

Using Creative Methods to Elevate Youth Voice to Understand Why Youth from Low-Income Backgrounds Return and Do Not Return to Camp

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Background: Common data collection strategies create barriers to authentically elevating youth voice, which is critical to understanding the complexity of youth's involvement in structured programs. These barriers may be especially profound when asking youth to share about their positive and negative experiences in programs, including reasons why they choose to return or not return.

Purpose: The purpose of this manuscript is to advocate for the use of journey mapping as a potentially effective approach to engaging youth in the continuous improvement process regarding a potentially challenging topic.

Setting: A case study with youth participants from a Canadian summer camp organization serving youth from low-income backgrounds is used to describe the journey mapping method.

Intervention: The case study used journey mapping and semi-structured interviews.

Research Design: Retrospective and qualitative journey maps and interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis: Qualitative data were interpreted using a six-step thematic analysis approach.

Findings: The findings of this case study suggest that creative methods such as journey mapping can be an effective approach to engaging youth in continuous improvement and evaluation.

Keywords: *journey map; qualitative methods; equitable methods; youth programs.*

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Complex problems require creative solutions. When considering the complexity of youth involvement in programs, youth voice is critical. However, many common data collection strategies create barriers to authentically elevating youth voice. These barriers may be profound when asking youth to share about their positive and negative experiences in programs, including reasons why they choose to return or not return. In this manuscript, we share a case study of how one organization furthered a continuous improvement cycle using creative methods to understand youth's experiences in their free, multiyear summer camp program. The goal of this manuscript is to showcase how creative methods such as journey mapping can be utilized to create authentic opportunities for youth voice, especially among youth from marginalized backgrounds.

Youth Voice and Creative Methods

"Voice" is a term that "privileges experience, over theory or training, as the basis of an individual's understanding of an issue or activity, and the meaning they give to it" (Hadfield & Haw, 2001, p. 487). Thus, youth voice recognizes young people's ability to reflect on, share, and use their experiences, with the aim of improving programs meant for them. Inherently, prioritizing youth voice means empowering young people and challenging adult systems (Hadfield & Haw, 2001). Incorporating youth voice in programs designed to serve them recognizes young people's abilities to provide important and thoughtful insights and create change. It is a mutually beneficial experience for the organization and young people (Blakeslee & Walker, 2018) and is philosophically aligned with positive youth development (Krenichyn et al., 2007), a framework to which many youth-serving organizations adhere.

Research approaches that involve youth participants in evaluation work are termed youth participatory action research (YPAR) or youth participatory evaluation (Sabo Flores, 2007). YPAR has become commonplace to foster youth voice and offer youth opportunities for meaningful engagement in programs that matter to them. A common YPAR approach is photovoice (Yonas et al., 2009). Photovoice often involves participants capturing photographs of their experiences, which become the starting point for later conversations. This approach has been used across disciplines, including public health and education (Sutton-Brown, 2014), and within youth-related disciplines (Fountain et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2007) such as summer camp, with youth campers capturing

images *during the camp session*. For example, in a photovoice study at a sports camp, Strachan and Davies (2015) had youth participants capture photographs to better understand the important features of sports camp and other youth sports environments. Similarly, scholars have used photovoice at a medical specialty camp (Shapiro-Franklin et al., 2025) to explore how youth participants experience belonging and develop relationships at camp.

Using photovoice to elevate youth voice while examining experiences in youth development programs may yield positive outcomes; however, the methodology's application can be resource intensive (e.g., involving access to cameras, printers, or tablets); can involve multiple steps (e.g., capturing photos, printing or sharing photos via tablets); and often requires access to the setting in which the experiences occur (e.g., summer camp). Additionally, photovoice may be a difficult methodology for capturing processes, especially multistep processes that take place over time (e.g., month or years). Although these limitations may not impact all studies, they pose significant challenges to answering questions related to youth's experiences across multiple months, years, or phases (e.g., initial engagement, in-person experiences, and decision-making about continued engagement) of a program.

