Support for Efficacy and Mattering

FACT SHEET

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Jan Norquest, Christine Bracamonte Wiggs, Rachel Villarreal, and Lynne M. Borden

Introduction

A key feature of positive youth programs is the fostering of youth voice and engagement through youth empowerment. Empowerment is the process by which young people become active participants in their own development. It is through this empowerment that youth gain efficacy—a belief that they have the ability to make a difference. Once youth believe they can make an impact in their community, they develop a sense of “mattering”—a sense that their participation and contributions are important to others and that they make a difference in the world around them.

In order for youth to become fully engaged in their communities they must develop this sense of efficacy and mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Pittman, Irby, Toman, Yohalem, and Ferber (2009) found that youth who have meaningful roles in organizations and in their community displayed fewer problems, more skills, and often became engaged as lifelong citizens who contribute to the development of their community.

Research

Underlying the activities that promote efficacy and mattering is the awareness that development is not something adults do to youth, but rather something youth do for themselves with the support of adults (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). With mentoring and guidance from adults, youth-serving organizations can encourage increased youth empowerment and autonomy among young people. Youth must be given the opportunity to try new ideas and learn from the outcomes of implementing those ideas. Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, and Green (2003) identified in their research that encouraging youth to experiment with new ideas is one of the key elements for creating an empowering environment. This empowerment of youth occurred through adult roles of facilitation, teaching, mentoring, and providing feedback to youth members. Developing an organizational structure and ethos that promotes youth efficacy and mattering can offer young people opportunities to become more active members of their communities and can provide ways for youth to experience personal engagement and growth.

Borden and Serido (2009) found that youth empowerment and participation can begin with involving youth in the day-to-day operations and decision-making within their program, allowing youth to identify issues that are meaningful to them, and encouraging young people to become active in addressing these issues. This interactive process challenges the thinking and perceptions of young people, often leading them to more active participation in the program. When programs establish age and culturally appropriate expectations for youth as well as encourage youths’ desire to try new experiences and set their own goals and expectations, youth achieve a greater sense of agency and belief that they matter. Research reviewed by Eccles and Gootman (2002) suggests that a person’s sense of self and identity develops through implementing action, taking on challenges, and making meaningful contributions.

During adolescence youth test their abilities and form their own ideas by participating in individual and group experiences. Yohalem and Martin (2007) found two different sets of predictors of youth
engagement, including those that focus on the family level and the structural or community level. Young people must be motivated to get involved. The research suggests that although individuals define their own motivation, there also exists a range of internal and external predictors, such as family, peer, and individual characteristics. Youth engagement in community organizations can also be a predictor of future involvement. A study conducted by Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) found that service and participation in youth organizations during adolescence is a good predictor of adult political behavior, including voting and membership in voluntary associations, even as much as 25 years later. Youth engagement during adolescence is critical to future involvement in the community.

Research points to personal development as a significant outcome for youth who gain a sense of empowerment and who are fully engaged in youth development programs. Pittman et al. (2009) suggest that engagement is the trigger for development. They note that when young people engage in programs fully and have real choices, they also experience self-improvement and a better sense of self. Engagement and participation in community service opportunities can also help youth look at potential career choices. Several studies indicate that youth participation in activities that foster efficacy and mattering positively impact the youths’ personal and social development and can help determine their future career choices and success (Balsano, 2005).

Additional youth outcomes can be achieved through youth empowerment and engagement, especially when activities are youth-initiated. A study by Lakin and Mahoney (2006) suggests participation in community service projects that are guided by student initiative and that encourage cooperation and collective decision-making can result in youth reporting higher levels of empathy and expressing a continued desire to be involved in service activities. For youth participants to have a sense of efficacy and mattering, it is essential to focus on the current interests and issues they view as relevant and pertinent to their future goals (Younis et al., 2002). When their interests and issues are taken into account, youth develop a more meaningful connection with their community.

In Evans’ (2007) research, youth reported feeling a stronger sense of community in contexts where they experienced voice and resonance, some power and influence, and adequate adult support and challenge. It is imperative that adults find the balance between mentoring youth and directing youth who are participating in the organization’s activities. Developing a sense of one’s voice and expressing one’s point of view can provide a youth with opportunities to experience respect and to see oneself as important to adults (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Connor, 2005). At the community program level, having youth voice as part of the group decision-making process is important as it keeps programs focused on the interests, ideas, and issues of youth participants (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005). Without opportunities to develop youth voice, participants will struggle to establish a sense of efficacy and mattering.

