Youth-Adult Partnership:
Impacting Individuals and Communities

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Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) in community decision-making and collective action has gained momentum as a key element of prevention programming. Indeed, there is a solid body of evidence demonstrating that youth-adult partnership has developmental benefits for youth (Mitra, 2004; Youniss & Hart, 2005; Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005). There is an increasing awareness that Y-AP may also produce positive community-level outcomes. This perspective, however, is supported more by rhetoric than by empirical study. Only a few studies have explored the influence of Y-AP on adult, organizational, or community development (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000).

The purpose of the present article is to: (1) explore the full range of outcomes that might emerge when organizations adopt Y-AP as a core organizational approach to practice, and (2) outline a framework for explaining how organizations promote these positive outcomes.

STUDY SAMPLE

This study focuses on two organizations that are grounded in traditions of youth development, community organizing, and system change: Oasis Community IMPACT(OCI), located in Nashville, Tennessee; and Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY), located in Austin, Texas.

Two criteria guided the selection of OCI and AVEY for study. First, Y-AP is a core organizational priority that focuses the management, operations, and community work of OCI and AVEY. Youth take on visible leadership positions within these organizations, not symbolic roles. Adult staff coach the youth, in addition to taking on active leadership roles themselves as appropriate. Second, OCI and AVEY are in the business of social change. Organizational leaders, therefore, maintain access and strategic links to local leaders in order to provide these youth-adult partnerships with opportunities to influence policy and programs. *For these reasons, the organizations are well positioned to positively impact youth, adult staff, community leaders, and community institutions.*

- OCI's mission is to "mobilize neighborhoods—youth, families, businesses, and organizations—to increase educational and economic opportunities for young people." Toward this end, high-school aged "youth mobilizers" work in partnership with OCI staff to conduct and disseminate action-oriented research. Research has focused on exposing the challenges that youth face in transitioning into higher education and on confronting predatory lending practices in low income communities. The findings, documented in reports and other outreach materials, are then used as a platform for vigorous outreach and education directed at community and school leaders. Youth, mentored by adult staff, give testimony in public hearings, presentations to public decision-making bodies, and workshops to community residents.

- AVEY's mission is to "mobilize the community to strengthen schools and expand opportunities for Austin's youth." Toward this end, AVEY takes a multilevel approach to systems change. Within high schools, adult staff empower students to take on issues of concern to their home campus. At the district level, a group of "youth mobilizers" are trained and supported by staff as they organize city-wide rallies, public hearings, and discussion forums. Concurrently, the most experienced youth ("youth consultants") work directly with the public school system, partner organizations, and city-wide youth coalitions. AVEY staff and youth inform district officials through governance and advisory bodies. Additionally, the youth-adult partnerships facilitate community conversations to help bring the concerns of residents to public officials.

Method

Case studies were conducted of the two organizations. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 22 current "youth mobilizers," one former youth mobilizer, and three young adult staff who were also former mobilizers. Most participants were youth of color from families with limited economic means. Many had histories of disengagement from school. Interviews were also conducted with 12 staff and board members, and eight community leaders who had partnered with or who were familiar with the work of the two organizations. The interviews were complemented by observation of Y-AP in community meetings, public events, and educational activities.

All interviews were transcribed and data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures. The research team coded and prepared interpretive memos through several rounds of analysis. Consequently, the themes identified in this article are grounded in the experiences of the study participants.

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BUILDING AN ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF PARTNERSHIP

Youth-adult partnership is involving youth and adults in collective action. In Y-AP, relationships are characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning. All individuals in the partnership have the opportunity to engage in ways consistent with their own interest and skill. Youth and adults see themselves as resources for each other, and each group offers what it uniquely can provide.

Youth-adult partnership remains an innovative idea in the United States. Very few adults have worked closely with youth, in a sustained fashion, on issues of common concern. Consequently, there exist few societal norms or institutions to support the creation of intergenerational partnerships. Recent research has examined

how organizations and public systems can engage in transformational change to promote Y-AP (Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin & Sinclair, 2003; Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2007). However, the evidence remains limited.

Given this context, it is impressive that AVEY and OCI have marshaled the will and capacity to establish Y-AP as an overarching priority. The key strategies used by the organizations are presented in Table 4.1. Our analysis further reveals that the emphasis on Y-AP has contributed directly to a vibrant culture of partnership within the AVEY and OCI. This culture is seen in the organizational values, structures, and action.

