, choice, and leadership experiences.

Grant reports suggest that sites entered their youth participation initiatives in different places and with different levels of existing youth-adult partnership. This is an important finding: It suggests that not every site needs to ascend Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation; rather, some may strengthen their voice, some their opportunities for decision-making, some their opportunities for leadership. The strategies that seemed to work well for providers are also worth noting: prioritizing flexibility, centering relationships, and expanding youth

membership. In Generator Z, sites had to deal with the very real administrative and program challenges of the pandemic shut-down, leading many to need to pivot to recruitment efforts when in-person programming started coming back. But recruitment is always an important part of youth programs, so the words of providers (see Appendix B) are particularly helpful.

Conclusions

Generator Z “flipped the script” in the world of grant making and youth program development. The project not only centered the needs and desires of youth, but it also actively involved young people in every step of the process. Although other examples of youth voice and decision-making in philanthropy exist, the scope, size, and success of this project set Generator Z apart.

Generator Z had many moving pieces, and many people were involved in its success, including consultants, youth development workers, IT and social media professionals, and, of course, youth. For other foundations and youth development non-profits that aim to replicate the successes of this initiative in its full form, resources—in the form of human capacity, time and financial capital—are required. For example, 100 contributors who were of different generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials, Generation Zers), racial and ethnic groups, and gender groups from multiple states across the U.S. helped develop and launch Generator Z. In terms of financial investment, millions of dollars were allocated across the different phases of the Generator Z initiative: \$250K for brand and website development, \$60K for public relations, \$1M in stipends for youth, and \$4M in program grants.

The project succeeded in being thoroughly youth-centered, radically inclusive, culturally responsive, and fundamentally authentic. By putting youth at the center of every step—both in terms of their actual involvement and by centering the needs of youth in every decision—the project reached across other boundaries, lifting up roles for youth across race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. As evaluators, we found the level of detail, nuance, and honesty in youth stories striking. The quality and degree of sharing by teens—often of important and personal information—is difficult to come by, especially in an online form. We think this is due to the efforts by the design and program teams, their attention to detail, to process, and to keeping youth voice and user experience centered throughout the project. The designers and leaders of Generator Z should be commended for achieving both a record of extremely high-quality stories, and a powerful and positive experience for youth (and many adult) participants.

Generator Z was a successful project that involved a large team and financial, time, and human resources. It can be difficult to balance the unique needs and processes associated with coordinating the many moving pieces of such an initiative. However, through a radical and inclusive approach to promoting positive youth development in grant making spaces and afterschool development, Generator Z centered youth at every step of the way. Such an approach has the potential to co-create solutions with youth to address structural oppression and increase access to resources.

Appendix A. Technical Information

This appendix provides methodological details for the analyses presented in this report. As we analyzed data sources in various ways, we organize this section by data source.

Analysis of In-take Applications & Generator Stories (Quantitative, Part 1)

In the report, we primarily present descriptive information (means and percentages) and some inferential comparisons (t-tests and ANOVA) for in-take applications and the information youth provided in their generator stories. To conduct those statistics, we recoded or processed several variables as follows.

Locality: We include two locality variables in our analyses. First, youth self-reported whether they are from Southeast Michigan or Western New York, and we used these directly. Second, urbanicity or locality variables came directly from student responses in the in-take survey; we computed locality variables with reference to the National Center for Education Statistics <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/maped/LocaleLookup/>.

Gender: Youth were not asked to define or describe their gender identity; however, the forms included personal gender pronouns. We therefore used gender pronouns as a proxy to infer youths' gender. Youth who listed more than one pronoun or used the gender neutral they/them pronoun were collapsed into a category we call *gender expansive*, which includes non-binary as well as transgender. Youth who used exclusive binary pronouns He/Him or She/Her were represented in binary gender categories of *young men* and *young women*. We recognize that inferring gender from preferred pronouns is imperfect; for example, youth who use pronouns she/her or he/him may also identify as transgender.

Race/Ethnicity: The in-take form allowed young people to check multiple options for race and ethnicity and thus the original dataset contained over 88 unique race/ethnic combinations for youth Generators. The team identified 6 unique race categories, and through a recoding process we narrowed it down to 30 unique combinations. We created three additional ethnic categories (Latinx, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous Peoples), using inductive approaches to better represent the qualitative stories that were presented. *Latinx* is an ethnic category which includes other racial background not including those who identify as Indigenous. *Middle Eastern* is an ethnic category which includes other racial backgrounds but all who are included identified as Middle Eastern. *Indigenous Peoples* is an ethnic category which includes other racial backgrounds but all who are included identified as an Indigenous person. *Bi/multiracial* are youth who are not Latinx, Middle Eastern, or Indigenous but who listed multiple racial backgrounds.

