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Who's Got the Power?
Youth Perceptions of Political Efficacy and Control
A Qualitative Evaluation of the Youth Empowerment Studies Project

By

Joanna Jenks Eveland

B.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 2001

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requirements for the degree of

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University of California, Berkeley

Spring 2005

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By Joanna Jenks Eveland

DEDICATION

To the 6th graders of Montalvin Manor Elementary School. If there is a revolution, it will be because of you.

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Chapter 1: A Review of the Literature Surrounding Empowerment and the Health of Urban, Minority Youth

Introduction

Urban, minority youth face daunting challenges as they move towards adulthood. The first section of this paper discusses the connections between structural inequalities, psychosocial responses and the health risks that result from their interplay. The risk factors for violence, alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) use, and mental health disorders are highlighted. The next sections introduce empowerment and the development of critical consciousness as strategies for changing both structural and psychosocial factors which impact health. Empowerment is discussed in relation to social power and community level change as well as a psychological construction at the individual level. Finally, ideas of community, consciousness and power are critically evaluated in terms of their application to health promotion work with youth.

The Ecology of Risk

This section explores factors that shape risk behavior and health outcomes for urban, minority adolescents. Statistics indicate troubling increases in rates of ATOD use, risky sexual behavior, mental health disorders, and exposure to violence among urban, minority youth (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Resnick, Bearman et al. 1997; Sanders-Phillips 1997). Because of the multi-factorial nature of risk behavior, authors have stressed the importance of an ecological approach to concerns such as neighborhood violence (DuRant, Cadenhead et al. 1994; Sanders-Phillips 1996). The same ecological framework can be used more broadly to address the range of health disparities found in

these communities. The following are useful constructs for understanding the forces at work in shaping risk behavior and health:

Poverty and Socio-Economic Status (SES)

Poverty consistently emerges as a robust and broad-based risk factor for a wide range of physical and mental health disorders. That the poor are sicker than the rest of the population is not a new idea. However, a recent explosion in social epidemiologic research on the connections between SES and health allows a more detailed analysis.

Geronimus (2003) defines 4 levels on which poverty increases disease risk. (1) Poverty is linked to **material hardships**. This includes decreased access to education, employment, medical care, housing, healthy food and a variety of other factors. While these material conditions are crucial, numerous studies have shown that they do not sufficiently explain the levels of disparities observed (Syme 1990; Marmot 1997; House and Williams 2003). (2) To further explain disparity, the **psychosocial impacts** of low SES must be considered. A wide variety of risk factors are documented, including: an increase in acute and chronic stressors, a decrease in social support and relationships, a decreased sense of control, efficacy and mastery, increases in hostility and depression, decreases in protective behaviors such as exercise and an increase in risk behaviors such as ATOD use, overeating and risky sexual behavior. (3) Poverty also increases one's chances of living and working in **hazardous environments**. This includes increased exposure to toxins from environmental contamination and poor housing, as well as increased risks of experiencing violence or victimization. (4) Finally, Geronimus argues that being poor decreases **access to health information, social services and technologies** that help individuals to decrease their health risks. For example, the poor

are less well-informed about the health risks of smoking or how to eat a healthful diet.

Race/Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity, while dismissed as biological categories, retain a powerful impact as social constructs in explaining health disparities. Taking into account SES explains some but not all of the inequity experienced by minority populations. House and Williams (2003) discuss the varied impacts of racism on minority health. (1) Racism has been demonstrated to profoundly influence SES. (2) **Residential segregation** creates and perpetuates inequality in several ways. For racial and ethnic minorities, living in segregated neighborhoods decreases access to quality education, employment opportunities and government services. Segregation also increases likelihood of exposure to environmental toxins and poor quality housing. (3) **Psychosocial effects** of racism include chronic stress resulting from the subjective experience of discrimination, as well as internalized racism shaping health ideas and behaviors. An important distinction exists between **individual racism**, which includes interpersonal discrimination, prejudice and hate crimes, and **structural racism**, such as the barriers to educational achievement for minority youth, enforced by segregation and economic disadvantage. While structural racism may be harder to visualize, it offers a clearer explanation for pervasive racial disparities in health. Jones (2000) identifies the level of **internalized racism**, where members of minority groups accept negative societal messages regarding their race, with concurrent changes in their self-concept and life choices. By directly shaping decision making, internalized racism can lead to an increase in risky health behaviors.

Neighborhood Factors

In addition to individual SES and race/ethnicity, neighborhood characteristics are

demonstrated to increase risk for individuals living in distressed areas. Anehensel (1996) describes the effect of living in poor, segregated neighborhoods on adolescent mental health outcomes. She demonstrates that youth in these neighborhoods experience greater ambient hazards (i.e. crime) and are more likely to perceive their neighborhoods as dangerous. Greater perceived threat leads to increased prevalence of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Wilson (n.d.) reports increased levels of ATOD use for youth who report high degrees of Neighborhood Social Disorder, defined as a set of factors including violence, crime and low helping behaviors that violate shared social norms. The recognition of neighborhood risk factors highlights the importance of interventions directed at a community level.

Risk Behavior and Decision Making

While structural forces clearly exist, it is individuals who ultimately choose their own behavior, be it to engage in violence, eat unhealthy foods or have risky sex. Accepting personal responsibility for one's actions is a widely held social value, seen in the American political and legal systems, as well as popular culture. However, this can lead to a culture of individualism, which obscures the constraints under which individual choices are made, often resulting in blaming the victims of social problems for their existence. The medical anthropology literature offers a critical perspective on this question of structure versus individual agency. Ethnography serves as a powerful tool to show marginalized people as active agents who make life choices within social, economic and historically determined constraints on their ability to succeed. Unfortunately, through these choices (such as ATOD use and criminal activity), individuals help further shape their own oppression and that of their community

(Anderson 1990; Bourgois 2003; Farmer 2003).

