

COMMENT



## Supporting Reserve Component Youth during Deployments: The Project Youth Extension Service Model

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### ABSTRACT

Military families face unique challenges, especially during times of deployment. Children and youth face particular stressors during deployment and benefit from formal and informal resources as they adapt to resilience. Reaching families of service members in the National Guard and Reserve, the Reserve Component, is more challenging since they are more often geographically dispersed and often less connected to military support systems. Project Youth Extension Service (YES) has provided educational programming and social support for children and youth of RC families during deployment events nationwide for the past 8 years through teams of college interns. The program also provides intensive training and practical experience to college interns in 21st-century workforce skills. We review the context, challenges, program design, and effects, then discuss implications of Project YES using the family life education framework. We close with recommendations for improving practice and training, evaluation and research, and policy.

### KEYWORDS

internship; military youth; National Guard and Reserve families; professional development; youth work competencies; youth worker training

Family adjustment and support are critical to military member effectiveness, which is a critical element in military readiness. Yet military life, especially deployment, can be stressful for children and families. To support member effectiveness and family resilience, Congress directed the Secretary of Defense to establish “a national combat veteran reintegration program to provide National Guard and Reserve members and their families with sufficient information, services, referral, and proactive outreach opportunities throughout the entire deployment cycle ... known as the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program” (National Defense Authorization Act, 2008). In accordance with Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 1342.28, each Reserve Component (RC) established Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Programs (YRRP) to meet the unique needs of their

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individual service cultures (United States Department of Defense, 2019). In fulfillment of that mission, YRRP engaged Project Youth Extension Service (YES) to provide youth development programming at YRRP events throughout the United States and US territories. Subsequently, Project YES supported 934 YRRP events and served 28,809 children and youth from 1 January 2011 to 31 July 2020. The purpose of this article is to discuss the challenges and opportunities encountered in this context and reflect on lessons learned from the perspective of the family life education framework (Darling et al., 2020).

## **Deployment effects on military families**

### ***Military family experience***

Over the past two decades of U.S. military operations over 700,000 children have experienced at least 1 parental deployment (Ohye & Bui, 2016). Family members provide a significant support system for military service members (Alfano et al., 2016; Park, 2011) but also incur significant stresses related to that work, including separations, and changes in routines, roles, and relationships (Chandra et al., 2011; Lester & Flake, 2013; Park, 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2017). Most military families demonstrate adaptability and resilience during and after deployment (Wadsworth et al., 2016), in part due to the use of formal and informal resources in military and civilian communities (Huebner et al., 2009; Park, 2011).

Military family stresses typically increase during all phases of the deployment cycle (Aranda et al., 2011; Compas et al., 2001; Institute of Medicine, 2013). Stressors tend to increase by the length of deployment (Interian et al., 2014; Lester et al., 2012; Messecar, 2017) number of deployments, and the cumulative effect (Chandra et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2016). However, first deployments often generate higher anxiety, partly due to an increased number of unknown elements (Gilreath et al., 2013). Alfano et al. (2016) identify the increased length of deployment, survivable injuries, psychological injuries, and women's military service as distinctive factors shaping deployment experiences since 2002. Further, the effects of deployment stressors may be magnified or moderated by concurrent events in the family life cycle. Such stressors could be either positive (e.g., the birth of a child, graduations) or negative (e.g., internal and external conflicts of family members).

Several reviews indicate children of deployed parents may be at higher risk for physical and psychosocial distress, adjustment problems, and mental health risks (Aranda et al., 2011; Chandra et al., 2011; Milburn & Lightfoot, 2013; Paris et al., 2010; Reed et al., 2011). A meta-analysis (Card et al., 2011) found no significant associations between deployment and

academic problems, internalizing symptoms, or externalizing problems among adolescents, but did identify some adjustment problems for children. Several studies have noted the resiliency of children and youth in military families, even during deployment periods (Knobloch et al., 2015; Lester et al., 2010; Park, 2011).