Journey Mapping

Another creative method with potential to elevate youth voice and capture experiences that unfold over time and across settings is journey mapping. Journey mapping offers participant-driven perspective of an experience and often includes depictions of key touchpoints or moments of a single experience or narrative of a multi-episodic experience (Connell et al., 2023; Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Originally used for understanding customers' experiences with a specific product or service, journey mapping stems from the fields of marketing and business (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). In these contexts, journey mapping can be useful for gathering information relevant to how customers first learn of a product, navigate the purchasing experience, and use the product, and what they do after they purchase or stop using a product. This information can be used to inform organizational decisions related to production and marketing, which aim to influence the customer experience and in turn impact business operations. Journey mapping has also been implemented within the health care field to better understand the patient journey as a means for improving access to

services and enhancing the quality of services provided (Bulto et al., 2024). Within the context of youth development, journey mapping may provide an opportunity for youth to more deeply reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the experience and provide meaningful feedback to improve experiences.

Similar to photovoice, journey mapping creates opportunities for youth to creatively share their experiences through visual media. Unlike photovoice, however, journey mapping does not require immediate access to the settings in which the experiences occur and is more reflective in nature, occurring after an experience. This time and space between the experience and the creation of the journey maps allows youth the necessary distance from an experience to meaningfully reflect. Leveraging youth's ever-growing ability to reflect and make meaning of their experiences (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) and similar to narrative approaches (Lubeznik-Warner et al., 2024), journey mapping may be an effective and psychologically safe means for youth's self-reflection. Not only may journey mapping provide a more adaptable approach to understanding experiences and elevating youth voice, journey mapping allows youth to engage in the playful act of creating artwork (journey map), which may be more age-appropriate for younger youth.

Although Connell and colleagues (2023) used journey mapping with parents to understand their family's experience with youth programs, to date, no researchers have used journey mapping with *youth participants themselves* to understand their programmatic experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this manuscript is to expand upon emerging literature on the use of journey mapping to highlight its value as a creative method to capture the temporal nature of youth experiences and prioritize youth voice. We share how a large, multisite youth-serving organization used this method combined with interviews to understand youth perspectives of initial program engagement, yearly experiences, and retention to inform programmatic decision-making. To accomplish this, we will provide an overview of the problem our organization seeks to address, and a case study of a research project (i.e., journey map methods, analysis, overview of findings), followed by lessons learned and implications for evaluation and youth-serving practitioners who wish to use this method.

Case Study Description

Each year Tim Hortons Foundation Camps offers free multiyear summer camp programs for about

2,000 youth aged 11–17 from low-income families, based on Canadian low-income cutoffs (as defined by Statistics Canada) and U.S. poverty thresholds (as established by the Census Bureau). Community members such as teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, and youth program leaders refer eligible youth based on perceived need. After completing an application, selected youth can attend multiple summers of camp at no cost to their families. This program aims to address the well-documented systemic inequities in North America that have created an opportunity gap for youth from low-income backgrounds, limiting access to developmentally enriching youth experiences (Putnam, 2015). By creating opportunities for youth from low-income backgrounds to access camp experiences, the organization seeks to foster the development of social-emotional competencies that have been commonly associated with camp (e.g., independence, grit, and social awareness; Spielvogel et al., 2024). A recent study identified myriad benefits of multiyear camp programming for youth from low-income backgrounds and found that the more summers alumni had attended camp, the more likely they were to attend and graduate from college or university (Povilaitis et al., 2023), with skills learned at camp supporting academic and career success.

The organization has an overarching evaluation and program development strategy focused on evidence-based continuous improvement. This approach involves systematically using information to inform change through cycles of data analysis and improvement efforts (e.g., plan-do-study-act cycle; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017). Continuous improvement of youth programs is common in schools (e.g., Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2017), after-school programs (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2015), and summer camps (e.g., Browne et al., 2015) and often addresses structural factors, human resources, and program practices.

