PITFALLS AND PROMISING PRACTICES OF YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS: AN EVALUATOR'S REFLECTIONS

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Youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs) are an innovation being used increasingly as a key strategy for promoting youth development, as well as for building strong programs and communities. This article discusses three pitfalls that can undermine their effectiveness: (1) the assumption that youth should do everything of importance; (2) the belief that adults should "get out of the way," and give up power, and (3) the focus on youth as the marked category. The article also describes three promising practices to overcome pitfalls: (1) integrate reflection into meetings; (2) articulate the logic of programs and Y-APs; and (3) engage a third party to help explore group assumptions and values. © 2005 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs) are an innovation being used increasingly as a key strategy for promoting youth development, as well as for building strong programs and communities. Youth–adult partnerships have been conceptualized as a way that youth and adults can work collaboratively for program or community action; they are characterized by mutuality in teaching and learning between youth and adults, as well as mutuality in decision-making (Camino, 2000). In the last decade, guidebooks and training curricula have been developed on the practice of Y-APs (Leifer & McLarney, 1997; National 4-H Council, n.d.; Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, National 4-H council, National Network for Youth, & Youth Leadership Institute, 2003). Additionally, there is an emerging research base to support this practice (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003).

Although great strides have been made, a decade is not a long time for an innovation to crystallize, and Y-APs remain in the early implementation stage (see Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). People are still learning how to formulate and implement Y-APs. As such, there remain relatively few signposts to guide policy and practice. Accordingly, and not surprisingly, both pitfalls and promising practices characterize the movement to Y-APs. My vantage point for reflection of these issues is based on 18 years of researching and designing youth-serving programs. For the past seven years, I have served as an evaluator for programs and initiatives attempting to implement Y-APs. In this role, I have worked directly with five national initiatives involving 27 sites, seven community coalitions, and four organizational programs. These projects have involved youth and adults in middle- to low-income ranges; have taken place in rural, suburban, and urban contexts; and have engaged multiracial and ethnic populations, including Caucasian, African-American, Latino, and Native American individuals.

I have found several recurring themes across settings as I reflect on my field notes and initiative reports. The themes I discuss are derived largely from the perspective of adults. This perspective is appropriate, given that adults are mediators of developmental processes for youth. They are significant gatekeepers who stand between environmental contexts, desired adolescent outcomes, and developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The themes evince challenges encountered by adults as they have grappled with the notion of "partnership." In brief, pondering the developmental and age-related capacities of adolescents, and how adults can best support youth development while concurrently acting as partners to youth, have represented considerable challenges for the adults that I have observed and interviewed. Adults have been beset with the question of what it means to partner with youth, ages 12 to 21, in institutional, cultural, and societal contexts that generally are predicated on asymmetrical relationships between adults and youth.

My discussion also is informed by two overarching observations from these evaluations. First, from all sources of data at my disposal, I can strongly conclude that solid Y-APs are formed as relationships between youth and adults as they work toward a goal larger than themselves, often for the common good of a given community or collective. Youth–adult partnerships do not work as well when the purpose is to mentor youth, or to promote youth development among individual young people. Second, a pattern of missteps usually appears to occur when there is lack of consensus among stakeholder groups regarding the primary purpose of a Y-AP, and consequently, a lack of clarity of roles among youth and adults.

This essay is written in two parts. First, I discuss the most common pitfalls encountered by adults who are beginning to engage in Y-APs. In the second part, I describe promising practices used by organizations that have helped them overcome these pitfalls and strengthen their Y-APs.

PITFALLS OF YOUTH–ADULT PARTNERSHIPS

The three pitfalls discussed below are based on positive intentions, but also contain significant limitations that pose barriers to effective design and implementation of Y-APs. Given that adoption of innovation is typically a reinvention of existing ideas and practices (Rogers, 1995), and the move to Y-APs is a relatively recent phenomenon, the pitfalls thus reflect attitudes, practices, and behaviors in a state of transition. They are partly old, partly new, and demonstrate turbulence characteristic of systemic change. A second feature of the pitfalls is that they operate in a cluster; therefore, the

distinctions are not crisp. Nevertheless, each pitfall is discussed separately in order to highlight their consequential premises.

