**YELL (Youth Engaged in Leading and Learning)**

Michele Brock, Director of Community Programs within the School of Social Work, has partnered with Laura Hall and the Michigan Disability Rights Coalition (MDRC) to develop, implement, and evaluate an innovative program entitled Youth Engaged in Leading and Learning. YELL is a curriculum-based leadership program for high school-age youth that includes experiential learning modules on disability history, disability leaders, disability identity and pride, advocacy, leadership, and activism, and it culminates in the implementation of youth-led advocacy projects. Additionally, the curricular content addressed the impact of ableism and internalized ableism and how youth without disabilities can serve as allies. As a core part of YELL, the team facilitated capacity building for inclusion among faculty/staff/service providers, trained adults with disabilities as ambassadors for the program, and supported students in their own advocacy efforts designed to foster inclusion at school.

**Angie Kennedy**

Hello. My name is Angie Kennedy, and I am the Associate Director for Research at the School of Social Work at Michigan State. Welcome to our Research Spotlight, where we profile some of the exciting work being done by School faculty members. Today I am talking with Michele Brock, Director of Community Programs at the School and her community partner on this project, Laura Hall, who is a Program Manager at the Michigan Disability Rights Coalition. Ms. Hall is also a graduate of our MSW program.

Today we are going to talk about the program they created, which is called YELL. YELL stands for Youth Engaged in Leading and Learning. It's a high school-based initiative focused on disability justice. It involves implementing a curriculum created by people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, supporting students to carry out their own disability advocacy efforts designed to foster inclusion, and training people with disabilities to be ambassadors for the program.

YELL has been implemented in four high schools across Michigan. Welcome to both of you, and thank you so much for joining me today…

**Laura Hall**

Thank you. It's nice to be here.

**Michele Brock**

Thank you for having us.

**Angie Kennedy**

…on this beautiful, sunny February afternoon. I'm just going to jump right into talking about this exciting program. First off, can each of you share a little bit about your expertise in this area and what brought you to this work?

**Laura Hall**

I’ve been with MDRC for the past ten years—it wasn't really my intention to work in the disability field, because I have a disability. I have cerebral palsy, so I live these issues every day. But after completing my MSW program, I just kind of found myself drawn to this organization because they were working on issues that were important in my life and MDRC really has a value of hiring people with disabilities and thinking about disability in terms of something that we should be proud of and take pride in and that really speaks to my heart, that disability is something that we take pride in and teach others to take pride in.

**Michele Brock**

This is Michele. I earned my Associate’s degree about 25 years ago now, a bit more. Although I started as a clinician, I quickly moved into program development and in 2004 I was hired by the MSU School of Social Work, and I was brought into that position to develop and administer the Continuing Education program. In 2015, I moved into my current role as the Community Programs Director, of which there are four in the School: Kinship Care Resource Center, Continuing Education Program, FAME and Chance at Childhood. I would say that while disability has always been a part of my life, it really wasn't until the birth of my daughter, who has an intellectual disability, that my experience shifted and my passion for disability justice was really ignited, and it was through this passion and my professional expertise in program development as well as my connection and support of the work of MDRC that I explored an opportunity to partner on YELL, which is a grant-funded project by the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council.

**Angie Kennedy**

Wonderful. So, you both bring such tremendous expertise and skill to this project, which I'm sure really enriched the process and the outcomes. Can you talk a little bit about what the main goal of the YELL program is? What did you most hope to accomplish with the program?

**Michele Brock**

Well, as you mentioned in the introduction, YELL is a curriculum-based leadership program for high school youth that includes experiential learning on disability history leaders, identity, pride, advocacy, leadership, and activism. It culminates in the implementation of youth-led advocacy projects, and it addresses the impact of ableism and internalized ableism, and how youth without disabilities can serve as allies. Alongside this experience, we were inviting faculty, staff, and service providers to build capacity for inclusion in their schools for organizations. The goal of the initiative was to really implement a disability justice model that would change the culture of these spaces in Michigan by giving them some tools they would need in order to create the change.

**Angie Kennedy**

This program seems so innovative to me. I was wondering if you could talk about some of the ways that YELL is unique and how that shaped its impact.

**Laura Hall**

Yeah, I think just in general, the fact that we are focusing on disability as a positive thing and something in which you can take pride, it's innovative in itself because it's so counter to the way that we think about disability, the stigma of ableism that surrounds disability and working-- the role that we have of working with students with and without disability is unique in itself as well.