Reducing Risk

In addressing the risk factors for health problems, researchers point out the importance of distinguishing between primary and secondary problems, or fundamental and ameliorative solutions (Krieger 1994; Farmer 2003; Geronimus 2003; House and Williams 2003). In all the above cases, the disparity itself is the fundamental cause of poor health outcomes. Krieger (1994) describes the limitations of epidemiological constructs such as “the web of causation,” which describe the multi-factorial nature of a problem, but obscure root causes, leaving out the “spider” who created the web. Many public health interventions focus on addressing consequences of inequality, i.e. anti-smoking education programs or increasing police presence to decrease community violence. While these projects show admirable results, it is also vital to address the policies that promote inequality. Empowerment approaches, discussed below, have the potential to address both structural conditions (through community organizing approaches) and to shape individual perceptions and decision making.

Defining Empowerment

How can we assist youth in escaping and challenging the ecological forces placing them at risk? I will argue that the concept of empowerment is an essential tool for improving youth health. Researchers have spent many years trying to clearly define the concept of empowerment (Rappaport 1987; Perkins 1995; Zimmerman 1995), often with great frustration. Deep divisions exist within the field over what empowerment can and should be. Is it about “feeling empowered” or actually having the power to make change

(Wallerstein 1992; Speer and Hughey 1995)? Is the individual more important or the community? Is empowerment only for poor and disenfranchised people? Is “power” something we need to talk about when we define empowerment? A few definitions of empowerment help to illustrate the depth and diversity of the concept.

Empowerment is a process

One of the earliest and most widely accepted definitions of empowerment is “a mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport 1984). Empowerment is not merely an end result, but a way to get there (Wallerstein 1992). This has led some theorists to argue that there is no such thing as a truly empowered individual or community, a concept which is challenging for those looking to quantify and measure empowerment.

Empowerment works at multiple levels

Rappaport’s phrase “people, organizations and communities” summarizes the three levels at which empowerment is commonly conceptualized. The first level is that of *individual or psychological empowerment*. This individual level of analysis focuses on personal perceptions such as self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and the ability to exert control over one’s life (Syme 1990). It also includes feelings about what is to come, concepts such as future orientation and sense of hope (Wilson, Syme et al. n.d.). The individual level has been redefined by community psychologists as “psychological empowerment,” a broader term that includes an awareness of the socio-political factors that shape ones choices and life factors (Zimmerman 1995). The development of this “critical awareness” is identified by some as the most crucial piece of any empowerment process (Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki 1994). Empowerment is frequently discussed solely as an individual

level construct, but some argue this is the most limited definition, especially when the dimension of critical consciousness is left out (Wallerstein 2002).

The second level is that of *organizational empowerment*. A distinction is made in the literature between “empowering organizations,” which provide opportunities for individual to gain skills and feel effective within the group, and “empowered organizations,” which can impact social policy and resource distribution (Zimmerman 2000). Zimmerman also notes that some organizations have both characteristics.

The third level is *community empowerment*. This refers to locally based processes that develop citizen skills and opportunities, bring resources into a community and address community concerns. Community empowerment processes include community organizing efforts, where groups identify issues in their community, as well as strengths and assets and work collaboratively to solve their problems (Speer and Hughey 1995; Minkler 2004). This collective problem solving ability is termed “community competence” (Minkler 2004). A focus on the root causes of social issues is important in order for community organizing to create lasting change. This level also includes community building strategies, which increase communication, commitment and involvement, creating a sense of shared identity between community members (Minkler 2004). One critique of the community organizing approach is that it requires victims of structural policies to do the work of making change, rather than placing responsibility on those in power. Another argument dismisses the efficacy of locally-based decision making in an increasingly globalized world. Labonte questions the ability of community groups to create large scale change through local organizing when decisions which affect their communities are increasingly made by international financial organizations with

little accountability (Labonte 1999). Supporters of community organizing efforts believe that small, locally-based struggles lay the foundation for larger social movements. Organizing can also link the levels of empowerment analysis (individual, group and community), effecting change in all three spheres.

While separating the three levels helps to clarify our goals, there is considerable overlap between the three constructs. Further research is needed to determine the dynamic interactions that take place between individuals, organizations and communities. Many researchers have noted that an empowered organization or community is more than just a group of empowered individuals (Wallerstein 1992; Israel, Checkoway et al. 1994; Zimmerman 1995), but how much more and why remains somewhat obscure.

Empowerment has measurable outcomes

Wallerstein (1992) writes that empowerment “promotes participation of people, organizations and communities toward the goal of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice.” This illustrates the idea that empowerment processes have desired results that can to some extent be quantified. A wide variety of potential empowerment outcomes have been identified, including perceived control, skill development, citizen participation (i.e. voting), increased flow of resources into the community and development of community organizations (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Perkins 1995). Note that these empowerment outcomes are different for each level of empowerment being studied; individual outcomes are not the same as those you would measure for a community. The development of measurable outcomes has greatly assisted those hoping to use empowerment interventions and methodology in their work. Scales have been developed

to evaluate the efficacy of interventions (Israel, Checkoway et al. 1994).

Empowerment is a set of values

In addition to processes, levels and outcomes, empowerment is an ideology that redefines the role of researchers and social service professionals (Rappaport 1987; Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki 1994; Zimmerman 1995; Minkler 2004). The development of Participatory Action Research methods that explicitly engage community members in knowledge production and social change efforts is one example of empowerment praxis (Minkler and Wallerstein 2003). Rather than developing programs to help people deal with problems, the “helped” are instead recognized as active agents contributing to change in their lives and communities. As applied to health, empowerment can be thought of as a wellness model rather than simply the treatment of disease (Zimmerman 1995). Empowerment involves a shift in focus from deficiencies to assets, utilizing strategies such as social network development and community capacity building (Minkler 2004).