Y-AP Means That Youth Do Everything of Importance

Adults often enter into Y-APs believing that youth should do everything of importance. The positive elements of this theme are that youth are capable, have assets, and bring valuable knowledge and experience to an enterprise. Therefore, a major premise is that youth can contribute substantially to designing and running programs. Accordingly, adults may strive to provide opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills; make decisions about policies, programs, and structures; and manage tasks and operations.

An unvarnished adherence to this orientation hampers Y-APs, however. For one thing, there is often an underlying assumption that youth will want to run all key aspects of a project. Furthermore, a frequent and implicit notion is that youth are skilled enough and have enough time to engage in all tasks. In interviewing youth and observing youth–adult interactions over many years, however, I have learned that youth desire to share responsibilities and tasks with adults, rather than do everything themselves. Moreover, youth welcome adult participation through coaching, guidance, modeling of behaviors, and sharing tasks.

The stance that "youths do everything of importance" can put program quality at risk. If only youth are engaged in tasks of importance, a full range of human resources, specifically that existing among adults, is not being used for the collective effort. An illustration comes from a recent project I was involved with, carried out in a public high school of some 2000 students and 200 faculty and staff. In the project, teachers and students were to engage in a self-assessment process to examine an institution-wide effort to reform the school climate. The assessment process involved a number of steps: administering a survey to students, compiling and interpreting the results, and facilitating discussions in classrooms about the results and recommendations for improvement. The entire process was designed to be effected through Y-APs. Teachers were drawn to the idea of youth and adults partnering in the project and the democratic values it embodied, and continually voiced support for it in principle. During interviews, however, it turned out that their unspoken belief was that the project should be entirely led and carried out by youth. The manifestation of this belief lay in the teachers' reluctance to step in and offer instrumental guidance, lest they interfere with, or overshadow, what they considered a critical task of learning leadership: trial and error. Most students proceeded without teacher assistance and faced several difficulties. The purposes of the assessment did not reach full fruition. Whereas a few students shined, many more sputtered. Overall, the experience was discouraging for students, as well as teachers.

This case illustrates a legitimate desire on the part of a public school to provide real-life experience for students to be "front and center" and to gain skills and experience in a climate reform project. However, adults assumed that the students wanted to run all aspects of the project and had the time to do so. As a result, the quality of implementation was poor. As these themes were discussed during debriefings, administrators reached an understanding that, in the future, students would have to be adequately trained and teachers given clearer roles with adequate understanding of their participation.

Adults Just Need to Get Out of the Way and Give Up Their Power

The theme of adults "getting out of the way" of youth is the one I have heard most frequently during meetings, conferences, and training sessions. It usually is expressed as an exhortation. On the positive side, in these contexts, the theme has been meant as encouragement of youth voice and action. However, when adults are primarily adhering to this theme, several salient principles of youth development tend to be neglected in the process.

A significant challenge to an unqualified stance that "adults just need to get out of the way" is that adults are weakened in their potential to nurture youth confidence and competence. A case in point was a multi-year initiative undertaken by a national youth development organization in eight community sites. According to initiative designers, a major purpose was to place computer technology into the hands of young people as a tool for spearheading and implementing community development and improvement projects. Initiative designers also stipulated that the project would be carried out though Y-APs. Whereas the initiative provided ongoing computer training and technical support for participating youth, very little training and virtually no technical support for adult partners was offered. So strong was the designers' commitment to Y-APs that they overlooked ongoing evaluation findings regarding the weaknesses of this approach.

Not unexpectedly, community adults remained mystified about the nature of their roles over the three years of the project. Youth also were puzzled about the nature of adult roles, as well as their own roles. The young people vaguely understood that they should be creating community-improvement programs and leading them, but at all sites, youth were not ready to direct the vision and action. Youth had very little idea about how to design, lead, and carry out community-based projects. Ironically, youth noted they could not count on their adult partners to help them in the endeavor because adults were not adept in computer operations, the web, and software programs.

