>GRIPTAPE>

YOUTH DRIVING LEARNING

Youth Researcher Challenge Learning Report
Fall 2019

INTRODUCTION

At GripTape, we've seen that giving young people opportunities to drive their own learning leads to powerful results. Our core program, the GripTape Learning Challenge, is designed to provide youth with full autonomy and resources to pursue their learning interests and passions. Over the last three years, we've sought to determine the conditions that youth need to lead their own learning and understand the outcomes they experience as a result—and these outcomes have been transformative. Through GripTape, youth are developing learner agency and cultivating mindsets, skills, and behaviors essential to their current and future success.

In 2018, GripTape partnered with Jobs for the Future to implement a student-centered approach to original research. Bringing together GripTape's youth-centered model with JFF's research expertise, the Youth Researcher Challenge pilot program engaged youth in designing and implementing an original research project over a nine-month period. With support from a JFF adult researcher and a GripTape adult "Champion," each young person conducted a youth-designed investigation into an area of student-centered learning. Youth were involved in every aspect of their research project—from choosing its focus and topic to deciding where it would be conducted and how it would be implemented.

The learning outcomes these youth experienced mirror many of those in the core GripTape program, such as increased confidence and perseverance, improved time management and communication, and a greater sense of direction and of the learning paths needed to achieve their goals. At the same time, we saw that engaging young people in the design of research introduces critical, provocative perspectives. As one youth said, "[having young people] engaged in the research conversation is crucial because otherwise you're trying to assess a problem without the people engaged in the problem."

In this report, we dive into the outcomes that young people experienced through the pilot Youth Researcher Challenge. We also describe lessons learned from the program's successes and challenges and offer reflections on how the model could be improved and on what might be needed to truly bring youth voice and perspective to the heart of research on student-centered learning.

Research Methodology

To learn about the experiences of Youth Research Challengers and the adults who supported them, GripTape collected and analyzed multiple types of data. Six youth participated in semi-structured interviews led by their Champions and also completed a survey at the completion of the experience. Information about youth research projects and outcomes was gathered at the culminating convening subsequent to Challengers presenting their findings. GripTape also conducted interviews of three Champions and three Research Partners as well as one program manager to gather additional data about Challengers' experiences and participant perspectives about the effectiveness of the model.

OVERVIEW OF GRIPTAPE

Since 2016, more than 600 young people ages 15-19 have led a 10-week, self-designed learning journey through GripTape's signature program, the Learning Challenge. Youth "Challengers" choose a topic that they are passionate about and have complete decision-making control over what and how they learn. They set their own goals and carry out learning activities of their choosing to help them meet those goals, with the support of an adult Champion who offers interest, belief, and encouragement without giving advice or direction; a network of their peers; and small grants up to $500 to use as they decide.

The inaugural Learning Challenge was designed in partnership with youth, in response to the kinds of supports and resources that youth identified were most needed to successfully drive their own learning. Over the last three years, we've tested and refined the model using "rapid learning cycles" based on each Challenge. Across eleven cohorts, young people consistently report gaining improved confidence, increased awareness of their own interests, strengths, and areas for growth, and an understanding of new ways to achieve successful learning.

Further, we've seen that these changes are sustained, and deepened, well past the end of the Learning Challenge. Our longitudinal study has found that youth demonstrate enduring shifts to their mindsets about learning, with increased confidence, determination, and self-awareness, and skills to regulate their learning, And, as many as 18–24 months after the Challenge, these shifts in mindsets and skills are supporting dynamic, lasting changes in behavior, both in and out of school—from demanding and seizing new learning opportunities, to creating new opportunities, to sharing what they've learned with peers and in their communities. We invite you to learn more about our model and research at www.griptape.org/resources.

THE YOUTH RESEARCHER CHALLENGE

GripTape partnered with JFF in 2018 to develop a new program aimed at bringing the voices of youth, particularly youth of color, into discussions around education research and improvement—where the perspectives of young people themselves are so often absent from the table. We selected eight youth researchers from across New England to conduct original research into an education topic they were interested in and passionate about, related to one or more pillars of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's Students at the Center Framework. Seven young people moved forward with participating in a research cycle that ran from October 2018 through May 2019 (with one youth leaving the program early due to personal reasons).

Participants
Each youth researcher fully designed their investigation, from identifying their initial research interests to developing their plans and presenting their findings. They received support from a GripTape Champion and a JFF adult researcher. GripTape matched all youth researchers with a Champion and collaborated closely with JFF team members to support the youth-adult researcher pairings.

- **Youth researcher**: A young person between 15 and 19 years old who developed a research project on student-centered learning as part of the Research Collaborative.
- **Champion**: A GripTape adult who held regular virtual calls with youth researchers, expressing deep interest, encouragement, and unwavering belief without advice or guidance. Champions

did not require research expertise and were recruited, supported, and managed by GripTape. This Champion model is a core component of the GripTape Learning Challenge program.