Reviews focusing on developmental differences within military families (Alfano et al., 2016; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2016) suggest young children (e.g., 0–6 years.) maybe both less aware of and less impacted by parental absence, whereas middle children (e.g., 7–12 years.) may have increased awareness and anxiety with limited coping mechanisms. By contrast, military-connected adolescents (e.g., 13–18 years.) are better able to understand, cope, and contribute to family needs, than are their civilian counterparts (Alfano et al., 2016; Mmari et al., 2010; Rodriguez & Margolin, 2018; Wadsworth et al., 2016). However, adolescents in military families who struggle with more severe developmental stresses, family conflict, neglect, or inconsistent supervision and support may be more likely to participate in risky behaviors such as drinking and drugs or become vulnerable to peer bullying (Gilreath et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2011).

For military youth of all ages, more positive youth outcomes tend to flow from a family climate with open, sensitive, and reciprocal communication patterns between parents, children, and siblings (Houston et al., 2009). By contrast, distress in the non-deployed member often manifests as higher anxiety and both internalization (e.g., depression, self-harm) and externalization (e.g., defiance, delinquency) problems among youth (Chandra et al., 2011; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Lester et al., 2010). Community informal supports (e.g., practical and social supports) (Bowen et al., 2013; Huebner et al., 2009; O’Neal et al., 2018), even more than formal supports (e.g., Family Assistance Centers, educational programs), contribute to well-being for military families [especially] during deployment. Educational programs are documenting positive effects on military parents and children (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Lester et al., 2010. Huebner et al., 2009) and affirm the military’s focus on family readiness provides tools to better prepare children and youth for demands of the military and general life skills.

### **The reserve component: service members and families**

Historically, military-family research has focused on active-duty (AD) service members. While RC and AD families share many of the same experiences, some experiences and perspectives are unique to RC families. (Huebner et al., 2007). Reserve Component deployments have increased over the past two decades and represent 43% of deployed troops since 2001

(Ohye & Bui, 2016). As a result, their experiences and effects of programming have gained greater attention (Collins et al., 2017; Huebner et al., 2009). Wadsworth et al. (2016) posit there is no singular military family experience, thus current research generalizations provide only a point-of-entry for understanding and working with RC families.

Reserve Component service members are more likely to have families than their active-duty counterparts (Messecar, 2017), thus their military service impacts more family members. Consistent with active-duty families, deployment generates the most stressful experiences for RC families (Messecar, 2017; Wadsworth et al., 2016), and emotional resources of the non-deployed spouse most influence children's responses (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012). Children and youth aged 3–17 years experience increased behavioral difficulties relative to community norms (Wilson et al., 2011), and those aged 6–18 years show increased problem behavior during vs. post-deployment (Pfefferbaum et al., 2012). Reserve Component youth also show significant evidence of enhanced coping and resiliency during deployments (Huebner et al., 2007; Messecar, 2017).

Several interview studies examined RC youth experiences in greater detail. Huebner et al. (2007) identified elements of ambiguous loss and uncertainty within military families known to impede coping or grieving (Boss, 2002). Children, ages 10–13, in focus groups (Knobloch et al., 2015) identified deployment as times of (a) change (e.g., more responsibility, alterations of everyday activities, greater responsibility, missing family traditions, emotional upheaval, family incomplete), (b) challenge (e.g., disrupted routines, emotional difficulties, missing deployed parent, family conflict, increased responsibilities), and (c) opportunities for growth (e.g., increased cohesion, cultivating independence, new and unique experiences, preparation for future deployments, although some saw no positives). Overall, they suggested deployment-related transition represented opportunities to reframe, prepare, and cultivate networks while addressing needed changes and challenges.

Baptist et al.'s (2015) interviews with 12 to 17-year-old, mostly post-deployment, RC youth identified both distress (e.g., loneliness, worry, sense of loss, stopped watching news) and coping responses (e.g., self-reliance, pride, support, and contribution to family). Youth recalled receiving some support from neighbors, camps, and school support groups, but primarily cited their reliance on (a) military values of courage and self-reliance, (b) choosing not to worry parents, and (c) finding friendship (but little empathy) among nonmilitary peers. Authors suggest self-reliance may facilitate maturity, but may also repress healthy processing of emotions. A second study (Thompson et al., 2017) found RC teens adjusted their deployment behaviors to minimize conflict, stepping in or withdrawing to

maintain normalcy and balance, based on their perceptions of non-deployed parent functioning. However, they note other research pointing to parent-child communication quality as key to adolescents' perceptions and adjustments (Houston et al., 2009).