Oasis Community IMPACT and Austin Voices have made great strides in creating a core set of *partnership values*. There is a shared belief within these organizations that decision-making and direct action is enhanced when diverse stakeholders are fully involved in the process. In addition to fostering youth participation in decision making, these organizations also demonstrate that they value the opinions and participation of staff, families, and community leaders. These stakeholders are expected to share ideas and perspectives in respectful ways. They are expected to work through difficult issues, both personal and organizational.

AVEY and OCI have also created *partnership structures*—roles, processes, and policies—that allow youth to participate in ways consistent with their interest, skill, and availability. At AVEY, for example, a core group of "youth mobilizers" organize other high school youth in issue-oriented campaigns, projects, and rallies. The mobilizers are given wide latitude in choosing their specific roles within the organization. As the mobilizers become even more experienced, they can apply for consultant and staff positions with greater responsibility. Similarly, the OCI youth mobilizers can choose where to invest their interest and skill. Many leadership opportunities are available to youth as they move through the steps of action research process: issue identification; data collection, analysis and interpretation; reporting and public testimony; and organization of action-oriented coalitions of interest. Both organizations also have mechanisms for support and accountability. Once youth choose to take on a significant responsibility, the duties are formally clarified through job descriptions and ongoing feedback from supervisors.

Public action in the community is essential to the culture of these organizations for it reinvigorates partnership values and structures. Concurrently, public action sparks community change. By organizing highly visible events (rallies, candidate's forums, community conversations) and creating products (research reports, documentaries, new programs), the youth-adult partnerships are explicitly bringing critical attention to issues of social justice. Public actions are designed primarily to create more equitable and responsive communities, however, they are also an opportunity for AVEY and OCI to publicly model youth-adult partnership to the wider community. The organizations are challenging negative stereotypes about youth while demonstrating the power of young people to positively contribute to communities.

THE IMPACTS OF Y-AP

The culture of partnership within AVEY and OCI— the adoption of partnership values, the creation of partnership structures, and the enactment of public action—allows the organization to have broad impacts. As seen in Figure 4.1, an organizational culture of partnership promotes positive developmental outcomes among youth and staff. As the organization reaches out to the community through public action, and through the efforts of youth and staff, community leaders take notice and respond. The cumulative impact, over time, is that community institutions become more responsive to youth participation and to the agendas advanced by the organizations and the youth-adult partnerships.

Impacts on Youth Development

The culture of partnership existing within AVEY and OCI contributed strongly to *a sense of safety and belonging* among the young people. The youth understood deeply that the adult staff "would follow through," and "had their backs." They knew that the staff had important things to teach them and would actively help out in a crisis. The youth spoke just as passionately about their peers—the other youth organizers—"being there" for each other. During the focus groups, for example, it became clear that the youth knew, in a specific way, about the life challenges that their peers faced. The youth also acknowledged the accomplishments and contributions of their peers. This sharing led directly to a collective sense of trust, healing, and interdependence among youth.

A sense of safety and belonging provided a foundation for personal growth. Moving from this base, youth were able to take risks, to "step out" and to garner the confidence to plan and implement complex projects. For many in these organizations, this *enhanced sense of efficacy and empowerment* was a powerful impact, one that the youth believed they would take with them into the future.

TABLE 4.1
Building a Culture of Partnership Through Y-AP

Partnership Values

- Organizational leaders, by word and deed, establish Y-AP as a core priority, not a side project.
- Youth and adults are expected to learn from each other.
- The organization explicitly addresses issues of trust, power, and authority.

Partnership Structures

- Youth have multiple options for participation, and receive the support to progressively take on more responsibility.
- There is clarity in the roles of youth and adults, as established by policy, position description, or compensation.
- Youth and adults receive coaching and ongoing feedback.
- The organization has established strategies to recruit and retain youth.

Public Action

- Youth and adults organize public events and facilitate intergenerational dialogue on significant community issues and pending policies.
- Youth play a visible role in communicating research-based information and insider knowledge to community leaders and constituent groups.
- The work occurs over time, it is not episodic.
- The work models Y-AP to the larger community.

This theme is illustrated by one youth mobilizer:

My experiences have really changed me on a personal level. I am now a person that I can depend on. I think that anybody could call on me in this organization, and I can do what they need me to do. I am usually a pretty busy, flighty person, and now I'm trying to really be devoted to certain things. I think that I really feel my devotion as I am leaving high school—graduating high school—just to be involved as a youth mobilizer. I'm really proud of myself to have that devotion and to be dependable.