Typically, if you see programs that contain content based on disability, it's typically aimed toward people with disabilities as a segregated program. So we wanted this program to be inclusive, inclusive of students with and without disabilities. We started talking about advocacy right away when we began the program because we wanted students to know that that would be a central focus of the program was talking about advocacy. It's more about doing and learning the skills to do the advocacy and to make those advocacy efforts. Also talking about things like disability culture, and ableism and internalized ableism and advocacy and self-advocacy at a younger age, I think was unique in this program because typically we don't see students start thinking about those type of skills until they're ready to transition, either from high school to higher education or high school into employment.

And that's really the time when you have to start making those choices and learning about advocacy and engaging in advocacy to deal with the need. So introducing this earlier was innovative in that they would have some of those skills before they reach that point in their lives.

**Angie Kennedy**

Mm hmm.

**Michele Brock**

Yeah. You know, one thing I would like to add to that is a little bit about how we even found our way into the schools, which took some time and relationship development. And it reminds me that something that was innovative about the program is that we went into this project having one idea of what that would look like and then [it] ended up becoming another and then yet another.

So the way in which we found ourselves actually working with schools is to find opportunities when students with and without disabilities were actually together, and that was a challenge in and of itself, because we found that there weren't often spaces where that was occurring. And some schools, for example, common understanding of students with and without disabilities working together are in programs that are called either links programs or peer-to-peer programs, can also have elements of working-- of students with and without disabilities working together.

And so we really had to adapt to what was available, how we could gain access to students and to find schools that were willing to help us find spaces for that to happen. And then that allowed some new opportunities for us to have the conversation about the important topics that the curriculum did.

**Angie Kennedy**

So it sounds like you had to even just build capacity to then build further capacity starting out and to sort of build this foundational inclusion and this connection across students even before you could start to really start to implement that.

That's amazing. Yeah, you've already sort of touched on this, but I wonder if you could talk about the curriculum development. I know that's an important part of the program. So, for example, who was involved in its development and what does it cover?

**Laura Hall**

Sure. So the curriculum was written by people on the YELL team who all have lived experience with disabilities. So we were able to incorporate a lot of our own lived experience and a knowledge of our own journey into disability pride into the curriculum. Topics of the curriculum include kind of an introduction to YELL and an introduction to advocacy and then we talk about disability history, leaders in the disability justice movement, and we talk about identities and the importance of intersectionality and looking at all parts of the person and not just, for example, the identity of having a disability. We talk about ableism and internalized ableism and how they can act as barriers to developing disability pride.

And then we really go into the skills section where we talk about self-advocacy and cause advocacy and what's cause advocacy. We approach it in a couple of different ways. First, looking at how to look at a problem and think about the problem, and who are your allies, and who may be able to support you with a goal that you're trying to achieve.

The second part of advocacy is creating a persuasive argument, so how are you going to create that argument that people should change with you or join you to make a difference. And then we talk about different leadership styles, and how different types of leaders can work together, and some of the challenges of working with people that have [a] different leadership style than you.

So in terms of things that we saw resonated most with students definitely the disability history section is something that we always saw have an impact on students. Essentially, the content was new to them. If you think about it, disability history isn't really something that we're taught in schools, neither is kind of disability culture or disability in general. So when we talked about disability history, a lot of students were saddened and shocked by the acts of oppression that have happened to people in the disability community over the years and never knew about them.

And they also developed pride when they heard about acts of resistance that people with disabilities engaged in over time to create change and create positive advocacy. We also saw that students were really impacted by ableism and internalized ableism and really impacted by the sharing of personal experiences. I remember when we were talking about advocacy one day with students, I shared a story with them about the time in my life where my father was very sick and I don't drive and so I wasn't able to get home to see him on my own. So I had made plans to take a public bus three hours out of my way to see him in Jackson. And the day that I arrived, my bus, the lift on the bus was all rusted and the door wouldn’t open, the lift wouldn't operate, and I couldn't get on the bus and the bus had to leave without me.

And it turns out that my dad died two days later, so I was never able to see him because of this problem that occurred on the bus that day and I really—when I spoke about that—I really think that they could feel that that was the sort of a turning point with me where, of course, I was very sad about the loss of my dad and angry about the fact that I was never able to see him, but there was a certain point where I turned that anger and I turned that feeling of helplessness into needing to do something. And when I decided to engage in advocacy around the bus company, I found that more people had had issues with that particular bus company as well. And so I was able to join together with the group.

As a group, we approached the bus company, who ultimately decided to make some changes to their maintenance schedules for their bus lift systems so that people wouldn't get left behind like that again. And so the use of that personal experience and those stories—I can't say enough about that and how powerful that was.

