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## Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO): Leveraging Youth Voice to Inform the Public Debate on Pregnancy, Parenting and Education

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## **Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO): Leveraging Youth Voice to Inform the Public Debate on Pregnancy, Parenting and Education**

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## Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO): Leveraging Youth Voice to Inform the Public Debate on Pregnancy, Parenting and Education

*Elodia Villaseñor, Miguel Alcalá, Ena Suseth Valladares, Miguel A. Torres, Vanessa Mercado, and Cynthia A. Gómez*

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Youth perspectives are routinely absent from research and policy initiatives. This article presents a project that infuses youth participation, training and mentorship into the research process and teaches youth how to become policy advocates. Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO) studies the individual and systemic factors impacting sexuality and childbearing among Latino youth and seeks to reduce negative stereotypes and elevate the social standing of Latino youth. As a team-in-training, ELAYO provides adolescents, undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to develop research skills while learning the importance of linking science to policy. This paper was developed in collaboration with Latino youth.

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*We're searching for new ways to discover and change identities imposed on us and illustrating our strengths and capabilities.*

—ELAYO Youth Advisory Group Member

### The Issue

Latino<sup>1</sup> youth are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States and are disproportionately impacted by unplanned pregnancies, HIV and other sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates, as compared to their European-American counterparts (California Adolescent Sexual Health Work Group; California Department of Public Health; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2). Prior research has attributed these disparities to factors such as earlier onset of sexual activity, lack of family communication around sexuality, inconsistent use of condoms or contraception, gender inequality in sexual relationships and cultural/ religious beliefs (Afable-Munsuz and Brindis; Cox; Guilamo-Ramos et al.). The dominant discourse in addressing sexuality, reproductive health, and adolescent childbearing among the Latino community approaches these issues from a deficit perspective. In so doing, Latino youth and their families are blamed, as individuals, for their "choices" and "conditions." Discourse from a deficit perspective has led to the continued vilification of youth, with labels of "hyper-sexuality" and "irresponsibility." This unfounded criticism often leads to punitive measures for pregnant and parenting youth, including systemic discrimination within educational institutions, such as pressure to transfer out of comprehensive high schools into alternative programs, and being subjected to substandard education

(California Latinas for Reproductive Justice 6). In segregating pregnant and parenting youth, opportunities to graduate, prepare for college and other economic advances are often hampered. This is one example of how the use of a deficit lens, and blaming the individual, devisibility structural inequities, perpetuating stereotypes and further marginalizing the Latino community. In fact, the deficit lens not only addresses disparities on an individual level, it negates the sociopolitical undercurrents at play, including anti-immigrant legislation (Ayón and Gaddy).

The Ford Foundation's Youth Sexuality, Reproductive Health and Rights Initiative recognizes that most sexual and reproductive health programs ignore the broader sociocultural and economic factors that prevent young people from making healthy decisions, and that contribute to their vulnerability to poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Through grant support, the Foundation provided an opportunity for our academic-community partnership to engage Latino youth in research, training and strategic communication efforts. As they have noted, "many young people are also denied access to information and support that would enable them to protect their own sexual and reproductive health" (see: <http://www.fordfoundation.org/issues/sexuality-and-reproductive-health-and-rights/youth-sexuality-reproductive-health-and-rights>). We believe, therefore, that the greatest opportunity for change lies in creating a context where Latino youth can learn more about the issues they are reported to be facing; can give voice to their own experiences; and, together with academic and community partners, can create effective research and communications efforts that inform policies and programs. Engaging Latino youth as equal partners in knowledge-seeking and advocacy for fair and just policies empowers them to become our future leaders.

This paper describes our process for Latino youth engagement—for giving power to youth voice—and is a process that is still *in progress*. These descriptions and stories represent our work-to-date, and have been created in close partnership with youth currently participating in the ELAYO: Empower Latino Youth Project.

## ELAYO: Empower Latino Youth Project

As a Ford Foundation grantee in the Youth Sexuality, Reproductive Health and Rights Initiative, the Health Equity Institute at San Francisco State University and California Latinas for Reproductive Justice embarked on a unique project: Empower Latino Youth (ELAYO). This project incorporates research, training, and mentorship as key elements of an alternative educational pipeline. Strategic communication plays a pivotal role within ELAYO's activities by enabling



Figure 1. First ELAYO Youth Advisory Group Meeting, February 2011

public discourse about sexual and reproductive health and rights through innovative communication strategies that translate science to inform practice and policy. These strategies include the production of documentaries focused on Latino youth's sexual and reproductive health needs; educating policymakers through formal briefings with California legislative staff; the production of Community Briefs which translate research findings into accessible knowledge for communities; and offering Community Science Dialogues in which providers, researchers, teachers and youth can all come together to discuss the topic, view a documentary, or discuss particular findings from the ELAYO project. Although the three primary elements of ELAYO are research, training and strategic communication, each component is fluid, with each influencing the other and the overall goal of the Project: to create a paradigm shift that positions Latino youth sexuality within an asset-based framework.

