

## **LESSONS ACROSS BORDERS**

### **The Promise of Integrated Approaches and Young Protagonists in Fostering Youth Reconnection**

Growing inequities and social fragmentation in the United States are contributing to youth isolation and alienation as reflected in the 4.6 million young people who are disconnected from school and work. Known as opportunity youth (OY), these young people find themselves detached from the systems and structures that would provide them with essential knowledge and skills to navigate a path to a healthy, productive adulthood. Around the globe, promising solutions exist; however, good ideas and proven approaches too often stay confined within geographic and sector-specific silos.

Recognizing that solutions to local problems transcend national boundaries, in 2016 the International Youth Foundation launched (Re)Connecting Youth: Exchanging Global Lessons (RCY). Supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the three-year initiative set out to identify and share innovative global approaches for increasing youth reconnection in the U.S.

Based on research into OY needs—and gaps in U.S. services—RCY focused its selection of promising approaches on four key themes: social and emotional learning, youth as assets, employer engagement, and creative outreach and recruitment. In each of these areas, RCY identified innovative practices with valuable lessons for practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

Our aim was not to replicate programs from abroad, but to identify approaches that could inform and complement U.S. practices. In the area of social and emotional learning, for example, RCY found innovative delivery mechanisms that resulted in improved outcomes (e.g., job retention) among youth. Not surprisingly, those practices that rose to the top of our search pursued integrated, ‘whole-person’ approaches. Work-readiness training and employment were not viewed as ultimate endgames, but rather as part of a more comprehensive approach to preparing youth to succeed more broadly in life.

In addition to documenting effective practices, RCY facilitated cross-border learning partnerships among youth-serving institutions in the United States and Latin America (see figure 1). Results from our knowledge mobilization and learning exchange activities were disseminated online and at local and national forums—and captured on a story-driven web platform.

*Figure 1*  
*Exchange Partnerships*

Latin America	United States
Fronteras Unidas Pro Salud A.C. <i>Tijuana, Mexico</i>	Mayor’s Office of Employment Development, Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore City Public Health Department <i>Baltimore, Maryland</i>
Rede Cidadã <i>Belo Horizonte, Brazil</i>	Youth Empowerment Project <i>New Orleans, Louisiana</i>
Doncel A.C. <i>Buenos Aires, Argentina</i>	Nebraska Children and Families Foundation <i>Omaha, Nebraska</i>

RCY exchange participants found similar forces driving youth marginalization within diverse national contexts. Youth and practitioners alike cited lack of opportunity—and hope—as critical barriers. “If you say they are *ninis*<sup>1</sup>, it implies they want to be like that,” said Marcela Merino, Executive Director of Fronteras Unidas Pro Salud A.C., an RCY exchange partner in Tijuana, Mexico. “I don’t think so. I think they don’t have opportunities.”

Her sentiments were echoed by Ernest Dorsey, Assistant Director of the Mayor’s Office of Employment Development in Baltimore, with whom Pro Salud was paired. “What I see in the population we deal with is hopelessness. There is no hope for them.”

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***– Ernest Dorsey, Assistant Director  
Mayor’s Office of Employment Development, Baltimore***

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Indeed, studies point to feelings of low self-worth and alienation among opportunity youth, with prolonged disconnection linked to less happiness in adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Each of the promising programs documented by RCY pursues holistic solutions that address youth needs for essential skills development and something more—a sense of identity, self-worth, belonging. Each also embraces an asset-based approach aimed at reinforcing youth self-esteem and positive attitudes toward the future.

RCY recognizes that solutions to the challenges facing America’s opportunity youth must address both individual needs and access to community and social support systems. In the programs it identified, RCY found elements of each. Summarized below are four lessons drawn from our experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The Spanish term *nini* is short for *ni estudia, ni trabaja*, or “not in school, not in work” in English.

