Understanding Innovation: Youth–Adult Partnerships in Decision Making

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Youth–Adult Partnership (Y–AP), or the practice of addressing critical issues through intergenerational collaboration, is emerging as a key strategy in youth and community development. A central idea in most civic engagement and youth leadership models, Y–AP typically involves deliberative activities such as policy making, priority setting, program planning, evaluation, and outreach. The logic for engaging youth as partners in collective decision making and action has long been articulated as both an issue of social justice and as a matter of good practice, most recently by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. There is now a growing body of research suggesting that Y–AP promotes a range of positive outcomes for young people, organizations, and communities.

However, Y–AP remains an innovative idea in the United States. The notion that youth and adults can collaborate on issues of importance runs counter to prevailing societal norms, public policies, structures, and standards of practice. For example, the general public does not perceive youth as having the proper values or competence to contribute to civic life. Most policymakers are not familiar with Y–AP and have little experience working directly with youth. The bottom line is that there is not much cultural or policy support in the United States for managers seeking to integrate Y–AP into youth programming.

The limited scope of empirical research reinforces these constraints. Scholars have made great strides in documenting the elements of quality that underlie the positive outcomes of youth programs. In contrast, there is little theoretical or empirical understanding of how managers promote the quality implementation of youth development practices, especially those practices that are new to the field. In raising this issue we consider Cuban's (1988, p.343) observation that even the most thoughtful, evidence-based reforms tend to "flounder on the rocks of flawed implementation." This caution reminds us that while data on outcomes may be necessary to mobilize political capital and inform the goals of praxis, such research is not sufficient to guide implementation. Managers also require research-based information on the pressing issues of implementation—risk, power, consensus, will, and capacity—which, on a daily basis, significantly impact efforts to integrate best practices into youth programs.

Our team at the University of Wisconsin works within this interface of research and practice by engaging in scholarship that connects the study of youth development with that of organizational and community development. One aim has been to explore how managers create the conditions for positive youth development. This article describes some of what we are learning, with a focus on understanding how community organizations refine structures, processes, and practices to include youth–adult partnerships in their programming.

What is Y–AP in Decision Making?

Strong youth–adult relationships are an essential element of quality youth programming. Y–AP describes a particular type of relationship, specifically strategic relationships involving youth between the ages of 14 and 21. Unlike most relationships in youth programs, partnerships are rarely dyadic, nor do they address individual concerns. Y–AP instead refers to a group of youth and adults working together over a sustained period of time to address issues critical to the overall health of an organization or community. According to participants, the hallmark of a successful Y–AP is one where relationships are bi-directional in influence, with youth and adults contributing their own skills and interests to a common issue.

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What are the Developmental Outcomes of Y–AP?

Research consistently finds that engagement in collective decision making and action—whether in the context of a family, school, youth organization, or community—confers developmental benefits to youth. Youth expand their sense of self by exploring their identity through new roles and responsibilities. They hone critical thinking, organization, teamwork, and communication skills. Working alongside influential adults provides youth with a sense of belonging, commitment to community and increased social capital.

Adults and organizations also stand to gain from partnerships with youth. Research demonstrates that adults increase their competence by learning experientially with youth in the context of decision-making activities. They deepen their understanding

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of youth issues and develop new strategies for reaching out to diverse populations. Indeed, inviting youth to the table raises the bar for everyone, with inspired adults demonstrating an increased commitment to their practice and a deeper connection to the organization. By narrowing the gap between management and practice, Y–AP clarifies mission and ensures that this vision is reflected at all levels of organizational activity.

Toward a Grounded Theory of Innovation in Youth Programming

Y–AP satisfies the criteria for innovation because the idea is new to most stakeholders, the principles are fraught with conceptual uncertainty, and the practice challenges cultural traditions and structures. Our research indicates that Y–AP is both an antecedent and a consequence of organizational change, with effective Y–AP generally occurring within a larger process of organizational transformation. These qualities make Y–AP an ideal focus for the study of organizational change. If scholars can identify how organizations successfully adopt a complex practice such as Y–AP, we can likely generalize these findings to other innovative practices in youth programming that emerge from forthcoming research and evaluation. In making this assertion we consider Sarason's (1996) observation:

> The way in which the change process is conceptualized is far more fateful for success or failure than the content one seeks to implement. You can have the most creative, compellingly valid, productive idea in the world, but whether it can become embedded and sustained in a socially complex setting will primarily be a function of how you conceptualize the implementation–change process. (p.78)

The primary question guiding our inquiry is this: How do community organizations build the will and capacity to integrate the practice of youth–adult partnership into their decision-making structures and processes? Our scholarship is grounded in two traditional methods: a synthetic literature review on the management of innovation and empirical research on Y–AP in youth development organizations and community coalitions. We have also increased our understanding of Y–AP through project management and participatory research. For example, over the past five years we have directed and studied two multi-state field demonstrations of Y–AP in community philanthropy and organizational evaluation. Through these collaborations with youth organizations, we learned by experiencing the false starts, frustrations, accomplishments, and celebrations that are integral to the processes of change.

The present analysis was conducted by triangulating across the three methods. Our aim was to integrate the dominant concepts gleaned from each method to discover the larger recurrent, cross-cutting categories that best characterize the implementation of innovation. Following established procedures of grounded theory, we allowed

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Table 3.1

A Four-Point Framework for Understanding Innovation

1.	**Stakeholders of Change**
2.	**Management of Innovative Ideas**
3.	**Leverage Points for Change**
4.	**Stages of Innovation**

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the extant literature, research, and experientially-based information to interact with and renew each other.

Through this iterative analysis we arrived at a four-point framework of contributing factors (Table 3.1) for understanding innovation. Our hope is that this preliminary framework will help organize the thinking of scholars and practitioners about "what is important" when studying or implementing innovative practices such as Y–AP. In the last section of this article we provide two illustrations of how this framework guides our own research and practice in an ongoing effort to strengthen the validity and utility of the framework.

Stakeholders of Change

Innovation is a collective process. While the initiation of an innovative idea may be inspired by one individual, it takes multiple people to make meaning of the idea and transform it into sustainable practice. The first factor in our framework considers the ecology of innovation by identifying the groups of individuals that have a stake in the change process. Y–AP occurs in diverse settings: youth programs, community development organizations, multi-agency collaborations, and local government. Regardless of setting, innovators focus on three stakeholder groups:

> *While the initiation of an innovative idea may be inspired by one individual, it takes multiple people to make meaning of the idea and transform it into sustainable practice.*

- *"Program stakeholders"* are those engaged in the proximal setting of the innovation. In the case of Y–AP, program stakeholders include youth and adults who are directly involved in shared decision making and action. Y–AP flourishes best when these stakeholders are motivated to contribute their time and skills to making the innovation work on the ground.

- *"Organization stakeholders"* are those individuals and groups that have legal responsibility for those within the program environment. The role of these top administrators, board and advisory group members is to provide overall direction and oversight to those who are directly implementing Y–AP. They may also model the application of the innovation by involving youth in their own deliberations.

- *"Community stakeholders"* represent a third group of constituents who are typically considered to be "external" to the program and organizational stakeholders. While they do not have direct authority or participation in the Y–AP, community stakeholders can exert influence by communicating legitimacy or by providing resources for the innovation. Community stakeholders include politicians, community organizers, or grant makers.

These stakeholder categories often lack a clear demarcation in practice. The important point is that the mobilization of individuals, both within and across these three stakeholder groups, is the most critical challenge to implementation. Endorsement, and the will to support implementation, is always an ongoing negotiation. To meet this challenge, successful innovators devote enormous amounts of time to the careful positioning of Y–AP within the existing history, norms, and structures of the stakeholder groups. Effective managers tailor this positioning to the specific needs and concerns of

Table 3.2
Managing Innovative Ideas
• **Maintain stakeholder attention by "planting seeds"**
• **Translate ideas into action by "walking the talk"**
• **Promote shared ownership of the innovation as "how we do business"**

different stakeholders. Moreover, they concurrently demonstrate their own commitment by providing each stakeholder group with the resources —be it time, encouragement, information, or technical assistance— necessary for quality implementation.