The methodology used for research in ELAYO was mixed-methods, incorporating interviews, focus groups, and surveys among Latino youth and key adult stakeholders in both urban and agricultural regions of California to increase our understanding of how Latino youth balance competing cultural and social values regarding sexuality, parenting and education. Also assessed were youths' knowledge of their sexual and reproductive health and rights, and how these might vary for Latino youth who have become parents. As the Community partner, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) ensures that ELAYO is strongly rooted in a reproductive justice framework. CLRJ also ensures that research is translated to inform and shape California reproductive and sexual health laws and policies that affect pregnant and parenting youth, through the development of policy recommendations based on key findings. Research outcomes are currently being analyzed for future dissemination. This paper focuses on the processes of our work and how youth voices were integral to the project, while also highlighting the role of partnerships and collaborations.

## A University-Community Partnership

The Health Equity Institute (HEI) at San Francisco State University and California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) joined together to create a university-community partnership to address the sexual health and rights of Latino youth in California. CLRJ is a statewide policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to advance California Latinas'/os' reproductive health and rights within a social-justice and human-rights framework. Given the critical need to reframe the political, academic and social discourse surrounding the sexuality of young Latinos, one of CLRJ's program areas promotes systemic policy change that directly advances their needs, interests and voices. Together, HEI and CLRJ conceptualized the initial project focus, defined each of their roles on the project, and co-wrote the grant application that ultimately led to receipt of the Ford Foundation award.

In addition to facilitating trainings (described below), collaborating on data analysis and publications, and leading the policy efforts for ELAYO, CLRJ also ex-



tended an invitation to one of the Youth Advisory Group members to travel to Los Angeles from San Francisco to see first-hand how research informs policy, and how it can be translated into action. The HEI senior investigator (Gómez), ELAYO's project director (Villaseñor), CLRJ's director of research (Suseth Valladares) and relevant CLRJ senior administrators continue to meet quarterly to review the progress of the project and to continuously ensure coordination and clarification of roles and responsibilities. Together, we continue to ensure that youth voices are present in all of our activities.

### The Important Role of Youth Voices

By incorporating youth voices, ELAYO seeks to contribute to a dialogue that shifts Latino public-health discourse to an asset-based framework, providing a necessary positive rhetoric for those who will shape our future: youth. The sentiment expressed by one of the Youth Advisory Group members early on still resonates: "I want (to be a part of ELAYO) because I am Latino and I am part of the community and I would like to be informed." This statement can be broken down into four parts 1) The desire to become engaged, 2) pride in racial and cultural identity 3) identifying with a larger community, and 4) desire to become informed.

After many hours of working with youth, it has become easy for us to see this statement come to life and resonate for many of them. First, the "engagement" portion of the statement speaks to an eagerness for becoming a part of something—creating positive change. Second, it has been shown that pride in racial and cultural identity serve as protective factors for Latino youth (Denner). Third, having a strong positive identification with a community is a protective factor: community fosters a sense of security and commonality between families, or similar groups of persons, such as LGBTQ youth or young parents, leading to a sense of belonging that serves as a protective factor (Denner). Lastly, the need to be informed indicates a need for reciprocity—not only will the team-in-training learn from the youth, but the youth can learn from the team, making knowledge production fluid and bidirectional. The learning model established within ELAYO embraces Shor and Freire's notion of "liberation education," which acknowledges the indispensable roles of action, critical reflection, curiosity, demanding inquiry, uneasiness, etc. Thus the team, from high school students to senior investigator, together become critical agents in the act of knowing (Shor and Freire). Through becoming a part of not only the research process, but also the training, policy briefings and overall strategic communication process, and using a strength-based approach, "young people may thrive and civil society may prosper" (Lerner et al. 15). Youth can create change through research and action, and, perhaps, become the next generation of social science researchers and/or policymakers.

