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# Youth–Adult Partnerships: Entering New Territory in Community Work and Research

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*Youth–adult partnerships are being promoted as a key strategy in community build-ing, yet this aspect of community building has not been empirically researched. Based on data from a range of diverse communities, this study identifies the dimensions that make up the construct of youth–adult partnerships and the conditions affecting the practice of youth–adult partnerships. The value of youth–adult partnerships as a via-ble strategy for youth development and community building is discussed. The study concludes that changes in the lenses of both research and practice will open new di-rections for reaping the wisdom of youth–adult partnerships.*

Adolescents operate on the fringes of adult community life. Only occasionally do they regularly interact with adults other than family or kin outside of an educa-tional or occupational setting. When they are inten-sively involved with adults, it is within rather strictly prescribed limits. (Schlegel & Barry, 1991, p. 67)

I've learned that youth have just as much say as adults, which I didn't think was possible because I always thought that adults had all the power and they were on top and the youth were just listeners. I learned that youth or adults aren't on top. They are both one. (Youth, age 16, resident in a rural community and par-ticipant in Bridging the Gap of Isolation Initiative)

As Freire (1983) and others (Boyer, 1990; Lerner & Simon, 1998) noted, it is not only previous re-search but also experience that drives theory and good research. Grounded experience often opens up new vistas for research.

A major challenge facing researchers, however, es-pecially those committed to applied endeavors, is how to tease wisdom from practice and practitioners. This represents a different effort from the activities of prac-titioners who glean and share the wisdom of practice with each other. Such efforts are largely oriented to-ward putting lessons from practice into the immediate service of further practice. For applied researchers, the task involves making sense of practitioner wisdom not solely as it applies to ongoing practice, but also as it ap-

plies to or affects continuities and discontinuities in the wisdom contained in the research record.

Youth–adult partnerships (Y/APs) represent a case in point. Across the United States, there is much exper-imentation and an emerging consensus that (a) build-ing healthy communities that also promote youth development necessarily requires youth as key actors and (b) Y/APs are a key strategy for success. Yet very little empirical research exists about Y/APs. The aim of this article is to fill that void and to present lessons for both practitioners and researchers.

## Theoretical Perspectives and Review of Literature

Implicit in the enthusiasm for building healthy com-munities by way of Y/APs are three major premises.

1. Strong communities are built on active participa-tion and civic engagement of members, including youth.

Citizen participation, with the goal of developing or improving community, has long been a mainstay of American society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Etzioni, 1998). A community in which members are actively engaged and involved provides for civic stability, social justice, strong advocacy, and consensus (Langton, 1987). Enjoining the collabora-tive efforts of nonprofit, government, business, and volunteer sectors to solve problems and build commu-nity capacity has now become a recognized broad-based tactic for crime and violence prevention (Powell, 1982); mental health and health promotion (Butterfoos, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993); social, physical, and economic revitalization (Emery & Purser, 1996; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993); and youth development (Camino, 1998).

Increasingly, there is recognition that youth can—indeed need to—play vital roles in community building. The youth service movement represents a case in point. The explosion in the 1980s and 1990s of youth conservation and other service corps that seek to develop young people's skills, as well as provide communities with tangible benefits and services, attests to widespread conviction that young people provide valuable civic work (Schine, 1997). Community development corporations and organizations are also now seeking to involve young people more directly in their operations and activities (Armistead & Wexler, 1997; Cahill, 1997).

2. Youth development is predicated on a larger focus on building healthy communities. If youth are able to participate in civic and public affairs as participants, not solely beneficiaries, they tend to experience optimal development.

Communities influence human development. Research has made it clear that various conditions—including policies, economic and social resources, and provision of basic services—affect adults and families, and thus youth, in myriad ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; National Research Council, 1993).