Analysis of Generator Stories (Qualitative, Part 1)

In April 2021, the research team convened to begin the qualitative coding process for published Generator stories. We began with regular team meetings where we shared observations and preliminary themes, based on initial reviews of stories. Over the course of the month, we agreed on preliminary codes. One teammate created the preliminary codebook and the team of five researchers informally tested it with randomly selected stories. Through this process, we were able to tightly define codes and organize them into parent and child codes.

We grouped codes into two sections associated with the generator form—background story questions and afterschool aspirations. In the Generator form, background stories contained 4 or 5 long-answer prompts and afterschool aspirations included three. In the coding process, we treated each response as an excerpt; that is, we coded every response. Throughout this document, we primarily report whether a Generator story received a code rather than reporting the number of excerpts that received a code. A given story may have received a given code multiple times across excerpts.

We employed both inductive and deductive methods and met regularly to define codes, discuss emergent codes, and to come to agreement on definition and application. During the summer of 2021, the coding team expanded to include 8 people – the research team plus two undergraduate research assistants. Two researchers took the lead in creating the coding protocol and overseeing the undergraduate research assistants. Training included two weeks of practice coding, meetings, and reflection. In August, the entire team successfully completed coding training using Dedoose (dedoose.com), a mixed methods analytic software package.

The stories were split randomly between the 8 coders for the first round of coding. Then, the two lead coders double-checked the coding for half of the stories for consistency. During the coding process, we added flags for Media, Interesting Quotes, and Stress. We limited coding to the text and words spoken in video/audio recordings and did not analyze images. Final codes were attached to entire prompt responses rather than to smaller quotes.

Analysis of Project Implementation (Mixed, Part 2)

Members of the evaluation team attended program team meetings throughout the entirety of Generator Z. We had access to planning documents, meeting notes, social media, and a wealth of artifacts from the process. Near the end of 2022, the program team compiled and gave the evaluation team access to an online folder, with documents organized from the earliest parts of the project (including visioning docs from prior to the initiative launch). In addition, members of the research team interviewed the project leader and other key staff at key points in the project—and conducted member checking (e.g., making sure our information aligned with program information) throughout the process.

Social Media: We conducted analysis of Generator Z Instagram posts from October 2020 to August 2022. The analysis focused on the following categories: Generator Z Excitement/Stories/Quotes (teens and grantees), Current Events/Celebrity News, Memes, Generator Z Information Sharing, and Tips. The themes of the posts, the people showcased, the likes and comments, and the tags used were also analyzed. To conduct the analysis, each Instagram post was coded based on the categories. The themes of the posts were identified, and the people showcased were noted. The number of likes and comments for each post was recorded, and the tags used were analyzed.

Analysis of Provider Applications (Qualitative, Part 3)

For several qualitative analyses in parts 3 and 4, we analyzed provider applications. To develop the coding scheme, we initially coded 30 responses, which led to the creation of a coding scheme that remained unchanged throughout the analysis. Subsequently, we coded an additional 68 responses using the established coding scheme. In total 98 responses were analyzed in this study. To facilitate the coding process, we extracted quotes that exemplified each code and documented in a spreadsheet. After completing the coding process, the exemplary quotes were categorized, and notes were taken to describe the meaning of each category. The codes were then combined to develop the narrative presented in this study.

Analysis of Mid-Point Reports of Provider Implementation (Qualitative, Part 3)

To understand providers' experiences during implementation, two researchers reviewed mid-point reports. Specifically we analyzed narrative responses to the prompt: "Describe the joys and challenges of bringing your idea to life so far." First, we reviewed the responses in the context of their full mid-point reports. This gave us an opportunity to understand the type of information providers were sharing. For example, we decided to include answers to "Defining success" as part of our analysis since it related to providers' overall experience. After this overview, we organized the data based on two components: "joys and challenges" and "defining

success”, and each researcher proceeded to individually code the same 20 responses to both prompts. We reviewed the open codes from each response together, and discussed our reasoning for highlighting certain themes. Based on this discussion, we jointly developed a codebook with definitions of the overarching themes to both prompts. We found that providers included multiple distinct challenges, so we reorganized the data to code for up to three challenges per provider, and one success. Thus, we proceeded to do a second cycle of coding whereby we indicated: “Challenge 1”, “Challenge 2”, “Challenge 3”, and “Success”. After, coding the responses a second time, we discussed our process and when we had differing codes, we shared our reasoning and came to a consensus on the appropriate code. Lastly, we selected the overarching themes based on the final codes and developed a narrative utilizing the providers’ own explanations.