Understanding the Camper Journey

After returning to post-pandemic programming in 2022, the organization began to quantitatively explore different phases of the camper journey, including rates of early departures from camp (Authors, 2024), declined camp offers, and no-show participants (i.e., those who do not arrive for their transportation to camp on the first day of the session and therefore do not attend camp). This yearly analysis revealed that although the organization knows the number of youth that do not return to camp, understanding *why* young people choose to return or not was missing. This

information is important to inform program improvement initiatives and ultimately support individuals from low-income backgrounds in returning to a free multiyear camp experience and reaping all possible developmental outcomes it offers.

Project Methods

Our evaluation used a multiphase design with camper journey maps (Phase 1; Connell et al., 2023), semi-structured interviews (Phase 2) and member checking (Phase 3; see Figure 3). We sought input from youth who completed a multiyear camp program (returners recruited from the organization's Youth Advisory Council (YAC); $n = 10$, $M_{age} = 18$, 20% male, 40% white). We also recruited youth who did not return to camp after attending at least one camp session (non-returners, $n = 12$, $M_{age} = 15$, 50% male, 75% white) from those who did not complete an application for 2023 or 2024 ($n = 302$).

Although we sent reminder emails approximately 1 and 2 weeks after initial communication, we experienced difficulty recruiting non-returning youth. The 4% response rate for non-returning campers may have yielded a non-response bias. This low response rate could indicate that once youth self-select to no longer participate in the camp experience, many do not interact with the organization again. As a result, the findings may be biased due to a characteristic of the youth or their experiences, and how these characteristics vary between youth who continue to engage with the organization compared to those who do not continue to engage with the organization after choosing to not continue attending camp.

Once participants indicated interest in participating, we obtained parental consent and youth assent. We provided \$400 CAD in a method of their choosing for participating in all three phases of the study. This amount of incentive was selected due to the participants' low-income backgrounds and a desire to solicit their feedback.

Often, individuals from marginalized and less privileged identities (e.g., youth, individuals of color, those from low-income backgrounds) are over-researched as there is a great need to understand experiences from those who face inequities. Although this incentive appropriately compensates participants for their time and sharing their experiences, the amount may serve as undue influence. To avoid this, youth were informed that involvement was voluntary and would not impact future camp attendance and that all information they provided was confidential and would be used for program improvement purposes.

We collected data in two phases. In Phase 1, youth created a journey map to depict components of their camp experience (e.g., registration, first camp season, challenges). We shared mapping instructions with youth via email (available in Appendix A). Prompts asked about how they became connected with the camp, their camp experiences and attendance, and the events or experiences that caused them to want to return or not. Youth created their maps on paper or online (e.g., using Canva) and were encouraged to creatively represent their experiences. See Figures 1 and 2 for examples.

In Phase 2, the journey maps were used to guide the semi-structured interviews ($m_{minutes} = 48$; range = 30–66). Of the 10 returners who completed journey maps, five chose to complete an interview, while all 12 non-returners who completed journey maps also participated in an interview. The interview guide is available in Appendix B. The third author asked participants questions about their journey maps and other camp experiences that were not depicted in their maps. Example questions included, How did you become involved with [organization]? Can you share more about the first event on your journey map? Why did you want to come back to [organization]? Why did you choose not to come back to camp? Is there anything [organization] could have done to make you come back to camp? We recorded interviews with permission from youth.