Informal resources (e.g., marital stability and family functioning, support from coworkers, friends, neighbors) and participation in YRRP re-deployment events offering “couples focused workshops” contributed to fewer depressive symptoms among RC couples (Collins et al., 2017). Instrumental activities such as establishing a care plan and developing circles of support were most valued, perhaps because they improve practical support and problem-solving infrastructures during unpredictable times. RC couples may have perceived formal resources (e.g., Family Readiness Groups, Family Assistance Centers) as less accessible or less effective than local resources. Authors recognized the significance of transitions and the importance of preparation since:

- Prevention and education before deployment can be effective (United States Department of Defense, n.d.).
- Pre-deployment mental health affects post-deployment mental health.
- Pre-deployment family well-being positively impacts service member deployment.
- Service member perception of family coping [emotionally and instrumentally] may impact their own performance, thus also impact the safety and effectiveness of their work team (McNulty, 2005; Schumm & Bell, 2000).

### **Barriers to reaching reserve component families**

Providing needed education and support for RC families is difficult due to their individual circumstances, to limited resources of RC service units, and to a lack of current research and programming. However, none of these barriers are insurmountable, as discussed below.

### ***Circumstances of reserve component families***

Reserve Component families are often more difficult to reach with education and support services since they are geographically and socially dispersed relative to active-duty families residing on/near a military installation (Collins et al., 2017). They generally have less access to both formal services, such as Family Assistance Centers, and informal resources, such as peer-support networks, typical of military bases (Huebner et al., 2009; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Pinna et al., 2017). Additionally, they

may reside closer to extended family and friendship networks and encounter fewer disruptions of routines (e.g., new duty stations, deployments), but their communities may be unaware or insensitive to their needs (Baptist et al., 2015). RC members are also episodically thrust into a *suddenly military* (emphasis added) role whereby their status changes from a traditional part-time military status to a full-time requirement (Park, 2011). Thus, most RC families remain busy with standard work and family routines and cope through self-reliance and informal resources (Collins et al., 2017; Park, 2011; Thompson et al., 2017). However, international assignments, especially first deployments, may impact a wider network and result in more disruption than for active-duty families (Pincus et al., 2001), especially regarding employment arrangements, community/school engagements, and family roles and routines.

### **Circumstances of RC units/providers**

As outlined in Department of Defense Instruction 1342.28, Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (YRRP), RC support units “... provide information about resources available to enhance resiliency and manage rigors of the military lifestyle and stressors caused by an activation, mobilization, or deployment” (United States Department of Defense, 2019, p.11). RC personnel experienced with military and community resources may facilitate referrals for specialized services but also face the same geographical challenges.

As summarized above, most research and prevention/intervention programming with RC children and families has occurred in the past 15 years. Alfano et al. (2016, p. 18) state, “There is agreement that the emotional health and well-being of children from military families should be a national priority (Defense Technical Information Center, 2011), yet existing gaps and limitations in research render it difficult to know how to best respond to these needs.” In their brief review of military family programming, Ohye and Bui (2016, p. 10) note, “Evidence-based interventions to support military children are much needed,” especially community-based interventions. They regard building an evidence base for a full range of preventive and treatment interventions as critical for the promotion of resilience and recovery. Moreover, they see an urgent need to address the negative effects of parental stress and war-related health and mental health conditions on children and adolescents as long as deployments are ongoing. Other scholars (Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Messecar, 2017) concur with these findings and the need for positive action.

Despite gaps in access, service delivery, and evidence base, program providers know that doing something is better than doing nothing. Deployment research and intervention, as well as theory and practice developed with other families and youth under normative and exceptional stress, point to the importance of (a) proactive support throughout stressful transitions (Mancini et al., 2020; Wadsworth et al., 2017), (b) skill-building in areas such as problem-solving and communication, and (c) connecting families to formal and informal networks that foster continued resiliency (Huebner & Mancini, 2010). As noted above, most RC family support and education efforts have been directed toward adults, as service members, couples, and parents, with emerging evidence for effective engagement and education of parents (Pinna et al., 2017). Evaluations of Speak Out for Military Kids (Edwin et al., 2010), Operation Purple camps (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012), and Passport to Success (Wilson et al., 2011) found that even short-term interventions offering recreation, skill-building, social support, and peer interaction can facilitate coping and adjustment for military youth.

