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*YOUTH PARTICIPATION  
IN EVALUATION AND RESEARCH*

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Urban Youth Building Community:  
Social Change and Participatory Research  
in Schools, Homes,  
and Community-Based Organizations

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**SUMMARY.** “Urban” youth—a euphemism for underserved, poor, marginalized, ethnic minority youth—can be active participants in community change. Countering the predominant image of these youth as disengaged or troubled, this article describes three projects that engage urban youth in community change through participatory research. The authors share their experiences as adult allies on these projects and examine four lessons learned, addressing: (1) the importance of positionality; (2) the role of adult allies in youth-led projects; (3) the creation of safe spaces; and (4) the building of trust and relationships. They conclude that urban youth can become a vital resource for community transformation. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Urban youth, participatory research, social/community change, youth leadership, race/class/gender/culture, adult allies

### INTRODUCTION

Increasingly scholars and policy makers are paying attention to the role of meaningful youth participation (O’Donoghue et al., 2002; McLaughlin et al., 1994), youth civic engagement (Youniss et al., 1997, 2002), and marginalized youth of color organizing for social justice (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Our recent experiences as adult allies in efforts to engage youth in social change have helped confirm our long-held beliefs that “urban” youth—a euphemism for underserved, poor, marginalized, ethnic minority youth—can be important actors in shaping their schools and communities.<sup>1</sup> Despite a dominant discourse that frames urban youth as disengaged or troubled, our experiences suggest that these youth, if given the opportunity, can become competent citizens (Checkoway et al., 2003), active participants, and powerful agents of social change.

As former elementary and high school teachers, we hold a special stake not only in the realization of such youth-driven work, but also in the maintenance of a dialogue on this topic. Given the persistent failure of public institutions like schools to serve “inner-city” youth (Anyon, 1997; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Fine, 1991; Noguera, 1996, 2003; Oakes, 1985; Payne, 1984), the promise of a better future for these

youths' long-neglected and underrepresented communities needs to be re-directed toward the valuable human resources already present in such neighborhoods. The experiences and knowledge of African American, Asian and Pacific Islander, Chicana, Latino, white, immigrant, transnational, and minority youth can be a vital source in the transformation of their schools, homes, and the community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with them.

In this article, we investigate the role of participatory research as a model of engaging *with* youth for social change. We share the work we have carried out with three different groups of youth in northern California: PARTY—a multi-ethnic school-based group of students transforming curriculum at an alternative high school; TNL—a small group of Latinas conducting research in both their U.S. and Mexican “homes” on children’s transnational experiences; and AYPAL—a pan-ethnic Asian and Pacific Islander CBO focused on youth organizing and social justice. We offer an illustration of these projects and some of their results, as well as a close look at the lessons learned through our participation as adult allies. Additionally, we examine our roles as university-based researchers *and* active participants in youth-led efforts for community change through the model of participatory research with youth.

### ***PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND YOUTH***

The purpose of participatory research is not merely to describe and interpret social reality, but to radically change it. (Maguire, 1987, p. 28)

We define participatory research as an alternative paradigm of knowledge production in which groups who are adversely affected by a social problem undertake collective study to understand and address it (Hall, 1992, 1993; Maguire, 1987, 1993; Park, 1999; Tandon, 1981; Vio Grossi, 1981). Participatory research is not just a “method” involving participation by research subjects: it “presents people as researchers in pursuit of answers to questions of daily struggle and survival; breaks down the distinction between researcher and researched . . . and returns to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing” (Hall, 1992, p. 16).

Participatory research is usually carried out by people from marginalized communities such as the poor, immigrants, women, or people of color. It is based on the assumption that people are capable of

understanding the social forces that shape the conditions of their lives. Research questions speak to the needs of the group because they emerge from their shared experiences. University-based researchers may participate as allies and contributors, but community-based members retain control over each phase of the research process, from developing research questions and methods, to interpreting and using the results as the basis for collective action.