Figure 2. Non-Returning Camper Journey Map Example

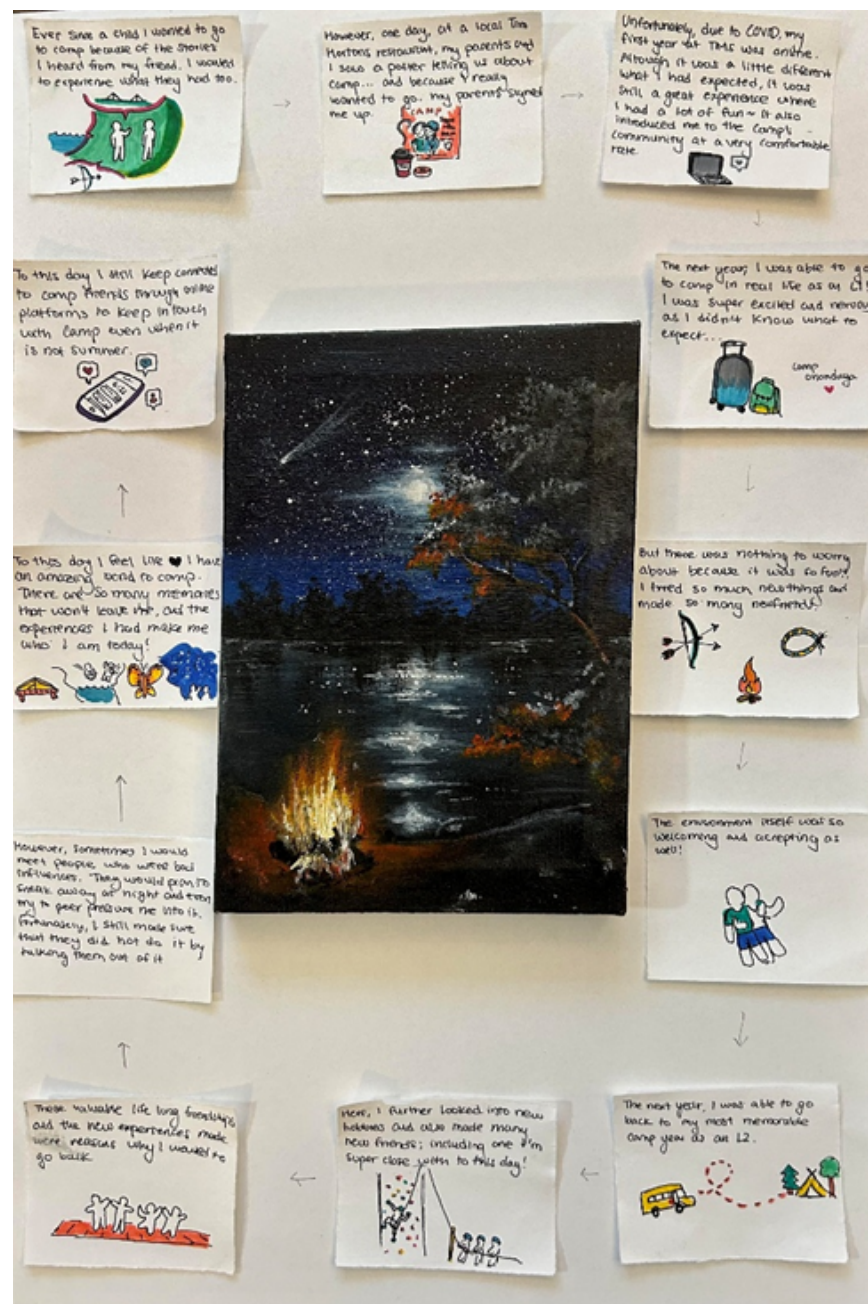
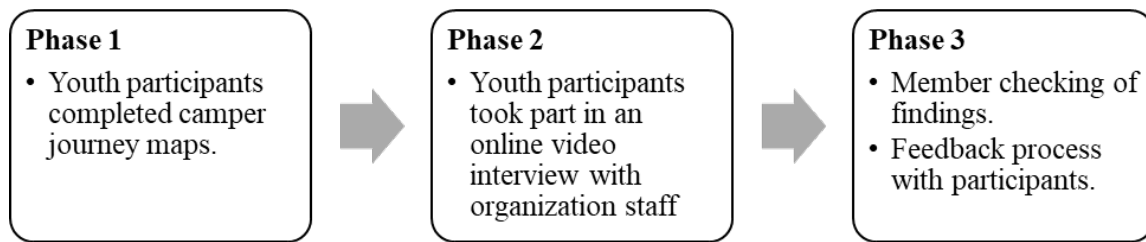