<sup>2</sup> [Zeroing in on Place and Race: Youth Disconnection in America’s Cities](#), p. 2

## 1. WHOLE-PERSON APPROACHES WORK BEST

Research undertaken by RCY to inform its work found existing efforts to address the needs of OY in the U.S. focused largely on employment or job training (75 percent), followed by soft skills training (69 percent).<sup>3</sup> Such interventions can fall short of addressing the underlying factors (e.g., low self-esteem, alienation, emotional trauma) that severely limit the prospects of youth who have experienced disconnection. While practitioners acknowledge the limitations of current approaches, they often lack the resources, tools, and training to offer more comprehensive services.

In the absence of holistic interventions, youth continue to experience difficulty charting their futures. “We can place kids at a hundred jobs next year, but if they can’t resolve conflicts or don’t have a good self-concept, they’re going to have these challenges throughout life,” observed Darrin McCall, Director of Programs at the Youth Empowerment Project (YEP) in New Orleans, an RCY exchange partner.

While YEP offered instruction in essential life skills as part of its standard employability programming, its training emphasized the acquisition of workplace skills with less attention focused on equipping youth with a strong sense of self or skills to identify and manage complex emotions.

The promising approaches identified by RCY expand on traditional life skills interventions, often incorporating creative delivery mechanisms that emphasize:

**Integration of body, mind, and emotions.** After ten years of implementing youth employability training programs across 47 cities in Brazil, Rede Cidadã (the Citizen’s Network), a national civil society organization, decided to revisit its approach. With 30 percent of the youth it placed in jobs leaving within a year, job retention and employer satisfaction were key drivers. Today, Rede’s core programming, delivered over 40 hours, includes music, movement, mindfulness, breathwork, journaling, dialogue, and reflection activities. As a result of this more holistic, integrated approach, job retention rates among Rede graduates now exceed 95 percent.

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Rede Cidadã, Brazil***

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“Our biggest innovation was to introduce non-cognitive training styles,” says Rede Founder and Executive Director Fernando Alves. “If you simply tell people how to behave, it won’t have the same impact as learned behavior through movement.” Rede’s emphasis on integrating the body, mind, and emotions is rooted in the concept of Biocentric Education developed by Chilean psychologist Rolando Toro. Rede found that the combination of movement, dialogue, and reflection helps facilitate emotional healing, while equipping youth with the tools to identify and manage their

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<sup>3</sup> [Mapping Opportunity Youth Needs in the U.S.: A Research Scan](#), p. 3

feelings. Its experiences reflect recent neuroscientific findings on the relationship between learning and the emotions,<sup>4</sup> and an increasingly holistic view of the factors that contribute to human wellbeing. Clinical neuropsychologist Dr. Mario Martinez, for example, has developed the concept of “biocognition” to describe the inter-relatedness of mind-body systems.<sup>5</sup>

**Connection and community building.** Also embedded within the Latin American programs RCY identified was a greater focus on nurturing connection among youth and between youth and service providers. For Rede, this translates into movement-based activities, often conducted in a circle; the sharing of emotions and experiences within a safe, nurturing environment; and respectful physical touch (e.g., holding hands, the occasional hug). Youth engaged in Rede programs come to view themselves as part of a supportive community and gain tools for nurturing positive relationships with others. “The more we look at our projects and their impact, we realized that what was missing in preparing young people for their futures was love,” reflects Rede Employability Manager Tatiana Carvalho.

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Rede Cidadã, Brazil*

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Nurturing trusting relationships also lies at the heart of Fundación Pescar’s work in Argentina. The organization establishes employability training centers within major companies where youth from marginalized communities benefit from life skills instruction and hands-on technical training delivered by Pescar staff and company volunteers. “The human component is very important,” says Pescar Program Coordinator Florencia Fossati, underscoring how youth come to feel part of a new culture and supported by professionals in a corporate environment. It’s not uncommon for friendships to form, among youth and employee volunteers. For youth who often lack role models, the program connects them to caring adults who offer genuine support.

