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Executive Summary

For my Lilly Fellowship I worked as a research intern at Big Sky Youth Empowerment (BYEP) in Bozeman, Montana. BYEP is a nontraditional education program that aims at providing at-risk youth the self-esteem, confidence, relationships, and supports that they need to graduate from high school with a plan for independence in the future. The program offers both weekly workshops, which carry a heavy group counseling approach as well as outdoor adventures each week, which help support the development of social and life skills. The programs are coordinated and designed by program managers that plan and facilitate the weekly workshops that focus on developmentally appropriate topics ranging from sexual education and drugs to identity and well-being. Mentors are coparticipants in adventures and workshops and serve as assistant facilitators who help to guide discussion but have not put in time before the workshop helping to structure it.

As a research intern, I existed in the space between program managers and mentors. On the one hand, I interacted with the program managers on a daily basis and often brainstormed about and reflected on workshop. On the other hand, I was often a more peripheral member of group conversation and adventures as both a transient figure that floated between groups (instead of sticking with 1 group like a regular mentor) and a participant observer. My “research” this summer, was specifically focused on how the program was “bleeding into” the kids everyday lives. What bridges existed between what happened in the program and what happened to these “at-risk” youth on a daily basis? What were the benefits being produced by the program that were easily and intuitively translated into the lives of these youth as they lived them?

While my analysis of this project is still ongoing, the basic themes that have emerged appear to be revolving around the idea of spaces and relationships of calm--spaces and relationships where one can step back from the worries of life appreciate the little things. Participants often discussed the role that small positive actions, and good friendships, even when imperfect, can have in producing feelings of hope and positivity. Interestingly, and while the similarities are still emerging, these perceptions and lines of reasoning are very similar to what the youth I worked with last summer in Honduras held as a theory of social change. By building spaces where positive relationships can provide youth with support and help youth to appreciate the small things in life, youth believe that social change can happen. These similarities have really excited me towards looking at how youth are conceptualizing social change in the relationships that structure their everyday lives.