Youth-Adult Partnership: A Priority for Volunteer Training and Support

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Abstract

This article synthesizes two distinct bodies of research that are fundamental to the effectiveness of 4-H: the practice of youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) and the role of adult volunteers. We review contemporary research to draw the conclusion that Y-AP is central to the mission of 4-H, and furthermore, that volunteers are the key to quality implementation of the practice. Building from this foundation of knowledge, the article explores implications for the training and support of volunteers.

The Centrality of Youth-Adult Partnership to 4-H Programming

Jones and Perkins (2005) define Y-AP as a key aspect of Positive Youth Development (PYD) practice. Y-AP is a practice where youth and adults have equal potential to make decisions, utilize skills, and promote program and community change. Y-AP seeks to balance the power between youth and adults as they work together for a shared purpose (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009). The practice is characterized by mutuality in learning, with both parties sharing their expertise, experience, and perspective. The voice and perspectives of youth are recognized, valued, and elevated in group consensus building (Camino, 2000; Rennecamp, 1993; Zeldin, Powers & Christens, 2013).

When implemented in a quality manner, Y-AP reflects the ideal of 4-H programming. Y-AP encompasses the experiences that underlie youth development: positive and sustained relationships between youth and adults, activities that build life skills, and the opportunity to use these skills in real work situations (Lerner, Lerner & colleagues, 2013). These life skills are central to the mission of 4-H (Hendricks, 1998). They include those of the heart (e.g., accepting differences, cooperation), head (e.g., goal setting, problem solving), health (e.g., self-responsibility, healthy lifestyle choices) and hands (e.g., leadership, teamwork).

Y-AP incorporates Extension's priority on diversity (Atiles & Eubanks, 2014) as well as key aspects of the 4-H essential elements framework (Martz, Micemoyer,& McNeeley, 2009). Y-AP promotes an "inclusive environment," one where diverse youth, adult volunteers and other community members collaborate to reach common understandings and goals.   Within this context, Y-AP provides opportunities for the essential elements of "mastery" and "self-determination." It challenges young people to "see oneself as an active participant in the future" and to "practice service for others." As young people experience the essential elements, community groups also have the opportunity to take advantage of these developmental experiences. Mary McAlesse (2009), president of UNESCO reinforces this point:

"The cost of not involving young people in shared decision making will likely come back to haunt us as a civil society and a golden opportunity to move toward a fuller and more inclusive wisdom will have been missed."

Benefits of Youth-Adult Partnership

There is a strong body of research indicating that Y-AP is an "essential ingredient" to effective programs and contributes directly to positive youth development and empowerment among youth of all ages (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009; Li & Jullian, 2012). Consequently, across the country, county 4-H agents have sought to integrate Y-AP into all aspects of 4-H programming. Youth are involved in the governance of 4-H, provide input into program and activity planning, collaborate with adults in providing training and workshops, offer testimony and public education to community leaders, and evaluate local initiatives. Young people of all ages take on these roles in settings such as community clubs, service projects, and cross-organizational coalitions (Murdoch, Moncloa, & Subramium, 2010).

These opportunities benefit participants greatly. In a study commissioned by the 4-H Council, Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert (2000) found that Y-AP promoted youth development, enhanced the abilities of adult staff and volunteers, and strengthened community capacity to serve young people. Specifically, youth who experienced high levels of youth voice and strong adult relationships were most likely to learn new skills, gain a greater sense of confidence and compassion, and to feel as though they belong and are important to their community. Adult volunteers gained new skills, more confidence in working with youth, and perhaps most importantly, a greater sense of connection and commitment to 4-H. Moreover, community leaders reported that their organizations were more likely to adopt positive views of youth competencies, strengthen their outreach to new audiences, and adapt their programming to provide greater opportunities for youth participation. Other studies have found similar patterns of positive outcomes (see Camino, 2000; Serido, Borden & Perkins, 2011; Lerner, Lerner & Colleagues, 2013; Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008).

Obstacles to Volunteer Engagement in Youth-Adult Partnership

When adult volunteers personally experience the enthusiasm and competence of young people within a Y-AP, research indicates that they are far more likely to seek out and to build partnerships in the future. But the problem is this: most adults in the United States, including volunteers and even parents of youth, have not had the direct experience of partnering with young people. Adults often have good intentions, but are not accustomed to working with young people on issues affecting organizations and communities. They do not know the models or best practices of Y-AP, and hence are unable to intentionally strive toward them (Flage, Vettern, Schmidt & Eighmy, 2010; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2007).

Youth policy in the United States has long reflected a concern with protection, both of and from young people. This deep ambivalence has resulted in the isolation of youth from program and

community decision making. There is a pervasive feeling that youth do not have the motivation or competence to contribute (Flage et al., 2010; Rennekamp, 2003). This ambivalence is also observed within the culture and values of 4-H. On the one hand, there is an understanding that youth learn by doing and when the stakes are high. However, there is also a strong pressure to nurture young people, to make it easier for next generation. Further, adults often raise the concern that fewer mistakes will be made in carrying out programs if they perform the tasks themselves. The consequence is that adults often lower the expectations and minimize the partnership opportunities afforded to young people (Brennen, Barnett & Baugh, 2007; Jones & Perkins, 2005).