What is known about supporting RC children and youth facing deployment-related stress can be summarized as follows:

1. Transitions, particularly those involving close relationships and changing roles, represent especially sensitive times for distress and growth, with some common and distinctive patterns by age (Baptist et al., 2015; Collins et al., 2017; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Knobloch et al., 2015; Milburn & Lightfoot, 2013);
2. Social support from family, peers, and/or mentors familiar with the military culture (Pinna et al., 2017) fosters stability and growth through transitions in multiple ways (e.g., belonging, encouragement, practical assistance, empowerment) (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011).
3. Evidence-based reframing and skill-building experiences refocus youth attention from risk behaviors, empower personal mastery, teach practical and transferable competencies, and provide an opportunity to help others (Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011; Huebner & Mancini, 2010; Mmari et al., 2009).
4. Increasing military families' awareness of community resource networks for further support and enrichment promotes optimism about coping with stressors, building assets, and offering help to others (Bowen et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2017).
5. Even brief experiences in positive youth development activities may have positive impacts (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Wilson et al., 2011), and mitigate against risky behavior.

Youth events during deployment transitions cannot ameliorate serious pathologies, although program staff may help identify and refer youth with therapeutic needs. However, enrichment events can provide support, help reframe perceptions, and build resiliency-related skills that help youth cope with immediate stressors and identify resources for coping with future stressors.

### ***YRRP youth events: program challenges and design***

#### ***Program context***

Project YES is an initiative of the United States Department of Defense Office of Employer Program and Policy and the United States Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a cooperative agreement with North Carolina State University. Created in direct response to the needs of RC youth, Project YES facilitates positive youth development (PYD) activities promoting leadership development, resiliency, life skills, STEM concepts, and reflective thinking as a means to help cope with the challenges of military deployments. PYD activities provide a higher quality of programming than existing child care and recreational activities, thus promising greater benefits to youth and greater incentive for all family members to attend events.

#### ***Program challenges and opportunities***

Providing enrichment activities for youth during deployment events presented many challenges and concurrent opportunities. Systemically, the program niche was limited to 1 to 3-days deployment events, which provided access to (relatively) hard-to-reach RC youth at strategic transition points of their individual and family life. Senior YRRP process-owners prioritized education (versus mental health counseling) as the primary domain (Myers-Walls et al., 2011), thereby enabling a focus on PYD activities, integrated by social support and reflection. However, program participants had access to mental health access referral networks, either directly (larger events) or through organizationally provided referral networks (smaller events). Logistics represented the defining programming challenge with assignments ranging between 77–122 annual events conducted in 53 US states and territories, the District of Columbia, and one international location. Project YES leaders established protocols for support activities (e.g., travel, reimbursement, event-related reporting) and empowered Project YES team leaders to coordinate with YRRP event hosts to plan and implement activities tailored to fit the needs of each location. Staffing required capable facilitators (not therapists) with flexible schedules. Thus, collegiate interns were recruited and trained to facilitate a suite of experiential

learning activities. Further, interns were trained to adapt the activities, as needed, to accommodate site-specific developmental and circumstantial needs. As is common within many community education programs, resources (e.g., personnel, expertise, technical support) and delivery schedules were tight, but these limits promoted capacity-building, efficiency, and distributed leadership.

### *Program design*

Project YES is a university-based program created to serve as an educational intervention versus a research model program, thereby functioning more like a community-based program in objectives and operations. In fact, youth development in camps (Povilaitis & Tamminen, 2018; Wilson et al., 2019), afterschool programs (Vance & Goldberg, 2020), recreational sports (Jones et al., 2017), and special interest events such as those sponsored by museums, libraries, schools, or youth organizations (Lerner et al., 2005) face similar challenges in engaging youth, delivering programming, evaluating quality and achieving short-term outcomes.