Learning, Growth and Change of implementation (Qualitative, Part 4)

For the impact section, two researchers focused on understanding how providers learned and grew, as well as how programs changed as a result of participating in Generator Z—though our ability to investigate change was limited by the nature of the data. For these analyses, we concentrated on two evaluation questions: “What are you and your staff learning through your participation in Generator Z?” and “Has your organization changed because of Generator Z? Explain.” These questions were essay prompts that the lead organization had to answer in short essay responses. Initially, we separately read ten individual essay responses, focusing solely on the two pertinent questions to best understand how organizations described their growth and change. We then came together to discuss our notes on important or unique themes that were emerging. Based on these notes, we compiled them into coded areas. Following this, we had weekly meetings of which we discussed 5–10 of the same stories that we coded using our codebook. These meetings allowed us to establish consensus and refine our coding process, define our themes, and discuss any emerging codes. These meetings happened over a month, until we felt we had reached saturation and no more unique themes were emerging.

Once we had defined our codes, we separately coded the remaining stories. Each coder focused on one column or set of questions. We developed our codes and codebook with definitions collectively and agreed upon themes until we met saturation. Then, we used our codebook to code columns or question responses separately. In total, we reviewed 89 responses to the two evaluation questions. Once the coding was done, we drafted an analysis document with our codes, definitions of codes, and example quotes. To analyze the data, we drew frequencies on how often codes were applied to highlight the importance or relevance of each themed area. Informed by this inductive, data-driven process, we mapped out our summaries with example quotes and analyzed the emerging themes.

We also engaged in some deductive process in how providers talked about how they involved youth in their programs. For example, in understanding the level of involvement for youth, we were informed by Akiva and Petrokubi’s (2016) work, which helped us to better understand that youth involvement could be based on differing levels of engagement (i.e., youth voice, decision-making, and leadership).

Lastly, we sample coded 12-month follow-up reports of 86 responses. For this, we randomly chose 25 entries to base our codes and analysis (which was informed by how we met saturation for the 6-month report). We again separately coded the same organization’s entry focusing on two separate questions, these were analyzed and formatted in the 12-month report section.

Evaluation of Final Program Reports (Qualitative, Part 4)

Analysis of final program reports and how programs described implementing their Generator Z projects was primarily conducted by one researcher, along with multiple meetings with the first author of this report. Before coding the data, the researcher skimmed all 90 reports to identify common themes. Then they met to discuss impressions and direction—which led to a developmental approach that focused on model building for youth

participation. The researcher then drafted the codebook based on a non-hierarchical model of youth participation or involvement. The reports were thematically coded in consultation with a colleague, and the codebook was adapted in response to emerging findings. Once the coding was completed, the codebook was finalized and the reports were reviewed again to ensure a consistent application of codes. Once the Youth Participation coding was completed, emergent themes in the reports were inductively coded. The themes were narrowed down based on the number of times they appeared in the reports, and ultimately, the researcher presented the three most common emergent themes.

Appendix B. Strategies from grantees

This appendix provides a sample of quotes from provider final grant reports that illustrate the three emergent strategies for implementing youth voice and participation described in section 4.3: Be flexible, emphasize relationships, and reach out to new groups.

Strategy 1: Be Flexible.

“As the program develops, allow flexibility for growth and change as the staff learn more about the needs of their specific community. We made a lot of changes to our program over the course of the first year, and it looks very different now than I first intended back in Summer 2021. If you’re too beholden to the original plot, you’ll fail to serve the community you end up with” —Howell Nature

“Ask youth what is most engaging to them and BE FLEXIBLE. It is very important to be able to change up the plan to meet people’s needs. Whether it’s providing transportation, moving your time slot, or switching up the material altogether, sometimes the best thing to do is take a step back and ask the youth what they need.” —Highland Clubhouse

“Be flexible. This funding allowed us to create an amazing experience for our teens and organizations because it was flexible. We did not feel the pressure of having to meet predetermined outcomes and expectations. We were able to flow with the teens thoughts and ideas which allowed us to truly create a program that they want and need.” —Niagara Falls Boys & Girls Club

“Our staff learned to be flexible. In particular, it was difficult to implement our project – which needed to be in person – as we went through virtual school this past year. Our work was really able to take shape and take off when we were in person again in March. We also realized the youth priorities had shifted from last summer to now. They really wanted the project of focus on mental health and to make sure it was a priority to the DPSCD school board – which they felt wasn’t happening. This was a good lesson in following the lead of our youth rather than pushing them to fit into the current project. We also learned to be flexible in implementation given the pandemic. Our visions of visiting artists etc. was nearly impossible given the pandemic.” —482 Forward

“Generator Z definitely helped us centralize youth voice in shaping the future of our afterschool programming at 5 Loaves Farm. It was very helpful to interact with the Generators on your website to spark innovative ways that we could improve our program to better meet the perceived needs of the youth we’re working with. This spilled over into us building in more youth involvement in the evaluation, improvement, and future curriculum planning. Part of this process required us to be very flexible as we took youth feedback, implemented it, and made continual changes as we did assessments of the changes we were making as we went through the year. It was really exciting to see, for both the youth and our adult staff, the ideas of our youth actually come to life.” —5 Loaves Farm