Although we often do not think about age as an axis of oppression like race, gender or class, youth in fact represent a marginalized group in society (Laz, 1998; Males, 1999; Minkler & Robertson, 1991). Despite youth's marginalized status, the most widely-circulated texts on participatory research tend to focus on projects involving adults (e.g., Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1992; Maguire, 1987; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall, & Jackson, 1993). Thus, the distinct opportunities and challenges of doing participatory research with youth have not been sufficiently explored in the literature. This article seeks to amplify the literature on participatory research by focusing on the role of urban youth in these efforts. Our experiences confirm that youth-led participatory research can be a powerful way to engage urban youth as active participants in school and community change.

### ***THREE YOUTH PROJECTS***

The youth-driven projects we have worked with have evolved and taken root in different social settings—a high school, homes, and CBOs. Yet the three projects are similar in two important ways: first, all three were conceived via an established relationship between adult allies and youth. In other words, much dialogue and community-building took place organically in the spaces we adult allies shared with the youth prior to initiating the research. Secondly, in all three projects, urban youth and their worldviews and concerns were at the center of the research and learning experience—unlike much of the youth's own public schooling experiences. Below we describe in more detail each project, pointing toward the powerful learning and social-change experiences created in these out-of-school settings.

#### ***Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY)***

The Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY) involves five recent graduates and current students from Jackson High

School<sup>2</sup> (ages 16-19), and myself (Nygreen),<sup>3</sup> a former Jackson teacher and university-based researcher (age 27).<sup>4</sup> Our shared community is a public alternative high school serving predominantly low-income youth of color who have been labeled “at-risk.” Together we embarked on a participatory research project aimed at making change within the school. Our team represents diverse ethnic backgrounds including African American, Filipino, Latino, and white.

In the first year, PARTY met weekly to conduct collaborative research on social issues affecting the school community. In these meetings we engaged in group reflection and dialogue about social and political issues, learned new facts and information, shared personal experiences, and built relationships across age, gender, race, and class. We discussed how social issues and news events affected our lives and the lives of Jackson students. In order to learn more about how social issues affected the lives and education of Jackson students, we conducted a school-wide survey and carried out audio-taped interviews with school staff, teachers, and students.

The next year we applied our findings by developing and teaching a high school course at Jackson High. The purpose of our course was to inspire Jackson students to think critically about social justice issues and engage in action for social change, as one PARTY member explained, “I want to see people who have a positive spin on society and get out there and become *part* of society . . . contribute to what’s going on in your country, . . . contribute to things being better.” Our course was approved by the principal and social studies teacher, and we gained permission to teach a weekly, 80-minute lesson in the U.S. government class. PARTY members developed lesson plans and taught the class, employing dialogue-based pedagogy to address topics like police brutality, prisons, and environmental racism.

For the PARTY participants, teaching the weekly government class was a concrete action for social justice in our school community. In designing and teaching a high school class, PARTY members took on traditionally adult roles, gaining confidence and leadership skills, as one participant reflected, “I gained a lot of strength being in this group. . . . I realize that I can really be confident. . . . I’ve gained a lot more power in myself. And I can articulate a lot better.”

### ***Transnational Latinas (TNL)***

Transnational Latinas (TNL) has been working together for over three years. We are four Latinas—three youth (ages 13-16) and a gradu-

ate student (age 29) whose parents emigrated from small rural communities in México.<sup>5</sup> Utilizing participatory research, we have attempted to document and understand the lives of transnational immigrant children and families, ultimately sharing this information through a co-authored children's book.

I (Sánchez) first met two of the youth through work at a community-based family literacy program; the third youth I met through a yearly pen-pal letter program in a local school district. Upon learning that all four of us were traveling to México to visit family, we came together as a group to share our pictures and experiences on these yearly trips. For the first year of our project, we simply got to know each other more, to understand our families' ties to México, and explore the meaning this had in our lives as transnational second-generation female immigrants. We had often shared how our trips to México, language, and close-knit immigrant culture were rendered invisible in school. This led to our decision to write a children's book on what it was like growing up in two homes spread across an international border.

The youth and I conducted research on this type of life through: (1) dialogue, (2) interviews and field notes with transnational families in both the U.S. and México, and (3) a collection of documents, such as home videos, pictures, writings, and other items exchanged in transnational families. Throughout this process, our families in both California and parts of México were excellent supporters and resources. We took their knowledge as members of transnational communities and created a meta-narrative, as seen through a child's eyes, of what life is like in these places.