In addition, research on informal coping strategies of RC youth such as self-directed learning and use of informal mentors (Baptist et al., 2015; Knobloch et al., 2015), as well as experiential and group learning strategies found effective in formal short-term programs with military youth (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Esposito-Smythers et al., 2011) are reflected in program design. From a prevention perspective (Darling et al., 2020), lack of support at this critical transition could contribute to negative affect, behavioral, or mental health problems (Milburn & Lightfoot, 2013). These insights were just emerging when Project YES planning began, but essential elements of youth coping (Huebner et al., 2009) and PYD programming (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005) were known and are consistent with subsequent findings.

The Project YES mission is to provide training, curriculum, and facilitation approach that supports military youth by (a) creating a safe space that supports discussions relating to changes and issues experienced due to family member's deployment, (b) providing fun, interactive experiences where youth explore how to apply learning outcomes from the event activities to real-life situations, and, (c) fostering team-building and networking among the military youth so they develop a support system during, and in some cases, beyond YRRP events.

The Project YES evaluation plan and theory of action were specified on initiation (Haigler Enterprises, 2011), based on developmental systems and PYD principals (Lerner et al., 2014), focused on what Lerner (2004) identified as "The Big Three" components of programs that promote PYD: (a) a caring adult, providing support and promoting self-efficacy, (b) life skills,

particularly socio-emotional skills such as active listening and problem-solving, and (c) leadership and teamwork skills, including various leader roles adapted for developmental appropriateness (Meschke et al., 2012). Broadly speaking, these practices contribute to developmental outcomes described by Bowers et al. (2010) as “the 6 Cs” (e.g., connectedness, character, competence, confidence, and caring that lead to contribution). For military youth, PYD programming contributed to two additional outcomes; control and coping (Easterbrooks et al., 2013).

Programs emphasized experiential learning with reflection in groups shown to be effective in short-term programs with military youth (Chawla & Wadsworth, 2012; Wilson et al., 2011), with college students in service-learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009), and in youth worker training (Walker & Walker, 2012). These practices are highly consistent with quality elements found in programs that promoted developmental assets (Durlak et al., 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Smith et al., 2010).

Youth activities and intern training were guided by similar practices and outcomes consistent with PYD best practices (Newman, 2020; Pekel et al., 2018). Intern training and experience included a broader range of knowledge and skills and a much higher level of mastery consistent with their developmental capacities and program roles (Silliman et al., 2020a). Interns received consistent mentoring from program staff, career mentors as well as individual and team-level peer feedback. They participated in over 100 h of intensive, face-to-face training and 150 h of supervised experience annually, and 60% of interns served two years or more. The training focused on 40 behavioral competencies of helping professionals (Burrus et al., 2013). Additionally, interns learned about military culture and family life, child and youth development, program planning, curriculum resources, program implementation, and a variety of leadership roles. Interns were trained to facilitate activities with fidelity but also to problem solve (Larson & Walker, 2010) and adapt to group needs and program conditions as necessary.

### ***Intern leadership component***

Successful peer leadership programs integrate elements of reflection and feedback. Creating a reflective culture provides an environment conducive to self-awareness, improved facilitation, more honest interactions, and increased confidence (White, 2012; White & Guthrie, 2016). Ash and Clayton (2009) suggest individual reflection enhances the greater learning experience. Reflection also stimulates deeper, contextual learning and opens feedback channels on a broader continuum, thereby deepening the comprehensive experience.

The peer leadership element is essential to the success of the Project YES program. Project YES support opportunities are provided to military hosts in all 50 states, Washington D.C., and United States territories. YRRP events are typically conducted on weekends, thereby preventing administrative staff members from attending all scheduled events. Therefore, the program relies heavily on peer-level team leaders to (a) serve as role models for the other interns, (b) support field-level intern training, and (c) ensure program integrity through all phases of program coordination, facilitation, and team management. While all interns have the opportunity to gain leadership skills in areas such as event planning, time management, and team responsibility, the team leader role provides an even more intense opportunity for interns to develop and hone their leadership styles in areas such as managing diverse teams, conflict management, and professional communication.