**Michele Brock**

And I would also share that I saw the students connect, and Laura brings in important points in history when other people were literally laying before buses in order to enact change in history. And so she and I remember you sharing how you recalled that, and that helped you realize that there's a group of people behind you that did something for you and if they could do that, then you can do that.

**Laura Hall**

Yeah. There was a whole group of people in the ‘70s who would lay down in front of Greyhound buses in order to get lifts on the buses. And so I remember seeing this footage and thinking, you know, if they can lay down in front of the buses to ensure that I have a lift, you know, I owe it to that community to make sure that I keep the advocacy going to make sure those lifts are still working. So, yeah, you're right. That was a powerful moment.

**Angie Kennedy**

It strikes me that you have all of these elements of the curriculum which are helping to kind of build knowledge but then you also have this shift—you help people shift their worldview from this sort of medical or deficits model to a justice model. And then how that opens up so much related to advocacy and like what you just described, taking that personal, that devastating personal experience and turning it into momentum and energy and toward changing, you know, these broader systems.

**Laura Hall**

Right, and within the YELL program, the people with disabilities were always the ones that were leading the content. So I think that sent a strong message of assuming competence of people with disabilities from the very beginning when we started working with students and then making sure that they understood, all students understood this was a program for everyone and not just people with disabilities.

**Angie Kennedy**

Right.

**Michele Brock**

I also noticed that there were important turning points around probably when we started talking about ableism and internalized ableism, where we really started to hear the voices of students with lived experience with disability, and where we started to see the students, that were more apt to maybe speak for someone or to engage in a conversation that didn't have a disability, step back.

And that, we noticed, was a change for that staff observed, that teachers observed and started to shift the sharing and the perceptions of the students and I think elevated how profound this experience was for everyone.

**Angie Kennedy**

That's a perfect segue into my next question. Students with and without disabilities working together as equal partners is a foundational part of YELL. How did you facilitate or model that? You've already sort of, you know, alluded to that, but if you [could] talk a little bit more about that.

**Laura Hall**

Yeah. So I mean, I think the thing that we did right from the beginning is make that the expectation that it was our expectation that people are working together as equal partners. And having people with disabilities in those leadership positions already kind of elevated that that kind of feeling in the classroom that people with disabilities we were assuming confidence, we knew that they could participate in the program. We wanted people, students without disabilities, to participate as well. We also worked really hard to make the materials accessible to everyone so that whatever that might be, we used pictures or symbols or I don't know, Michele, too, you know, jump in here. I know you did a lot of that work on this to make sure that everyone could have access in whatever way they could participate.

We really did a lot of work to make sure that whatever it was that someone could communicate with us or however they could indicate their choices, whether they used their voice to communicate or not, that there was a way for them to do that.

**Michele Brock**

Yeah. I'd like to add that we worked really hard to use universal design as much as possible when developing materials, when conducting evaluation, when gathering information from students for asking for participation. And so when our-- we would also utilize accommodations as needed. And we would try to forecast that some of those things might be and would have to flex to the moment on many occasions.

And then finally, we would move to individualized modifications to support full participation. And I think in this environment that allowed [and] provided a model for anybody with or without a disability that there are many roads to inclusion.

**Angie Kennedy**

I know there have been a lot of challenges in terms of partnering with schools during COVID and you know, those relationships with the schools that was the foundation of this project. So I wonder, what are some of the ways you've had to adapt the program, given COVID?

**Michele Brock**

Well, certainly the COVID pandemic itself was a significant challenge in all of our lives, but it presented a barrier for YELL specifically because of mandated school closures initially. And then when schools did resume online learning or virtual learning at the end of the 2020 school year, the program abruptly-- the teachers and students struggled to adjust to online learning and teaching.

And so we did maintain contact with our school champions. The educators out there, of course, were continuing to deliver. But once again, we were forced to adjust our model because of the challenges with student engagement and the needs that the schools had and students had at that moment in time. So fortunately, we did have that ongoing relationship with one school and were able to continue learning about the ways in which they implemented an advocacy project with the technical support that we have been infusing throughout the year.

And I don't know, Laura, you want to share about that specific advocacy project, but I will share that COVID also did present an opportunity for us that was an unexpected and I think benefit and really elevated our thinking about YELL and sustainability in a different way. And it allowed us to develop what we called YELL ambassadors.

**Laura Hall**

So in one of our schools, we had been working with a group for during the previous school year where they had learned the entire YELL curriculum and all of the tools, and they had asked us to come back the following year to sort of help implement that advocacy project. And with that group, we really kind of started with a review of the YELL curriculum and everything they learned and then we asked students to go on a bit of a scavenger hunt throughout their school.