This sense of efficacy, in turn, allowed the youth to take advantage of existing opportunities to participate, and to create new opportunities. Consequently, all of the youth reported specific gains in their sociopolitical awareness and civic competence. The depth and thoughtfulness in their learning was impressive. The majority of youth spoke about their ability to critically analyze community problems, or in the words of OCI youth, to "explode the issues." Youth learned how to develop agendas, communicate their concerns, and persuade others. Apparent among most of the youth was a greater appreciation for the power of collective work, and the need for tolerance, as indicated by the following comments by youth mobilizers:

We feed off each other, so I think that being respectful at all times, while still holding your own values, is important. I've totally never been thrown into such a situation like this. I am surrounded by people who are so diverse. So, to realize where I stand on issues and

things—and yet still have so much in common with them— it is an amazing place to be. It really helps to have learned about movements and what groups of people have gone through.

This program changes you, changes who you are. It's just really defined who I am and what I want to be doing. It's really instilled the idea of social movements in me. I love that idea, and that's what I really want to pursue in the future. Wherever I am with this, I want to be mobilizing people to do what they feel is important.

The opportunity to work with others on significant community issues also resulted in *strengthened community connections*. Working with AVEY and OCI provided youth with the chance to interact with influential community leaders, politicians, school board members, and other types of professionals. While not all of these adults were supportive of the young people, of course, all of the youth could readily identify multiple adults with whom they had developed reciprocal and respectful relationships. These relationships helped the youth feel more emotionally connected to their schools and communities. Moreover, these relationships led to instrumental benefits. Youth gained access to information, recommendations, and networks through these influential adults which led directly to jobs and referrals to needed community services. One youth concludes:

That there is such a group of adults dedicated to children's learning is amazing to me. I didn't even know. I just knew I wasn't satisfied with school, and that is the reason I joined this organization. I didn't know that they would actually help me get professional experience in the field that I am interested in. They helped me get an internship as a fashion designer.
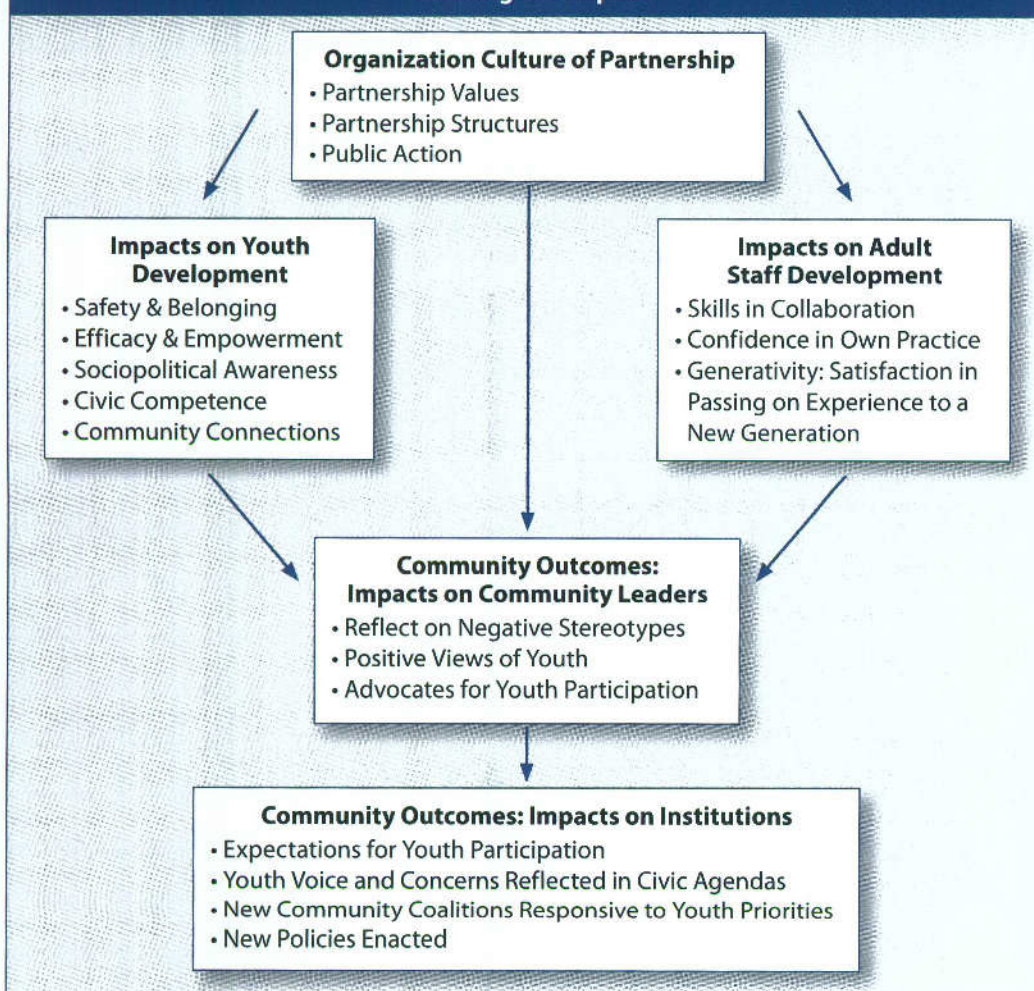
The youth spoke just as frequently about their own efforts to create emotional and instrumental connections for others. These young adults perceived themselves as organizational pioneers. They garnered a great deal of pride in knowing that they were creating opportunities for future cohorts of youth.