Consistent with program scope and stakeholder expectations, youth programs were evaluated for outputs (e.g., number and satisfaction of event hosts and youth participants) and short-term outcomes (e.g., the usefulness of learning). Intern learning outcomes and performance were formally evaluated via initial pre-service assessment and post-service mixed-methods exit surveys. A variety of informal monitoring (e.g., staff and team leader observations), youth- and peer-feedback and reflection processes, and periodic self-assessments were embedded in experiential learning and reflection processes during intern training and experience as well as during youth programming. A more extensive description of program structure and outcomes was previously published (Silliman et al., 2020a, 2020b). More recent results are presented below.

### ***Program evaluation: feedback from military youth, event hosts, and interns***

Project YES leadership evaluated youth events and intern growth for accountability to the funding partner and conducted evaluation research on long-term intern outcomes for program improvement and advancement of knowledge in a field. Project YES administered a 7-item youth feedback survey to 11,072 youth attending 934 events from 2011–2020. Over 87% of youth agreed or strongly agreed that events were enjoyable, useful, and timely, while 94% agreed that Project YES staff did a good job leading activities and discussions. Over 79% of youth agreed they learned more about being a leader. Youth comments on most important things learned most frequently mentioned leadership and teamwork opportunities and life skills such as communication, friendship, stress management and handling deployment. Character values such as kindness, respect, helpfulness, honesty, and hard work were also highlighted. Finally, many participants

identified specific learning or recreational activities that they enjoyed or found useful in addressing their current life situation.

Event hosts also completed surveys after each event, and over 95% of the time indicated high levels of confidence and satisfaction with intern leadership. Hosts rated coordination (e.g., communication, adaptability, meeting objectives) very high (e.g., 95–100% across 11 criteria) and indicated plans to request more events in the future (Silliman et al., 2020a).

Interns observed that RC youth expressed concern that circumstances and emotions related to deployment were not understood by others in their local communities or even viewed as a vulnerability, thereby resulting in peer bullying or adult neglect (Johnson, 2019). Interns further identified that youth carried a wide range of personal and family circumstances and reactions (e.g., distress, emotionality, eagerness to learn, and resiliency-based coping strategies). Interns most often commented on participants' resilience, self-discipline, and peer support.

### ***Intern growth during internship and beyond***

Intern performance and growth were also a priority for all stakeholders and the duration of service and sustained contact with program senior staff provided an opportunity for ongoing evaluation research. A comprehensive review of exit survey results from 2011–2016 ( $n = 64/73$ ) found statistically significant increases in all 37 competencies, with increases above .5/5.0 for 24 items (Silliman et al., 2020a). The greatest increases occurred in areas most related to intensive, responsive programming (e.g., adapting approaches, learning from mistakes, stress-awareness, maintaining composure, asking appropriate questions, and managing conflict effectively). Qualitative comments reflected significant growth in personal and professional skills and heightened sensitivities to experiences of military-connected youth.

An online follow-up study found significant long-term effects of training and experience as over 60% of respondents ( $n = 54$ ) rated 36/40 Project YES competencies as important for their current work performance (Silliman et al., 2020b). Competencies related to scales including Adapting to Change, Coping with Pressure, Working with People, Delivering Results, Maintaining a Learning Mindset, Presentation Skills, Work Ethic, and Following Instructions were equally valued, with Applying Technology rated slightly lower. Retrospective ratings of the importance of training in the 40 competencies were included in those scales. Qualitative comments underscored both personal and professional growth, with the latter highlighting programming skills, adaptive thinking, exercising leadership and teamwork, and effective communication.

In recent evaluations (Johnson, 2019), several interns commented on initially feeling overwhelmed by the experiences of RC youth, but that tools such as debriefing and reflection techniques helped them process their experiences with youth and with intern peers. Interns identified enhancing their sensitivity to [military] youth stressors and vulnerabilities as a significant benefit of the internship. Interns also reported that Project YES training and experience in engaging youth, facilitating activities, and one-on-one mentoring were among their most personally and vocationally rewarding experiences during college.

### ***Implications for community-based programs***

As noted above, Project YES is similar to many community-based programs that provide support and challenge opportunities for youth (Gambone et al., 2002) in a relatively short time frame. Although extended engagement may optimize benefits (Lerner et al., 2014), programs are often challenged to maximize available opportunities for participating staff, children, and youth. Thus, we believe that lessons learned from Project YES offer insight for short-, and perhaps long-term, programming by community-based organizations. These insights are discussed in relation to the Framework for Family Life Education (Darling et al., 2020).