### Youth Engagement in ELAYO

*I am a passionate and driven Latino. I am a part of ELAYO because it creates a space that empowers Latinos and creates opportunities.*

—YAG member



Figure 2. ELAYO YAG members join staff and Dr. Gómez at national convening of Ford Foundation Grantees in January, 2012

The Youth Advisory Group (YAG) was developed with the intention to foster the growth of future social scientists and sexuality researchers, encouraging and supporting matriculation to higher education while also informing, participating and contributing youth voice to the research process. To address the goal of creating a type of educational pipeline that promotes higher education, four high school students—two female sophomores and two male juniors—were initially recruited. Four undergraduate students from San Francisco State University (SF State) were also recruited (three females and one male). Recruitment occurred through various youth-serving community organizations in San Francisco, and among San Francisco State University contacts initiated by ELAYO staff's personal and professional networks. The recruitment process included many phone calls to agencies, as well as in-person conversations about the research and training aspects of the Project. A \$25 stipend was provided to each YAG member for each meeting attended and, since meetings were held in the evening, dinner became a part of the agenda. YAG members often made requests for subsequent meeting times and food options, allowing for different tastes and opinions to be honored.

The YAG meetings are facilitated by research staff-in-training (one post-baccalaureate Latino male and one post-MPH Latina female). The process of unifying the Youth Advisory Group began with getting to know each other (through "ice breaker" activities), establishing ground rules, and writing and signing a contract, "YAG Rights and Responsibilities." YAG meetings began with introductions and check-ins, along with eating and interaction time, since the meetings were held in the evenings during traditional dinner time to allow all persons to attend after school and work commitments. Over the course of 15 months, YAG members and core staff gathered for 10 meetings, four trainings and one national Grantee Convening where all current grantees, representing diverse geographic regions from the Ford Foundation's Initiative on Youth, Sexuality, Health, and Rights, were gathered. The content and function of trainings and meetings are elaborated in more detail below.

Youth who participated in the advisory group joined with different levels of knowledge, responsibility and engagement. As group facilitators, it was crucial for us to honor the starting point of all members. From there, a foundation of trust and safe space emerged as the key to ensuring positive group formation. The YAG, as a group, demonstrated support and flexibility for all of its members. For example, when child-care was an issue, younger siblings or children were allowed to remain in the room while meetings took place. Similarly, when a new youth member was hesitant to attend alone, she was allowed to attend the meeting with a friend. In the latter example,

by the third meeting, this young person not only attended by herself, but was also more outspoken and willing to participate without prompting.

### Youth Participatory Research

The engagement of Latino youth in all processes of research, the dissemination of research findings, and action through policy advocacy are modeled on Youth Participatory Action Research. Youth Participatory Action Research is rooted in several fields, including, Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and empowerment evaluation and positive youth development (Powers and Tiffany). Youth are able to acquire skills, gain knowledge, and challenge themselves. According to Powers and Tiffany, youth developmental assets acquired or enhanced through participatory research include leadership skills as change agents; critical thinking ability; and the development of diverse social networks and a broad knowledge base. Other valuable skills acquired through participatory research include writing; analysis; effective presentation and advocacy; decision making; and the formation of new relationships with adults and community members. These youth serve as role models to other youth, and become experts possessing local knowledge about issues that affect youth. A recent study found that youth participation in YPAR was associated with adolescents' increases in socio-political skills and motivation to influence their schools and communities (Ozer and Douglas). The acquisition of these assets empowers youth to create social change.

Our process follows many of the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Israel et al.). Though ELAYO is not strictly a CBPR project, the involvement of youth in the advisory group, as well as students in various stages of their educational trajectory working as staff on ELAYO, has: 1) created social support systems (ex: within the youth advisory group itself, between youth involved in the Ford Foundation Sexuality Initiative grantee projects, and ELAYO staff); 2) allowed for the learning of research tools (ex: interview and focus group tool development); 3) gained skills that may be employable (ex: how to facilitate a focus group or conduct an interview); 4) expanded youths' ability to view inequities holistically through a reproductive justice lens (ex: include analysis of the economic, social, and political power and resources available to communities and the choices that are generated as a result) and, 5) involved youth in the production of knowledge (ex: collaborating on articles such as this one). These components are all infused into ELAYO to strengthen its process by not only creating a richer deepening of knowledge within the specific fields of sexual health and rights and Latino populations and educational equity, but also providing opportunity and context for the Latino youth involved.

### Reflection: From Undergraduate University Student to ELAYO Staff

I began working on this project at the tail end of my time as an undergraduate student at San Francisco State University. My first task as a student assistant was to read the literature on the issues ELAYO hoped to tackle: Latino youth sexual and reproductive health and rights. My experience in research had been limited to an introduction to research course that I took as an undergraduate student. Working on ELAYO has broadened my understanding of qualitative and quantitative research. The skills that I have gained as a research assistant range from learning how to do a literature review, to interview and focus group facilitation. And they continue to grow as we are immersed in data analyses.

Prior to joining the ELAYO Project, I had only planned on graduating with my BA in Psychology and jumping into a career in Counseling. There wasn't much thought of furthering my education. Now, after working with individuals that have gone to get their Master's and PhDs, continuing my education is something that is embedded into my future plans. I have had the opportunity to speak with individuals who have studied at San Francisco State University, University of California at Berkeley, and even, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Not only is graduate school in my radar but also, continuing my career in research is something that I plan on doing. Being a part of a project that directly impacts my community and family has given me a lens into how I want to change the inequalities that impact Latino youth today and tomorrow.