Within the last decade, researchers have begun to broaden their focus on the effects that settings exert on young people to include the effect of community participation on the development of individual youth. Several studies concluded that youth involvement in positive social relationships and community activities is associated with a reduction in risky behaviors and an increase in resiliency (Bernard, 1991; Elliott et al., 1996; Werner & Smith, 1982). Evidence is also emerging that youth participation is correlated with enhanced self-esteem (Kurth-Schai, 1988), enhanced sense of civic efficacy and personal and social responsibility (Hamilton & Zeldin, 1987; Melchior, 1998), and increased problem-solving skills (Conrad & Hedin, 1982).

3. Adults can overcome negative attitudes and misinformation about youth if they join with youth to address community concerns.

Typically, studies of youth civic engagement focus on changes wrought in youth themselves. Very few studies have addressed changes at the community level resulting from youth participation. Almost no studies have examined changes in views and attitudes that adults hold of youth as an outcome of youth participation.

This is unfortunate, given that the time-honored view of adolescence as a period of "storm and stress" inevitably experienced by all youth and deriving from internal biological and emotional states is giving way to an emphasis on settings and how they exert stress on adolescents (Garratt, 1997; National Research Coun-

cil, 1993). Nonetheless, many adults continue to adhere to the popularized conception of adolescence as a turbulent phase, defined by conflict with adults, mood fluctuations, and risk-taking behavior (Arnett, 1999). The policy and funding climate of the 1980s and early 1990s added fuel to these views, dominated as it was by a focus on risky behaviors, such as teen pregnancy, violence, and drug use, with the result that adolescents tended to be seen as either collections of problems or problems waiting to happen.

One study found that positive attitudes held by adults toward youth increased as a consequence of youths' volunteering in community service projects (Calabrese & Schumer, 1986). Although appealing, the assumption made in practice that youth civic engagement, particularly in collaboration with adults, results in greater adult acceptance requires systematic examination.

## Definition of Youth–Adult Partnerships

Practitioners know the concept of Y/APs as derived from Lofquist (1989), who posited a typology of adult attitudes to assess approaches used in prevention and youth development programming. This typology included views of youth as objects, recipients, or resources. A number of practitioners in more recent years have added youth as partners to reflect the principle that young people should have legitimate opportunities to develop and exercise decision-making power in program activities and community initiatives.

Yet the philosophy and spirit behind Y/APs are hardly new. Twenty-four years ago, The National Commission on Resources for Youth (1976) described youth participation in strikingly similar terms:

> Youth participation can thus be defined as involving youth in responsible, challenging action, that meets genuine needs, with opportunity for planning and/or decision making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequences extends to others—i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. (p. 25)

Even earlier, the Commission explicitly advocated a partnership model in which "there is mutuality in teaching and learning and where each age group sees itself as a resource for the other and offers what it uniquely can provide" (National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1974, p. 227).

Mutuality in teaching and learning between youth and adults is now regarded as critical to Y/APs. This feature, coupled with youth power in decision making, distinguishes Y/APs from parent–child, student–teacher, and mentoring relationships.

Mentoring itself represented a new type of youth–adult relationship when it was first popularized in youth work. It emphasizes different principles, ones that highlight adults' assistance of youth in

the transition from childhood to adulthood (Freedman, 1988, 1991). Foremost among these principles is helping youth attain a particular goal or develop specific skills and competencies. Second is nurturance: adults giving youth the care and support they need to thrive. Third is generativity. Adult mentors help pass on knowledge and wisdom to young people and, in so doing, satisfy their own life-stage need to have a stake in and exert influence in guiding the next generation.

As demonstrated in the data analyzed and discussed in this article, Y/APs are also established to achieve action in community arenas. The processes of community building and development require the coordinated efforts of stakeholders who represent diverse community sectors. Y/APs reflect the need that cooperative efforts include people of all ages.

## Purpose and Method

The purpose of this article is to ferret out the wisdom contained in the practice of Y/APs in light of the fundamental premises contained in the literature reviewed for this study: Youth participation helps build strong communities, building healthy communities contributes to youth development, and adults' negative attitudes about youth can be overcome when adults work with youth to address community concerns. The primary questions addressed are the following: What dimensions make up the construct of Y/APs? What conditions affect the practice of Y/APs? Are Y/APs a viable strategy in building community, one that also furthers the goals and principles of youth development? By virtue of these questions, the nature of this inquiry is exploratory and descriptive.