Finally, we spent the last twelve months of our project writing and illustrating our book. We printed the first 80 copies with money we received from a small grant at a local copy store and distributed these to our families, at teacher conferences, local libraries, and day care centers. Most recently, the same CBO—where two of the youth still work—connected us to a children's book publisher that is now working with all four of us on national distribution.

### ***Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL)***

The Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) is a pan-ethnic community-based youth organizing collaborative made up of six Asian and Pacific Islander (API) youth groups including Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Laotian,

Mien, Samoan, Tongan, and Vietnamese youth, ages 14-18. As an organization, AYPAL works toward accomplishing three overarching goals with their youth: building youth-led community groups, promoting youth civic participation and community leadership, and promoting self and cross-cultural understandings.

Unlike PARTY and TNL, AYPAL was not initiated as a research project. Rather, I (Kwon) became involved in an existing CBO's effort to engage youth in civic participation. I was immediately drawn to the politically active group and became a volunteer youth community organizer. Over time, I built authentic relationships with the staff and youth of AYPAL and became integrated as a member of the organization. I shared in the analyses, actions, and reflections organized by AYPAL and my role as a researcher has always been secondary.

Although AYPAL does not overtly identify as employing the principles of participatory research, they understand that knowledge production and solutions come from those who are adversely affected by social problems. Each year, AYPAL youth are engaged in a youth-led community organizing campaign that addresses a problem in their community that stems from their personal experiences. Campaigns include organizing for an ethnic studies curriculum to be taught in high schools; creating district-wide policy changes to address school police harassment, to unlock bathrooms during passing periods, and to require teachers to hand out written grading policies. AYPAL also convinced local city council members to increase programming and staff at neighborhood recreation centers and worked with a local congresswoman to sponsor a bill into congress that would end deportations of legal immigrants.

### ***LESSONS LEARNED***

In this section we discuss four of the major lessons we learned as adult allies with PARTY, TNL, and AYPAL, which we believe best represent our shared experiences, and speak most succinctly to the power of these youth-led grassroots efforts.

#### ***Recognizing Race, Class, Gender, and Culture***

In much of the literature on youth and community participation, the role of race, class, gender, and culture is often glossed. Though some authors have referred to it in describing the work of organizations that see

youth as “competent citizens” or “community builders” (Checkoway et al., 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998), we propose that more youth practitioners and researchers interrogate the issue of positionality—by which we mean the relative power, privilege, and position of all group members. Indeed, we have found that those who work with urban youth—or those who write about others who do—need to incorporate a more extensive discussion on how these social constructs play a critical and material role in working with communities of color. This applies to the role of adult allies as well as the overall youth-led projects.

In two of our projects, TNL and AYPAL, youth and adult allies shared similarities of race, immigration status, and social class. These common experiences facilitated initial entry into many of the immigrant youth’s communities as well as their recruitment into the projects. For example, Kwon believes that her acceptance into AYPAL was easily facilitated by her position as a 1.5-generation Korean American. Additionally, the shared experiences and identities of the youth and adult allies helped reduce struggles of power and conflict within the groups.

These common experiences were also central factors in the way that TNL and AYPAL were organized and the type of work embarked upon. For example, the main goal of TNL—researching and writing about the way children experience “home” and transnationalism—was very much a central aspect of all TNL members’ lives. Sánchez recognized the role of culture, language, and family in her work with TNL and immediately sought support of the project by the young women’s families through face-to-face interaction. Maintaining relationships with youth’s families in their home language enhanced the project. The cultural value of family, as experienced by Mexican immigrants, was also a remarkable resource in traveling to México and staying with relatives of both the youth and adult ally during the initial phase of data collection. AYPAL also recognizes the importance of young people’s racial identity as second-generation Asian and Pacific Islander youth. Through workshops and cultural arts projects, youth link their racial and pan-ethnic API identities to a powerful political identity. This emphasis on youth’s cultural and political history is often neglected in schools.