Impacts on Adult Staff Development

AVEY and OCI adult staff also benefited from youth-adult partnership. For these stakeholders, the central learning curve revolved around *gaining the skill, confidence, and experience to establish one's personal practice*, especially in terms of working in partnership with groups of young people. Almost all the staff spoke about learning when to "step up" and when to "step back" while still being aware of and "owning" their own status within the group. These adults had to learn when to "come on strong" with the group and when to be more passive. A culture of partnership within the organization accelerated this learning. Be it feedback

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FIGURE 4.1

When Youth-Adult Partnership Becomes an Organizational Priority: Tracking the Impact

Organization Culture of Partnership
- Partnership Values
- Partnership Structures
- Public Action

Impacts on Youth Development
- Safety & Belonging
- Efficacy & Empowerment
- Sociopolitical Awareness
- Civic Competence
- Community Connections

Impacts on Adult Staff Development
- Skills in Collaboration
- Confidence in Own Practice
- Generativity: Satisfaction in Passing on Experience to a New Generation

Community Outcomes: Impacts on Community Leaders
- Reflect on Negative Stereotypes
- Positive Views of Youth
- Advocates for Youth Participation

Community Outcomes: Impacts on Institutions
- Expectations for Youth Participation
- Youth Voice and Concerns Reflected in Civic Agendas
- New Community Coalitions Responsive to Youth Priorities
- New Policies Enacted

from youth or from other staff, all of the adults spoke about how they created their own approach to youth-adult partnership through negotiation and reflection with others.

As staff members gain confidence in their own practice, *partnering with youth becomes a powerful source of generativity*. That is, the staff felt as though they had extended their own contribution and productivity within the organization. Some of the older staff in the two organizations spoke to the satisfaction of passing along their historical understanding and personal experience with social movements. Others spoke about teaching "tried and true" organizing strategies. This "passing of the torch" clearly helps to sustain the motivation of staff.

When organizations adopt Y-AP as a priority, good things happen.

Impacts on Adult Community Leaders

Not having partnered directly with youth in the past, many of the adult leaders in the study—whether a school administrator, organizational board member, or city politician—initially harbored some question about the ability of youth to work productively with adults. These concerns were not realized, however. Rather, all of the leaders were impressed with the high level of youth motivation and competence that they observed. These adults commonly described youth mobilizers as being "prepared," "thoughtful," and "respectful." In brief, Y-AP *subverts the assumptions, often negative, of community leaders*. One Nashville leader observed:

> When I think of Community Impact, I think of youth gathering outside of the City Council office last year. The youth had really thought out their position, they were very organized in a way that you don't usually see in youth. You can tell the students think about things critically. They are not just voicing a typically teenage opinion because they are upset or didn't get their way. It's like: "This is what needs to be improved. And, here are some steps that we think can be taken."

These types of experiences are powerful. After collaborating with youth on specific events, all of the leaders reported that, over time, they became *stronger advocates for youth participation*. They took steps to enhance youth voice in community governance. External adult leaders were not the only ones who deepened their understanding of youth capacity through Y-AP. The adult staff of AVEY and OCI, in their role as community leaders, also experienced a learning curve as they worked with youth over time. One youth mobilizer explained how the adult staff listened and learned from youth during the first year of the program:

> By the end of the year, I guess they [organizational leaders] were kind of surprised by how much potential we had. And the next year, they knew. They listened, you know. I think they realized that, wow, the youth, we have a good resource here.