I analyze three data sets concerning Y/APs. These data come from initiatives that involved formal youth workers. But the majority of youth workers in these projects were volunteers—youth and adult community residents, with other commitments in their lives, who were attempting to implement Y/APs. The first and largest data set comes from a community and youth development initiative involving 10 small, rural, isolated communities. This initiative, Bridging the Gap of Isolation (BTG), was a nationwide project of the National 4-H Council from 1996 to 1999.[1] The second data set is evaluation research of five diverse youth leadership programs (YLPs) that operated in localities across the country from 1994 to 1998

(Zeldin & Camino, 1999).[2] Finally, this article draws on interview data collected for a videotape on Y/APs in 1999.[3]

The BTG initiative involved 10 rural, isolated communities that were geographically and demographically diverse. They represented frontier, prairie, desert, and mountainous landscapes and included predominantly African American, Native American, Pacific Islander, Anglo-American or White, Latino, and ethnically mixed populations. Population densities were sparse, ranging from 2 to 87 persons per square mile.

The YLPs included five programs serving 48 communities. Communities represented a racial and ethnic diversity similar to that of BTG, but also included Asian populations. Urban and suburban environments comprised the majority.

For BTG and the YLPs, I served as documenter and evaluator. Documentation and evaluation employed the standard ethnographic and qualitative methods of participant observation, individual and focus group interviews, site visits, and document review. As an action researcher, I gained additional data through interaction with stakeholders while I delivered feedback and recommendations in planning sessions and neighborhood action. For the purpose of this study, I also reviewed 43 transcribed interviews with youth and adults throughout the country who were working on Y/APs; these interviews were prepared for the videotape production mentioned previously.

The analysis employed three strategies. First, the empirical data in each data set were examined to identify patterns in actors' perceptions and practices. Second, the three data sets were triangulated to deduce common themes. Third, the extended case method was used. This method bolsters empirical data with the researcher's previous knowledge as well as knowledge gleaned from other studies contained in the research record. The net result is a portrayal of Y/APs that is at once grounded in the lived experience of actors, anchored to existing theory, and indicative of new theory and practice.

## Findings

### Dimensions of Y/APs

This study found that Y/APs are a multidimensional construct. They contain (a) principles and values, which actors use to orient the relationship and to guide behavior; (b) a set of skills and competencies through which the behaviors are focused; and (c) a method to implement and achieve collective action.

**Principles and values.** Principles and values represented an essential basis for Y/APs for both youth and adults. The principles and values embodied a moral philosophy and belief system that individuals in the programs used to focus their plans and actions. Youth and adults entered the programs with notions that Y/APs are, fundamentally, a relationship. The crux of the matter, therefore, lay not in articulating whether youth and adults should work together, but how they should do so.

Adult community participants in the initiatives had a common goal: to work with, rather than for, youth. They wanted to work from an orientation that incorporated youth in all aspects of the work. Youth were similarly eager to partake in various tasks; they, too, wanted to work as active participants and partners, not as program beneficiaries.

In the early phases, and continually throughout their work, the core components of Y/APs, mentioned in interviews by nearly all youth and adults, were respect and equality. For example, youth consistently stated, "It [Y/AP] means I have a say-so," "I can be listened to," or "I can be treated as an equal partner." Similar statements were made by most adults: "It [Y/AP] means having respect for youth," "It's working together with youth, not for youth," or "It means being equal partners with youth."

Moving toward such an orientation, however, was not a smooth undertaking. While trying to hold firm to the philosophy, the resolve of youth and adults was tested regularly. Over the course of several years, they tackled issues of power and authority, determining differences and similarities between adults and adolescents, and the gap between principles and values and the behavior that should relate to them.