**Health and healing.** OY needs for health education were also addressed through RCY-identified programs. Beyond employability training, Pro Salud’s Órale curriculum includes modules on sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, substance use prevention, and healthy decision-making—all delivered through a highly-interactive, peer-to-peer approach. Originally developed to meet the needs of underserved youth in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the program has been successfully adapted, by Pro Salud and other NGOs, in the cities of Tijuana, Leon, and Guadalajara. Eighty percent of youth enrolled in these programs over four years completed their training, with 75 percent of graduates employed or enrolled in education six to nine months post-training. Youth who took part in a RCY-supported pilot of the Órale program in Baltimore also demonstrated impressive results. Ninety

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<sup>4</sup> [Students Learn from the People They Love](#), David Brooks, *New York Times*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.biocognitive.com/>

percent reported that the training provided them with new knowledge about their reproductive health and confidence in their ability to make informed decisions.

**Emotional and physical expression.** U.S. exchange partners were struck by the cultural acceptability of emotional expression reflected in the programs operated by their Latin American counterparts. At first, YEP senior staff expressed doubts that the Rede model could be viable in New Orleans, given the level of emotional engagement, integration of personal narratives and physical contact involved. Ultimately, their concerns were mitigated when YEP beneficiaries who participated in the piloting of the Rede approach embraced the program’s integration of music, movement, and emotional and physical expression.

One of those, Jevon Le Blanc, praised the model’s nurturing of empathy and compassion for self and others. “I never experienced a training anywhere else that was so impactful,” said Le Blanc. The emphasis on connection also helps youth better cope with feelings of isolation and alienation. “It (the Rede training) made me feel better ‘cause I don’t want to be isolated by myself. It helped me with my stress and depression,” said Landrea Brazile, a former YEP beneficiary and current employee.

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Program staff working within what can be emotionally-challenging environments can also benefit from greater self-awareness and acquiring tools for self-care. Nearly all YEP staff received training in the Rede methodology, with elements of the model now being integrated into the organization’s culture and operations (e.g., more emphasis on communication and appreciation of team members’ contributions). While reluctant at first, staff now view the Rede training as a professional growth opportunity, equipping them with stress-management techniques and the tools to do their jobs better.

Equipping youth and adults to express and manage their emotions isn’t just a tangential or supplementary activity; rather, Rede recognizes that the ability to identify and control emotions is critical to success in the workplace and educational settings.

## **2. YOUTH HAVE AN ESSENTIAL ROLE TO PLAY IN ADDRESSING OY NEEDS**

Youth are a valuable and underutilized resource when it comes to meeting OY needs. RCY’s global exchange partners illustrated the powerful roles youth can play in OY programs—from coaching and training their peers to conducting surveys and collecting data to advocating for improved services and policies. What unique qualities do youth offer their peers? It comes down to shared experience, trust, empathy, and the ability to communicate in terms youth experiencing disconnection can relate to.

**Youth as mentors and advocates.** Doncel Asociación Civil, a national NGO in Argentina that helps youth in state-managed care transition to independent living, stands out in its prioritization of youth participation. In 2010, Doncel took steps to incorporate youth views and voices more formally into its work. It began by supporting care-leavers in creating a youth-led web portal for their peers poised to exit the system. Over time, this dedicated youth group, called the E-Guide, expanded, assuming increasing responsibility and autonomy. E-Guide members, who are paid for the peer-to-peer services they provide, were highly influential in the passage of national legislation guaranteeing financial and emotional support for youth transitioning to independent living.

Through an RCY-facilitated learning exchange with Doncel, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (NCFE) learned what's possible in truly embracing youth engagement. While NCFE elevates youth voices in its work, its leadership recognized there was more they could do. "No matter what happens in the future, NCFE is a better organization because of this experience," said Associate Vice President Sara Riffel after traveling to Argentina to witness Doncel's approach first-hand. "Staff and young people have a renewed energy and spirit to make changes to increase authentic youth engagement because of what we learned."