Yet in many youth projects, such as PARTY, the adult allies do not share the youth’s racial, class, or gender backgrounds. Because PARTY participants initially knew Nygreen as their teacher, they often viewed her as an authority figure rather than an ally, partner, or colleague. Contributing to the perception of Nygreen as *teacher* is the fact that she, like most of the teachers at Jackson High, is white while the students at Jackson High are predominantly African American (approximately 75%). It

therefore became important to construct a shared sense of community within PARTY and to address relations of power and privilege within the group.

The lesson learned for adult allies in youth-led projects is the importance of positionality as well as the adult's institutional relationship with youth. Adult allies must be conscious of the ways that race, class, gender, and culture can shape their relationship with youth. We must take into account both our formal, institutionalized relationship with youth, as well as the perceptions that youth have of the adult on the basis of this relationship.

### *Strengthening Adults as Allies*

Leading but not leading, is this possible? The challenge of leading without controlling is central in participatory research (Maguire, 1987, 1993). Ideally, participatory research projects employ democratic decision-making processes in which all members of the group share equal power (Gaventa, 1993; Hall, 1992). In reality, however, intra-group power inequalities and conflicts often emerge, and these frequently reflect larger societal relations of power and privilege (Maguire, 1993; LeCompte, 1995). In our experience, we have found that power inequalities between youth and adult allies are often masked through discourses such as "youth-led" and "youth-initiated" when in practice, these projects are heavily directed by adult participation. These struggles are especially pertinent because wider societal power relations between adults and youth or teachers and students are well established (Laz, 1998; Males, 1999; Minkler & Robertson, 1991). We address some of these issues of power in our roles as adult allies.

In PARTY, an important contradiction became evident once the youth began teaching the government class at Jackson High: here was a *youth-led* project in an *adult-controlled* institutional context, a public high school, where the parameters of possible action are defined by adults. This contradiction came to the fore when PARTY members, while teaching their class, brought students outside to play basketball as part of their relationship-building pedagogy. After class, the PARTY members were reprimanded for failing to get permission from the teacher for this activity. Thus, although the weekly government class was "youth-led," the PARTY youth were empowered only within the limitations of pre-existing (adult-defined) school rules, policies and procedures. These were in essence a set of "non-negotiables" that youth were bound to obey but could not influence.

For TNL, the opposite was true; the group was able to work on its own timeline with little or no institutional constraints. However, struggles between youth leadership and adult control still arose. As a former teacher, Sánchez struggled to maintain a balance of encouragement and guidance without domination. She found that just keeping silent more often during meetings granted others more time to think, participate, and express themselves as well as gain further ownership of the project. In addition, discussions of non-negotiables often came up in the course of traveling to México or to present at various out-of-town conferences. At other times, Sánchez offered her advice on some of the ways children's literature was used in the classroom by bilingual teachers. It was helpful to recognize that some adult knowledge *is* important in working with youth, and it would be disingenuous to not bring that forward.

AYPAL's adult leaders hold this belief as well. They understand that youth need to be guided by the expertise and knowledge that comes from their experiences as adult community organizers. One adult staff's comment shows how to find the balance between adult direction and youth ownership:

If you let youth organize whatever they want to organize, they might organize a picnic or a dance. (Laughs) . . . It is hard finding the right balance, right? Because ultimately you do want the youth to feel it and they should make all the important decisions. But then you also want to recognize that . . . I *do* know more about organizing than they do. And there has to be some process where, you know, my wisdom and the wisdom of the other staff can be passed along to the youth and then the youth can make decisions.

Youth also see the role of adult coordinators in AYPAL as mentors, providing guidance for youth-initiated and youth-led community organizing projects. One youth explained:

Like in AYPAL, you have the coordinator that teaches you. But the site coordinator is not really like your teacher, but they're just there to support you. Like they have us doing our own agenda, hosting the meetings with different youth, it's youth ownership. Like in high school, they [the teachers] boss you around and tell you what to do. . . .