Underlying and conflicting beliefs about the allocation of power and authority were demonstrated in both subtle and blatant ways. For instance, a manual for young leaders in one program was written in an authoritarian style and tone that belied the respect for youth espoused by the adult staff who helped draft and edit the materials. Perplexed by the tone, the young people found it difficult to articulate their perceptions; for a long time, adults remained unaware of how their editorial choices conveyed adultist intimations. A more obvious example occurred at a national training event involving all the BTG sites at the beginning of the initiative. Disagreement broke out over nightly curfew checks on youth. Most youth, and some adults, held such checks to be at extreme odds with a philosophy of respect and trust. Many other adults, and a few youth, viewed the checks as inherent and inevitable elements of accountability in conducting overnight trips for legal minors.

In each community, youth and adults tussled with the ideal of equality between youth and adults, finally concluding that being equal does not necessarily mean being the same. Early on in one of the BTG communities, adults interpreted the project as "youth-centered" and, longing to be "good at partnerships," they tried hard "not to see age." Consequently, they encouraged adolescents to meet among themselves to develop their own goals and agenda. After a few meetings, the young people responded by emphasizing their need for adult guidance and their desire to work together with adults. Though it was not their intention to do so, these adults actually perpetuated power imbalances between youth and adults. By the adults' being "age blind," the fact that the young people had little to no experience in organizing and running meetings was overlooked. On later reflection, one of the adults acknowledged,

> we've given up the notion that it's only youth who should be working in the project. Now we're trying to broaden things so that youth *and* adults can both do things ... work together ... everyone tries to respect each other's contribution.

Attaining such a goal, however, proved to be difficult, and not just for this particular team. Each team labored at it. Some teams chose to reconcile the apparent paradox between equality and equity by viewing youth roles in the teams as approvers and implementers of plans engineered primarily by adults. Both youth and adults thought the result was youth empowerment. Ironically, though, by defining roles in this way, adults were able to maintain their status as managers, thereby subtly maintaining a measure of power, however unintentionally. At the same time, however, against the frame of day-to-day life, defining roles in this way was not without function. It allowed middle- and high-school-aged adolescents to maintain their primary status in the community as students who also had many extracurricular activities and family chores occupying their time.

**A set of skills and competencies.** Stakeholders quickly learned that there is a "how to" regarding Y/APs, not just an orientation or a set of principles and values. Moreover, the how-to skills and competencies

did not emerge naturally, irrespective of how much youth and adults were committed to Y/AP principles and values. It was necessary for youth and adults to develop an array of skills to enable them to mobilize and lead community work. More important, it was necessary for youth and adults to develop fundamental skills related to their partnerships. Common areas of skills and competencies were communication, teamwork, and coaching.

Cultivating the art of forthright and open communication required focused time and attention, typically on the part of adults. Adults had more difficulty letting their guard down in communicating with youth than did youth with adults. When effective communication was achieved, the result was mutual insight and a deepening of respect. Said a youth of 17 about the adults he had worked with,

It's really great when you get to know the adults as people, not just as adults, but really get to know about their lives, families, their dreams. You've got to get into their lives. When they let you in, you realize, hey, this is a person maybe like me ... this person maybe makes mistakes too ... but it's O.K.... they're basically a good person.

An adult in an immigrant community, used to relating to young people primarily as students or as "like my children," had this to say:

Once you get to know them, not just their problems, but who they are as a person, and what their circumstances are, you begin to see their behavior in a whole other light. You've got to get into their lives ... spend time just talking with them ... also it's a back and forth thing, you've got to tell them something about you that lets them know who you are, too.

No less important to the success of Y/APs was becoming proficient in the dynamics of teamwork. Successful partnerships tended to have flexible roles for both youth and adults, high tolerance for differences, and appropriate responses to developmental challenges. As one adult put it,

The teens want power to make decisions, but once they know you're not going to do it all for them, they're kind of surprised. It would've been easier a lot of times if I just did the things for them, but it's better to stand back and let them learn how to do it for themselves.

Two teens in another community made a similar observation:

It was rocky at first. At first, adults didn't let us talk in meetings. The youth would kind of huddle in the corner—talk about how bored we were, or what we were doing, or what we were going to do tomorrow.