Empowerment cannot be separated from power and control

Empowerment has also been defined as “ the manifestation of social power at individual, organizational and community levels of analysis” (Speer and Hughey 1995). Many empowerment researchers use words like “control,” “mastery” and “self-determination” in their definitions and analyses, but dance around the actual concept of power. In recent years, theorists have stressed the importance of explicitly discussing social, economic and political power when evaluating empowerment processes and outcomes (Speer and Hughey 1995; Wallerstein 1999; McCubbin 2001).

Empowerment impacts health outcomes

Across multiple disciplines, profound connections have been made between the health of individuals and psychosocial factors such as powerlessness (Syme 1990; Wallerstein 1992; Bandura 1997). For example, British researchers found an increased risk for coronary artery disease in civil servants with low levels of control over their workplace environments (Marmot 1997). Wallerstein posits both direct and indirect health benefits of empowerment processes extending beyond the individual level. Direct outcomes may result from empowered organizations and communities taking action to change their physical environment, i.e. by advocating for a grocery store to increase availability of healthy food. Indirect outcomes may involve decreased social isolation and increased helping behaviors (Wallerstein 1992).

Empowerment is a political concept

The conservative organization Empower America (2005) defines empowerment as the idea that “individual liberty and the freedom to compete increases consumer choices and provides individuals with the greatest control over what they own and earn.” This quote illustrates how the idea of empowerment has been used by those on all sides of the political spectrum for a variety of ends. Perkins (1995) points out that it is politicians who use the term most ambiguously, allowing it to reflect their personal agendas. Progressives and much of the research community have imbued the word with a social justice philosophy, but empowerment also has potential to further ideas of victim-blaming. The individual level of analysis is particularly vulnerable to this interpretation. If poor and disenfranchised people would only improve their outlook, feel more empowered (the argument goes), health outcomes would improve, crime would decrease

and graffiti would disappear. Numerous writers have pointed out this potential distortion of empowerment ideology if the term is left poorly defined (Perkins 1995; Wallerstein 2002; Minkler 2004).

Conclusion

In summary, empowerment has both processes and outcomes that contribute to individuals, organizations and communities gaining control over factors that affect their lives. Empowerment values strengths over deficiencies and respects ideas of self-determination rather than dependence. However, it also recognizes the socio-political forces that shape efficacy, and works towards broad social change rather than merely changing individual perceptions of control.

Power and Powerlessness

Further discussion of the role of social power in empowerment processes and outcomes clarifies this important relationship. Multiple theories exist on the nature of power and its manifestations in the development of social inequality. A few relevant constructs are discussed below, with emphasis on their application to empowerment.

In Gaventa's case study of Appalachia (1980), the author examines the roots of quiescence; why, in the face of inequality, oppressed people fail to demand or work for change. Gaventa describes three levels at which power operates. The first is a materialist perspective: the **control over resources** (land, jobs, money, etc.) which shape opportunity. The second level involves **control over participation** and the terms of debate. Those with power shape the issues that get on the table for discussion, as well as who has a voice in the discussion. The third and most nebulous dimension is **control**

over information and ideas. Those with power write the social myths that tell us where blame lies, how change is made, and what our values are. Authors have conceptualized this level in many ways, giving rise to the ideas of *hegemony* (Gramsci 2000), *internalized oppression* (Fanon 1963) and *the culture of silence* (Freire 1970). Gaventa also stresses that both power and powerlessness are accumulative. For example, those with money (level 1) are able to influence politicians through donations and influence what legislation is proposed (level 2). However, the process also works the other way. Community members who develop critical consciousness and alter their perceptions of their own efficacy (level 3) become more effective in getting their agenda on the table (level 2). The fluidity which exists between these levels offers a key role for empowerment processes to influence social change efforts.

Other conceptualizations of social power also deserve examination. Foucault (1977) uses the metaphor of the Panopticon (a prison structurally designed so inmates never knew whether or not they were being watched) to describe infinite dimensions of power, shaping every aspect of our lives. The extent of surveillance and control makes the actual exercise of power unnecessary, leaving us in “state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” In other words, people remain in a state of quiescence, unconsciously afraid of the consequences of challenging the power system. However, Foucault also argues that the extent of control also makes it inherently unstable and vulnerable to attack. In this setting, empowerment and critical consciousness become tools which give individuals a better understanding of the operations of power in their lives, increasing their ability to confront inequality.

Marilyn French (1985) offers a feminist analysis which challenges traditional

masculine conceptions of “power over” others, replacing them with a more inclusive idea of “power to” make change. French and others argue that true social change requires not just a change in the distribution of power, but a rethinking of the meaning of power. This critique is important for empowerment practitioners looking to develop a broader understanding of social power.

Those using empowerment methodologies who fail to look critically at power risk perpetuating inequality rather than challenging it. For interventionists hoping to influence health outcomes through empowerment processes, a structural perspective is especially important. Increasing an individual’s sense of control when he or she actually lacks the social power to improve their condition may actually harm their health. Researchers describe the phenomenon of “John Henryism,” where low income African-americans who engage in persistent high-effort coping to deal with disadvantage face a higher risk of hypertension (James, Strogatz et al. 1987; James 1994; Broman 1996).

Coupled with a power analysis, empowerment becomes a force to effect lasting individual and social change. Researchers must not shy away from openly discussing power operations both in the communities they work in and within their own projects. A failure to do so undermines both the integrity of the research and the desired empowerment outcomes.