The belief that adults need to "give up power" is predicated on a legitimate concern that real power differentials between adolescents and adults make youth passive and disengaged. The value orientation is clear and positive: to transform asymmetrical relationships between youth and adults into more symmetrical ones that are characterized by an atmosphere of equality. The intention is to assist youth in exercising the full range of agency that they are developmentally capable of, and to assist youth in assuming roles as active decision makers and problem solvers. The fallacy of this perspective is that it conceives of "power" as part of a zero-sum equation. That is, the only way youth can gain power is for adults to give up power.

I have observed that adults frequently confuse the concepts of institutional and personal power. Wishing to cede some of their institutional power, adults often also abdicate their personal power—that which is grounded in their experience and wisdom. For example, in one evaluation I conducted, youth and adults completed a survey to check on their cohesiveness and productivity as a group. There was an interesting pattern in the data. One of the results revealed that adults thought that youth learned a great deal from the adults, whereas youth rated this item very low. The young people explained they had learned little to nothing from adults because although all adults routinely attended the meetings, they scarcely said anything. The adults were astonished. In construing the program as one emphasizing youth empowerment, they thought they were being exemplary partners by attending, but not speak-

ing. The adults had not considered that their lack of contribution could limit overall group effectiveness and frustrate youth.

An additional thorny issue embedded in the theme of adults giving up power is that all adults do not unilaterally have great amounts of institutional power. In U.S. society, privilege, and therefore institutional power, is distributed unevenly across gender, socio-economic, and racial/ethnic lines. Many adults are dealing with their own pain from oppressive conditions, and this can influence significantly the ability to attend fully to roles as collaborators with youth (Camino, 2000; Ginwright, 2005).

"Youth" Is the Marked Category and Focus

The practice and study of adolescent development are posited on the presence of salient differences—cognitive, emotional, and physical—between adolescents and adults. What proves enigmatic for scholars and practitioners is to understand and negotiate the nature of the differences. Puzzlement arises, for instance, from attempts to disentangle factors of essential developmental processes from social and cultural constructions, especially in industrialized societies where adolescence has become a protracted life-cycle stage (Modell & Goodman, 1990). In the parlance of critical theory, youth has become the "marked" category played against what often is considered the "unmarked" category of adults. This seems due—at least in part—to the innovation of Y-APs having taken place in the field of youth development. It therefore seems natural to place the focus squarely on articulating the nature of "youth," how youth operate in Y-APs, and what practices best promote developmental outcomes for youth because of Y-APs.

In practice, a sole focus on youth is misplaced. Youth–adult partnerships demand consideration of adult development (see Ginwright, 2005). Focusing only on youth and ignoring the developmental processes of adults, as well as the notion of adulthood, can pose some insidious challenges to Y-APs. For illustration, in interviews over the years with youth workers, volunteers, agency administrators, and policy makers, I have asked these adults what they think youth bring to Y-APs. The following have been common and prevalent statements: "Youth are so vibrant, so alive"; "Youth keep us honest"; "They are so creative"; "Young people have so much energy"; "They are just amazing"; and the like.

Statements such as these convey the enthusiasm that adults can have in working with adolescents. The importance of stressing such positive experiences cannot be underestimated, especially in a current social climate in which youth are widely defined in negative stereotypes (Gilliam & Bales, 2001). However, on closer examination, such statements also perpetuate stereotypes. The danger is typecasting abilities and roles. In interviews, adults have painted these images of youth in contrast to themselves and other adults. Typically, adults have perceived that adults bring the component of life experience to a partnership. They also have seen themselves in the roles of advisors, teachers, and mentors, but not as "creative" or in the role of "co-learner" with youth. The pitfall lies in assuming that "creativity," "authenticity," and "energy" are the sole qualities that youth can contribute, and that only youth can contribute them. On the other hand, because youth are "marked," issues of experience often are often directed to youth, but rarely to adults in the partnerships. The implicit idea is that adults have relevant experience, whereas youth do not.