Then youth got more involved. Adults started asking us for our opinion. We had a lot of ideas. Those were easy to come up with. The hard part was to figure out how to make it work, how to get everyone's strengths and advice to pull together.

One of the most strenuous skills for adults to take on and actualize was coaching—providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles in the partnership while also holding them accountable. Although many adults benefited from learning certain skills from young people, such as those related to computer technology, the role of coach fell to adults because of their greater experience and access to institutional power. Again, the difficulties related to ambiguity and equivocation over positioning youth and adult roles as equal or equitable.

Adults assumed that if they helped and supported youth in taking on new roles—as decision makers, trainers, organizers, and the like—then the young people would intuitively and consistently understand what was expected of them and therefore would not make mistakes or deviate from assigned responsibilities. This, combined with adults' earnest desire to treat youth as equals, resulted in conflicts when young people strayed from agreements or responsibilities.

The experience of a team of youth and adults in one rural community is illustrative. Young people had agreed to organize a community service event, but a few weeks before the event was scheduled to occur, they had not followed through on several critical tasks. Two adults stepped in to complete the assignments in an effort to ensure the event's occurrence as scheduled; however, although this course of action benefited the community, it cost the Y/AP. Adults were quick to revert to stereotypes of youth, concluding that they should not have expected the young people to follow through. The young people were not only disappointed and embarrassed with their own performance, they also were ashamed and angry in the wake of criticism from the adults. In their view, the adults should have offered more proactive guidance.

In response, adults said that they did not want to play the role of the "bad guy" by having to "keep on" the young people. Yet by not challenging the young people and holding them accountable during the process, the outcome was that the young people were dysfunctionally rescued. The service event was successful, but youth were not provided clear, consistent, and constructive feedback by adults in the preparation phases. Youth missed opportunity to learn and exercise persistence, responsibility, and the pursuit of alternative procedures, as well as to be provided support in doing so by their adult team partners. Adults also missed the opportunity to trust and rely on their youth teammates.

**A method to achieve action.** The third dimension of Y/APs is a method to achieve community action. BTG and YLP data indicate that this aspect of Y/APs allows for the expression of the partnership, on the one hand, and for the instrumental execution of common goals, on the other. The major features of this dimension are an emphasis on cooperative rather than competitive behavior, a balance between youth and adult voices, and the enactment of openness and flexibility.

Participants built Y/APs on an assumption of cooperation—that everyone has something to learn from and to teach one another, to give to and to take from one another, so that mutual benefit accrues. As such, they used Y/APs to both enlarge and promote civic discourse. Current paradigms for community development emphasize building community capacity in the context of shared power, in which public, private, and nonprofit sectors share goals, activities, and authority (Bryson & Crosby, 1992; Camino, 1998). Y/APs in the BTG and YLP initiatives worked to extend this operational context to include youth, and they demanded that youth assume active and genuine roles. A Cooperative Extension agent involved in BTG voiced it as follows:

> It's also a teaching opportunity in terms of cooperation and understanding that ... they will have to cooperate, whether it be with each other, or an adult ... they need to remember that in having that youth/adult partnership, you are also teaching them about teamwork and helping them build personal skills.... The art of compromise is very important.

Young people did not become involved in BTG and the YLPs because they lacked things to do. In fact, the majority had many competing demands on their time, including school, sports, jobs, and family responsibilities. These young people were interested in civic action because of their concern about their communities, their desire to work for collective advantage, and their desire to establish new relationships with peers and adults.

In one rural community adults believed that a primary role of youth was to learn by listening to and observing adults. The voice of one teen as he quietly, but steadfastly, described his idea for building community bus shelters as a means to improve conditions for residents had been disregarded by adults at several meetings until the State Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialists publicly backed the idea. As the idea slowly gained acceptance, the community team increasingly realized that building bus shelters was an action that would produce a physical outcome, as well as unite various schisms, including that between youth and adults.