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Nebraska Children and Families Foundation***

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As part of the RCY knowledge exchange, NCFE received technical assistance from Doncel youth and staff in the creation of a statewide youth advisory committee to inform and support improved policies and practices for their peers transitioning out of care. In the process of the exchange, Riffel was struck by differences between the U.S. and Argentina in the legal protections and regulations impacting youth who have experienced care. "In the U.S., there's more red tape," she says. While such limitations were designed to protect young people, they can restrict efforts to engage youth as peer mentors. For example, to qualify as a mentor in Nebraska one is subjected to a background check. Mentors and mentees are also restricted in the number of hours they can spend together, with mentors prohibited from using their car to transport the young people they serve. By contrast, in Argentina, E-Guide members stay in close contact, leveraging whatever practical resources they have at hand to support one another and their peers in care.

**Youth as peer-to-peer trainers and coaches.** The valuable role of youth as service providers is also reflected in the design of Pro Salud's Órale program. Young adults with backgrounds in psychology, social work, and related fields provide a strong foundation of peer-to-peer support throughout the program cycle. Each receives 40 hours of training, complemented by coaching, and assumes a salaried position as a workshop facilitator, mentor, or job placement counselor. As a result, Órale participants benefit from youth-led training sessions and receive one-on-one coaching from peers to help them navigate obstacles and follow through with potential employers.

When Órale was piloted in Baltimore through an RCY-facilitated exchange with youth-serving government agencies (e.g., Mayor’s Office of Employment Development-MOED, Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore City Public Health Department\*<sup>6</sup>), participating youth praised its peer-to-peer approach. “It was cool having young people lead the sessions,” said training participant Dane Armstrong. “It helped me to define my career goals and what I want to do.”

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In the United Kingdom, another RCY-identified program, Foster Focus, equips former foster youth with training (e.g., in public speaking, facilitation, and communication skills) to serve as consultants and advisors to organizations engaged in the foster care system. The Foster Focus-trained youth staff (or consultants) deliver speeches at conferences, seminars, and classes. In 2016, their efforts reached over 100,000 teachers, students, social workers, funders, and government officials. “A lot of times, youth aren’t consulted because people don’t know how to engage them,” says Foster Focus Founder Luke Rodgers. “We’ve developed a framework for involving young people in service delivery that’s proving youth participation works.”

**Youth as social innovators and movement-builders.** Another area RCY explored was the role of youth in building movements and catalyzing policy makers to take action to incorporate youth views in decision-making. In Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, for example, dozens of youth coalesced in 2009 to reclaim their communities from record-breaking violence. They called themselves Red de Agrupaciones Juveniles (Network of Youth Groups), or the Red (Network), for short. Beginning as a loose-knit collective of youth-led initiatives, the Red’s membership gradually evolved into over 70 legally-registered, youth-run organizations. Together, they sought to tackle the underlying causes of youth alienation and anger (e.g., poverty, poor quality education, and lack of recreational and employment opportunities) that often drove their peers to join the ranks of narcotics traffickers.

The dedication and passion of the Red captured the attention of municipal and national government leaders, who supported the youth with technical training, funding, and a place at the decision-making table. In March 2013, the mayor of Ciudad Juárez announced the launch of a municipal youth committee, comprised of government officials and representatives of youth-led civil society organizations. The committee was given a budget and tasked with supporting local youth development and incorporating youth voices into related policy decisions.

The Red illustrates what youth—driven by passion and purpose—are capable of achieving within organizations and communities.

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<sup>6</sup> BCHD staff were trained in the methodology, but the model has not yet been piloted with youth served through BCHD services and programs.

### 3. STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION LIES AT THE HEART OF LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS TO YOUTH DISCONNECTION

RCY's exchange partners—in the U.S. and globally—stress that equipping youth experiencing disconnection with employability skills alone is not enough. More effort is needed to reinforce the social fabric in affected communities and the willingness of individuals and institutions to be part of the solution.

Pro Salud, for example, galvanized a range of community stakeholders in recruiting out-of-school and out-of-work youth to participate in its Órale program. Years of delivering quality health services at the grassroots level reinforced Pro Salud's reputation as a committed community partner. Its staff relied on existing relationships with youth groups, churches, community-based organizations, and government agencies across 32 communities to identify youth, ages 16 to 28, who could benefit from Órale. Because the program was delivered through local community centers, there was greater buy-in among the community at large in contributing to its success.