### Training Sessions

*I love them (trainings)! Sometimes I wish there was more time for more in depth conversations and to look at topics concerning us.*

—YAG member

One of the three pillars of ELAYO is the training component. Intended to facilitate the professional growth and development of the team, training sessions took place to coincide with the various phases of the Project. The training sessions were designed for both the core ELAYO research team-in-training and the YAG. Since the background and experience of team members and YAG members were so varied, the training sessions were a place for everyone to gain exposure and contribute their expertise to the topic at hand. Often, the presentation themes resonated with core members of ELAYO and youth alike. Table 1 illustrates the array of trainings that were provided to the YAG and core research team-in-training.

The first training session was conducted by Dr. Cynthia A. Gómez, the senior investigator on the project, on the topic of "Sexuality, Health and Latinos." The training provided an overview for the ELAYO team and YAG members on Latino sexual-health related statistics and the deficit models of Latino youth sexuality, reproductive

health, and childbearing that ELAYO was created to counteract. YAG members were highly engaged, asking questions, sharing personal stories, and requesting additional research articles to read to become better informed about the issues. It was evident that youth were capable of integrating knowledge that is not often available to them, or is perceived as “too academic” for a youth audience.

*Table 1: Training Sessions Delivered to Youth and/or Research Team-in-Training*

When	Topic
Spring, 2011	Sexuality, Health & Latinos
Spring, 2011	Policy, Advocacy & Reproductive Justice
Spring, 2011	Educational Equity and Latino Youth
Summer, 2011	Qualitative tool development (Focus group guide, interview guide)
Summer, 2011	Basics on Focus Groups & Facilitation
Fall, 2011	Effective interviewing on sexual topics
Fall, 2011	Ethical Practices in Research
Fall, 2011	Incorporating Research into Documentary Films
Spring, 2012	Principles of Community-Based Participatory Research
Spring, 2012	Interpreting Qualitative Data
Spring, 2012	Survey Development
Fall, 2012	Publication Development
Spring, 2013	Interpreting Quantitative Data (Statewide Online Survey)

CLRJ staff conducted a three-hour training, introducing the reproductive justice framework to ELAYO’s research team and YAG. This training consisted of various activities and exercises intended to broaden the team’s understanding of reproductive justice. One of the first activities in which the team engaged was a values-based game called, “Agree/Disagree.” In this game, participants were asked to walk toward either side of the room, depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with a statement made by the facilitator regarding youth sexuality and pregnancy. Statement examples included: “All youth have the right to seek confidential reproductive and sexual health services without having to notify their parents or guardians,” and “Comprehensive sexuality education should be a mandate for all public schools.” Once the participants walked to their respective positions, the facilitator asked for volunteers to share why they either agreed or disagreed with the statement, allowing for respectful dialogue and debate. This activity encouraged the team, and particularly the youth, to share their own views about these issues, and to discuss how these issues affect or are perceived by their own families and communities.

This analysis provided a way to connect with each other’s stories and values, and to better understand differing viewpoints. Participants were then given a brief description and history of the related, but distinct, areas of reproductive health, reproductive rights, and reproductive justice, and the main differences within each of these

advocacy movements were discussed. Due to the nature of ELAYO—with its roots in social justice, and the goal of creating a paradigm shift—addressing Youth Sexuality, Health and Rights alone was not sufficient. It was important to incorporate a reproductive justice lens prior to developing research instruments and analyzing data, because the use of this framework allows for a broader ecological view of the multiple realities of youth’s lives.

This particular training was replicated with SF State students who would be creating documentary films focused on the objectives of ELAYO (see the Health and Social Justice Documentaries posted on HEI’s website: [www.healthequityinstitute.org](http://www.healthequityinstitute.org)) to ensure that they, too, understood the reproductive justice lens prior to developing the documentaries. These documentaries would be critical tools for creating dialogue about the sexual and reproductive needs and rights of Latino youth and their families. As part of the training, an activity called “Six Chairs” was delivered. This activity highlighted the difficulty for many in navigating the health care system. Through this activity, participants were encouraged to incorporate critical factors such as age, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability and immigration status when addressing reproductive and sexual health issues faced by communities of color, and, in particular, Latino youth.