So we developed a scavenger hunt with questions like go to your school library. Do you see books about people with disabilities, or are there books written by people with disabilities? Go to your gym? Are there spaces for people in wheelchairs to sit among spectators seating or you know, just are there pictures of people with disabilities represented on the walls?

Is there signage for people with disabilities to help navigate the building? And so this is kind of a fun way for them to sort of explore their environment and see places where there might be room for greater inclusion. And so our group going through this decided on their own that one of the areas that they saw that was really lacking, that their school had no tactile and raised Braille signage in the school and if they did, it was kind of in random places or it might have been covered up by a flier or something like that. There was no consistency. So they decided that they wanted to they wanted to have some real signage throughout the high school, and they started doing research on what it would take for that to happen.

So they looked at the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) and what it said about Braille signage and how big it had to be and what kind of signage. They spoke with various stakeholders, including the school administrators and the facilities managers and the superintendent. They visited their state capitol and they met with their state representatives and also talked about the project.

And so through all of this advocacy, they were able to find funding in the budget that the school had already had for renovations to help pay for this Braille signage, and they were able to pick it out themselves from a vendor online to say what kind of real signage they wanted and make sure that got installed throughout the school.

And so that was a very exciting thing that happened all during COVID, all during the time where we weren't involved at all but the skills and the advocacy they learned through that-- throughout that period of time.

**Angie Kennedy**

That's wonderful. What a great example. When you evaluated the program or in even just implementing the program and then thinking about the outcomes, did anything surprise you in terms of either the process or the outcomes you were able to achieve?

**Michele Brock**

Well, I learned a lot of lessons. I think we all learned a lot of lessons. I think one of the important aspects I would say about our evaluation process was how critical qualitative data was—that our focus groups definitely provided us with the most powerful feedback that helped us adapt and modify throughout our process. So we had a number of different times throughout the project where we engaged focus groups to provide feedback.

We also had an advisory board from whom we would seek advice and then also included various different stakeholders, including people with lived experience with disabilities, school personnel and family members. We learned that it's important to acknowledge [what] the capacities the teachers, schools and administration really is to implement this particular curriculum. It's about 12 modules long. And so that's 12 hours that we were invited into these school sites.

And we're so grateful for their courage to take a risk. And I think the other part of that was gathering teachers as champions and administrator buy in was so important and we invited and included when we when we say teachers and champions, teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators were so, so helpful and important. The flexibility of evaluation of how we would evaluate was so important.

As Laura mentioned and as I talked about earlier, universal design was really critical and the tools that we used and making sure that we could capture hand gestures and drawings and social stories, assistive technology in order to gather things like satisfaction or experience. We also would engage students in role play and we would keep copious notes throughout. We're really grateful to all the team members, including our interns, who helped provide support, our social work interns that provided support for all aspects of the program.

**Angie Kennedy**

Yes, it sounds like your model of inclusion and the sort of advocacy and justice orientation carried through all the way into thinking about how to collect data and how to use the data, right? Because you're really inclusive in the data that you-- that, you know, deemed important and useful. And I think it's just a model of inclusion from, you know, participation in, you know, we talk about participatory action research, and this is, really this is a wonderful example of it all the way-- threaded all the way through…

**Michele Brock**

Yes.

**Angie Kennedy**

…the process.

**Michele Brock**

And I think it's common for people with disabilities to be excluded and their voices often to not be heard because of the limitations of the tools that are used. And it also, I think, highlights the diversity of disability and how challenging creating tools can be, but that there are always ways to gather the voices and the communication of people with disabilities and to move into the data collection.

**Angie Kennedy**

Expertise in the leadership. Absolutely. Yeah.

**Laura Hall**

So, yeah, as far as what's happening from here, Michigan Disability Rights Coalition just received another round of funding from the Michigan Developmental Disabilities Council to work on another leadership grant. We're calling this grant Leaders for Inclusion, or LFI. So we're going to be using some of the content from the YELL curriculum, some of it from some of their leadership programs, putting the best of the best together and creating a training program for specifically looking at people age 18 to 26 and looking to have at least 60% people of color involved in our training groups to develop further leaders who can assist us on working with organizations, providing training, disability pride, and disability history and culture, as well as how to become a more inclusive organization or group, and really looking at inclusion and what that means, to what that looks like. We're very excited to start that.

**Angie Kennedy**

Yeah. So the core of YELL lives on.

**Laura Hall**

Yes, yes.

**Angie Kennedy**

Thank you so much, both of you, for joining me today. I really appreciate it. And it's been a wonderful conversation.

**Michele Brock**

Thank you so much for having us.