The Management of Innovative Ideas
The implementation of innovation requires not only the mobilization of people, but equally important, the management of ideas. In the second factor of our framework, innovative ideas serve as a foundation for collective action. As Van de Ven (1986, p.593) reminds us, "it is the central focus on ideas that provides the vehicle for otherwise isolated, disconnected, or competitive individuals and stakeholders to come together and contribute their unique frames of reference to the implementation process." Extending the metaphor, the engine of innovation is communication. In our research we found that communication is a two-way process through which the idea of Y–AP comes to acquire consensual meaning among managers and stakeholders. We have identified the following three categories of *management strategies* as fundamental to the successful implementation of Y–AP (Table 3.2).

Maintain stakeholder attention on purpose and outcome
Stakeholders have competing demands on their time. Yet successful implementation requires that stakeholders attend to the innovative idea and eventually come to consensus on the purposes and outcomes of change. This clarity promotes initial buy-in and provides ongoing guideposts for implementation. In our research, managers often use the metaphor "planting seeds" to describe the strategies they use to provide key stakeholders with a framework for considering the value of Y–AP and the motivation for implementing the practice. Innovative managers plant seeds by getting Y-AP on the agenda of strategic stakeholder groups, building alliances with potential champions, and providing stakeholders with a relevant research rationale.

Translate ideas into action
Another task for innovators is to help stakeholders translate ideas into practices. Translation is especially critical when the innovation is an abstract idea such as Y–AP. To accomplish this, successful managers "walk the talk." They change their own practice to model commitment to Y–AP by formally including youth in their own decision-making activities. Innovators also re-allocate resources and make investments that encourage experimentation by staff, nurture youth and adult relationships, deliver training to promote stakeholder competence, and scaffold activities to build confidence.

Promote shared ownership
A third challenge for innovators is to make Y–AP a regular occurrence in stakeholder activities and conversations, or "how we do business." Successful managers create a culture of transformation where all stakeholders have the opportunity to continuously learn about the innovation, have a voice in re-defining it, and establish their own roles within it. Over time, they make Y–AP "official" by establishing the formal roles, expectations, and boundaries of the practice.

Leverage Points for Change
Innovators use management strategies to activate the third factor in our framework: leverage points for change. Leverage points are the underlying conditions that influence the implementation of innovation. By attending to the leverage points that exist within the three stakeholder groups, innovators may anticipate, and ultimately transform, potential challenges into opportunities for positive change. Maximizing these leverage points enables managers to harness the will and capacity of stakeholders to propel the idea of Y–AP into productive and collaborative action. Conversely, neglected leverage points may serve as significant barriers to implementation.

Through our inquiry we have identified eight leverage points critical to the successful implementation of Y–AP. As seen in Table 3.3, these leverage points fall into three areas: stakeholder efficacy, social capital, and resources. Independent of setting, innovators consistently identify these leverage points as focus areas for their efforts to build the will and capacity of key stakeholders. Indeed, leverage points may serve as performance benchmarks to plan and assess implementation. This is not to suggest that managers need, or are able, to activate all leverage points concurrently. The challenge is to determine which leverage points to activate, and when.

Stages of Innovation
Time is a major consideration of innovators in assessing which management strategies and leverage points are appropriate for their stakeholder groups. The fourth factor in our framework focuses on the importance of time in understanding innovation. Theorists note that organizations may proceed though a series of up to 10 overlapping stages when adopting innovation. In our research, we find that managers are most likely to collapse the innovation process into the three basic stages discussed below. Our research further indicates that each stage has its own character and set of challenges for managers to consider when implementing Y–AP.

Table 3.3
Leverage Points for Change
STAKEHOLDER EFFICACY
• **Self-Interest:** Stakeholders perceive the demands of Y–AP as compatible with their daily priorities and responsibilities.
• **Competence and Confidence:** Stakeholders have the requisite skills and sense of mastery to effectively engage in Y–AP.
SOCIAL CAPITAL
• **Collective Stories:** Stakeholders share positive narratives about the practice and outcomes of Y–AP.
• **Influentials:** Brokers and champions, within and outside the program, are willing to promote Y–AP and affirmatively address issues of power.
• **Social Networks:** Innovators have strong relationships within the personal and professional networks of the community.
RESOURCES
• **Infrastructure:** Policies, structures, youth and adult roles, and monies are aligned to support Y–AP.
• **Knowledge:** Stakeholders have ready access to empirical data, professional wisdom, program models, and technical assistance.
• **Praxis:** Stakeholders have sufficient opportunity to engage in a continuous cycle of planning, action, and reflection to improve the program.