Critical Consciousness

An analysis of social power is brought into empowerment methodology through the development of critical consciousness, a process known as *concientization* (Freire 1970). Critical consciousness has two parts; the first is the ability to perceive social,

political, and economic oppression as a force in one's life. The second is taking action to change the oppressive elements of society. Some theorists argue that these two sides of conscientization are in fact inseparable; without critical understanding you cannot take effective action, and without working to end oppression, you have not fully understood it (Freire 1970; Horton and Freire 1990). These ideas are put into practice in an adult education movement known as *popular education*. Popular educators believe that the central purpose of education is liberation and the development of full, democratic participation. Popular education theories connect individual and social change, providing a path to shift the balance of social power. The core ideas of popular education have emerged organically at different points worldwide in a variety of settings. The diverse origins of these concepts illustrate their centrality in the development of social change.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a key figure in popular education, developed his theories through literacy work with rural peasants in Northern Brazil. Freire describes the process of conscientization occurring through a cycle of dialogue, action and reflection. Participants use their own life experiences as catalysts for the development of a shared understanding of social problems. This analysis leads the group to take action towards change. Popular education is a dynamic process of collective action and critical reflection on the successes and challenges of the work. This perspective joins the ideas of empowerment to political change processes. However, empowerment is not blindly taking action, instead it is the development of a critical understanding of how and when to best effect social change. As Freire puts it, individuals "must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire 1970).

Youth Empowerment

While youth empowerment is frequently a goal of educators, organizers and health workers, until recently there has been a paucity of information regarding the application of empowerment principles to work with youth. There is also disagreement about how empowered and in control of their lives youth should be. Most adults feel that youth do not have full developmental and cognitive maturity to make decisions regarding their own health, politics or life choices. These beliefs are reflected in laws limiting the ability of those under 18 to purchase cigarettes, leave school, vote, or serve as elected officials. Urban, minority youth often face additional distrust within their communities, as well as negative portrayals in larger society.

Despite controversy over what youth are capable of deciding, numerous benefits of youth empowerment and participation have been noted. First, young people who are active in their communities tend to stay involved as they move towards adulthood (Valaitis 2002). Thus, youth development is an effective way to foster greater civic participation on a community level. Secondly, some of the psychological outcomes of empowerment (including greater perceived control, sense of hope and future orientation) have the potential to influence life choices such as drug and alcohol use, risky sexual behavior, use of violence, and pursuit of education (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles et al. 1999). These decisions have life-long consequences, giving empowerment interventions targeted to youth a unique opportunity to create individual change. Thirdly, youth have played a key role in social change movements internationally. Examples of youth organizing include desegregation work during the

U.S. civil rights movement, anti-apartheid struggles against the educational system in South Africa, and the street children's movement in Brazil (Ginwright and James 2002). In this sense, developing youth leadership is vital for successful social change efforts.

Much of the challenge in youth empowerment comes from the power imbalance between young people and adults. In some ways, the situation is analogous to the relationship between dominant and oppressed communities as defined by race or socio-economic status. Power imbalance impacts both the structure and outcomes of youth interventions. For example, efforts to involve youth in community organizing projects risk angering parents, school officials and community members who disagree with the decisions made by youth. Wallerstein (1994) alludes to challenges in running an empowerment education program for adolescents: "In the end, due to the many financial, ethical, legal, and mechanistic issues, youth still depend on adults. Their organizing strategies may only go so far as the alliance formed with supportive adults." These limitations put youth empowerment projects at risk for fostering "John Henryism," described above, if youth are told they can make change but instead only become aware of their powerlessness.

An essential part of community-based research is an open discussion of the power relationship which exists between researchers and community members (Wallerstein 1999). However, this discussion may be difficult to have openly with young participants, especially when working in a school-based setting. Adults working in these settings must be aware of their own privilege and the fear youth might have of openly disagreeing with their ideas. For those wishing to do critical participatory research with youth, engaging young people as active research partners requires a restructuring of youth development

mistrust between adults and youth in the community; youth felt prejudged and discriminated against. These findings suggest change is necessary in both youth and adult perceptions in order for youth to be effectively integrated into their communities. Further research is needed to help guide the application of community empowerment principles to youth.

The methodology of popular education must also be adapted for use with young people. Popular educators have often described their work explicitly as adult education. For some, this decision was based on a power analysis. Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, the center of the popular education movement in the United States, described his reasoning, saying “the adults run society. Students don’t run society. They have very little to say within the schools, let alone society, the larger society. So I decided I wanted to deal with the people who had the power, if they wanted to use it, to change society” (Horton and Freire 1990). However, many have chosen to bring empowerment principles into work with youth, both inside and outside of traditional classrooms. Many of these efforts have incorporated youth as active participants in community-based research (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1988; Ginwright and James 2002; Cheatham and Shen 2003; London, Zimmerman et al. 2003; Wilson, Minkler et al. in press). While they face unique challenges, these projects offer the opportunity to change larger society’s perceptions of youth ability, in addition to fostering empowerment outcomes for young participants.

Some have argued that due to their developmental stage, youth have different needs from an empowerment intervention than adults (Cheatham and Shen 2003). This may require a much more structured approach and the involvement of adults as active

paradigms. Berman (2003) describes the dominant social and historical construction of childhood, where children are viewed as passive victims of social forces rather than active agents in their own development. She notes that “the notion of innocence ultimately renders children invisible and silent.” A critical analysis reveals that programs devoted to children’s welfare may do very little to provide authentic opportunities for the development of youth power and participation.

The widespread lack of reflection on youth and adult power relationships is reflected in the literature on power and control, which fails to place young peoples’ lives into a political context. Even more so than in adult empowerment research, studies with children “psychologize” empowerment, defining it as a personality trait of individuals rather than a dynamic sociopolitical construct (Prilleltensky, Nelson et al. 2001).

A similar deficiency exists in the literature surrounding the role of youth in their communities. While young people make up a significant percentage of most neighborhoods, their voice is often left out of local community organizing projects. Developing authentic youth participation requires reframing our view of communities to include young people. In a study of youth perceptions of community, Valatais (2002) found that youth had positive abstract ideals about their communities, but held negative perceptions regarding their own position and influence within the neighborhood. She identifies three threats to youth empowerment at the community level. First, was the perception that “grown-ups run everything.” Youth had a low sense of decision making power relative to adults. Second, was the feeling that “we’re just kids.” Youth thought adults saw them as having low efficacy, even though they felt they had contributions to make. Third, was a sense that “they don’t trust us.” There was a perception of broad

participants. However, this facilitated process should still include real opportunities for youth involvement.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies democratic participation as a fundamental right of all young people. However, numerous authors have cited the discrepancy between this widely ratified treaty and the reality for most youth (Prilleltensky, Nelson et al. 2001; Ginwright and James 2002; O'Donoghue, Kirshner et al. 2002; Valaitis 2002). Further research into youth participation, power and community involvement, with young people as active research partners, offers the potential for authentic youth development.