Volunteers were asked to read aloud a fact and an accompanying scenario. For example, “FACT: Latinas’ teen birth rate is three times higher than that of white teens.” “SCENARIO: ‘I am a seventeen-year-old high school junior and honor student. Now that I’m pregnant, my counselor told me I should go to a continuation school. But I’m staying at my high school because I want to graduate and go to college. My boyfriend and I got the ‘abstinence only’ classes. I wish we would’ve heard about birth control.’” The youth engaged in a discussion within which they relayed what happens to pregnant youth in their own high schools, and whether the example scenario reflected the realities in their own communities. CLRJ/HEI facilitators further asked the trainees to explore the institutional or structural barriers that prevented youth from graduating and/or preparing for college. Many of the youth commented that pregnant and parenting students seemed to be punished by the school administrators because administrators did not want other students to get pregnant; the youth expressed surprise when they were told that California and federal laws existed to prevent this type of treatment.

These trainings served multiple purposes, since they not only provided knowledge and skill-building functions, but also provided youth with a place to express their own experiences and views on issues that directly impact them on a daily basis. One young man from the YAG voiced his views that the needs of young dads were often neglected when discussing teen pregnancy. He shared with the group that his cousin’s ex-girlfriend did not allow his cousin to see their son. He shared this story with the assumption that male voices would not be considered because males aren’t the ones who get pregnant, and are often perceived as bad fathers. The facilitators emphasized that this is one reason why it is important to shift the way that policymakers, community members, adults involved in teenagers’ upbringing, service providers, advocates and the youth themselves think about and address Latina/o youth sexuality in general, and particularly in regard to teen mothers and fathers. This case also provides a great example of how emphasizing an asset-based framework provides space

for youth to feel included, share their experiences, and address the impact that stereotypes have on us all, by engaging in a deeper analysis of the issues affecting families and communities.

Though this is a brief example, the space for reflecting on lived experiences allows for critical thinking and a shared learning experience that is active. When the trainings become personal, youth continue their path towards becoming more conscious and socially transformative, and can embrace their power to create individual and social change. Future trainings will focus on data interpretation, dissemination of findings back to our local communities, and CLRJ will train and prepare the YAG and ELAYO to use these research findings to educate policymakers.

### Local and National Activities of the Youth Advisory Group

In addition to the trainings that were for the personal and professional growth of the team-in-training and the YAG, formal meetings tailored specifically for YAG members also took place on a regular basis. These meetings differed from the trainings in that they were a private space for youth and their facilitators, or they focused on particular activities of contribution to the work of ELAYO. One YAG member perfectly stated what our goal for the group was: "...the YAG is a really safe place where everyone can speak their mind and not be judged." The partnership built between the team-in-training, the youth advisory group and CLRJ is one that allowed for *confianza*. The English translation of *confianza* is "confidence," but really it is much more meaningful—akin to mutual trust and support. When youth and adults can work together with *confianza*, it is then that positive transformation, development and empowerment can occur for youth and adults alike.

Some examples of the work the YAG conducted included: (1) project name development (i.e., ELAYO) and the ELAYO logo and color scheme; (2) serving as a mock focus group to provide feedback on the focus-group guide and provide critique to focus-group facilitators on their facilitation styles and skills; and (3) learning how to conduct interviews and focus groups. In the process of data collection, YAG members provided ideas for the recruitment of non-parenting and parenting youth for participation in focus groups, and also spoke with their networks about ELAYO to identify appropriate community-based organizations in the San Francisco Bay area for collaboration in recruitment of youth participants and—sometimes—space for conducting said interviews and focus groups.

One of the YAG members additionally became a part of the research team that conducted interviews and focus groups with non-parenting Latina/o youth. The interviews and focus groups were planned in a manner such that two team members were present, allowing for the YAG member to be accompanied by someone who had previously engaged in data collection. Though the roles of note-taker and facilitator alternated, the opportunity for observation and engagement remained. Experiencing the data collection process from set-up to debriefing afterwards allowed for a rich discussion that delved into what research looks like in the field during data collection. The need for additional ELAYO team members during data collection proved invaluable in allowing for greater opportunities for YAG members to engage in the process, demystifying research. In the future, meetings will include YAG input on the research

analysis, interpretation of findings, and participation in the dissemination of findings and policy advocacy efforts.