Through our work with PARTY, TNL and AYPAL, we gleaned important lessons about the role of adult allies in youth-led projects. First,

we found that non-negotiables are almost always present in work with youth, even if they are unstated. We propose that adult allies be upfront with youth about any non-negotiables or adult-led activities from the outset of the project and to let youth come up with their own set of non-negotiables as well. Secondly, we found that adult allies often have important knowledge to share with youth and should work to achieve a balance that ensures both youth leadership and adult contribution. Moreover, equality and shared power can be achieved through the mutual respect and trust built in strong working and personal relationships. Rather than glossing over these issues of power and leadership, we propose that those who work with youth address them and those who often write about the concept of “youth-leadership” honestly explore its limits across projects and institutional contexts.

### *Creating Safe Spaces*

As urban schools increasingly become oppressive and negative social environments for youth (Devine, 1996; Ferguson, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Kretovics & Nussel, 1993), community and city recreational programs geared for teens are phased out due to budget cuts, and public spaces such as malls ban youth through restrictive measures (Collins & Kearns, 2001; Jeffs & Smith, 1996), many youth are finding it difficult to find safe and alternative places to interact meaningfully with each other. In the projects we have worked with, special attention was paid to the need for such spaces.

For example, AYPAL recognizes the importance of creating a community environment free from the controls of schools and other public venues. Yet this CBO also realizes that such community spaces must be culturally and ethnically supportive environments where youth can build personal and leadership skills, enrich their sense of ethnic and cultural history, and gain political community organizing skills. Often in participatory research, this notion of space is addressed in terms of creating supportive venues for dialogue, such as the Highlander Center’s well known method of sitting in circles in rocking chairs (Adams, 1975); however, there is less documentation on how this type of space can be created and sustained in an ethnic-specific context.

Both PARTY and TNL learned the importance of their physical meeting space. When PARTY changed their meeting venue from the sterile and “school-like” setting of a university classroom to the more comfortable and open home of one of its members, it produced a dramatic and positive shift in the ways dialogue and meetings took place,

cohering the group further. Weekly PARTY meetings were a “pedagogical” space as members began reunions with a discussion of “news stories,” sharing any newspaper, news magazine, or internet printout they found most salient or meaningful to their lives. These weekly discussions—the most dynamic and fruitful parts of each meeting—ultimately were used as the model when the team started teaching the government class at Jackson High. PARTY took the notion of “safe space” and dialogue into the classroom.

Likewise, TNL moved from meeting in a community center’s conference room to a member’s home, and later, changed the weekly meeting time from a weekday afternoon to a Saturday morning. In both cases, the changes produced positive results. Considering that middle-school and high-school youth often have very segmented days—jam packed with school, family, and work responsibilities—moving meeting times to Saturdays provided more time, less rush, and better relationship-building that not only gelled the group but improved the project’s work considerably.

In all three projects, an important component of the work entailed simply creating a context appropriate space for youth to come together and dialogue other about common concerns. The lesson learned was that building and fostering these spaces is an important aspect of participatory research with youth.

### ***Building Trusting Relationships***

Participatory research projects depend on authentic relationships and trust whether they involve adults, youth, or both (LeCompte, 1995; Maguire, 1993). Although the literature on participatory research is clear about the role of relationship-building, there is less written about how to do this specifically with *youth*, and in particular, between youth and their adult allies. In our work with youth, we found it was critical to incorporate the youth’s ways of socializing and to engage in fun activities together, to build in supports in the ways a “family” might. Here we offer some of the measures each project undertook, or had in place, to achieve this.

In AYPAL and TNL, similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of youth and adults facilitate the development of close and trusting relationships. In AYPAL, the youth frequently refer to the organization as a “family.” This process of relationship-building is actively supported by AYPAL; many adult staff grew up in the same neighborhoods and attended the same public schools as the youth, allowing both parties to de-

velop a keener understanding of each other's experiences. TNL also found that the common backgrounds of the youth and adult ally were important for creating a sense of "family" in the group.

Both TNL and PARTY found that the in-between spaces and time spent not officially meeting became as important as the work itself, such as the car drives to and from meetings, visiting each other's homes, and going to different places to eat. These non-official sites became critical places for members' reflections on the project's progress. In TNL, getting to know each other greatly informed the writing of their book because it was about their own lives as immigrants and transnationals. The TNL youth and adult ally offered each other advice and support on other milestone hurdles as well, such as college attendance, career paths, and romantic relationships. Their work demonstrates that participatory research can achieve much more than just research.