Intentional planning for program quality and outcomes, including a theory of change and evaluation plan as recommended by Hawkins et al. (2020) was a critical first step in program development (Haigler Enterprises, 2011). Stakeholder accountability, as well as program duration and resources, focused formal evaluation at the output (e.g., youth and host satisfaction) and short-term outcomes (e.g., self-reported learning and usefulness) level. However, integrating debriefing as part of experiential activities with youth and within intern training and event-related team meetings enabled continuous quality improvement and program adjustment and facilitating learning of critical reflection skills for planning, problem-solving, and evaluation. Intern competencies included learning to “read” youth and to ask questions. Interns were similarly observed and mentored by team leaders and senior staff. Thus, a structured group process, or action-with-reflection, represented a kind of developmental or participatory evaluation as recommended by Hawkins et al. (2020). Intensive and extended training and informal evaluation of interns was punctuated through exit surveys and the engagement of an external evaluator to conduct a follow-up investigation. Thus, while not a rigorous research mode, Project YES integrally, through the use of group process, and incrementally, through strategic investments in evaluation research, advanced the feasibility and utility (Yarbrough et al., 2011) of program evaluation.

## **Culture**

A key element of intern orientation was learning about military culture, the rhythms of military family culture, the “suddenly military” experience of RC families, and the microculture of deployment. These realities provide an alternative, if not superordinate, the context for understanding family diversity, including family structure and connections to extended families, ethnic traditions, and enduring values. Intern learning about developmental stages likewise included significant attention to the strengths and vulnerabilities of youth growing up in military families (Baptist et al., 2015). However, intern feedback consistently highlighted the importance of practical engagement on a relational level for understanding, articulating, and addressing the stress and coping patterns characteristic of the culture. As discussed further below, the experiential learning/critical reflection process helped both youth and interns negotiate challenges of their cultural transitions (e.g., youth in deployment, interns in internship, and career transition).

Navigating organizational cultures was critically important to program success. Although all key stakeholders prioritized support and challenging learning experiences for RC youth, military unit administrators prioritized youth and family support in terms of military readiness. Event hosts sought to maximize participation in quality, experiential events. Project YES staff and interns prioritized logistics, training, and adaptive implementation in order to provide the best quality programming for diverse audiences in diverse settings.

Finally, a program itself creates a culture within which staff grows and contribute. Positive assessments of internship experiences (Silliman et al., 2020a, 2020b) and positive feedback from youth and event hosts (see above) affirm that the Project YES climate of support and challenge “fit” with its niche in the deployment cycle.

## **Context**

A deployment youth event is a microcosm of military family life in which individual and family strengths, as well as stressors, provide both the backdrop and the grist for meaningful activities and reflection. As in a summer camp setting, detachment from families of origin and engagement with peers in developmentally-appropriate experiential activities and reflection can contribute to developmental assets including connectedness, competence, and confidence that might be applied in the home, school, and community contexts. Reflection on events and broader life experiences may evoke a range of feelings that can be processed through supportive behaviors of peers and intern/mentors, group discussion, and/or individual coaching or referral to professional staff. In this context, experiential

learning theory facilitates adaptation to changing conditions (e.g., facilities, age groups, energy levels) and optimizing teachable moments. Though more could be accomplished through extended learning opportunities, Project YES demonstrates that much can be accomplished in a brief space of time.

For interns, the practice context represents a critical catalyst for translating and expanding upon academic learning and life experience. Repeated cycles of planning, implementing and evaluating activities in the context of peer teams, experienced mentors, and self-reflection fosters personal and professional growth (Silliman et al., 2020a) associated with successful career transitions. Project YES also demonstrates that some contexts that do not require or could not support full-time certified professionals offer invaluable opportunities for supporting and training multiple groups of learners.