- **Adult Research Partner:** A professional researcher who acted as a mentor and helped guide youth researchers during the project, providing support on research design and practices throughout the program duration. Adult researchers were recruited, supported, and managed by JFF.

Program Components

The Youth Researcher Challenge, like the core GripTape Learning Challenge, was designed to provide youth with the support and resources to pursue their learning interests and approaches, with full decision-making control over their learning journey. Program components included:

- **Application:** Youth submitted written or video applications online stating the proposed research question that they were interested in pursuing, a learning experience that led to their interest, the ways that their project related to their current or future success, and their initial goals and plan for the project.
- **Opening convening:** The Youth Researcher Challenge opened with seven youth traveling to Providence, Rhode Island in October 2018 for the Research Collaborative Convening. They were accompanied by GrIpTape team members and took part in the three-day conference with more than 100 researchers, educators, district leaders, funders, and policymakers. The youth had the opportunity to begin refining their research questions and establishing professional contacts with subject-area experts who offered support over the coming months as their studies developed.
- **Stipend:** GripTape provided youth researchers with stipends of up to $500 in recognition of the commitment youth were making, to be spent as they chose.
- **Research budget:** Youth also received a research budget of $1,000 to fund expenses specific to their research, e.g., computer expenses, travel to another school district to conduct interviews.
- **Calls with GripTape Champion:** Youth and GripTape Champions held calls every 2–3 weeks to reflect on their experiences and progress with their research.
- **Calls with JFF Research Partners**: Research Partners were available to meet with youth as needed and offered resources and guidance on research fundamentals and subject-area expertise. Originally, calls between Research Partners and youth were designed to be regularly scheduled; ultimately, they were episodic in practice.
- **Group virtual meetings:** GripTape and JFF team members met virtually with the group every six weeks to hear about their progress, challenges, and support needs.
- **Peer community:** Youth developed an informal support community over the course of their research projects, offering each other encouragement, support, and assistance.
- **Closing convening:** The nine-month commitment culminated in six youth researchers participating in workshops and presenting their findings at the Student-Centered Learning Research Collaborative Grantee Meeting in May 2019. Each young person selected the format of their presentation and hosted Q&A sessions with adult participants during a gallery walk. This was followed by a short panel discussion in which the young people shared their thoughts on their overall Youth Researcher Challenge experience.

Youth Research Investigations

In their applications, youth were asked to describe the interest they had in changing how young people are taught, and the specific pillar(s) of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's [Students at the Center Framework](#) they were interested in pursuing. Youth did not need prior knowledge of or experience with

research fundamentals in order to participate in the program. They further refined their research questions and plans based on conversations with participants at the Research Collaborative Convening in October 2018, and in consultation with their Research Partners over the course of the project.

- Adrian, 16, investigated the effect of stereotypes on students' self-esteem and performance.
- Darriell, 17, investigated the linkage between the male African American experience in poverty and education.
- Anyfern, 17, investigated how her school district serves immigrant families, including what schools were doing now and what could be improved.
- Shawn, 17, investigated the connection between school and stress for youth of color, and in particular explored what school disengagement looks like for Black and Brown students.
- Timothy, 15, investigated the effectiveness of teaching methodologies in math for both comprehension and engagement.
- Makayla, 17, investigated the impact of unhealthy body image/mental health and low self-esteem.

YOUTH LEARNING OUTCOMES

The youth researchers consistently reported that the Challenge had a dynamic impact on how they approach and lead their learning. Every young person surveyed felt their Challenge overall was a success and described the experience as transformational. One young person stated, "It's definitely empowered me as a woman and as a youth, to be the change." Another youth discussed his motivation: "I was legitimately interested in finding the answer to my question. I thought about my own experience in school and wanted other students to have more options." Every youth also reported that they accomplished some or all of the goals they set out—including goals that may have shifted over the course of the research project—and gained knowledge and skills that they saw as meaningful and valuable to their future success.

Mindset Shifts: Confidence, Perseverance, and Connection with Others
Young people's experience with the Youth Researcher Challenge helped to spur important shifts in their beliefs about their own learning. They reported a marked increase in their self-confidence: 100% of the youth credit the Challenge with increased confidence that they can complete similar projects in the future, and that they can get better at challenging things if they work hard. We believe that this is a foundational shift; GripTape's broader research suggests that the boost in self-confidence that youth experience makes further changes in mindsets and behaviors possible.

Similarly, all of the youth expressed that the Challenge helped them understand that they can persevere through challenges if they keep working. Indeed, 83% said that at some point they lost motivation or felt unsure about completing the Challenge and had to change direction or modify an activity or goal. The support from the research partner and/or Champion were cited as important factors in helping them get past both of these hurdles.