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- During the *start-up stage,* stakeholders assess their willingness to initiate the innovation process by weighing risks against anticipated benefits. Management activities in this stage focus on providing stakeholders with a general framework for understanding Y–AP. Once the choice is made to initiate Y–AP there is typically much enthusiasm and creativity as stakeholders give shape to the new ideas and practices that are being generated.

- During the *growth stage,* innovators orient activities towards balancing the traditional with the new. The primary challenge facing managers in this stage is to implement Y–AP while simultaneously restructuring existing programming to accommodate the new practice. An additional challenge is to establish accountability systems concurrent with building the capacity of stakeholders to grow the practice.

- At about three years, successful programs reach the *sustainability stage.* In general, Y–AP is productive and systems have matured. The challenge is to make Y–AP standard practice within the organization while continually seeking to renew and redefine the innovation. At this stage stakeholders may adjust program policies and practices to better reflect current issues. They may also focus on developing systems for engaging and training new stakeholders in implementation.

Theorists emphasize the early years of innovation as being most critical to long-term sustainability. Our own research supports this idea, as innovators repeatedly stress the importance of taking time to "go slow and do it right." Given this context, the next section provides illustrations of how innovators use management strategies and leverage points to create the structural and interpersonal foundation necessary for change.

Application of Framework

Using this four-point framework as a guide, our analytic approach is to research the innovation process while engaging in reflective practice ourselves. We expect that the research and practice will work in tandem to strengthen the framework, thus contributing to a grounded theory of innovation in youth programming. Our analysis is focused on how innovative managers transition out of the start-up phase and respond to the paradoxes embedded within the growth stage. We are particularly interested in identifying which leverage points are activated during these stages, and why. Key findings are summarized below.

Y–AP in Local Governance and Programming

Our team is engaged in an ongoing study of a statewide initiative to promote Y–AP via the University of Wisconsin Extension system. One component of the study was structured interviews with 14 Extension professionals who are working to mobilize local communities to implement Y–AP. The interviews focused on the start-up and growth of Y–AP. Extension professionals described the infusion of young people as decision makers in a variety of settings, ranging from their own volunteer-run youth development program to multi-agency collaborations and county legislative systems.

The aim of the study was to identify the contributing factors that influence implementation of Y–AP in the core functions of program management, organizational governance, fund development, and community action. We found that Extension professionals employed various combinations of management strategies to effectively manipulate leverage points in support of Y–AP. Following are the main cross-cutting findings on the successful implementation of Y–AP in different settings and functions.

Since Y–AP is a new concept, Extension professionals **maintain attention on the purpose and outcomes** by regularly "pitching" the innovation to potential stakeholders. An effective pitch describes Y–AP in terms that resonate with the audience, provides examples of successful projects in similar settings, and outlines available resources. For example, Extension professionals pitch Y–AP to long-time volunteers as a way to deepen the tradition of youth leadership within the organization. By addressing stakeholder concerns, this strategy maximizes the *self-interest* leverage point. Extension professionals also plant seeds for Y–AP by cultivating *social networks.* Those who gain access and become embedded within these networks are most likely to convince community *influentials* to take a risk and support Y–AP.

In addition to maintaining a high profile for Y–AP, Extension professionals "walk the talk" of Y–AP by helping stakeholders **translate ideas into action.** Interspersing stories with statistics, they use *knowledge* to demonstrate that Y–AP is a field-tested innovation supported by empirical data. They also build the *confidence and competence* of youth and adult partners by phasing in Y–AP with "pilot projects" focused on concrete, short-term activities such as event planning. This gives youth and adults the opportunity to experience collective success, as well as time to practice skills before applying them to more challenging projects. Extension professionals also "model" Y–AP to the community. They bring youth to meetings and create significant roles for them, for example. Such modeling helps Extension professionals counter the claim: "That idea will never work here." This strategy challenges stereotypes by providing counterexamples, thus contributing to a positive *collective story* about Y–AP.