Conclusion

Empowerment processes offer opportunities to decrease health risks for urban, minority youth. Empowerment methodology, using the approaches of popular education, can improve individual outcomes, such as self efficacy, perceived control and sense of hope. However, it can also work at the community level to alter structural factors such as poverty, racism, and neighborhood environment, the root causes of poor health and risk behavior. Effective empowerment programs must look critically at issues of power, especially as they apply to youth, in order to achieve individual and structural change.

(through participatory action research strategies) an issue of significance to their group. Then, they design and carry out a project to deal with the issue or problem of importance. In the first year of the project, the SAP focuses on the school community, in the second year, on their neighborhood community, and the third year, the larger community (as defined by the children) (Syme 2001).

YES! works with children from fifth grade to 8th grade, through the transition from elementary school to middle school, a critical time period for health intervention (Wilson, Battistich et al. 2002).

Theoretical background of YES!

The YES! Conceptual Risk Model describes how youth living in poor neighborhoods face increased exposure to both physical and environmental disorder (i.e. polluting refineries) and to social and behavioral disorder (i.e. violence and ATOD use). Living in this environment influences cognitive and attitudinal factors for these youth, leading to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. These perceptions lead to poor proximal outcomes, including a decrease in health promoting behaviors. The long term effects of powerlessness include a range of outcomes, including violence, ATOD use, mental health disorders, and ultimately, distressed lives (Syme 2001).

Chapter 2: The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) Project

An Example of Empowerment Praxis

Introduction

This study was done in collaboration with the Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project, an intervention/control study which examines how participation in a three-year after school empowerment program affects adolescents in West Contra Costa County. YES! applies the principles of empowerment, critical consciousness, and participatory action research to their work with youth (Syme 2001; Wilson, Minkler et al. in press). This section will describe the goals, theoretical framework, methodology and challenges of the YES! project. A discussion of YES! illustrates how empowerment theories have been translated into practice, as well as laying the groundwork for the final chapter, a study of perceptions of control and political efficacy among YES! participants.

Goals of the Youth Empowerment Strategies Project

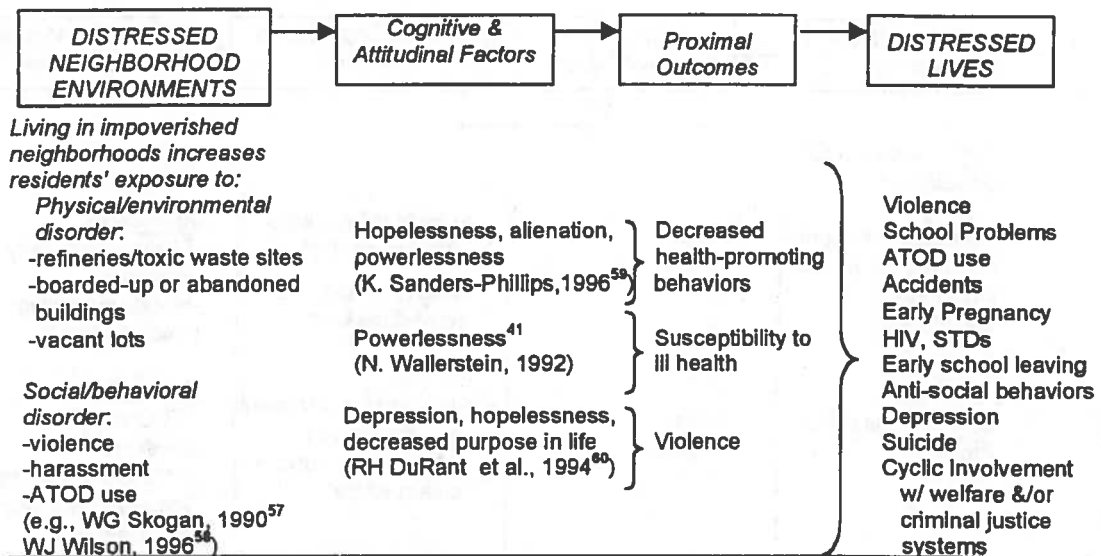
YES! tests the hypotheses that Photovoice, empowerment education and other participatory action research approaches will:

1. Influence empowerment at multiple levels: individual, group and community.
2. Positively influence children's health attitudes and behaviors.

Students participate in a weekly, same gender, small group, jointly facilitated by a U.C. Berkeley graduate student and a Richmond High School student. The groups work together and as individuals on projects that promote critical thinking, problem solving and civic participation (Wilson, Minkler et al. in press).

A key part of the process is a Social Action Project (SAP), where students identify