Throughout our meetings, YAG members expressed an interest in being involved in every capacity of the ELAYO Project. One way ELAYO was able to expand its capacity and provide further opportunities for youth engagement and activism was by introducing Project Connect, a collaboration between four of the six grantees of the Ford Foundation Youth Sexuality, Reproductive Health and Rights Initiative. As described by the coordinator, Project Connect was a means by which youth activists connected with other youth activists across the country who were addressing issues of youth, rights and sexuality. First, we worked directly with our YAG, with curriculum provided by Project Connect, to create a two-minute video on youth participation with ELAYO. The process of creating this video far surpassed our expectations of collaboration and teamwork between the youth and staff. Though it employed a curriculum developed by Truth Sarita Consulting for Project Connect to provide the framework for video production, the actual product was entirely youth-led. The brainstorming phase was a collaborative effort by all youth involved. Three ELAYO staff were present for support and advice, but none was sought. The overall production process was safe, inviting, fun and supportive. In fact, when reminded that the scheduled end of the meeting time was quickly approaching, one youth remarked, "We don't have anywhere to go. It doesn't matter if we stay late." The message was clear: community had been built. A support system had been established. The youth took great care and pride in the production of knowledge in the form of an introductory video, "We are ELAYO." (See the video here: <http://healthequity.sfsu.edu/our-work/research/elayo.html>).

By sharing the videos they had created, youth were able to get a sense of the varying projects taking place throughout the country within the scope of the Ford Foundation's initiative. Not only did this further promote a sense of community within the differing youth groups, but it allowed for better understanding of different topics being addressed, creating another opportunity for dialogue. The following is an example of a response the Youth Advisory Group received,

Hey San Francisco,

Your movement on empowering Latin@ youth really touched us considering most of our communities are Latin@ as well! The safe space you guys provide remind us of our mission and made us feel as if you can make others feel completely comfortable.

With Love,

Tucson Youth Poetry Slam

ELAYO staff and youth also worked together to create a Resistance Zine. Through the curriculum, youth learned about Zines, allowing for the creation of their own contribution that shows how youth are addressing the topics within the scope of each individual Project. According to the Project Connect Zine Curriculum, a Zine is defined



as a “self-published, small circulation, non-commercial booklet or magazine, usually produced by one person or a few individuals ... Zines are personal and idiosyncratic.” The Zine consists of two pages from each of the four participating groups, then assembled into one product and given to the youth to distribute to their communities. In the production phase of the Zine, the youth worked diligently and asked each other questions and conducted web research about colonization, history, geography while also discussing their current educational transitions and aspirations. One can imagine the additional possibilities for creativity, dialogue and the sharing of expertise that arises from such an exciting collaboration.

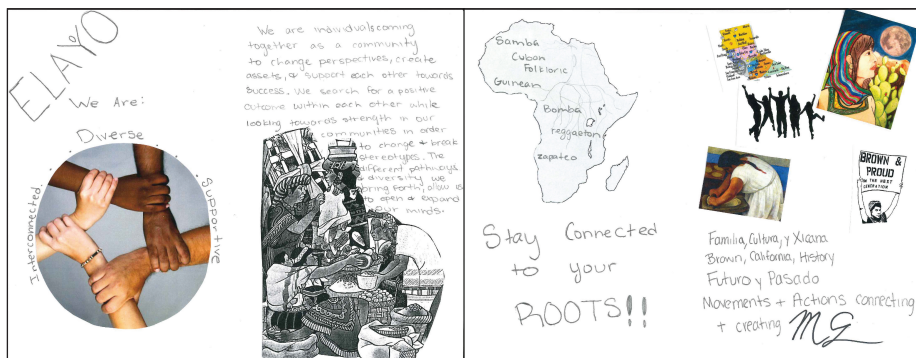


Figure 3. The final Zine from ELAYO

One dynamic that was established early in the YAG meetings, and reinforced by the ELAYO alternative educational pipeline, is the bidirectional transfer of knowledge. ELAYO staff consistently checked in with each other to ensure there was not a mere “transference of existing knowledge” to students, but rather a dialogue honoring “the student’s comprehension of their daily life experiences,” the foundation for liberation education (Shor and Freire 67). From this reflection on life experiences, not only was critical thinking promoted, but so too was the act of learning from one’s own lived experience. Students learned to deconstruct reality, becoming more conscious and empowered to make individual and social change. We realized that the students had achieved this level of consciousness and empowerment when one YAG member stated, “(I can) take this knowledge and use it when discussing about politics in school and outside of school...” In essence, this is the power of ELAYO; YAG members demonstrated incredible aptitude to not only express themselves, but to act as agents of change.

## Self-Evaluation and Reflections of Youth Participants

*I am an open-minded and family oriented Latina. I am a part of ELAYO because I want to change the perspective of Latinos.*

—YAG member



Figure 4.

Throughout the course of the first year, the YAG members were asked to engage in one evaluation and three written reflections. The evaluation included questions such as: What made you decide to participate in the Youth Advisory Group?

How do you feel about the trainings and meetings so far? Is there something else you would like to learn that we haven’t covered yet in the meetings or trainings? What are your goals and aspirations for the future? Have you considered being a researcher or exploring the topics we have covered in the meetings and trainings in the future?