Serving the interests of a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the communities required a stance of openness to different perspectives and the flexibility to incorporate these perspectives into action. Just as this was an important linchpin of community building, it also reflected the caliber of Y/APs. Youth and adults engaged in BTG and YLPs periodically came together in training sessions and cross-site educational institutes to reflect on their progress. A few years into their work, a common theme began to emerge: the realization that if youth and adults were attending well to Y/APs, they were also likely attending well to the dynamics of community work. The understanding of one adult, himself a staff member of an organization devoted to youth leadership, demonstrates this awareness:

> Young people have been told for throughout their experiences that maybe their views don't matter, they don't know what they are talking about, that they need to just listen to their elders, or older people or adults that they are working with. So they internalize that. When they are getting into groups of adults and young people, they don't feel as comfortable speaking or don't feel assured of themselves in terms of putting out their views ... Adults are pretty comfortable working in ways that suit adults best. But you need to really work and look at issues that young people need assistance with, things like transportation, making sure that meetings aren't during times where young people can't meet in, making sure that meetings are dynamic and not just based on Robert's Rules of Order.

## Conditions Affecting the Implementation of Y/APs

As important as understanding the complexity of the construct of Y/APs is, it is equally critical to be cognizant of existing conditions in the communities where Y/APs are played out. Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Friere (1983) reminded us that settings exert powerful influence on individuals and, therefore, on what individuals are able to imagine and achieve. Perhaps the most trenchant analysis of context was offered by Foucault (1970), who theorized that to understand behavior, one must understand not only the relationships between individuals and settings, but, more fundamentally, the relations among structure, process, and power that configure settings.

The experience of youth and adults in the BTG and YLP sites drew attention to several elements of settings that affected implementation of Y/APs, and ultimately affected community work. This section discusses (a) the power of established social relationships and community traditions, (b) daily rhythms, and (c) community history.

**The power of established social relationships and traditions.** In all 10 rural BTG sites, but also in 3 of the 5 YLP sites, participants viewed their communities as either a small, isolated community (e.g., a population of 280 in a rural area) or as having a

small-town feel (e.g., an urban neighborhood). These perceptions did not amount to a cliché; participants felt that they were acquainted with nearly everyone in their defined communities.

In many instances, community residents construed the small social network as an asset. In their opinion, established relationships gave them a "leg up" in building Y/APs because they thought the relationships were imbued with trust. Many adults said with conviction that the familiarity meant that Y/APs "didn't have to be built from scratch ... we had that trust established." But the familiarity of established relationships did not always translate into trust and, consequently, was not always viewed as a positive feature for Y/APs. For many young people the familiarity posed an obstacle. In their view, if several generations of families had made the community their home and if there were conflicts among members of one generation, these conflicts were perpetuated in the next. Said one young woman from a community of 712 residents, "There are adults in our community who don't like each other, and then take it out on the kids ... it's hard to get them to see past it."

Established relationships also added a twist to mythologies that held that because the communities were small and close-knit, residents were supportive of all youth. Divisions and conflicts rooted in the past were maintained in current rifts. Both BTG and the YLPs sought to involve adolescents who traditionally had not held leadership positions at school or in other community projects. Recruiting these youth for Y/APs and community work had the effect of exposing this myth. A 17-year-old Latino youth who had had adjudication problems in his younger years consistently ran up against adult attitudes that "he's not right for this kind of work," "He'll just be in trouble in the end." "It's really hard dealing with parents who are like why are you involving these other youth, instead of being excited we're drawing more and different youth in," observed one local Cooperative Extension agent.

Y/APs lead to unexpected change and consequences, which makes people nervous about tradition. The development of Y/APs, as well as the experience of working through them, was also influenced by decisions and events that occurred within the context of traditional ways of doing things. Not always immediately discernable by community stakeholders, this larger social and political frame nonetheless showed itself to be a formidable foe when met with. For example, a teen who had been involved in her local 4-H club for several years was attracted to the community-focused work of BTG. In her effort to develop as a leader, she ran for, and was elected, secretary of the local 4-H Council, a position traditionally held by adults. She described her experience:

> I was elected secretary. Some of the leaders [adults] who didn't come to that meeting, later raised hell.