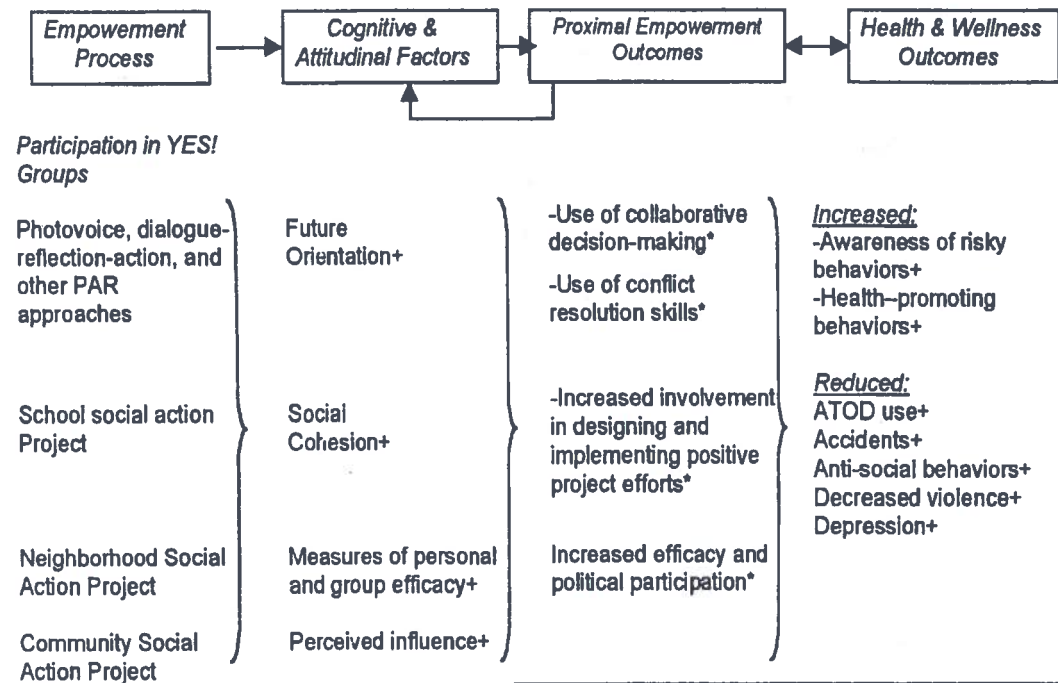
Figure 2.1. The YES! Conceptual Risk Model.



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The YES! Intervention Model posits that participation in YES! groups, including the use of Participatory Action Research approaches such as Photovoice, as well as designing and carrying out a social action project at the school, neighborhood and community levels, will influence these cognitive and attitudinal factors positively. This will lead to changes in future orientation and social cohesion, as well as an increase in perceptions of efficacy and influence. Positive cognitive and attitudinal factors will lead to proximal outcomes affecting group process and political participation, as well as influencing long term health and wellness outcomes (Syme 2001).

Figure 2.2. The YES! Intervention Model.



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Previous studies

YES! builds upon the work of the Adolescent Social Action Program (ASAP), a community based empowerment program that began in 1982 in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki 1994). ASAP worked with middle school and high school students with a goal of reducing drug and alcohol related morbidity and mortality through empowerment education. Through the program, youth were encouraged to make healthier life choices and to actively engage in social and political action in their schools and neighborhood. YES! incorporates many features of ASAP, including a strengths-based approach, and the use of graduate student co-facilitators for each group.

Methodology of YES!

YES! draws upon the ideas of popular education developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). YES! groups use a cycle of dialogue, action and reflection to promote critical thinking about the school, neighborhood, and community. YES! also uses the Photovoice process, which has been used successfully worldwide (Wang and Pies 2004). In Photovoice, each participant is given a camera and asked to take photos of important parts of their lives. The photographs are then used as triggers for discussion and action (Wang and Burris 1997). A model called S-H-O-W-e-D is used to analyze photos. S-H-O-W-e-D asks the questions: what do you **See** here? What's really **Happening**? How does this relate to **Our** lives? Why is this a problem for children? What can we **Do** to improve our lives or the lives of other children (Wang 1999)? YES! groups will also use other participatory action research approaches such as asset and risk mapping, where participants collaboratively generate a community map which serves as the basis for discussion around community issues (Minkler and Wallerstein 2003).

Quantitative measurement of the empowerment goals is assessed using a variety of previously validated scales. Variables measured include future orientation, depression, sense of hope, exposure and attitudes towards violence, and involvement with community activities. Questionnaires are administered at baseline, at the end of the first school year, at the end of the second school year, and at the end of the third school year. A comparison group consists of age-matched students who attend schools in areas with similar socio-economic status and ethnic diversity to YES! program schools. The comparison group controls for developmental changes in perceptions and risk behavior

over the three year period (Syme 2001).

A qualitative process evaluation of the project is also ongoing, documenting contextual factors and the perceptions of participants. Observations of YES! groups and interviews with participants and community key informants form the basis for this evaluation.

Challenges

YES! faces many challenges due to the age group, structure, and methodology of the project. First, YES! works within a school based setting, forming part of the after-school curriculum for student participants. YES! groups meet in school classrooms and rely on active support from school staff and administrators. Working closely with the school gives the program access and resources that would be challenging to obtain in other ways. However, it also creates challenges.

First of all, only schools with supportive administrators who were willing to host the project have YES! programs. Schools where administrators were less open might be in greater need of such an intervention. Second, the social action projects that the YES! group chooses must be approved by the school principal. In this setting, it would be difficult for students to pick a project that directly challenged power relations within the school. Participants also perceive the program as associated with the school, frequently addressing facilitators as “teacher.” This impacts the ability of the program to challenge students to think in new ways. YES! group facilitators must be aware of these dynamics as they guide participants towards taking action at school.

Chapter 3: A Study of Youth Perceptions of Political Efficacy and Control

Introduction

The concept of empowerment is a powerful idea for educators, community organizers and researchers. While many organizations work towards the empowerment of youth, we still lack a clear idea of what the concepts of power and control really mean for young people. Without this understanding, we are limited in evaluating the efficacy of empowerment interventions.

One intervention which attempts to further our understanding in this area is the Youth Empowerment Studies (YES!) project, a three year after-school program working with at-risk adolescents in West Contra Costa County. Prior to this study, I worked for a year and a half as a facilitator of YES! after school groups, ending that role six months prior to beginning this project. YES! hypothesizes a link between participation in an empowerment education program and an increased sense of hope, efficacy and power. These perceptions of control have been linked to improved health and wellness through their effects on life choices, mental health and decision making (Syme 2001; Wilson, Minkler et al. in press).