Extension professionals **promote shared ownership** by publicly celebrating the practice. They highlight Y–AP in press releases and disseminate research reports that increase stakeholder *knowledge* of how Y–AP supports their long-term goals. Extension professionals make *infrastructure* adjustments such as rewriting by-laws to grant youth voting power or by renaming governing bodies to reflect Y–AP. They transform the culture of governing bodies to support youth participation by making the agendas "youth friendly," changing meeting times, adopting new consensus-building methods, and working in subcommittees to foster closer youth and adult relationships

Y–AP in Program Evaluation and Improvement

Many organizations are seeking to involve youth in program evaluation, but managers are finding it difficult to maintain the engagement and productivity of Y–AP in this effort. To help organizations overcome these challenges, we have produced *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence (YALPE): A Practical Guide to Program Assessment and Action Planning.* YALPE is a resource kit to support program improvement through the analysis, interpretation and use of assessment data.

We have piloted YALPE with diverse organizations over the past four years. While we are now receiving positive feedback about the utility of the resource kit, we have to admit that YALPE did not always work. In revising YALPE with the pilot organizations, we have found that the four-point framework has helped us to better understand the processes of change, which in turn has led to improvements in the resource kit.

In response to the decreasing engagement of stakeholders over time, we modified the resource kit to **maintain attention on purpose and outcome.** We discovered, for example, that it is necessary to

create opportunities for the youth and adults to discuss their *self-interest* at the beginning of the project, and to renew this initial commitment at later stages through *praxis.* We find that stakeholders also use this time to create *collective stories* about the project, which in turn reinforce the motivation to sustain engagement in the evaluation and program improvement process.

To help translate ideas into action, we created a "12-step" *infrastructure* of implementation, complete with assessment surveys. We initially did not have this structure, fearing that stakeholders would not have sufficient flexibility. We have learned, however, that stakeholders appreciate the processes and templates. This structure allows them to focus their energy on developing local *knowledge* through data analysis and interpretation, rather than on recreating the evaluation process itself. This structure also serves as a foundation for building *competence and confidence.* We have found that stakeholders quickly learn that while evaluation may be complicated, they can pool their collective capacity to successfully pull it off.

While YALPE seeks to **promote shared ownership** of the change process, our early pilots were unsuccessful in garnering the collective interest of stakeholders. We responded by increasing opportunities for building *social networks* within the organization around the tasks of analysis and data interpretation. This enabled the stakeholders to work on aspects of the project that matched their *self-interest.* Additionally, we modified the reporting process to ensure that the Y–AP reported directly to key *influentials,* typically the board of directors. The consequence is that all stakeholders within the organization understand the evaluation findings and become committed to the improvement process.

Conclusion

The four-point framework offers a guide for understanding the conditions that promote innovation in youth programming. We hope that it provides a foundation for managers who are seeking to adopt innovative practices, such as Y–AP, in youth programming. The framework will continue to evolve as more inquiry is completed. Hopefully, this article will provoke such scholarship. We believe that scholars will soon be able to demonstrate the positive outcomes of youth development practices. Complementary research, designed to provide insight on how these innovative practices can be implemented with quality, will further serve to establish the legitimacy and sustainability of the youth development field. ✍

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Notes

This article is adapted from the following publications:

Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community youth work and research. *Applied Developmental Science, 4,* 11–20. (Defines the philosophy and practice of Y–AP.)

Camino, L., Zeldin, S., Mook, C., & O'Connor, C. (2005). *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence (YALPE).* Ithaca: Cornell University. Available at www.actforyouth.net.

Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science, 8*(2), 74–89. (Identifies adult and organizational outcomes of Y–AP.)

Zeldin, S., Camino, L., & Calvert, M. (2003). Toward an understanding of youth in community governance. *Society for Research in Child Development Social Policy Report, 17*(3), 3–20. Available at www.srcd.org. (Contains a literature review on the cultural context of Y–AP.)

Zeldin, S., Camino, L., & Mook, C. (2004) The adoption of innovation in youth organizations. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 121–135. (Contains a literature review on innovation.)

Zeldin, S., Larson, R., & Camino, L. (2004). Youth-adult relationships in community programs. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1). (Special Issue, with 11 articles.)

Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in Decision-making: A Study of the Impacts on Adults and Organizations.* Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council. Available www.atthetable.org. (Focuses on the organizational conditions that promote positive outcomes.)

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