These experiences helped to build understanding that projects like these rarely have a linear or smooth path. Youth learned not only about the importance of having a back-up plan, but also that unexpected results and challenges could present new learning opportunities. One youth said, "If it had all gone off smoothly, I would've learned less." Another stated, "As opportunities came, I adjusted my goals, and as those things showed up, I was able to become more involved and even more intrigued."

Several youth researchers also noted changes in their views of others as a result of the connections they built with other teens and with people in the community as part of their projects. They described greater empathy, an increased ability to make connections with other people, having more patience, and being more welcoming and friendly. One youth researcher wrote:

> *In some ways, I got more sympathetic… because I understood people more. I did not know their struggles because they didn't show that on the outside…. I used to be cold toward people. I am a lot more welcoming… a lot more friendly.*

They also expressed greater awareness of new possibilities and of their own impact: 83% of youth said that participating in the Challenge exposed them to new people or places that they didn't have knowledge of before, and the same percentage said they felt like they have a better sense of how their actions impact the world around them.

Skill Development: Time Management, Organization, and Communication
All of the youth noted learning the importance of time management and how to do a better job with managing their time. Similarly, they described improving their organization and ability to more effectively put a plan in action to execute their ideas. One youth researcher noted the process taught him that "there's a proper way of doing things instead of taking shortcuts" and that he will apply this knowledge to plan for his work and manage his time in the future. Another youth said:

> *I think I got better at being disciplined and putting things in my calendar and following up. At the beginning it took me a long time to follow up, but as time went on I got more consistent, and I started working more in little chunks than just big bursts of work and then nothing.*

Every youth described greatly improving their overall communication skills as a result of participating. In particular, they described improved public speaking through presenting their results, and an improved ability to summarize and communicate their ideas as a result of having to do a presentation. This caused them to take a really in-depth look at their data and push themselves to find an effective way to communicate what they'd learned.

Participating in the Challenge also helped improve their ability to advocate for their learning needs: 100% said they felt like they are better able to speak up for themselves to ask for what they need or want in learning situations. One youth stated, "I didn't used to be this girl who could advocate for herself. If you'd told me then, I wouldn't have believed you." Youth also noted the importance of having a vision for what they wanted, especially when advocating for their needs with adults, so that they could communicate effectively and maintain the integrity of their plans.

Future Learning
Youth described how participating in the Challenge transformed how they approach their learning interests and experiences, including future research projects. They discussed how they intend to apply their new mindsets and skills to future learning opportunities. They also gained greater self-awareness of their own interests, strengths, and areas of growth, as well as a clearer sense of the direction they want for their lives and what it will take to get there.

- 100% said they will approach learning differently in the future as a result of participating in the Challenge

- 83% said the Challenge helped them clarify what they were most interested in learning, as well as their own areas of strength and areas for improvement, and feel more motivated to get more involved in making sure their learning experiences match their interests.
- 83% said participating in the Challenge helped them discover a sense of purpose or direction in their life, and 100% noted that the Challenge helped them learn to map out a path to identify their goals and the learning experiences needed to reach them.
- 100% noted significant learning related to their topic of study, as well as how this learning impacted their self-knowledge about their own passions and how they plan to work towards those passions in the future.
- 100% are interested in pursuing additional topics where they get to design and lead their own research project, and said participating in the Challenge increased their understanding of what it means to successfully carry out a research project. Youth researchers described significant learning about how to carry out research, including the process of research design, survey administration, data analysis and data display, and conducting interviews and focus groups.

CHALLENGES, SUCCESSES, AND LESSONS LEARNED

This pilot was an exciting opportunity for young people to be directly involved in cutting-edge research —and having youth play a role in the broader community of researchers underscored the importance of bringing young people to the table. As the *Students at the Center* blog noted:

> *The presence of youth at the convening of the Research Collaborative elevated conversations among the adults and pushed them to check assumptions and plans against those who are most directly impacted by the practices and policies being studied. Having youth in the room changed the conversation, made it more rigorous, more responsive, more real.*

We also learned important lessons about how to apply GripTape's core competencies around developing youth learner agency in support of a student-centered approach to original research.

Building on the Core GripTape Learning Challenge
The Youth Researcher Challenge and the core GripTape Learning Challenge share much of the same blueprint—and we are thrilled that many of the outcomes are reflected across the two programs. However, there are important distinctions between the two models. Like the Youth Researcher Challenge, the Learning Challenge invites youth to pursue their interests and passions with full decision-making autonomy, supported with small flexible grants of up to $500 (to be used as determined by the youth), a peer network, and an adult Champion. Key differences in the Youth Researcher Challenge model include:

- The research cycle spanned nine months, compared to ten weeks for the Learning Challenge
- The addition of an adult researcher to help guide the design and implementation of their chosen research topic and analytic approach
- A stipend of up to $1000 to be used for research activities
- The Research Collaborative convenings at the beginning and end of the research cycle, where youth had the opportunity to connect with and present to each other and to adults in attendance.