This notion has been challenged by youth in my interviews. While respecting the experience of adults, many youth of color and refugee and immigrant youth have

explained that they, too, have had life experience, such as caring for siblings or parents or holding jobs and providing income for their families, and bring these perspectives to Y-APs. I am not suggesting that differences between youth and adults be discounted. Rather, closer examination of this theme could serve to render more nuanced recognition of what each bring to the Y-AP.

FROM PITFALLS TO PROMISING PRACTICES OF COLLECTIVE REFLECTION AND LEARNING

The inability of adults to engage youth in the creation of Y-APs may, and often does, limit the potential of the organization or program to reach its objectives. This statement is not meant to blame adults. It is a statement based on extensive observation of practice in a variety of settings. As we engage in critique, however, it is equally important that we remember that Y-APs are an innovative idea and practice in the United States. It is truly new territory (Camino, 2000). There are few models and little collective experience to guide practitioners and community residents who take the risk and seek to implement and sustain Y-APs. Because there are few models, there is a need to keep critical consciousness of assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors in the forefront.

In this section, I highlight promising practices used by coalitions and organizations that have been effective in helping stakeholders confront and overcome the aforementioned pitfalls. I hope to demonstrate that just as individuals may operate on inaccurate assumptions or untested beliefs, they also can learn and create promising practices through experimentation and repeated efforts.

Adoption of an innovation requires learning on the part of individuals and groups. The type of learning required, however, is not one of acquiring knowledge and skills per se, although these are important elements. Doing things in a different way requires a foundation of critical thinking—of unpacking fundamental assumptions, examining the influences of multiple contexts, and generating alternatives (Brookfield, 1987). Freire (1983) taught that in order for people to change the conditions of their lives, they need critical literacy; primarily, they need to be able to read accurately the conditions of their lives, placing events and difficulties into a broader context of community policies and social forces. After critical appraisal, informed action can then be undertaken. After a certain amount of action, reflection is engaged in to consider how the action has fit so far with the definition of the problem. Then, the newly informed planning and action are attempted again, leading to another round of reflection. Freire called this ever-spiraling cycle "praxis."

A key ingredient for successful critical reflection and praxis is a community of individuals striving for similar goals to comprise a group or network These have been called, variously, learning communities (Senge, 1990), communities of inquiry (Friedman, 2000), and reflective practicums (Schon, 1987). Regardless of the label, the emphasis lies in the need to create a space for individuals to reflect, dialogue, and learn together. In such a space, individuals can question and challenge one another, problem solve, build networks, share information, and practice the application of new knowledge. In effect, stakeholders can engage in critical thinking, or "reflective skepticism"—"being wary of uncritically accepting an innovation, change, or new perspective simply because it is new" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 22). In such contexts, stakeholders also can construct a meaning and rationale for new ideas and practices (Choo, 1998).

Below I describe three promising practices of reflection and practice that have been employed successfully by organizations or coalitions working to create and sustain Y-APs.

Integrate Reflection Into Meetings

In a service-learning initiative, I evaluated an initiative that was predicated on Y-APs and where stakeholders were constantly facing difficulties. For the better part of a year, there was tension and the group described itself as being in "crisis mode." The students felt demoralized. They felt they were given only "gofer" things to do at the host organizations. In their view, these activities did not constitute service; consequently, the students felt they were wasting their time. Adult staff at the host organizations felt they were often babysitting because of the youth having bad attitudes or lacking basic workplace skills, such as courtesy, keeping to schedules, and carrying out assigned tasks.