### **Content**

Program content is necessarily informed by culture, context, and available resources. Project YES enjoyed access to a plethora of evidence-based curricula, along with a tradition of training volunteers and young professionals on experiential and social-emotional learning skills. Diverse and geographically-dispersed interns, settings, and audiences, paired with short turn-around times (e.g., intern recruitment-to-training, scheduling-to-event implementation) and logistical challenges (e.g., transportation of interns and educational supplies) contributed to a complex environment. Effective leadership required finding efficient simplicity within that complexity. Thus, intern training and youth programming focused on three PYD research and practice priorities:

- caring adults
- life skills learning
- opportunities for leadership focusing on strengths and teachable moments (Lerner, 2004, 2018)

### **Practice**

Program design and delivery are integrally related to culture, context, and content (Ballard, 2020). Actual youth programming times were often less than forecasted times provided by event hosts. The real-time variances required adaptations to changing conditions and practice, thus experiential learning with critical reflection, enabled interns to adapt to developmental needs and individual or group dynamics and fulfill objectives of support, learning life skills and values, and providing leadership.

Program implementation quality and fidelity are the best predictors of outcomes (Durlak et al., 2010). Some have suggested that where outcomes in community-based programs cannot be measured, that quality indicators may serve as a proxy for outcomes (Arnold & Cater, 2016). Capable program providers are key to quality in FLE and PYD programming (Ballard, 2020; Durlak et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2010), thus investments in provider training are key to effective program delivery. Unfortunately, for many programs, staff attrition and limited resources too often restrict training investments (Cunnie, 2017). Intensive, extended training, especially focused on interactive skills (e.g., communication, teamwork problem solving) that support and parallel youth outcomes (Akiva et al., 2017; Newman, 2020; Walker & Walker, 2012) provide the “active ingredients” for building assets needed by military youth (Easterbrooks et al., 2013). Learning in cohorts enhances provider skills (Abraham, 2017; Garst et al., 2019; Robideau & Santl, 2020), as does the use of reflective practice and scaffolded leadership (Walker & Walker, 2012).

## **Recommendations for improvement**

Learning from experience and increased capacity helped recognize opportunities for improvement in practice, research, and policy, as suggested below.

### ***Practice & training***

Project YES has documented a consistent record of positive feedback from youth, event hosts, interns, and alumni. Nevertheless, practice with youth might be improved through the development of additional life skills and leadership activities, especially materials specifically targeting age groups or particular needs, such as bullying or stepfamily communication. Broader research, as indicated in the review of literature, suggests an ongoing need among RC youth for local community education and support resources or additional online information.

Given the relatively greater duration of intern service, Project YES has opportunities to enhance training and skills application through enhanced video and digital learning and feedback tools and through advanced training modules benefitting those interns returning for subsequent years of service. Team cohesiveness and effectiveness might be complemented through more detailed assessments of individual strengths and group dynamics followed by targeted training and mentoring on collaboration and problem-solving skills.

Given Project YES' reliance on experienced interns as team leaders, the program could benefit from advanced training on management and coaching skills. Additionally, continued analysis of youth, event host, and intern feedback could provide integrated insights supporting the event- and team-level program enhancements and tailored training opportunities. Lastly, the mapping of team leader competencies and growth would enhance contributions to program development as well as support their career and personal development goals.

### ***Evaluation & research***

Although program monitoring, individual assessment, and group reflection are integral to intern training and youth programming, these are typically conducted informally, without retaining permanent records. More systematic documentation and analysis of these events could identify effective components of program success as well as patterns of professional growth. Engagement of interns in the improvement process might facilitate professional development and utilization of evaluation processes and results.

More rigorous research is needed on both strategies and outcomes of intern training and youth programs as well as longitudinal effects on adaptation and growth. Further investigation of the organizational development and management model for intern training and program delivery in diverse and geographically-diffuse contexts could provide valuable insight on education, marketing, training, service delivery, and evaluation across a variety of fields.

### ***Professional practice & policy***

The Project YES model has implications for professional communities in education, service delivery, and beyond. We celebrate the development of broader frameworks for FLE (Darling et al., 2020) and YD (Lerner, 2004) to guide practice, volunteer and professional development, and promotion of PYD. At the same time, we affirm the need for greater attention to practical challenges in implementing frameworks and best practices, as well as insights resulting from innovative efforts to apply best practice principles. We believe there is a substantial need for continued guidance on the application of research to all phases of program development: management, staff selection, and training, programming, evaluation, sustainability. Moreover, we believe there is a need for continuing and expanded dialogue among practitioners (Abraham, 2017) and the research community.

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