These differences sparked a unique set of successes and challenges for both youth and adults over the

course of the program and point the way towards areas for improvement.

Reflections on Resources and Supports

Overall, youth were largely satisfied with the supports and resources they had during the Challenge: 83% said the resources they received were sufficient to help them meet their goals. In particular, they noted the conferences and the adult support from their GripTape Champion and Research Partner as critical to their success.

All of the youth researchers uniformly lauded the conferences, and specifically appreciated the opportunity to present their research, form a community with other youth researchers, and get authentic feedback from the adult researchers about their data. Champions and Research Partners agreed that the conferences were an important component and noted that the youth presentations were key for building both accountability and confidence. One youth expressed that "having these conversations with people at the conference was really valuable and intriguing," while another noted that convening participants "asked me questions, and I was able to share a lot of personal stories."

Youth also all found that the support and encouragement of the Champion and JFF Research Partner helped them make it through their Challenge and agreed that these adults played different but complementary roles. They appreciated the initial engagement of the Champion and described the Champion's role as one that gave them a space to voice their concerns, get help with structure or staying on track, and get encouragement and support. Meanwhile, the Research Partner's role was seen as helping them learn how to carry out research and aspects such as the process of research design, survey administration and data analysis. Together, having these two adults made youth feel like "I had people in my corner." Youth also expressed that these adult roles helped them navigate the research process with other adults, such as getting the superintendent or principal to agree to let them do the research.

At the same time, both youth and adults noted some challenges around certain aspects of the program. In particular, these challenges suggest ways in which we can improve clarity and consistency around the expectations for all partners and stakeholders and provide clearer structures to support the success of youth throughout the project.

Key Takeaway: Building greater clarity and coherence all partners and stakeholders on their complementary roles.

Some youth and adults noted that communication was inconsistent, with a lack of responsiveness or availability for calls, and wanted clearer expectations around the level and amount of communication. Research Partners uniformly said they needed more guidance and structure (e.g. a playbook) to understand the process, their role, and what was expected of them and of youth. Champions also felt youth were unresponsive at times and had some questions about the availability of Research Partners and whether some were too heavy-handed with their guidance for youth. Some youth also noted time constraints with doing a project of this depth and duration during their junior or senior year of high school, and several adults noted that these conflicts contributed to inconsistencies in communication. Additionally, while youth found the roles of the Champion and Research Partner complementary, a small number of adults expressed some confusion about each other's roles and activities.

A foundational step for addressing these challenges would be ensuring that we build stakeholders' confidence in the model, together with philosophical alignment. This would include selecting partners

who are fully supportive of youth having complete decision-making control over their learning goals and activities. We should also create more comprehensive expectations regarding what adults can support and should do and make those expectations explicit for all stakeholders. This could include, for example, developing a more formal mechanism and structure for relationships with the Research Partner, including clarity and agreement about the mode of communication, the time commitment involved, the need for more active management, and the need for flexibility to work with youth who have very limited say over their schedules due to school, family, work, and other responsibilities. We also need to be clear up front about the skills and capacity needed for Research Partners, and the importance of matching Research Partners to those needs.

Key Takeaway: Developing a more clearly defined structure that both sets youth up for a strong start and provides a level of consistency throughout the process.

Several youth described a disconnect between the first conference and starting the research, largely because they didn't meet with their Research Partner at that time and needed more information about how to design research. In some cases that delay caused a loss of momentum. Similarly, Research Partners noted they shouldered most of the responsibility for teaching and knowledge transfer, leading to uneven treatment and challenges with starting especially for youth who had no previous research knowledge.

We should seek out ways to help youth get a strong start of the gate; for example, we could provide "Research 101" at the opening convening in order to equip youth with a concrete research plan. We also should consider implementing milestones and accountability structures that are communicated at the outset, such as regular blog posts, datasets, and/or monthly reflections on the project, that provide ways to track young people's progress and to help adults and youth understand expectations.

CONCLUSION

The first Youth Researcher Challenge sought to bring youth to the table as true partners in research design—and it spurred both profound changes in how young people approach their own learning, as well as new understanding for how to facilitate opportunities for youth-led research. The experience of fully designing and leading their research projects sparked new skills and direction for their future and inspired newfound confidence and motivation to learn.

These findings suggest the importance of structuring learning experiences that provide needed resources and support in ways that preserve and develop young people's agency over their learning. In doing so, we can authentically center youth voices in research on education issues that directly impact their lives. We're excited about the powerful outcomes we've seen in the Youth Researcher Challenge, and we hope to continue improving and expanding opportunities for how youth can shape the conversation around learning and schools across the country.