In Argentina, Fundación Pescar is known for its work in building bridges between youth living in drastically underserved communities and the corporate world. As stated earlier, the organization delivers its youth employability training in close partnership with companies, which host Pescar training centers within their physical infrastructures. Currently, 22 Pescar Centers can be found in some of the nation's largest and most visible companies, including Accenture, Coca-Cola, Dow, Santander Río, Samsung, and Toyota.

Being embedded within a corporate environment can be transformative for youth from marginalized communities. While attending the centers, youth interact informally with company employees. It's not uncommon for youth to share meals with staff in the cafeteria, or to be greeted by employees in the hallway. By the end of the training—which lasts 4.5 to 9 months, depending on the company—youth not only acquire life skills and technical training, they gain exposure and acceptance within a professional setting, an experience that would have otherwise been out of reach.

“This program reflects what we think could be the future for Argentine society,” says Florencia Renda, RSE Project Manager at Banco Santander Río, a Pescar partner. “We want people to feel not only that they can integrate, but it's going to be much better for society as a whole.”

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“This is a program of inclusion,” stresses Fundación Pescar Executive Director Sylvia Rueda de Uranga. “Businesses and NGOs both know things. We have to work together.” Far beyond a check-writing exercise, Pescar invites companies to co-design and co-implement each Center's activities.



A message of inclusion and active citizenship also permeates the work of Rede Cidadã in Brazil. Rede's training methodology nurtures four key relationships: with one's self, one's friends and neighbors, one's professional peers, and the planet. In Rede's view, achieving one's personal goals cannot be separated from having a positive impact in the community. Rede also works closely with its corporate partners to foster an ethic of social responsibility.

Rede's efforts benefit from a policy in Brazil that requires medium- and large-scale companies to provide paid apprenticeships to youth, ages 14 to 24, equal to five percent of their employee base. Through its Apprenticeship Program, Rede helps companies prepare youth for the workplace. During the 11- to 16-month program, youth trainees spend one day per week at a Rede training center and four days on-the-job. Not only do trainees acquire valuable experience but company employees interact with and support the apprentices.

Achieving real progress in tackling youth marginalization requires a commitment to promoting the material and social welfare of young people as citizens, not just workers, and an emphasis on tackling underlying inequalities of power and wealth.<sup>7</sup> It requires shifting the narratives society holds about young people—particularly marginalized young people—and transforming the mindsets of actors outside of the youth development field, including employers, policymakers, and the community at large.

If society has a negative perception of marginalized young people—and our decision making is deeply affected by unconscious values and prejudices<sup>8</sup>—it becomes more likely that we will perpetuate an environment that leads to social isolation and disconnection.

Building an enabling and inclusive environment conducive to youth reconnection takes time and intention. RCY found that progress begins with creating opportunities for interaction among youth experiencing disconnection and key stakeholders, including community members, employees at local businesses, policymakers, and business leaders. Through fostering connections and greater empathy, mindsets begin to shift creating greater potential to influence systems and ultimately policies.

#### **4. CROSS-BORDER LEARNING OFFERS PROGRAMS A FRESH LOOK AT THEIR WORK AND CAN SURFACE AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Exchange participants who traveled from the U.S. to learn from peer organizations in the global south quickly noted similarities between the issues driving youth disconnection in different parts of the world, among them poverty; violence; family breakdown; and a lack of relevant education, training, and employment opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> Clarke, Steve. (2005). "Youth Policy and Social Inclusion: Critical Debates with Young People," \* Monica Barry (ed.), \* London, Routledge, 2005, pp. xii + 315, British Journal of Social Work. 36. 10.1093/bjsw/bch409.

<sup>8</sup> Kahneman, D. (2015). "Thinking, Fast and Slow." New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Such similarities—and shared experiences in serving youth—helped to facilitate strong relationships among exchange partners. That said, it took time for the leaders of U.S. organizations to embrace new approaches and new ways of thinking about their work.

For Kerry Owings, Center Manager for the Baltimore City MOED, it took hearing from youth who had graduated from the Órale program in Tijuana to convince him of its effectiveness. “When you can see young people impacted by a program, that’s what makes it real,” he said.

