



ENGAGING YOUTH WITH COMMUNITY COALITIONS: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON YOUTH AS PARTNERS IN COMMUNITY PREVENTION INITIATIVES

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A growing body of research on youth civic development indicates that when youth take on leadership roles within committees and organizations—through organizing, activism, media, research, and governance—civic engagement is promoted and youth development is enhanced. As such, youth organizing can be an innovative social justice and youth development strategy that allows youth to create meaningful institutional change and alter power relations in their communities. Recent research analyzes the dynamics and best practices of youth organizing, and suggests that encouraging, engaging, and supporting youth in community coalitions is both advantageous in its own right and beneficial to wider social movements when done in cooperation with adult-based coalitions.

Examining potential opportunities for improving member participation in community-based coalitions, research by Wells et al., (2008) determined that opportunities for influence were associated with individuals' coalition participation, however coalition process competence was not associated with participation.

Assessing the current state of youth organizing, Christens & Kirshner (2011) identified youth organizing as a formidable driver of social change, that—when initiated as a multi-level approach with certain common characteristics—is among the most effective means of community and youth development.

Wolff (2001) additionally identified nine key factors critical to effective coalitions—such as intentionality, structure and organizational capacity, taking action, and membership—that must be present in a multi-dimensional approach to assure success.

Brown et al. (2015) compared the functioning of youth partnerships with adult partnerships, finding that most aspects of partnership functioning did not differ significantly. However youth partnerships faced substantially more participation difficulties than adult partnerships, difficulties that may be managed by strategies such as increasing opportunities for youth to help others directly, and creative scheduling.

Zeldin et al., (2012) found that authentic decision-making, reciprocity, natural mentors, and community connectedness are essential elements of effective youth-adult partnerships, with the potential to support community change, catalyze positive youth development, and increase civic engagement.

SUMMARY

Seeking to identify potential opportunities for improving member participation in community-based coalitions, Wells and colleagues (2008) assessed 818 members within 79 youth-oriented coalitions to examine two incentives: the opportunities people experience for influence within the coalition; and how competent they perceive coalition processes to be—both foundational as they relate to coalition capacity to achieve other goals. In terms of individual decision-making about how much to participate in coalitions, these two factors can be conceived of as “Can I influence what this coalition does?” and “How capable is this group of achieving those goals?” Based on previous studies, researchers hypothesized that coalition members will participate more when they perceive (a) more opportunities for influence and (b) greater coalition process competence (p. 94-98).

Study results yielded partial support for the first hypothesis. **Members were significantly more likely to report having attended a higher percentage of meetings, and having spent more time outside meetings on coalition business, when they perceived more inclusive styles of leadership.** Both belonging to and chairing committees or other subgroups was positively associated with reported participation. However there was no association between committee membership and amount of time spent on coalition activities outside meetings (p. 98, 99).

The second hypothesis—that coalition members would participate more when they perceived greater process competence—found no support. Neither meeting effectiveness nor board directness were associated with participation in or outside coalition meetings. Overall, opportunities for influence were associated with greater participation, while process competence was not (p. 99-101).

Results from the study suggest that people do more when they feel a greater ability to personally influence events, and when they feel recognized and appreciated for their efforts, leading them to be more receptive to requests for more help from leadership. Committee membership may also improve socialization and enable members to build interpersonal ties, supporting more active and effective participation. An actively inclusive leadership style is therefore key to effectiveness, making it useful to survey all members about how they perceive their ability to influence the coalition’s work. Forming temporary work groups to accomplish specific tasks may increase participation, as only people chairing committees spent

above-average time on coalition activities beyond meetings. Overall, Wells et al (2008) argued that “incentive management is an appropriate overarching construct for understanding why people participate in coalitions,” and “empowerment and shared leadership are two facets of inclusivity that provide members with incentives to participate actively” (p. 100-102).