“We have found that we have the most success when we give youth the flexibility to work on the projects of greatest interest to them, as their schedules allow. We also found that creating a supportive space where youth can collaborate and share their ideas allows people who might be initially reticent to become more comfortable taking risks and being creative.” —Detroit Creativity Project

Strategy 2: Emphasize Relationships

“Creativity, ingenuity, new and fresh ideas are best cultivated in environments where students have the comfort level and relationships established where they can confidently experiment, bring new ideas and try new things.” —Regents of the University of Michigan

“Low student to adult ratio spaces make for magic and the ability to be responsive to youth’s interests and needs. However, it is “expensive” to be able to offer this long term.” —People in Education

“Our organization hasn’t changed in our values or ways of being/doing, but our relationships have deepened through the leadership of teens driving the project. Collaborations grew and community support was expansive! It has been an INCREDIBLE YEAR! Generator Z investment was an affirmation of what we do and how we do it, and we are stronger because of it!” —Youth Arts Alliance

“Creativity, ingenuity, new and fresh ideas are best cultivated in environments where students have the comfort level and relationships established where they can confidently experiment, bring new ideas and try new things. For those funding afterschool activities, look for programing that builds relationships which will help to build strong foundations for students.” —Regents of the University of Michigan

“This was one of the first times I’ve worked with teens. I was nervous going into it, and spent so much time putting together lesson plans and planning specific activities. We had fun, but it didn’t quite feel like we were meeting the needs of our teens. The second season, I let go of these plans. I focused on how I wanted the teens to feel rather than what I wanted them to specifically do. We let the teens just be weird, and they thrived. The culture and relationships were more important than the activities.” —Howell Nature Center

“While some feared that affinity groups would have an adverse effect on the Generation of Promise class and create feelings of division amongst students, the affinity groups actually did the opposite. They allowed our students with largely underrepresented identities to have space to express themselves authentically and build strong relationships with each other. We found that the students who participated in the affinity groups showed increased confidence and comfort in the program and were able to express themselves more readily in the larger, more diverse group.” —Generations of Promise

“Being able to eat together and have impactful conversations is at the core of what we do, and it was a really wonderful reminder of that. Many of our Advanced students have been with DFA for over 3 years, and some since they were middle schoolers! Being able to support them as they grow and develop their passions, plus pursue career and educational opportunities as adults, is truly a privilege.” —Detroit Food & Entrepreneurship Program

“To see youth, engage with students from various backgrounds and build relationships in a fun positive way was priceless. The company developed a new sense of pride and cohesiveness between youth and adults.” —Confident Girl Mentoring Program, Inc.

Strategy 3: Reach Out to New Groups

“This grant has also helped us engage a much broader range of youth and not limit our outreach to just in-person services in in the Buffalo/Niagara region. Finally this grant has allowed GLYS to better understand the needs of youth in rural areas throughout Western New York and create more sustainable long-term goals for providing the support and leadership opportunities our youth are asking for.” —GLYS Western NY

“This program also underscored that youth coming from urban versus suburban settings have impactfully different frames of reference. Not only do they have different levels of exposure to things like podcasts and evaluation, but they also have different expectations about the power of their voices. Young men growing up in over-policed neighborhoods and punitive school cultures not only have less expectation of being heard, but the topics they feel able to address are different. While they’re often focused on issues related to basic rights and challenging injustices, suburban youth often are more encouraged to explore and share their creativity more freely. Generator Z gave all our young men the opportunity to explore and magnify their voices.” —Breaking Barriers

“The extra funding allowed us to pay teens stipends, bringing in teens who usually don’t use the library, providing a broader perspective to youth voices curating the packs and producing the podcasts.” —Ypsilanti District Library

“The Generator Z has helped GLYS both expand and focus the scope of our work. Specifically by helping us provide opportunities for connection growth and leadership to the youth in our Western New York community

and establish meaningful partnerships with organizations like GLOW Out! as well as hold Drop-In sessions at schools libraries and other community spaces we had not previously gone to. This grant has also helped us engage a much broader range of youth and not limit our outreach to just in-person services in in the Buffalo/Niagara region. Finally this grant has allowed GLYS to better understand the needs of youth in rural areas throughout Western New York and create more sustainable long-term goals for providing the support and leadership opportunities our youth are asking for.” —GLYS Western NY

“One big learning is that homeschooled, unschooled, and queer teens need spaces to connect and discover their identities and interests. We will continue to make sure our programming centers all different types of teens. This was our first time working with people from all parts of the city (not just one school or other organization)– it became a special space for youth to connect when many expressed a hard time “fitting in” in other places.” —People in Education

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