To break the impasse, agency staff, students, the project director, and I brainstormed possible solutions. We came up with the idea of holding routine brown-bag lunches and afternoon meetings for teachers, agency staff, and youth. The designated focus of these meetings was learning about the history of service. A short presentation was given at each meeting about the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Peace Corps, VISTA, and similar service programs, and an informal discussion was held afterward. This structure proved successful. In addition to gaining knowledge about the history of service, other outcomes were achieved. Meeting-by-meeting, all stakeholders began to build personal relationships. They dialogued collectively about why community service mattered personally to them, and the reasons why each was motivated to participate in the initiative. Stakeholders also had a chance to reflect on what Y-APs meant to them, and why they thought Y-APs were a significant way to engage in service. As youth and adults began to listen to one another and understand one another better, the student–staff relationships improved, and so did morale. Youth were able to better understand that not all service work is glamorous, entailing only large, exciting events, but instead involves some tedium. Consequently, the students engaged in routine tasks knowing that their efforts would build incrementally toward a larger goal. Teachers and adult staff were able to see that their position of "staying out of students' way" was counterproductive. The young people needed more guidance and skills training in workplace culture and techniques. Accordingly, they instituted more preparatory and booster training sessions for the students.

Articulate the Logic of Programs and Y-APs

Evaluation researchers have long been advocating the use of theories of change for program planning. Theories of change are cause-and-effect models of how programs are conceptualized as operating (Bickman, 1987). These models address the why, what, who, and how of programs. The purpose is "to engage program managers and evaluators to see more clearly the underlying rationale or logic of a program" (Chen, Cato, & Rainford, 1998–1999, p. 450). Because program theory always rests on fundamental assumptions, which typically remain unarticulated, doing a theory of change helps stakeholders articulate assumptions (Renger & Titcomb, 2002; Weiss, 1995). Theories of change also lay bare the program logic, the connections between assumptions, resources, activities, and desired program outcomes. When stakeholders agree

on a program's theory of change, progress is promoted because consensus is gained regarding what goals and objectives are realistic for the program.

Charting a theory of change proved beneficial in a multi-site national community-building initiative I evaluated, in which Y-APs were a core feature. Early on in the initiative, there was a significant problem. Although everyone endorsed the philosophy of Y-APs, there was lack of clarity and consensus regarding how Y-APs were to work, what outcomes they were intended to effect, and why they represented an appropriate method for community building. To address this confusion, several national meetings were held, bringing together youth and adult teams from the sites with initiative staff. In these meetings, time was devoted to charting a theory of change. Youth and adults teams from the community sites began by addressing a series of "why" questions; therefore, why should the work be done through Y-APs? Why would Y-APs be a good way for your communities to achieve a future vision? Each "why" question was designed to uncover another layer of assumptions that participants and staff brought to the initiative.

The strategy proved fruitful in allowing stakeholders to reach a mutual understanding about Y-APs. For example, youth from community sites initially cast their responses as, "because we have rights," "because we don't want to work alone," or "because we're young, and really don't know what to do." These statements constituted a solid foundation. However, through several subsequent meetings, youth's statements evolved to embrace a broader, more-collective view. Statements included, "because we're part of the community," "we best know how to bring in other youth," "this initiative is about building the whole community, and our community needs us," "we have good ideas and are hard workers," "I love my community, but it's dying out, and we all have to jump in and do something," or "everyone working together—youth and adults together—is the best way to get the kind of community we want." Community adults similarly came to new and broader understandings though the charting process. At first, adult responses tended to emphasize an orientation that the initiative was for youth—thus focusing on youth as the marked category—but not for themselves and the community. Accordingly, adults thought that youth should carry out all the visible and important tasks. Adults also emphasized benefits for youth, such as "youth need to learn leadership and skills," or "youth need something to do to keep them from engaging in risky behaviors," rather than benefits for the entire community. At the end of the theory of change charting process, however, adult responses tended to converge with youth responses. Like youth, adults came to stress the importance of working collaboratively with youth to address community problems and to build healthier, more livable environments for the common good.

Engage a Third Party to Help Explore Group Assumptions and Values

As noted above, having all stakeholders address issues of why they advocate a partnership approach between youth and adults is critical. This is easier said than done, however. Often, it is useful, or perhaps necessary, to engage an external third party.

For example, I recently evaluated a community coalition that had operated successfully for ten years under the banner of "creating a healthy community for youth to prevent risky behaviors." Coalition members had heard about Y-APs and wished to explore the concept and practice for the coalition. Because they felt that they knew

little about the practice of Y-APs, they engaged a youth facilitator from another state who was experienced in helping groups with Y-APs.