CITATION

Wells, R., Ward, A. J., Feinberg, M., & Alexander, J. A. (2008). What Motivates People to Participate More in Community-based Coalitions?. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(1-2), 94-104.

ARTICLE 2: Taking Stock of Youth Organizing: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

SUMMARY

Youth organizing is having a moment. As it expands from an innovative yet marginal approach to youth and community development into a more widely accepted model for practice among foundations and nonprofit organizations, youth organizing has earned increasing interest through its emphasis on collective action to advance shared interests, positive youth development, and asset-based approaches. **It has also gained increasing prevalence and traction in recent decades from the growth of economic inequality, as well as the broader movement to include youth in civil society—emphasizing youth as fully competent participants in society.** Through an examination of the current state of this growing area of study and practice, Christens and Kirshner (2011) have identified common elements of youth organizing: relationship development, popular education, social action, and participatory research and evaluation (p. 27-30).

Surveying youth organizing initiatives in California and Arizona, the authors found that youth organizing can be an effective strategy to positively influence participant leaders and social systems, garnering institutional impacts, and youth sociopolitical development (2011). Relationship development serves to build commonalities and understandings of common issues to develop a network of trust and concern, while popular education builds critical perspectives on social systems and the perpetuation of inequality, such as addressing racial disparities in education, health, immigrant rights, and the prison-industrial complex (p. 30-34). **Youth organizing capitalizes on these methods to take social action to modify power relationships in their communities, and can utilize research and evaluation to understand problems and suggest solutions.** Taken together, this powerful combination of elements represents a promising model or pathway for the inclusion of young people as full participants

in civil society. An examination of the current research shows that youth organizing can be considered a multilevel intervention—a community-based, culturally relevant category of interventions that integrate a commitment to working in collaboration with local groups and settings, and an appreciation of how intervention efforts are situated in local culture and context. As such, youth organizing initiatives are among the most effective environments for community and youth development to simultaneously occur (p. 34-37).

Because it demonstrates the capacities and potential contributions of young people to the larger public, youth organizing has been identified as a powerful driver of broader social change. It can be a critical contribution to the future of democracy by altering the public's view of youth, catalyzing greater civic inclusion of young people (p. 37- 38).

CITATION

Christens, B. D., & Kirshner, B. (2011). Taking stock of youth organizing: An interdisciplinary perspective. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2011(134), 27-41.

ARTICLE 3: A Practitioner's Guide to Successful Coalitions

SUMMARY

Though community members have increasingly learned about the coalition building process, the success rate for community coalitions is mixed, and their track record is not widely known. Many successes contrast with significant amounts of wasted time, confusion, and disorganization as coalition building can create community change, yet also fail to meet a community's goals (p. 173-176).

Building on work in Massachusetts starting and supporting three community coalitions over 16 years and assisting hundreds of others across the country, Wolff (2001) identified nine dimensions that are essential to coalition functioning and can make the difference between success and failure: coalition readiness, intentionality, structure and organizational capacity, taking action, membership, leadership, dollars and resources, relationships, and technical assistance. **Respectively, a community must employ a multisectoral approach to find methods to solve its own problems, develop a common shared mission and vision, and have a structure that reflects the usual organizational capacities of any successful organization**, e.g. decision-making, communication, and adequate resources (p. 174-180).

Additionally: a coalition's ability to affect change impacts the coalition's members, evaluators, and funders, as achieving concrete outcomes maintains coalition membership; engaging a broad cross section of the community in active membership is essential; and successful coalitions disperse their leadership and develop it among all members of the coalition rather than just one individual. In terms of dollars and resources, coalitions started by grassroots groups with no money yielded genuine community ownership, whereas coalitions created specifically to take advantage of a funding opportunity did not see a great level of community involvement. **Lastly, a successful coalition brings people together facilitating relationships that allow problem solving processes; and as coalitions can generate disagreement and conflict, as well as entailing excessive risks with too few resources, technical assistance, consultation, training, and member support is essential (p. 181-188).**

By developing and applying these nine key aspects critical to coalition success, and maintaining a long term commitment to the communities and coalitions, the Massachusetts coalitions made a real impact on the quality of life in their communities, successfully tackling some of the major impediments to coalition success. However, rather than being considered rules to strictly follow, this nine-dimension formula is better conceived of as a set of guidelines, or "opportunities to raise questions and study more carefully both the process and the outcomes of this fascinating and powerful form of community change" (p. 188-190).