Figure 3. Data Collection Phases



The phases were intentionally executed in this order to, first and foremost, encourage creative reflection opportunities for youth, followed by deeper discussion of the events that youth depicted on their maps. Given the age of non-returning participants ($M_{age} = 15$), this process allowed for a psychologically safe opportunity to personally reflect on what may have been a challenging or unpleasant experience, prior to engaging in discussion with a researcher about it.

Project Data Analysis

Our analysis of the semi-structured interview data used Nowell and colleagues' (2017) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Building upon Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, Nowell and colleagues incorporated trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) into the analysis process. The six steps are data familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and reporting. Trustworthiness is established through prolonged engagement with the data, audit trails, researcher triangulation, and member checking (Phase 3).

As part of familiarizing ourselves with the data and generating initial codes, we reviewed journey maps to inductively identify themes to inform the Phase 2 interview guide and initial codebook. For example, in Phase 1 many participants included in their camp journeys a "virtual camp"; virtual camps were held during the summers of 2020 and 2021 as a response to COVID-19. This prompted interview questions about virtual camp and resulted in two codes, "comfortable introduction to camp" and "lack of engagement." Importantly, the journey maps themselves were not analyzed as visual artifacts. Rather, they were used to inform interview guide creation and interview questions.

In Phase 2, we conducted youth interviews via Zoom and used OtterAI software for transcription. The third author reviewed and edited transcripts while listening to recordings, as well as augmenting the codebook to include themes not present in the

initial codebook created from the camper journey maps. The first and third authors reviewed the codebook, which included condensing codes and clarifying definitions, before independently coding five transcripts using the codebook. After reviewing discrepancies between the two coders' coding, final codes were assigned, and the remaining transcripts were coded by the third author. Themes were designated as either positive or negative elements of camp experiences.

As a form of member checking, we shared a summary of the findings, including example quotations, with youth and asked them to provide written responses to questions about the findings. The member checking reflection guide is available in Appendix C. Questions included, Do you feel your experiences were represented in the findings? Why or why not? Which themes were surprising to you, why? Which themes were not surprising, and why not? Is there anything that was missed in the findings and report? Twelve youth responded. In the final question, multiple youth thanked the researchers for conducting member checking, indicating the value of this aspect of establishing trustworthiness. We used youth feedback to update codes and definitions before classifying challenging themes, or barriers and constraints, within three constraint types (i.e., interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural).

Project Findings

Our final analysis of the interview transcripts revealed 17 themes, including 10 positive and seven negative aspects of camp experiences. Returning and non-returning youth reported multifaceted camp experiences, including both unique and overlapping aspects of their experiences and potential or real barriers to participation; however, each group referenced some themes at different frequencies. This indicates that many factors contribute to one's desire and ability for continued involvement in a multiyear camp program. For

additional information on findings, please contact the first author.

Implications for Youth Program Evaluation

This case study provides practical implications for youth-serving organizations intending to use creative YPAR methods—and specifically journey mapping—for evaluation. First, the organization's use of creative methods challenged adultism in the research process by elevating youth voice. Secondly, this study indicates that journey mapping is a viable and developmentally appropriate creative evaluation method to support youth in systematically reflecting upon the positive and negative aspects of a multiyear camp program experience. In this section of the manuscript, we highlight journey mapping's affordances, risks, and use cases. We also discuss when to deploy maps, how to pair them with interviews, and what outputs to expect.