In PARTY, the group learned to be more open and flexible in carrying out the weekly meeting agenda. While PARTY members routinely and collectively developed their agendas at the start of each meeting, they discovered that when the group "strayed" from meeting items, these conversations were often the most important for learning and relationship building. Occasionally during meetings, the television or radio would be on. Rather than take away from the group's productivity, these practices helped the group develop relationships and friendships that ultimately strengthened their work together.

In all three of these projects, building relationships of trust was one of the most important aspects of the work. The lesson we learned is the importance of prioritizing relationship-building *throughout* these projects, and not to relegate it to a few "ice-breaker" activities upfront. As a result, taking the time to build and nurture relationships within the group must be prioritized as a central, not peripheral, aspect of these projects.

## CONCLUSION

This article has presented three projects and their attempts to engage youth in school, community, and social change through participatory research. As our "lessons learned" suggest, it is important to consider the ways youth identify in terms of race, class, gender, and culture, while the role of adult allies in youth-led projects should be interrogated. Additionally, the creation of safe spaces and relationships of trust are central to participatory research projects and particularly those involving urban youth. Our collective work shows that, given the oppor-

tunity, youth are capable of identifying issues and problems they face in their communities and lives; the youth in PARTY, TNL, and AYPAL are active participants in social change.

It is important to create more opportunities for meaningful youth political engagement. In a time when public schools and other public institutions routinely fail to meet the needs of urban youth, we cannot rely solely on the generosity of policy-makers or the expertise of academics and professionals to make changes in the lives of these youth. We must also draw on the vital resources, knowledge, and talents that are already present within these communities. Urban youth are consistently portrayed as disengaged, apathetic, and deficient. These prevailing images serve, in many ways, to justify the persistent social inequality and marginalization that these youth experience and to stifle possible efforts to engage the power of urban youth in meaningful projects for social change. We believe it is important not only to build more such efforts, but also to maintain a scholarly dialogue on this topic. Such a dialogue can encourage and strengthen future youth-driven projects while challenging popular representations of urban youth.

As university-based researchers who recognize our own privileged positions, we hope to spark continued discussion and exploration of ways we can do research *with* communities rather than *on* them. We may consider ourselves to be organic adult allies, but we also recognize we have one foot in the academy as researchers. Our ultimate hope is to bridge academia with community and to push academic research to be more democratic, meaningful, and of service to traditionally underserved communities. One way we have tried to practice these ideals is through participatory research: projects that combine our scholarly research with active engagement in local projects for school and community change. While we are encouraged by the potential of participatory research as a tool for social change, we also recognize it is not a panacea for the many barriers facing marginalized communities. Participatory research is not always the “best” or most appropriate method for social science research or community change (Tannock, 2004); as Paolo Freire (1993) has written: “Participatory research is no enchanted magic wand that can be waved over the culture of silence, suddenly restoring the desperately needed voice that has been forbidden to rise and to be heard” (p. ix). Even so, we contend that participatory research can be powerful. As we have seen in the work of PARTY, TNL, and AYPAL, change was effected not only in the youth’s schools, homes, and communities, but also for the participants themselves—youth and adults alike.

## NOTES

1. We recognize that “youth” and “adult” are socially-constructed categories whose boundaries are constantly negotiated and shifting. For many purposes, the youth participants in these three projects (ages 13-21) would be considered “adults” and for other purposes we (ages 27-33) would be considered “youth.” However, in the context of this article, we have categorized ourselves as adults, due to our institutional relationships to the other participants as their former classroom teacher, school-sanctioned mentor, volunteer staff, and university-based researchers. We also categorize the other participants as youth in part because that is how they define themselves and how they are defined by others in the various contexts of each of these projects.

2. A pseudonym.

3. Each project description is written in the first-person by the corresponding author.

4. Participants’ ages correspond to the start of the project.

5. Participants’ ages correspond to the start of the project.

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