This study took a step back from the larger empowerment aims of YES! in order to look more closely at how fifth and sixth graders in Youth Empowerment Strategies after-school groups think about issues of power. I posed the question “how do youth perceive their control and political efficacy at the individual and community levels”? By studying what perceived control and empowerment mean to youth, we can develop better strategies for both intervention and program assessment. In order to assess empowerment, we first need to know how to ask about it.

Definition of Terms

The aim of this project was to assess youth perceptions of control and political efficacy. These terms are often used loosely. The following are definitions which guided my analysis.

Empowerment is defined by Rappaport (1984) as “a mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their lives.”

Wallerstein (1992) elaborates on the dimensions of empowerment, noting that it “...promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goal of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice.”

Control is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the power to influence people’s behavior or the course of events” (<http://dictionary.oed.com> 1989). The process of gaining control has also been termed “the action dimension of empowerment, involving intentional, informed participation, aimed at effecting change” (Becker, Israel et al. 2002). An alternative definition was developed by a focus group held with YES! participants: “power...take charge...hit people...it means like you can control your anger...change...take control of something in your life, feelings, controlling fear.”

Political efficacy can be seen as a subset of control. This is defined as “the ability to influence the governing process.” For my purposes, “governing process” includes both larger governmental institutions like the city council or the governor, and institutions important in students’ daily lives, such as the school administration or the student council. There are two components to political efficacy. First is a perception of the

governing body's responsiveness to community input or action. Second is self perception, an image of your own role in the political process (Chrostowski de la Sota 1970).

Background on the Site: West Contra Costa County

The YES! Program target population is children in areas of Richmond and San Pablo, in West Contra Costa County (WCCC). This area was chosen because of the social, economic and environmental issues that young people face growing up in this area. The following are some of the major concerns:

- **Health:** WCCC residents have high rates of HIV-AIDS as well as substance abuse. Another major public health concern is the growing prevalence of asthma and obesity. The teen birth rate is also higher than in surrounding areas (County Health Status Report 2004). There are extensive environmental health risks in the area, which is home to oil refineries and numerous toxic waste sites.
- **Education:** These parts of WCCC have the highest drop out rates in the county, Schools score at the bottom of the state Academic Placement Index as well as the California Fitness Test (School Accountability Report Card 2000). The WCCC School District made headlines last year with a proposal to close all libraries, end sports programs, and fire college counselors to close their budget deficit (Zamora 2004).
- **Violence:** The homicide rate in Richmond and San Pablo is one of highest in the U.S., with homicide as the leading cause of death for youth ages 15-19 (County Health Status Report 2004).
- **Socioeconomic factors:** In these census tracts, more than half of residents live

below the poverty line. (American Fact Finder 2000) Unemployment is high; the area was once home to numerous industries (such as shipping and steel), most of which have closed or moved offshore.

Methods

Participants:

Interviews were held with 93 fifth and sixth-grade YES! group participants. Participants were between the ages of 10 and 12. Thirty were male and 63 were female. Most participants were fifth-graders who had only recently started the program. However, a few were sixth graders in their second year of YES!. The majority were in a same gender YES! group, although two sixth-grade groups were mixed gender. The group members were all residents of West Contra Costa County. Almost all were non-white, predominately African-American and Latino/a, with a small number of Asian-Americans. fifth-graders were in their first year of the YES! program while sixth-graders were in their second year.

A focus group was conducted with sixth grade participants who were members of the same YES! group. The students were in their second year with the YES! program. During the first year, boys and girls met separately in two different groups. The two groups merged together at the beginning of the second year due to smaller numbers in each.

Eight students (5 girls, 3 boys) were present for the focus group; this included all but two group members. Of the two who did not participate, one I was not able to contact by phone to remind him, and the other was present for the first few minutes of the group

and then left to go play video games. The group met after school in the same room used during the YES! group, a portable classroom. Since parents/caregivers had already consented to their children's participation in YES! activities such as focus groups, additional consent forms were not necessary. However, parents/caregivers were informed about the focus group meeting through letters sent home with group members as well as phone calls. Student participation was elucidated through announcements during the group's regular meeting time, by me and by the group's facilitators. Students were told about the purpose of the focus group, that food would be provided, and that they would be compensated with a free role of film for participating. My preexisting relationship with group members may have contributed to the large turnout.

I facilitated the group jointly with a colleague, an experienced community organizer and facilitator who I had worked with in other settings, including trainings for YES! facilitators. She had never worked with a YES! group before. Also present was a YES! staff member who took detailed notes on group proceedings.

Procedures

Interviews

Participants' perceived control was evaluated through semi structured interviews completed with YES! students. These interviews were conducted by members of the YES! staff, including myself. Interviews took place during YES! group time after school. Students who did not attend the group session that day were not interviewed. Interviews took place about one month after the start of the YES! program for the year. Interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes and included a range of questions evaluating YES! My

analysis focused on two questions I helped contribute to the interview guide:

1. Do you think that BY YOURSELF you could influence decisions that affect your school? Why or why not? Have you ever tried to? What happened?
2. Do you think that if you work WITH OTHERS you can influence decisions that affect your school? Why or why not? Have you ever tried to? What happened?

These questions were selected based on their relation to perceived control and efficacy. A school based setting was included to make the questions less abstract and more relevant to students' lives. Participants were told that participation in interviews was optional and that there were not right or wrong answers to any question. Prompts were used to clarify the questions and responses as needed.

Focus Group

The focus group was originally intended as an empowerment evaluation of the YES! program, where sixth-grade participants would identify ways that YES! might be influencing them. Their feedback would then be used to design interview questions for use with fifth-grade participants. I also hoped the group would be able to evaluate perceived control scales designed by Israel et al (1994), adapting the questions for use with young people. However, during the session, students denied that the YES! program was in any way impacting their lives, and were unwilling to formulate interview questions.

Instead, they were interested in discussing the questions themselves and issues of control in their own lives. The focus group shifted to a discussion of participants' perceived control at individual, school, neighborhood and state/national levels.