At an intensive three-day community-wide training, the facilitator introduced an exercise to provide opportunity for youth and adult participants to explore their notions about Y-APs. He called the exercise "To, For, With." The facilitator explained that these small words make big differences because they represent core attitudes adults bring to interactions with youth. As he described the framework, he gave examples. "Doing to" youth often occurs in health treatments or in adjudication systems. "Doing for" youth can occur when adults take over for youth because they assume youth lack necessary skills, such as when a parent or teacher does a young person's homework "for" him or her. Finally, according to the facilitator, "doing with" youth occurs when adults consider youth as having strengths and assets, and when the relationship is reciprocal. The facilitator's example was a situation in which youth and adults jointly evaluate community grant applications and make decisions about funding.

The facilitator then asked the youth and adults to enact role-play scenarios based on each of these orientations. Youth and adults engaged in the role-plays with a great deal of enthusiasm. During the role-plays, and especially in the debriefing and reflection session that followed, it was clear that both youth and adults had been moved to new intellectual and emotional points. They reported that they had gained new awareness that none of the orientations was unilaterally positive or negative. Some, mostly youth, stated that they were very surprised to discover that a partnership model is not always the best one to use in various contexts. Youth, for instance, reported awareness that in settings where it is critical to transmit information in a highly efficient manner, it might be better for adults to engage primarily in a "to" or "for" orientation. Similarly, adults reported insight that "with," especially as predicated on assumptions that adults "should get out of the way," or "give up their power," may not be the most functional approach in situations of immediate threat or danger, such as when supervising a student driver. In other situations, however, youth and adults affirmed that a partnership approach is best, such as choosing the school play for a given year.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article stresses three points. First, Y-APs are an innovation, and as such, youth and adults are experimenting with ways to formulate and implement them. There are pitfalls, and good intentions are not always enough to fully achieve desired outcomes. Second, Y-APs only go so far as a guiding concept; they need to be realized in terms of practice. However, because Y-APs are a relatively new way of working, there are few established traditions or procedures for their design and implementation. As such, many adults fall back on their own existing beliefs, assumptions, and ways of getting things done, or they adopt new stereotypes about youth and about their own roles in working with youth. Focusing on "youth" as the marked category, rather than on the partnership, is a frame that inclines adults to tend to fall back into prior positions. Assuming that a Y-AP is only for the benefit of youth, for example, undermines the value and benefits that action through partnerships can bring to adults, organizations, or communities. The seemingly progressive assumptions that youth should do everything of importance, or that adults should get out of the way and give up their power, are also misbegotten. That is, such assumptions merely turn old ways of relating to youth on their heads instead of transforming them, and are therefore equally

inadequate for Y-APs. Ironically, it is often the adults who become disempowered, and they do not have the confidence to fully share their experience or knowledge. As Dewey (1954, p. 85) observed fifty years ago with respect to creating a democratic school climate:

> It is possible of course [for a teacher] to abuse the office and force the activity of the young into channels which express the teacher's purpose rather than that of the pupils. However, the way to voice this danger is not for the adult to withdraw entirely. The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction, and secondly, to allow the suggestion made to develop a plan and project by means of the further suggestions contributed and organizations into a whole by the members of the group. The plan, in other words, is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation.

The final point is that Y-AP is a collective construct. Youth–adult partnerships are means through which youth and adults can work on issues that matter to them both. The meaning, design, and implementation must therefore be created by the collective group. This means that Y-APs require negotiation on issues of problem definition, motivation, purpose, power, and role (Camino & Zeldin, in press). Fortunately, as documented in this article, adults and youth are finding settings and strategies for negotiating these issues. They are working in staff meetings to engage in relationship building and reflection, charting theories of change, and bringing in third parties to help them reach clarity and consensus. Therefore, it is useful to find ways to bring adults and youth together in forums conducive to honest dialogue, and where they may functionally challenge and learn from one another. The vision is to locate ways for youth and adults to join together for shared action, and in the process create environments for individual development, as well as for the common good.

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