CITATION

Wolff, T. (2001). A practitioner's guide to successful coalitions. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 29(2), 173-191.

ARTICLE 4: Comparing the Functioning of Youth and Adult Partnerships for Health Promotion

SUMMARY

Youth partnerships are uniquely powerful because, as peers, youth can engineer and deliver effective strategies for youth behavior change, and youth are better able than adults to relate to and understand a youth target population. Yet though partnership functioning is an important factor for success, it may be at risk in youth partnerships because youth are less skilled than adults in coordinating large projects, addressing complex problems, and have less overall experience. Seeking to understand the differences and similarities in the operations of youth and adult partnerships for community health, and thereby allow more effective strategies for supporting youth partnerships, Brown and colleagues (2015) administered

standardized partnership functioning surveys to participants in three smoke-free youth coalitions and 53 Communities That Care adult coalitions (p. 25, 26).

Numerous aspects of partnership functioning were examined, including: task focus, cohesion, leadership, community support, and participation costs and benefits. Compared with adult partnerships, results found females reported lower levels of efficiency than males, though gender was not significantly related to any other outcomes. Ethnicity other than non-Hispanic white was associated with higher levels of community improvements, and both age and ethnicity were associated with higher levels of cohesion. Percentage of meetings attended and years involved were not significantly related to any aspect of partnership functioning, however time invested was related to all measures of partnership functioning (p. 26-32).

Results showed that most elements of partnership functioning were similar and did not significantly differ between youth and adult partnerships. These findings are encouraging given the success of adult partnerships. However youth partnership differed in important ways, e.g. youth partnerships rated their leaders as having higher levels of competence, and reported greater participation difficulties. Countering this requires increased participation benefits to support engagement. Youth partnerships may benefit from technical assistance strategies such as trainings in participatory decision making, creative scheduling, and increasing opportunities for youth to help others directly.

Overall, youth partnerships “maintain substantial promise as they provide opportunities for youth to build capacity and commitment for a lifelong involvement in health promotion” (p. 32- 33).

CITATION

Brown, L. D., Redelfs, A. H., Taylor, T. J., & Messer, R. L. (2015). Comparing the functioning of youth and adult partnerships for health promotion. *American journal of community psychology*, 56(1-2), 25-35.

ARTICLE 5: The Psychology and Practice of Youth-Adult Partnership: Bridging Generations for Youth Development and Community Change

SUMMARY

Though the construct remains unfocused with an insufficient foundation in developmental theory and community applications, and many are unfamiliar with the practice, youth-adult

partnerships (Y-AP) have the potential to encourage positive youth development, support community change, and increase civic engagement. Zeldin et al (2013) conceptualized **Y-AP as both a developmental process and a community practice, and grounded in the frame of “free spaces” involving people across generations working together to address common concerns**, Y-AP operates as a core and active ingredient toward these outcomes. Four central elements underlie effective Y-AP—authentic decision-making, reciprocity, natural mentors, and community connectedness—which make Y-AP a unifying concept distinct from other forms of youth-adult relationships (p. 385, 386, 393, 394).

By reviewing the methods by which Y-AP has become a phenomenon of interest over the past 40 years, Y-AP emerges as focal, cross-cutting concept, leading researchers to define the Y-AP construct in ways that are consistent with recent research and field-based best practice. Grounded in historical, empirical, and community foundations, researchers define Y-AP as “the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization, and/or affirmatively address a community issue” (p. 388). **As such, Y-AP is a specific constellation of activity, role, and relationship—a social regularity with essential parameters—that buttresses positive youth and civic development, and distinguishes it from other types of interactions between youth and adults** (p. 387-393).