> They said we had to look at the bylaws, and when they didn't find anything in the bylaws about how old you had to be, they still ended up taking me out of office ... it [the incident] was written in the minutes, but then stricken. So it's like it never happened. But, of course, it did happen.

**Daily rhythms.** Although youth and adults were enthusiastic about the work, it was difficult to carve out time to plan and carry it out. Most youth involved in the initiatives had little free time. In addition to the hours they spent in the classroom, BTG youth faced farm and ranch chores, caring for siblings, long commutes to school, club and sports commitments, and evening homework. YLP young people carried a comparable load of responsibilities, but they also often worked part time and had their own children to care for in their daily lives. Adults' routines were similarly filled with multiple responsibilities, including those relating to jobs and families.

The lack of available time, combined with the different rhythms dictated by school and workplace schedules, posed challenges to Y/APs. The first challenge was finding mutually agreeable meeting times. This limited progress in community work. It also limited opportunities to explore and practice relating to one another in Y/APs. The second challenge was that, because of the time limitation and because Y/APs represented a new set of partnership roles for youth and adults—not child–parent, student–teacher, or mentee–mentor—youth and adults often reverted to playing out the more established and familiar roles.

**Community history.** Historical circumstances also affect Y/APs. All of the BTG and YLP communities had a history of oppression—racial, political, economic, or a combination of these. Given such backgrounds, it was difficult to launch community-building efforts inclusive of all community sectors, let alone to launch Y/APs. Oppression exerted far-reaching consequences. For example, whereas adults held institutional power relative to youth, many adults held little institutional power in the communities. The larger landscape of societal oppression resulted in limited venues for power in communities.

The circumstances of a primarily African American community illustrate these dynamics. Founded by emancipated slaves after the Civil War, residents participated in the county's economy of tobacco growing, which provided stable, but not high, incomes. In more recent decades, the community had endured economic recession and the combined effects of problems with drugs, violence, and crime. Although over half of the county's population of 734 were youth, youth-serving organizations were scarce. In addition, young people

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were discouraged from playing in the yard or riding bicycles in the road because of a lack of safety. To address concerns, a number of adults were stepping forward to take leadership.

The difficulty with respect to Y/APs was twofold. First, too many individuals were stepping forward to take leadership, leading to competition for control of resources, competition for recognition, and a lack of coordinated efforts. In a community with limited formal venues for power, individuals who were able to obtain power were not inclined to share it. Consequently, adults tended to reinforce youths' traditionally held roles. Observed one participant, "There's too many people wanting to be chiefs ... youth empowerment gets lost in the crossfire." Second, the notion that youth should be protected was imposed. Doing so, however, obscured the feasibility of applying an asset-building lens to the work, including engaging youth as partners and leaders.

The forces of political and economic oppression in another community worked to undermine adults' confidence in their ability to even begin to imagine that change is possible. The community, including and surrounding a national park, had an economy heavily dependent on the tourist industry. There was no local government; the federal government owned most of the land and property, and its policies regarding the park and park services dictated much of the community's life, including housing, education, employment, and training. Consequently, local political action had not been a major feature of civic life.

Through involvement in BTG over time, individuals began to question and defy previously accepted notions of what was conceivable. They began to engage in collective critical thought aimed at initiating change. At the same time, however, it was difficult for adults to imagine sharing power with youth and to view young people as partners in achieving change. Remarked an adult, "It's hard for us to deal with kids wanting power, when we weren't demanding the same things at their ages."

Eventually, a few youth and adults in this community were able to see the commonality in their struggles to claim rights to a stake in their community. This led to the formation of some strong Y/APs. Nonetheless, the going was not easy, and the youth and adults in this community continue to learn from one another and to learn to support one another as they journey through community work.