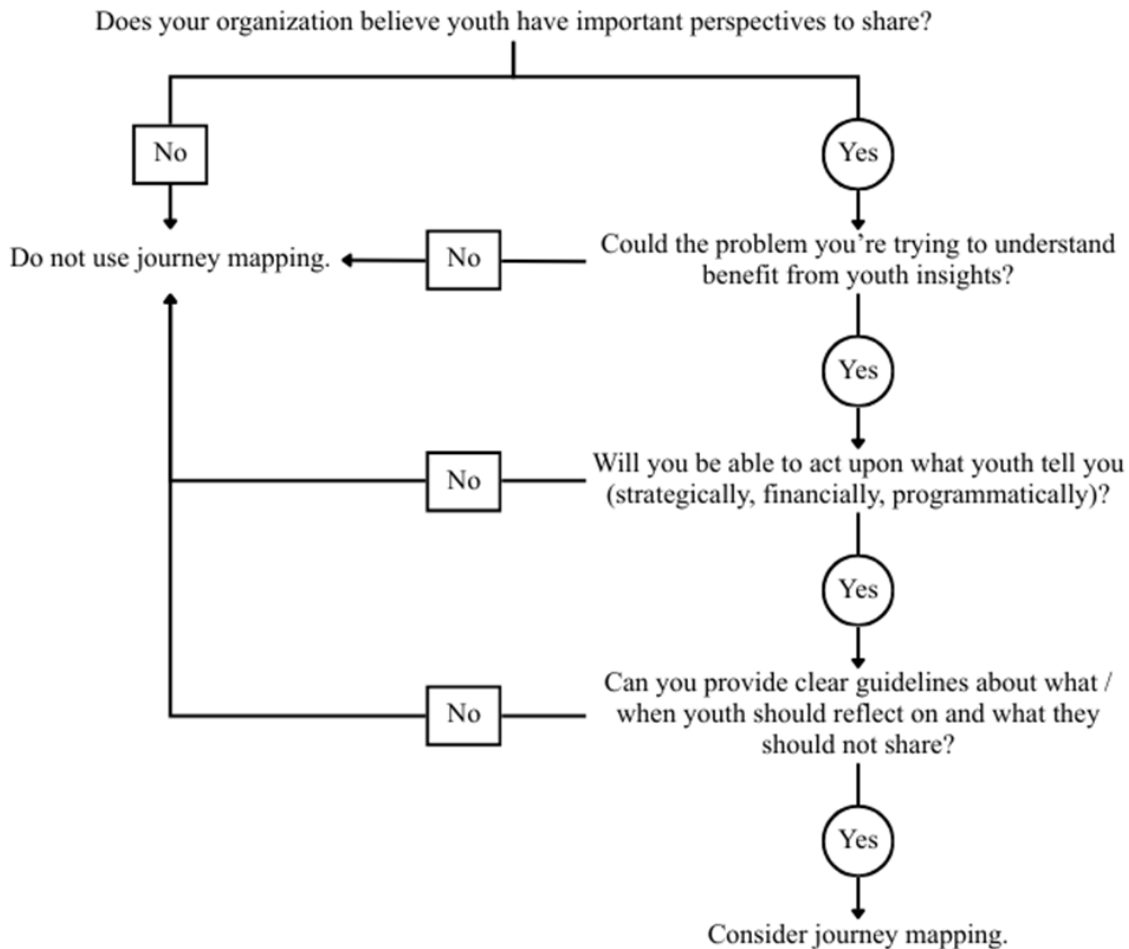
The creation and execution of this research project challenged adultism in the organization overall. During the ongoing continuous improvement project reviewing administrative camper journey data, there was a recognition of the need to engage youth directly to learn more about their experiences and perspectives throughout the program. Specifically, recognizing that youth are important partners in the evaluation process and that they have valuable insights to share fosters inclusion and begins to shift the power dynamic to a group of people who often are not in positions of power. Understanding that young people can share more about their negative experiences at camp and that these insights could be used to foster greater organizational improvements is aligned with the organization's guiding principle, positive youth development. Program evaluators should consider if incorporating youth voice is aligned with their mission, vision, and values and, if so, how they may take steps to incorporate youth voice to challenge adultism and prioritize youth perspectives in their own organizations.

