

When Is It Safe Enough? Considering Diversity and Equity When Brokering Pre-Professional Opportunities to Youth of Color

Rafi Santo, New York University, Rafi.Santo@nyu.edu
Dixie Ching, New York University, Dixieching@gmail.com
Kylie Pepler, Indiana University, Kpepler@indiana.edu
Chris Hoadley, New York University, Tophe@nyu.edu
Eda Levenson, Scope of Work, Eda@scopeofwork.org
Geneva White, Scope of Work, Geneva@scopeofwork.org
Mikey Cordero, Scope of Work, Mikey@scopeofwork.org

Abstract: This study conceptualizes “brokering pre-professional learning opportunities” as a practice that goes beyond facilitating access across settings to include concerns about when, exactly, an opportunity is “safe enough” as a fundamental question when connecting youth to opportunity. Utilizing a design-based research approach, we report results of an organizational ‘vetting’ routine used to assess companies being considered as work-placement sites for youth of color. Our findings confirm that characteristics of staff diversity and equity orientation of work-placement organizations can support or hinder positive learning outcomes. However, we also found that both strengths and limitations in terms of diversity and equity, in concert with other supportive factors, can be productive resources within the context of future goal setting for youth of color. We close with implications for researchers and designers interested in promoting equity-oriented cross-setting learning.

As learning scientists have theorized learning as a cross-setting phenomenon (Banks et al., 2007), the question of how to equitably support productive connections across settings has become a focal point for intervention design (Acholonu, Pinkard & Martin, 2015). One practice, that of brokering learning opportunities from one setting to another, has emerged as a key form of support for cross-setting learning pathways that sit within a larger framework of Connected Learning (Ching et al., 2016; Ito et al., 2013). However, the practice of brokering can easily be misunderstood as one that rests solely on an assumption that *access to new learning opportunities* is the only challenge to be addressed in order to support equitable learning pathways (Vossoughi, 2017). However, for non-dominant youth interested in various disciplinary pathways, opportunities brokered to them may themselves not be considered by youth or educators to be places that are productive, comfortable or ‘safe.’ Often, this can be connected to lack of representation of non-dominant groups in those industries and limits in terms of companies’ orientations to equity and pro-social concerns within their organizational activities and business models.

This study is based in a research-practice partnership focused on developing brokering routines across learning settings within Hive NYC, a network of informal education organizations focused on digital learning. We report results from a design partnership with one organization, Scope of Work (SOW), which addressed issues of access to and transformation of creative industries in terms of under-represented youth. SOW’s approach to brokering focused on not only considering issues of access, but also on assessing various characteristics related to diversity and equity of the settings they were ‘brokering into’ – the workplace sites they planned to match with their youth. Our cross-organization team co-designed and tested an organizational ‘vetting’ routine that could be used to assess the potential of a workplace to provide a positive early employment experience for youth of color. Because of SOW’s organizational focus, all workplaces in the study were associated with creative sectors.

This analysis considers two factors the vetting routine focused on: *How were organizational characteristics of staff diversity and equity orientation consequential to positive early workplace experiences of non-dominant youth of color?* The pilot summer program, framed as a fellowship, involved five youth of color aged 16-21. Each was placed at a company in the creative sector including a high-end fashion brand, a hip-hop and electronic music record label, and three design and branding studios. This analysis utilizes data from three of the youth, including semi-structured interviews with the youth, with supervising employees at each of the work placement organizations as with SOW staff and, finally, observations of weekly activities SOW staff facilitated with the youth participants where youth discussed their week’s work experiences.

Three findings emerged with regards to the role of staff diversity and equity orientations in organizations. Two were more straightforward and tracked with SOW’s design conjectures that were indexed in the vetting tool about the consequentiality of the focal factors – that relative strengths and limitations in terms of diversity and equity orientations could contribute to positive and negative youth workplace experiences, respectively.

In the case of Mateo, an 18-year-old Dominican American, diverse leadership at his placement contributed to a positive orientation towards his work placement, to positive relationship development with staff, and to shifted conceptions related to diversity and business leadership. In talking about Rob, the company's CEO, he shared: "When I first started learning about business, I had this image of a CEO: In a corporate building, with a suit on, and you know, like bougie [short for 'bourgeois'], like 'don't talk to me you peasant!' [jokingly]. So then when I talk to [Rob]... he listens to rap music, I listen to rap music, he plays basketball, I play basketball. It's cool to see that you don't have to change, and be some type of robot to be successful."

Likewise, the experience of Sean, a 20-year-old African-American, provided additional confirmation of the importance of staff diversity. He shared that, for him, "there sure was not a culture fit" with staff at the record label he was placed at. He saw a lack of shared class background as hindering the formation of social bonds with staff through common interactions like 'water cooler' conversations; "If you can't relate, how are you going to jump into the conversation?"

The final case was the most notable, and unexpected, in terms of the ways that diversity and equity orientations of partner organizations played into youth's socio-political professional goal-setting. Eve, a 21-year-old identified as female, African-American and Puerto-Rican-American, was one of two women of color within an organization led by three white men with the rest of the staff made up of white cis-female interns. Her case highlighted distinct ways that *both* strengths around *as well as* weaknesses related to staff diversity in her workplace setting were utilized as a resource within her process of identifying what kind professional setting she wanted to be in in the future with regards to workplace diversity. Additionally, a perceived lack of equity orientation in the business model of the company Eve was placed in — a brand strategy firm called Signal that served corporate clients to promote their businesses — was leveraged as she affirmed and specified her plans around her professional future, plans that involved more explicit orientations to addressing issues of equity and celebration of black identity. She shared with us, in terms of these corporate clients, that "my voice and the work that I want to do is not for them. [...] I want to be a part of something that's celebrating community... what it means to really be a human being, and a black human being, in America."

The final case of Eve led us to conclude that *both strengths and limitations of learning settings in terms of diversity and equity orientations, in concert with the support to understand such experiences from a critical and socio-political lens, can be productive resources within the context of future goal setting for youth of color.*

Within efforts to promote cross-setting learning for non-dominant youth, this study highlights the importance of broadening approaches to brokering from a purely access-orientation to include an equity-orientation concerned with the nature of the opportunities being organized for youth. In particular, in confirming conjectures that diversity and equity orientations of workplace environments can consequentially impact outcomes, it highlights the need for care and consideration when considering whether an opportunity is 'safe enough.' At the same time, findings show that limitations, along with strengths, can be productively utilized within youths' socio-political professional goal setting. The finding confirms existing research on the importance of sense-making supports set outside of work placement sites (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016), of supporting youth to critically 'read' the dynamics at play within a work environment (Diemer & Blustein, 2006) and of extending critical youth development approaches into workplace learning settings (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Given that reality, the answer to the question of "when is it safe enough?" likely depends, in some part, on what kinds of supports non-dominant youth have to engage with a worksite through critical and socio-political lenses.

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