A legacy of oppression can also divert attention away from the recognition of young people as current participants, rather than as future community resources. In a Native American community, members were struggling to come to grips with a past rife with racism and pressures to abandon cultural traditions in favor of assimilating into European ways. "It's a hard thing," said an adult. "Because of the history of our people, we're trying to figure out how much of the past to keep, and how much to leave behind ... 52 percent of the population [of approximately 300] is under 18, but lots of adults are saying, 'we'll let the kids do this later.'"

## Conclusions and Implications

Partnerships between youth and adults represent an innovation in community development work. To be sure, the concept of youth working alongside adults surfaces periodically as larger social forces contribute to shifting notions of what adolescence is and what roles adolescents can—indeed should—play in society (Modell & Goodman, 1990). Youth work theory and practice are also in transition from a period in which an emphasis was placed on protecting youth to one in which youth participation is promoted. This shift is occurring along the lines that Dewey (1938) advocated: Development and learning are best achieved through a dynamic interaction of knowledge and skills, on the one hand, and experience, on the other. In effect, current changes in society are once again beginning to give greater legitimacy and acceptance to a conjoining of youth and community development.

Such a shift cannot occur by renaming alone, as this article makes clear. Individuals, in asserting that the Y/AP way of engaging in community work has virtue, face several challenges. Most simply, Y/APs subvert prevailing notions of youth and adult roles. As such, the issues discussed here call attention to several implications for both practice and research.

Practitioners need to be aware of the three dimensions of Y/APs and to gear their efforts accordingly. Each of the dimensions—principles and values, skills and competencies, and an action-oriented method—deserves to be considered in terms of what part it will play in the larger frame of youth and community development. As the communities portrayed here demonstrate, it cannot be assumed that good intentions will necessarily lead to optimal results, nor can it be assumed that attention to one dimension will necessarily spill over into the others to attain desired results.

Settings and context should also figure significantly in the creation of Y/APs. The training of individuals is a vital and necessary first step, and this is what the initiatives analyzed here did. The caution is, however, that individual training alone cannot achieve an infusion of Y/APs into communities for the long term. This is because community arenas are governed not only by individuals, but also by a number of both overt and subtle established structures and relationships of power.

Finally, this study highlights that both youth and adults need consistent access to support as they engage in and promote Y/APs. Breaking new ground is difficult work; sparking community work, while also

breaking new ground, is formidable work. Although it is generally accepted that community work represents new spheres for youth, it less obvious that it is also new for many adults. Many adults will be rookies at volunteering, community work, and working as partners. Simply put, adults will find it hard to pass the torch if they themselves have not had a previous opportunity to hold the torch. Support can take many forms, such as ongoing training to build skills, time devoted to networking and dialoguing among colleagues, or access to an intermediary, capacity-building organization (Camino, 1998).

As more and more young people become involved in community development, it is clear that researchers will also have to don different lenses for their work. They will have to be willing to challenge established views of adolescents and their potential. Research can pursue, for example, inquiries into factors responsible for the marginalization of adolescents. As Friere (1983) and those quoted at the beginning of this article emphasized, marginalization of individuals has less to do with their intrinsic features than with the roles that society allocates to them.

Researchers will also have to continue to broaden their samples from clinical and school to community frames (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992). In doing so, they will have to broaden their range of methodologies to include more attention to ethnographic and action strategies. Through these methodologies, researchers can begin to address factors that strengthen partnerships, those that pose barriers, and, more fundamentally, those that shape youth and adult roles in the first place.

Researchers would also do well to investigate the power dynamics that maintain situations of segregation between different community constituents, including youth and adults. At the close of the millennium, great strides have been made in issues of diversity and intolerance, including calling attention to the ways that forms of segregation are maintained; yet few studies address the circumstances and effects of youth–adult segregation.

In brief, Y/APs urge that we rethink approaches to youth and community development. In particular, as youth and community development efforts continue to converge and intersect, new venues for the integration of theory and praxis are opening. As the data here suggest, Y/APs are a principal asset that all communities have the potential to tap. The dual wisdom of research and practice holds great promise to help communities deliver on that potential.

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