Maximizing Volunteer Engagement in Youth-Adult Partnership
Y-AP is best considered as a social innovation. It is (a) perceived as new by volunteers, (b) has a high degree of conceptual uncertainty, (c) challenges traditional norms, and (d) often requires the adopting program to change its operations in significant ways. From this perspective, the challenge is somewhat daunting: How does 4-H encourage adult volunteers to "take the leap" into Y-AP by creating conditions that promote innovative practice? Fortunately, a growing body of literature sheds light on this question.

A key time for engaging volunteers in innovative practice is when they first start working with 4-H. Reflecting on his experience as a state program leader, one of the authors of this article learned that volunteers come to 4-H with a high degree of enthusiasm. Often, however, they are a bit overwhelmed with the vast array of philosophy, information, and values that make up the 4-H program. Y-AP, because it incorporates the key values and practices of 4-H, can provide an "on-ramp" for understanding the program and their roles within it. Because of societal stereotypes about young people, Y-AP often requires volunteers to make a philosophic shift in their orientation toward collaborating with young people. Beginning with orientation and continuing through the ongoing mentoring and training of volunteers, state and county staff must find ways to maintain volunteers' attention on the purpose and outcomes of the desired change (Zeldin, et al., 2007). There must be consistency in message, with communications that are both conceptual and concrete. Y-AP needs to be consistently framed as a core practice of Positive Youth Development, one that produces positive outcomes among youth. One agent elaborates:

> *We never let them [volunteers] forget about Y-AP… When we go to meetings we always make sure that we keep it in the forefront that it is a partnership. I think if we can remember, and we always strive to incorporate that into our projects and the 4-H board, then we will continue to make great strides. If we keep doing that, and keep talking about it with our friends who are not in 4-H… maybe get to some of the other youth organizations that are not so traditional* (Zeldin et al., 2007).

This type of focus should resonate with contemporary 4-H volunteers who want to know that their efforts will make a difference in the lives of all young people, not only their own children.

Furthermore, these volunteers want to grow and try new approaches to practice. They want to know that their efforts are central to the work of the 4-H program (White & Arnold, 2003; Culp, 2009).

While it is important for state staff and county agents to be assertive champions of Y-AP, it is equally important that they ensure that volunteers can "walk the talk," that they can translate the vision of Y-AP into quality practice (Zeldin et al., 2007). Volunteers look to county agents for knowledge about best practices, and can benefit from instruction and evaluative feedback (Arnold, Dolene & Rennekamp, 2009). Volunteers are at risk for discontinuing their service when they do not receive adequate training that meets their needs (Lobley & Quellette, 2013). Furthermore, volunteers are most likely to adopt Y-AP when they are put in situations where they are challenged to partner with youth, and consequently, receive coaching from agents and the opportunity to reflect on the practice with their peers and with the young people with whom they work. One agent explains:

> *"You can help people be aware of their own biases, you can help people understand what the obstacles are, you can help them to see what the gifts are, but until people see and experience Y-AP in a successful way, it (quality implementation) is not likely to happen. It is only when they have had that experience."* (Zeldin et al, 2007).

Ownership is another factor in influencing volunteer engagement in the innovative practice of Y-AP. Developmental theorists, such as David McClelland and Erik Erickson, remind us that adults are searching for generative experiences, affiliation, and influence. They are looking to serve the next generation. In brief, they are looking for some of the same things as young people. Not surprisingly, research indicates that 4-H volunteers become most engaged when they feel a sense of connection within the program, when they have a voice in employing new program strategies, and when they are recognized for the contributions that they are making. Adults who feel valued and well trained for their role gain a sense of mastery and ownership for their responsibilities, which in turn allows them to be stronger assets to the program and to the youth participants (Culp, 2013). Y-AP provides an ideal context through which to meet the developmental needs of young people, as reflected in the views of one 4-H volunteer:

> *I was resistant to youth on board at first. But now I know them. My listening skills and understanding have increased dramatically... I personally see and hear the passion of young people and this gets me more interested and engaged.*
> (Zeldin, 2004)

Implications and Resources
While county agents are responsible for the overall 4-H program, it is the adult volunteers who most frequently work directly with youth. Volunteers therefore play a critical role in the

effective delivery of programming. Indeed, attracting and training dedicated adults will largely shape the 4-H program over the next several decades (Borden, Perkins, & Hawkey, 2014). Traditionally, volunteer orientation and support has focused on the nuts and bolts of leading a club, and on the "ages and stages" of youth. Less emphasis has been placed on teaching volunteers about how 4-H operates as PYD program (Arnold, Dolene & Rennekamp, 2009). This context is changing, however, as 4-H across the country is rethinking volunteer development. The system is mobilizing its resources to identify and implement more effective strategies for orienting, training, and coaching volunteers about the fundamental elements of 4-H philosophy and practice (Midwest Working Group, 2014; Murdock, et al., 2010; Quellette, et al., 2014).