Providing time and space to process an experience and reflect upon questions without the influence of an interviewer's presence may create opportunities for youth to more thoroughly, thoughtfully, and safely consider their experiences. By eliciting journey maps first, the evaluation provided youth a developmentally appropriate experience to initially share their insights. They had time to consider their experiences in the program without the pressure of providing in-the-moment responses to interview questions. In some cases, youth may have decided not to share specific experiences that they considered too personal or that they did not wish to relive. In typical research designs, interviewers inherently hold a position of power with participants; however, with the first phase of the study soliciting journey maps, youth were able to process their experience in a pressure-free environment first. Additionally, the journey map technique allowed for creative self-expression on a topic that may have brought up memories of challenging experiences.

Because the journey mapping exercise was followed by semistructured interviews, the youth's perspectives guided the interview process, rather than the interviewer being unaware of the youth's experiences before starting the interview. This is a subtle way of redistributing power and providing youth more agency in the research process. Relatedly, the pairing of the journey mapping exercise with interviews allowed youth to come to the interview feeling prepared to participate, as they had an idea of what the questions would be focused on. As a result, youth may have felt empowered to contribute more meaningfully than if they were simply in the role of interviewees. Youth program evaluators may consider developmentally appropriate ways to solicit young people's perspectives, including using creative methods or evaluations integrated with program activities.

To support youth-serving organizations in whether to consider using a journey map for a project, we've developed a decision tree (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Journey Map Decision Tree



Risks and Limitations

Our evaluation and similar evaluations to the one presented in this paper may include several noteworthy risks and limitations. First, given the intensity of the personnel resources needed to conduct high-quality qualitative research, our evaluation was based on a relatively small sample. As such, and as we presented our project as a case study of journey mapping methods only, we expect the potential of limited generalizability of the findings to other organizations. As the study was completed for internal evaluation and improvement purposes, participants were recruited through the organization and completed interviews with an organization staff member. This may have biased the findings due to concerns about social desirability or reluctance to share candidly or participate. These limitations should be heeded as

potential risks associated with evaluations using the approach we have outlined in this manuscript.

The findings of our evaluation and other evaluations using the approach outlined in this manuscript may be biased, given the retrospective nature of both the journey map creation and semi-structured interviews, making the delimitation of the findings to participant perceptions rather than an objective reality or truth an important step in the presentation and interpretation of the findings. This means that our findings best reflect what participants recall about their experiences rather than what may have objectively occurred or the objective details at the time of their experiences. This reliance on perceptions and recollection does not allow for understanding specific details from an objective lens, which may pose a risk to organizations intending to use evaluation findings based on this method as the sole source of evidence informing decision-making. Additionally, the findings of our evaluation, as well as other

evaluations that experience difficulties in the recruitment of non-returners, may fail to yield sufficient coverage of the myriad experiences that may not have been shared by returners or those non-returners who participated in our evaluation. This means that our findings may not capture the full range of possible experiences, and especially those experiences of potential non-returner participants.

Conclusion

This case study may serve as a useful example for how youth-serving programs can leverage creative methods to elevate youth voice during evaluations of their programs. Youth from low-income backgrounds deserve to access youth development programs that are rich in developmental opportunities, and although many programs offer

reduced participation fees or scholarship opportunities, many barriers in accessing or returning to these programs still exist. Our use of creative methods offered a developmentally appropriate and positive youth development-aligned evaluation of the reasons why youth decide to return or not return to camp. All participants reported positive and negative elements of camp; however, non-returning campers less frequently reported camp helping them see future opportunities and more frequently reported life conflicts with camp as a reason not to return. Our evaluation approach and specific findings may be used to develop and understand the evaluation strategies organizations may use to support youth from low-income backgrounds to return to high-quality youth programs.

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