Youth-centered empowerment in other settings, such as schools and home, is also related to positive youth development outcomes. For example, parental support of adolescents’ autonomy and decision-making, along with consistent and careful oversight is related to adolescents’ positive development in areas such as motivation, growing competence, and increased self exploration (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).
Practical Application

Youth and Adult Partnerships in Youth-Centered Organizations

Another important aspect of developing youth efficacy and mattering is the partnership between youth participants and adults in the program. The role of adults at youth-centered organizations is to ensure youth participation in decision-making; promoting the positive development of youth; and building community and civil society (Zeldin et al., 2005). Research by Zeldin et al. (2005) examined youth- and adult-driven programs and found that in youth-driven programs, youth participants experienced a high degree of ownership and empowerment and reported an increased level of leadership and planning skills. In the adult-driven programs, the adults crafted youth-centered learning experiences that facilitated youths’ development of specific talents. Across both approaches, youth gained self-confidence and benefited from the adults’ experience in other ways.

To strengthen youth-adult partnerships in an organization, Zeldin et al. (2005) suggests some key strategies:

- Everyone needs to respect youth voice
- Those involved in the organization should demonstrate care and concern
- Adults should model/instruct in tangible ways
- Work as partners

Organizations can further support youth-adult partnerships by being intentional in their design and daily operations, having a clear organizational and articulated purpose, and establishing clear expectations. Organizations will also have to create opportunities for staff training and create or revise program policies and procedures to incorporate youth input and partnership. Finally, organizations must ensure that a youth’s first encounter with the organization offers a welcoming and safe situation (Cargo et al., 2003).

Recognizing the barriers to supporting youth voice can help an organization plan for effective action to ensure youth voice is fostered in its program. Balsano (2005) identified eight social impediments to youth voice:

- Lack of civic knowledge and skills
- Societal decrease in collective orientation
- Adults’ negative perceptions of youth
- Lack of horizontal communication among youth and adult groups
- Insufficient opportunities for consequential participation
- Social marginalization of certain youth
- Decrease in social pride
- Pervasive sense of hopelessness among youth
The following suggestions offer insights into designing and implementing programs that support efficacy and mattering:

- Provide a safe and caring environment to attract youth to the program. This environment would include a setting free from violence and unsafe health conditions, as well as supportive staff who can provide youth with a sense of belonging.
- Adopt standards, both within the programming and the organizational structure itself, to ensure an atmosphere that encourages youth engagement and youth voice. Examples of this practice would include incorporating opportunities for youth to provide input related to the development of programming, rules, and organizational philosophy.
- Staff training for those working directly with youth should include youth mentoring and youth empowerment components.
- Youth must be viewed as valued members of the community and as resources rather than as problems to be solved.
- Youth must be given age-appropriate and culturally-sensitive opportunities to try new ideas and to learn from the process and end result of implementing those ideas. Goal setting and evaluation of goal completion should be an intentional program component.
- Recognize youth leadership potential and, when appropriate, include youth in program planning and implementation. The need for adult oversight may decrease as youth increase their sense of efficacy and mattering.

Summary

Efficacy and mattering are important components that contribute to the positive development of youth. Youth who have meaningful roles in organizations and develop voice have fewer problems, learn more skills, and have a higher likelihood of becoming engaged citizens as adults. Developing a sense of efficacy and mattering as an organizational ethos will help ensure continued youth participation in a program. As a result of youth engagement, youth empowerment can occur and can result in positive outcomes for youth.
Web Based Resources

**Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development**— [http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/](http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/)

The Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development has several publications available as free downloadable can be found at [http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/](http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/)

Some suggested titles:

- **Building Community: A Tool Kit for Youth and Adults in Charting Assets and Creating Change**
- **At the Table Resource Catalog**
- **Collective Leadership Works: Preparing Youth & Adults for Community Change**
- **Creating Change: How Organizations Connect with Youth, Build Communities, and Strengthen Themselves – Research Report**
- **Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships: Training Curricula for Youth, Adults and Youth-Adult Teams**
- **Learning and Leading: A Tool Kit for Youth Development and Civic Activism**

**Corporation for National & Community Service**—[http://www.nationalservice.gov/](http://www.nationalservice.gov/)


References