Y-AP is a fundamental practice of PYD and 4-H, and hence, a priority for quality implementation by 4-H volunteers. The two components of Y-AP – youth voice in decision making and supportive adult relationships – work in tandem to promote youth competence and leadership, volunteer development, and organizational capacity. Moreover, Y-AP is central to all 4-H programming from clubs, to collaborations, to community service. Y-AP speaks to the core values and beliefs of 4-H, and further, the practice articulates key expectations and roles for adult volunteers. It is for these reasons that we believe that Y-AP provides a valuable lens through which to strengthen the orientation and training of adult volunteers.

4-H, across a variety of states, has begun to create resources and developmental opportunities for volunteers to explore ways of promoting youth voice while continuing to build supportive relationships with young people. Space limitations preclude a full discussion of the innovative work being done, but three states can serve as illustrative examples. In Maine, the state 4-H office focuses on youth voice and supportive adults through its orientation called 4-H 101 and through its afterschool Training Academy (Lobley & Quellette, 2013) . Through these venues, volunteers are urged to guide youth "from the side," that is, to support the exploration and leadership of young people by collaborating with them as partners in learning. Instructional approaches emphasize "success stories" that describe what "from the side" looks like in practice and how it benefits young people. Volunteers are also urged to become instructional problem solvers. They are given real world and hypothetical scenarios, and then challenged to identify ways that they would enhance youth voice in the given context. Maine has long sought to provide these trainings through face-to-face modalities believing that it is the best way to address the individual learning needs of adults. This approach has not been possible for all potential volunteers, and the state office believes that it has "lost" some good applicants because of this. Hence, on-line training is now offered as a way of satisfying requirements. That said, state and county staff continue to offer trainings and follow up sessions in person and seek to reach as many volunteers as possible through this pedagogy.

Colorado is one of the Western regional 4-H programs to fully implement the 4-H Volunteer Training e-learning course (citation). Staff find this course beneficial because it is self-paced, interactive learning that has the ability to reach high numbers of potential volunteers. Two of the four modules focus directly on key aspects of youth-adult partnership. In the Leadership and Training module, for example, volunteers have the opportunity to explore what it means to engage youth as partners, with the aim being

to "transform 4-H from a youth-serving organization to a youth-driven organization." In the Youth Development module, volunteers are challenged to create vibrant youth groups. Instruction focuses on how to teach in ways that "empower rather than dictate" and which "affirm and support" youth. Colorado 4-H's most recent initiative is to broaden the diversity of volunteers that are trained in strategies of positive youth development. Toward that end, state and county 4-H staff have been training personnel and volunteers in afterschool programs and community organizations on 4-H principles and practices. Moreover, the state office is creating a new video for prospective volunteers, particularly aimed at those with little familiarity with 4-H. This video will seek to engage adults to look into 4-H by providing a captivating overview of what it looks and feels like to be an energized 4-H volunteer leader.

Wisconsin 4-H has embarked on an initiative specifically focused on youth-adult partnerships in 4-H. State and county staff have conducted a wealth of research on youth voice, and, along with a long-standing "youth engagement" work group, has created a variety of resources and assessment tools for use by volunteers and county agents (http://fyi.uwex.edu/youthadultpartnership). Fundamental to this effort is a brief narrated powerpoint that orients volunteers and early career professionals to the fundamentals of Y-AP. After that powerpoint has been viewed, staff and volunteers have access to three resource guides – "Being Y-AP Savvy: A Primer on Youth-Adult Partnerships," "Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence" (YALPE), and "Y-AP in Evaluation: Translating Research into Practice." Being Y-AP Savvy provides practical information and learning activities on where and how to integrate Y-AP into 4-H programs. YALPE provides assessment tools and procedures through which youth-adults can evaluate the quality of youth voice and adult relations in their programs, while Y-AP in Evaluation offers practical summaries of the most relevant research and analysis methods on involving young people in data-driven program planning. To further enhance the applicability of these and other resources to volunteers, and to support self-directed learning, Wisconsin is providing an on-line learning opportunity for volunteers. This training and orientation program will highlight agents, youth, and other experts speaking to the key elements of youth-adult partnership.

Summary
Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) is a core practice of 4-H because it promotes an array of benefits to youth, adults, and communities. That said, there are significant challenges to implementing Y-AP in a quality way. There exists a broad array of theory and research identifying the cultural, institutional, and historical barriers to Y-AP in the United States. Our culture tends to separate persons of different ages thus minimizing the opportunity for youth voice and intergenerational collaboration. Fortunately, there is also a broad array of research and experience, grounded in 4-H, that speaks to the ways that volunteers can become engaged and learn how to effectively partner with young people. These lessons are becoming "standardized" within 4-H Youth Development's orientation and training for volunteers.

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