These self-evaluations and reflections were a way for the ELAYO staff to provide a venue for YAG members to express anything they may have not had the opportunity or felt comfortable to say during the meetings. As time went on, and our time together grew, their reflections began to change. The youth participants felt as though they could simply speak their minds, so that everyone in the group knew how they felt. As one YAG member stated, “It’s really fun for me because I get to meet new people and just say what’s on my mind and it’s a good experience for me because I’m usually a shy person but after a while it goes away.” At times, their reflections and self-evaluations became a group discussion. In a matter of months, we went from being complete strangers to viewing each other as family.

Through these writings and discussions, we were able to learn how the topics YAG members discussed gave them the confidence to be leaders amongst their peers and within their communities. They also expressed a desire to continue to learn about research, and their interest in attending a university for undergraduate and graduate work grew. At present, the ELAYO staff feels that we have been able to provide a safe space for the youth to grow and to be themselves. The exploration of these topics has informed the YAG process and will continue to inform how ELAYO moves forward, with input from all team members.

## Lessons Learned

Though the ELAYO Project is not over, we have already noticed that time constraints pose challenges with respect to both scheduling meetings and exploring content areas. Through the self-evaluations and reflections, one YAG member expressed, “I love them (trainings)! Sometimes I wish there was more time for more in-depth conversations and to look at topics concerning us.” Given the age range of the YAG members

and core ELAYO team members, the demands on each individual's time differ significantly. While some hold traditional workday schedules, others go to school or have internships in addition to working, limiting their time for extracurricular activities and collaboration with ELAYO. In addition, we have seen that the lack of a consistent date/ time for gatherings and trainings contributes to this scheduling challenge. Once data collection began, the travel necessary for field research became a limiting factor for scheduling meetings and maintaining contact with the YAG. Unfortunately, this coincided with an unforeseen change in staffing, contributing to a lack of continuity. Having a few months between meetings required re-establishing the group dynamic. We have noted this challenge and are working towards both creating more time for in-depth discussions during meetings, as well as continuing to engage YAG members and core team members, alike, to create a more structured meeting day and time. Furthermore, staying connected through the use of social media, especially Facebook, has been a key communication tool and lesson learned. In fact, we have found that emails and phone calls are the least effective forms of communication with the YAG members, while a Facebook message or text usually elicits an immediate response.

When reflecting on the life of ELAYO, we conclude that the largest lesson learned for adult programmers has been the importance of youth voice. We have heard in resounding unison, from the youth, that no one had posed "these questions" to them before. This points to the lack of space in traditional social settings or educational spheres for conversations about sexual and reproductive decision-making and its impact on education among youth, and for deeper reflection upon the structural factors that they deal with on a daily basis. The longing for a platform for these discussions is palpable among youth. The ensuing discussions that arise about social justice are organic, stemming from observations and lived experience. It is noteworthy that, when given the opportunity, youth are eager to amplify their voices, which are filled with incredible insight and curiosity: "When youth have a voice within contexts that affect them, opportunities for positive youth development emerge" (Serido, Borden and Perkins 45).

Below, we include the reflections from one of our YAG members, who helped formulate this paper and who wanted to make sure she could express—in her own words—the major impacts that serving as a YAG member and participating in the ELAYO-related activities had on her personal and educational aspirations.



Figure 5.

## ¡Presente! : A Youth Advisory Group Member Reflects on Lessons Learned

It has been a great opportunity working in the ELAYO project. What this project did was bring people interested in the Latino population together, and use their experiences to help influence a study. This was not as easy as it sounds. What I really enjoyed was that ELAYO first and foremost created a space where everyone felt comfortable. They did this by creating a location where "the door was always open". Their offices, or the main room where we met, were very inviting. You would immediately feel welcomed. They made getting to know us a priority. They were very helpful in creating ice breakers at the beginning of every meeting, not only to help them get to know us, but for us to get to know each other as a group.

The coordinators would also always find time to remind us of the group rules to ensure that we were all aware of the space we are trying to create. This also helped for us to become trusting of one another and know that we were not going to be attacked or judged. Feeling safe and comfortable was very important when we participated in the activities with CLRJ, because we were exposing our thoughts and opinions to the team. It felt great to know that although some did not agree, our beliefs were respected.

I always felt part of the team when they invited me to join the workshops. It gave me an opportunity to become more informed on a subject I had little knowledge about. The information provided during the presentations was relevant to me, because it was about my people, my culture. During those workshops, the coordinators were always open to questions. They understood that for some of us, it was the first time being exposed to information that pertained to our population.

The ELAYO team was inclusive of everyone, no matter what their background is. It did so by having workshops on what questions they should ask when addressing topics such as education, sexuality, and sex education. They also included us in the naming of the project. They took our input in what the name for the study should be. It made us feel like our help and input was needed to keep the project running.