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation’s Sara Riffel acknowledges that traveling to Argentina and being immersed in another culture gave her a fresh perspective on NCFF’s youth engagement work. While the organization had established committees and created venues for youth voices to be shared, its efforts were generally not youth-led. Observing the work of the E-Guide in Argentina showed Riffel and other NCFF staff what was possible.

“We have many programs with youth ambassadors, many of whom don’t know each other even though they are working towards a common goal,” said Riffel. “What I take away from the E-Guide is the genuine human connection that members have. It’s a missing piece for us and offers an opportunity to grow and connect as an organization with our young people.”

While senior staff from the Youth Empowerment Project expressed profound interest in Rede Cidadã’s movement-based approach from the beginning, the process of fully understanding and embracing the program evolved over the course of a year. It wasn’t until youth experienced the model first hand—and signaled their approval—that YEP’s leadership decided to proceed with piloting the methodology in New Orleans.

YEP Co-founder and Executive Director Melissa’s Sawyer embraced the exchange with cautious optimism. Her concerns centered on the Rede model’s emphasis on movement, emotional expression, and physical touch. With time she saw that Rede’s approach satisfied a yearning among YEP beneficiaries to feel more positive about themselves and their future. She and her team came to the conclusion that youth who feel more positive about themselves and are better equipped to manage their emotions would ultimately be more likely to get and stay in jobs.

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Youth Empowerment Project, New Orleans***

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Participants in each of RCY’s three learning exchanges reported that the experience of traveling to another country offered the chance to not only learn about new approaches and innovations but to view their own efforts in a new light, revealing both strengths and areas for improvement. Said YEP’s Sawyer toward the end of the exchange: “Too often in the U.S. we think we have all the answers and we’re doing it better than anyone else... One of the things we were reminded of was that we know we’re doing great work, our results speak to that, but also there is something that we’re missing out

on. And I think a lot of that is working on the whole person, working on self-value, on supporting one another, on building a true sense of community. I think that's something we could all learn from in the United States.”

## CONCLUSION

IYF's experience over three years of implementing (Re)Connecting Youth underscored the value of cross-border learning for U.S. exchange partners and their Latin American counterparts. RCY identified promising practices for addressing youth disconnection with much to teach U.S. practitioners, funders, and policymakers. Each of RCY's exchange partnerships sparked new ways of looking at problems, many of them youth-led, through holistic approaches designed to foster individual and societal healing. The results speak for themselves:

- In New Orleans, YEP adapted mindfulness and movement-based approaches from Rede Cidadã (Brazil) into its organizational structure and programming to promote trauma-centered healing for staff and youth participants.
- In Baltimore, the Mayor's Office of Employment Development and Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) piloted the Órale curriculum with local service providers and youth. Based on results from the pilot, BCPSS' Re-engagement Center plans to integrate the curriculum into all of its alternative options programs for over-age and under-credited students and MOED is integrating the curriculum into programs serving youth in disadvantaged communities on the Westside of Baltimore.
- In Nebraska, the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation adapted elements of Doncel's youth engagement model by creating a state-wide youth advisory board of youth transitioning from the foster care system. The youth advisory board has autonomy and decision-making power to strengthen support networks, policies, and practice for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Culture understandably factored into RCY's efforts to build cross-border relationships and adapt global practices. In its role as exchange facilitator and knowledge broker, RCY 'held the space' for learning partners to understand, process, and relate to cultural differences. Such differences presented both opportunities for new insights (e.g., the incorporation of music, dance, and emotional expression into program activities) and occasional obstacles to be mitigated (e.g., the acceptability of physical contact within Latin American programs). RCY took steps from the start to ensure value alignment among exchange partners and a willingness to explore new ways of working. In at least one exchange site, Baltimore City, a culturally-relevant model is now poised to fill a critical gap in services. Steps are being taken to integrate the Órale model into summer programs serving Latino youth, providing them—for the first time—with access to a comprehensive, culturally-competent employability and healthy-behaviors program.