Impacts on Community Institutions

AVEY and OCI have come to symbolize high-quality youth participation within their communities. Their focus on partnership, their public action, and their positive reputation have allowed them to have a broad impact. First, *youth participation is becoming an institutionalized expectation*. Policy-makers in both cities, for example, are coming to view young people as constituents. They are taking the initiative, on their own, to solicit the opinion of young people. In Nashville, city council and school board members emphasized how public officials are now more likely to seek out and listen to youth voice, "something that we didn't do very well in the past." In Austin, policies have been changed to ensure that youth participate on school district task forces and campus advisory councils.

As this collective expectation arises, *civic agendas begin to better reflect the concerns, priorities, and voice of youth*. Through careful research and strategic outreach, OCI has influenced Nashville's public agenda. Their College Access report, for example, documented neighborhood disparities in college preparation resources for high school students. According to community leaders, this report raised awareness and served as a "wake-up call" for policymakers to make this issue part of their agenda. Using similar strategies, the youth have recently taken on the practice of predatory lending in low-income neighborhoods. The issue is now on the action agendas of local business groups and nonprofit organizations. According to community leaders, much of the success of AVEY and OCI is due to the way that the organizations "are persistent," engage in "consistent messaging" and "keep the issue on the table" even when the media hype has died down.

AVEY and OCI are catalysts for collaboration, and consequently, *new coalitions have been formed to take collective action on key community issues*. In addition to bringing together citizen groups with the school district to address plans to restructure "failing" high schools, for example, AVEY is leading a multi-sector council to coordinate and strengthen youth policies in Austin. OCI has recently established a new coalition of state and local leaders to address issues of predatory lending. One city council official reflected on the impact of the economic literacy work conducted by OCI over the past several years:

> These guys [OCI] are the only people really talking about predatory lending. They are up against enormous odds, Tennessee is where the predatory loan industry got started. For a small, not super-funded group of young people, it's an incredible impact. They started the Weathbuilding Alliance. And to have the United Way take on a [new] program—that was remarkable.

As illustrated above, *public institutions are responding to the youth-adult partnerships and coalitions in ways that address specific community needs*. Responsiveness is witnessed at multiple levels. AVEY's organizing within high schools, for example, has led Austin principals to affirmatively address issues of safety, privacy, and
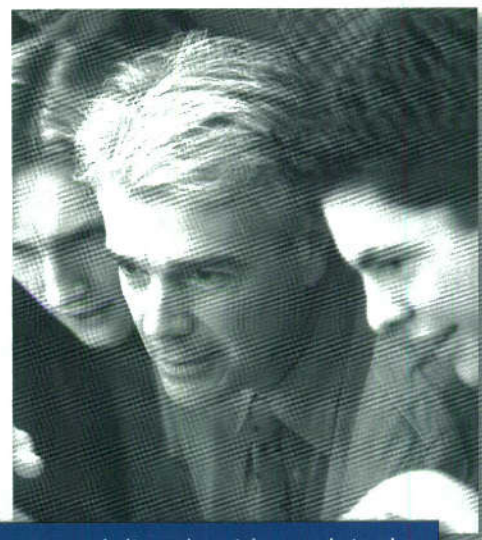
> Not having partnered directly with youth in the past, many of the adult leaders in the study initially harbored some question about the ability of youth to work productively with adults. These concerns were not realized.

racism. The district has adjusted the job descriptions of staff to strengthen the voices of parents and youth on school-wide issues. In Nashville, OCI and its partners were not only able to fend off threatened budget cuts for school counselors, but also succeeded in increasing the numbers of counselors available to help youth prepare for college.

CONCLUSION

When organizations adopt Y-AP as a priority, good things happen. As seen by AVEY and OCI, a culture of partnership can be created, which in turn, directly impacts participating youth, staff, community leaders, and public institutions. In brief, communities benefit. These benefits—be they at the individual or collective level—always appear incremental. Over time, however, the changes become substantial and significant.

We hope this article provokes further research that examines, concurrently, the individual *and* collective outcomes of youth

participation. We further hope to advance discourse about the types of benchmarks that practitioners can use to demonstrate their progress when adopting Y-AP as a core organizational approach to practice.

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