For many of the members, having been a part of the workshops and creating interview questions, really got them interested in working as researchers. This study served as a gateway for youth to want to do research on other social issues that affected them directly. Exposing youth to this type of work had a positive spin.

I went into the project as a Raza studies major at SFSU, wanting to learn more about issues affecting the Latino population. I had heard about the ELAYO project through one of the female members. She told me I would be part of a study that aims to find factors affecting decision making of Latino youth. I thought it'd be great exposure to the sexual reproductive needs of Latinos. What I got was something greater. Through the project I learned how a research project is started, because we were a part of it since the beginning. I also learned what goes into interview questions. I was given the opportunity to conduct interviews myself. This project helped me figure out where I want to go after graduating. I found that I wanted to work more in public policy, especially in policy affecting the Latino community. ELAYO has played a strong role in shaping our minds in breaking barriers and fight for social justice.

## Next Steps for the Youth Advisory Group

*We are individuals coming together as a community to change perspectives, create assets, and support each other towards success.*

—YAG member, describing their purpose as a group

ELAYO recognizes the already-significant contribution the YAG members have put forth in the project. YAG member participation in the first year contributed to the ELAYO name, logo, research tools, and a unique lens inspired by Latino youth voice. The project would be quite different without the Youth Advisory Group. In fact, the YAG members contributed to an incredibly rich conversation that very clearly countered the current deficit-based framework for youth health, demonstrating incredible intelligence, insight, resilience and—above all—a desire to continue making positive contributions to their community. Allowing youth voices to inform academic and policy efforts will ensure that a shift towards an asset-based framework is achieved.

As integral as the YAG has been to the success of this project thus far, the team-in-training model, with the alternative educational pipeline at its core, has been equally influential in the growth and development of the YAG members. Their participation in the research process has allowed them to acquire skills in research methods and has deepened their knowledge within the fields of sexual and reproductive health and rights, Latino populations, and educational equity. Moreover, ELAYO has supported the pursuit of higher education, and fostered career interests in the social science and sexuality realm.

Furthermore, the impact of our alternative educational pipeline has proven influential throughout the course of the project, as evidenced by the trajectory of our YAG members through their academic endeavors. All of our high school YAG members have since graduated from high school and pursued higher education. Two high school YAG members will be attending four-year universities beginning in the fall of 2013, after receiving offers from multiple universities. The remaining high school YAG members will continue their education at a community college, with the hopes of soon transferring to four-year universities.

Consistent with the high-school YAG members' educational trajectory, all of our undergraduate YAG members have since graduated from San Francisco State University with their bachelor's degrees. One of the undergraduate YAG members is pursuing a graduate degree, and has been admitted to a Masters of Public Health Program beginning Fall 2013. The other undergraduate members have entered the workforce to gain experiential knowledge, and they express the desire to pursue a graduate degree in the future.

One of our top priorities for the next phase of ELAYO is to ensure that each team member's individual educational goals are supported. Goal setting and mentoring for each person, regardless of her/his educational path, will lead all of those involved in ELAYO to become more proactive about each person's individual and collective educational aspirations. Together we will continue to access the mentoring resources we have created within ELAYO's team of adults and youth, particularly reaching out to the YAG members transitioning to new educational or work environments, and providing guidance and support.

## Closing Remarks

*...I am a part of ELAYO because I believe in empowering Latino youth.*

—YAG member

ELAYO: Empower Latino Youth has been an immeasurable opportunity for many of those involved. Honoring youth voice, being part of a collaborative process with California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) and allowing for mentorship to occur through an alternative educational pipeline are some methods that have made ELAYO a unique project. Though the research process is nearly over, the learning process is still in its infancy. As findings from the research emerge, the continued partnership with CLRJ and the YAG continue to inform the interpretation of these findings, along with influencing the discussion around themes and appropriate courses of action through policy advocacy.

Protecting the sexual health and rights of our youth should be a priority for parents, teachers, mentors, and policymakers alike if we are truly invested in the future of our nation. Engaging Latino youth to help develop creative and effective ways to improve policies and programs that impact their own sexual and reproductive health and rights provides a necessary model for transforming social norms, reducing negative discourse, and elevating youth voices. To follow ELAYO: Empower Latino Youth please visit: <http://healthequity.sfsu.edu/our-work/research/elayo.html>; <https://www.facebook.com/elayoproject>; <https://twitter.com/ElayoProject>.

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## Endnotes

1. The term Latino will be used in this paper to include persons of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race or gender. If we mean to specify by gender, we will still use the English-language adjective Latino for either Latino male or Latino female as opposed to the Spanish-language gender-based nouns of Latino and Latina to avoid confusion of terminology.

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