Cultural distinctions also led RCY to consider broader lessons its Latin American partners offer related to community building and addressing young people's emotional needs. The primacy of relationships and emotional expression in the Latin American context were emphasized in the *2018*

*World Happiness Report* (WHR), produced by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. Despite negative indicators, including poverty, corruption, violence, and crime, the WHR found Latin America exhibited relatively high levels of happiness in relation to other regions of the world. This conclusion was attributed to the abundance of close and warm interpersonal relations Latin Americans enjoy with relatives and friends, and what the authors call “an affective regime that values and encourages the experience and manifestation of emotions.”<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the WHR found levels of wellbeing in the U.S. to have declined as reflected in an erosion of social capital and increasing health risks (e.g., addiction, depression, and obesity).<sup>10</sup> This coincides with studies pointing to a decline in the quality and quantity of social relationships in the U.S. with serious risk factors for mental health and mortality.<sup>11</sup>

While observations related to culture run the risk of gross generalization, many of the WHR’s findings reflected RCY’s experience. The premium placed on emotional expression and the forging of meaningful relationships among youth and between youth and service providers were notable among those Latin American programs studied. Said Valere Lourme, Head of Marketing and Communications at Volvo Trucks, a Pescar partner: “Latin Americans have spontaneous emotional expression. They don’t sense the risks and what’s acceptable to share.” For Lourme, who grew up in France, Pescar’s relationship-centered approach offers a welcome antidote to a “world that is building a code of conduct that forces us to repress emotions.”

RCY’s Latin American partners also stressed the importance of social inclusion and social cohesion in their work—from Rede Cidadã’s efforts to sensitize youth and business leaders in Brazil to their responsibilities as active citizens to Pescar’s work with corporate partners in Argentina to co-design and co-implement youth employability training programs. Youth also have a valuable role to play in advancing social inclusion as evidenced by members of the E-Guide in Argentina and Red Juvenil in Mexico, both of which successfully advocated for improved policies leading to greater recognition of and investment in marginalized youth.

Exchange partners from north and south underlined the importance of supporting vulnerable youth in rewriting the narratives they hold about themselves, while fostering new societal narratives that strengthen reconnection efforts. Through uplifting promising practices and adapting these within the U.S. context, RCY sought to demonstrate new ways of advancing youth wellbeing and societal healing. That said, RCY’s experience raised critical questions that beg further exploration:

- How do we counteract the sense among many U.S. practitioners that they have less to learn or gain from approaches and practices abroad?
- In a resource and time constrained environment, how can practitioners gain the training and insights needed to pursue holistic practices that support young people’s emotional wellbeing?

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<sup>9</sup> [2018 World Happiness Report](#), “Happiness in Latin America Has Social Foundations,” p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> [2018 World Happiness Report](#), “America’s Health Crisis and the Easterlin Paradox,” pp. 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, J. Bradley Layton, [“Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review.”](#) 2010

- How can we create opportunities for practitioners to pursue comprehensive and intensive practices at scale when integrated services cost more per youth and funding is scarce?
- Does an emphasis on evidence-based outcomes in the U.S. stymie the introduction of innovative approaches? And how do we create the space for demonstrations and pilots so that organizations can try new ideas without putting funder relationships, or youth, at risk?
- How can service providers and policymakers foster authentic youth engagement while protecting young people's safety and welfare?
- How can we leverage technology in creative ways to reduce the costs inherent in cross-border learning?

While cross-border knowledge and practice exchange is not without its challenges, RCY's experience demonstrates there is much to be gained. Cross-border learning sparked new ways of looking at problems, many of them youth-led. In all cases, new approaches were seen as complements to, rather than replacements for, existing practices.

The question is not "why should we take the time and effort to learn from global experiences," but "why wouldn't we maximize our collective knowledge?" In the words of Rede Cidadã Founder Fernando Alves, "We're reaching a moment in time when humanity is saying it's necessary that we work together to create a better world." RCY's experience shows how cross-border learning can result in mutually-beneficial collaborations that offer valuable insights for the field that can contribute to healthier communities overall.