Synthesis of community practice and empirical study suggests that Y-AP is most influential when implemented as a unifying construct involving these four core elements. Y-AP could be useful in conceptualizing settings and establishing rubrics for quality implementation. However it needs further observation and categorization if it is to become a focal point for setting design. Nonetheless, there is requisite field experience and research to guide and justify implementing Y-AP in a broad array of community settings. It is apparent that Y-AP catalyzes integration of individual and collective programming approaches, and spurs the birth of settings that promote civic engagement, youth development, and community change. Advocating and implementing Y-AP in the environments and mission of civil society may, “provide youth with the legitimate opportunities to build social networks, gain competencies, and experience a sense of connectedness even during periods of personal vulnerability and developmental risk” (p. 394) (p. 393-394).

CITATION

Zeldin, S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The psychology and practice of youth-adult partnership: Bridging generations for youth development and community change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(3-4), 385-397.

CONCLUSION

One of the key factors that helps communities, states, and regions reach their prevention goals is having successful coalitions, comprised of diverse stakeholders, that bring different strengths, leadership capacity, and useful experience to the table. In the coalition model, adults and youth can work together to build capacity necessary to tackle tough prevention challenges. This review of research introduced five studies that explored, broadly, how youth organizing, activism, and civic engagement may be aligned with initiatives designed to empower youth in community prevention roles.

Wells et al (2008) aimed to investigate how they could improve member participation in community coalitions. They found that the perception of inclusive leadership styles equated to more frequent meeting attendance, as well as more time spent on this work. In addition, they noted that “neither meeting effectiveness nor board directness were associated with participation in or outside coalition meetings.” The authors noted that coalition members are more active when they feel that their efforts matters, when they feel recognized for their work, leading them to be more responsive to future requests. Thus, empowerment and shared leadership are two valuable components of coalition success, and, even more critically, effective leadership.

One of the ways that adult-youth partnerships can function more effectively is to learn from the successes of youth organizing and youth coalitions. In this study, Christens & Kirshner (2011) explored youth organizing efforts, finding a number of important dimensions of this work: relationship development, popular education, social action, and participatory research and evaluation (p. 27-30). Through building relationships, and informing the public, youth organizing can produce meaningful social change. Youth should be included in initiatives aimed at solving the complex problems of society, as a well-functioning democracy depends on the full social, economic, and civic participation of young people.

Seeking to analyze characteristics of successful coalitions, Wolff (2001) relied on over 16 years participating in, and providing guidance to, hundreds of coalitions across the country. The

author identified important factors that support coalition functioning, including: organizational capacity, leadership, relationships, and technical assistance. In addition, attracting a diverse set of stakeholders who would be active participants, and those who can thrive amidst disagreement and conflict is important as well. Wolff's guidelines will provide expertise to coalitions looking for structure and guidance.

In their study comparing youth and adult partnerships, Brown and colleagues (2015) found many similarities between the two. For example, youth may benefit from additional training and assistance, such as scheduling meetings, direct service work, and participatory decision making. This kind of support seems targeted to address their developmental challenges, such as in organizing complex projects that require more extensive experience. Overall, Brown argued, youth occupy a powerful position, as they are capable of developing and delivering strategies for behavior change in ways that adults cannot.

Zeldin et al (2013) sought to learn more about youth development, community change, and civic engagement by researching youth-adult partnerships. They conceptualized Y-AP as collective, participatory work that aims to resolve a community or justice-related issue. The authors found that these partnerships are most effective when they seek to involve elements of the four components (multiple people, democratically, over time, working together).

Overall, this research review explored how coalitions can function more effectively, and how youth organizing, activity, and participation can contribute to community change. A number of contextual factors are at play in successful youth involvement, but that social change around community problems, through youth leadership seems to span across all studies.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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