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Final Output Report

Shifting Power Cohort 2020

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The Challenge

As the project manager in an afterschool program, Lisa Marie identified a trend among her students. Many of them struggled with digital literacy, limiting their ability to engage fully in the education system. Once the COVID-19 Pandemic hit, and learning from home became the requirement, this barrier became even greater and began limiting the level of engagement in the afterschool world. With the primary focus of Scholar Project being to identify and eliminate barriers to student success, this issue became a major focus of the program for the 2020-2021 school year.

The Original Plan

Questions that needed answered...

Once a potential issue was identified, it was important to research how impactful digital literacy was to student engagement. We knew that students had struggles with it but, it was possible that it was not a leading factor for disengaged youth. To dig in deeper, Shamyia utilized her expertise as a researcher to identify 2 main research questions:

1. How did EdTechnology (EdTech) contribute to the decreased youth engagement in an after school program after moving from an in person setting to a virtual setting due to COVID?
2. In what ways, if any, does previous experience with EdTech affect the level of engagement of youth?

Methods of Research

A research project was developed to answer these questions through youth and educator interviews. Shamyia and Lisa Marie were going to interview the expected 30 youth and 2 educators in the space on how EdTech was used, the level of comfort with the tools, and what needs existed for improving the tools from both perspectives. Once completed, the data was to be analyzed and a potential new EdTech tool proposed. After some time utilizing the tool, a post-survey would have been administered to gauge the effectiveness in increasing student engagement.

The Turnout

Challenges

1. Staff Transition - Lisa Marie transitioned out of the lead organization into a new organization in December of 2020, about 2 months into the afterschool year. At the time of her transition, 12 of the expected 20 students were actively enrolled and participating in the Scholar Project Program. The program met, in person, 3 days a week and virtual 1 day.
2. Program Model Change - After Lisa Marie's departure, the program model decreased to 1 day a week, completely virtual and completely self-directed. With all students also attending school 100% virtual, this was a major detractor from participation.
3. New Staff Buy - At the time of the transition, a new program manager had not been identified, putting the Scholar Project on a back burner. By the time a new manager was hired, almost 2 months had passed, and staff buy-in at the organization was limited. Ultimately, the organization lost the contract funding the project leading to lack of interest in the proposal.

Attempted Solutions

In order to troubleshoot these challenges, Lisa Marie met with organization staff once a week for about a 2 months. In these meetings, she offered to volunteer her time to lead the activities until they were able to identify her replacement. Once someone was hired, she also offered to train them on the curriculum, free of charge, in order to ensure the program kept running, which was declined. The last solution attempted was that Lisa Marie and Shamyra were green-lit to host Monday evening sessions with students, using the established curriculum in a Google classroom.

End Result

Ultimately, 5 sessions were held for students with very little to no engagement. 3 out of 5 sessions had 0 students participate, 1 had 2 students sign in with limited interest, and 1 had 5 students sign in without completing any activities. This unfortunately led to the project being scrapped, at this point in the year it was too late to attempt a project shift and it was clear, with the other challenges in the program, results from our project would be minimal and inconclusive.

The Takeaways

While the research project may not have been a success, participation in Shifting Power was transformative. Being in a space where everyone in it has the same goal, of prioritizing youth and dismantling barriers that exist as a result from white supremacy, was magical. 3 main takeaways from this project are:

Community is Vital - finding space to exist, problem -solve, innovate, and listen is critical to the success of us as educators.

Naming It - language matters, Shifting Power sessions often brought ways to call out various issues, or rethink the problems faced daily in a way that wasn't known previously.

Vulnerability is necessary - the greatest takeaway was the ability to be vulnerable in this space. Dealing with the ups and downs of this project, something that was very close to Lisa Marie's heart, and being able to enter a virtual space that felt safe and welcoming was inspiring. Knowing that not only did other educators/researchers get it, but were there to support during the challenging times was incredibly valuable.