The group format varied and was itself a topic of discussion. Participants wanted to respond directly to each other without raising hands, however, this resulted in a chaotic group environment where it was difficult to hear what was being said and some students were left out of the discussion entirely. I used my authority several times to ask students to go around the circle until everyone had contributed, or to raise hands and speak only while holding a “talking object.” Participants frequently spoke out of turn and over each other, even during more structured parts of the session.

The general format of the focus group was as follows:

I. *Introduction/ eating*: During the first 10 minutes, we waited for students to arrive, get settled and get food. I also took a few minutes catching up with students I hadn’t seen in a few months. We seated students in a circle around a group of desks, with the two facilitators standing up front with a flip chart to take notes. Once things had quieted down, I thanked participants, introduced the co-facilitator and told them again about the purpose of the focus group. I noted that they were the experts, having been in the YES! group for over a year already.

II. *Discussion about YES!*: In the next section, we asked open ended questions about the student’s perceptions of the YES program and its effect on their lives. I asked the youth to think about ways they might be different because of YES!, and then prompted them with specific questions about changes in school behavior, social interactions, group work and problem solving.

III. *Defining control*: Due to difficulties in the above section, at this point the

group shifted away from my original evaluation goals to a discussion about youth and control. We asked the group “what does control mean to you?” and generated a list of responses.

IV. *What youth control:* After we had discussed the meaning of control for a few minutes and I was confident all group members understood the term, we asked “what are things you or other kids can control or get to decide?” Prompts included further questioning about the extent of their control at home, in class and within their families.

V. *State/national levels:* After a few minutes talking mostly about the individual level, we asked “can kids control what the President, or the Governor does?” Little prompting was needed for discussion during this segment of the session.

VI. *School level:* As time was running short, we cut off the interesting political discussion to talk about school, asking “stop and think a minute about how kids control or influence things that happen at school. Do kids at X school control what it’s like to be at X?”

VII. *Neighborhood level:* In the last few minutes of the session, we discussed students’ perceptions of their neighborhood and who controls things there. Students were prompted a few times to explain their answers more thoroughly. For the conclusion of the group, we asked participants to vote on the question “do

people who live in the neighborhood have control over it, or do people who don't live here control the neighborhood?

Analysis

The choice to use qualitative methods was based largely on the goals of the project. While the bulk of the YES! project analysis employs quantitative methods, primarily survey data, there is a need for better understanding of the meaning and implications of power and control for youth. These are questions best answered through qualitative methodology. Surveys will tell us how participants rank their perceived control, but interviews and focus groups help reveal what these answers mean and why students feel that way. A more thorough understanding of the meaning of control will also help us to ask better quantitative analysis questions in the future.

Interview data were examined using an **editing organizing style** as described by Miller and Crabtree (1999). In this form of analysis, the organizing scheme emerges organically out of the text. Codes are developed through preliminary readings of the data and then modified based on further organization of the text. This type of grounded theory approach allows participants' voices to guide interpretation rather than the researcher's own agenda. Interview notes were read multiple times and coded roughly into categories of response for each interview question. Data were then entered into Microsoft Excel, including the participant's school, group, grade, gender, full response and any previously identified code categories their responses fell into. This allowed calculation of the number of times each code was mentioned, giving a sense of their relative importance. Responses that did not fit any code categories were entered as "other," and then

reexamined to see if new code categories emerged. Most responses that remained in the “other” category after repeated rounds of analysis were unintelligible (i.e. “well, I could...”) or unrelated to the question asked (i.e. “my dad needs an operation”). The high number of responses coded as “other” probably reflects the difficulty of interviewing young, easily distracted participants.

Analysis of the focus group data used an **immersion/crystallization organizing style**, also described by Miller and Crabtree (1999), where major themes emerge out of extended reflection on the text. “Crystallized” interpretations of each part of the focus group discussion are presented below. The decision to use this style rather than to develop a formal codebook was based on the wide range of topics discussed by the group, and my own relationship to this data. Given my role as focus group facilitator and my prior relationship with participants in the YES! project, I felt it was crucial to use a style of analysis which incorporated *reflexivity*, “a technique by which researchers turn the focus back onto themselves to evaluate their influence on the findings and interpretations” (Borkan 1999). In an immersion/crystallization analysis, findings are grounded in critical reflection on the context and implications of the data.

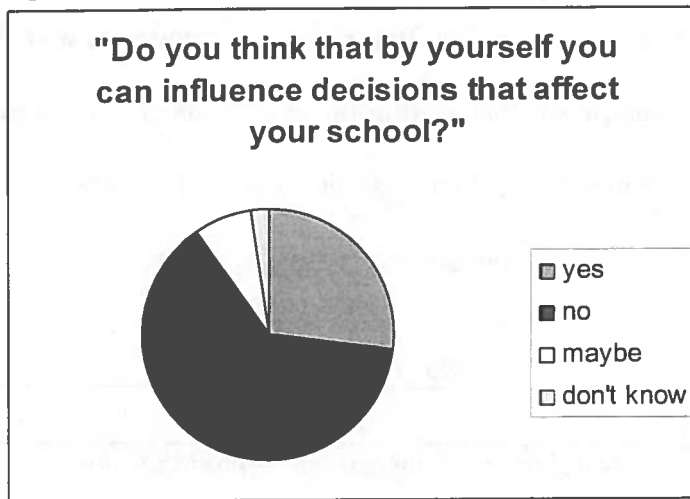
Findings

Interview Results

Individual efficacy

To the question “*do you think that by yourself you can influence decisions that affect your school?*” 25/93 (27%) of participants said yes, while 59/93 (63%) said no. 7/93 (8%) said maybe and 2/93 (2%) said they didn’t know.

Figure 3.1. Perceptions of individual efficacy.



Of those who said yes, many described a concrete plan they would use to make change. Some felt that they could **persuade people in power** (teachers, principals, etc.) to go along with their ideas (n=15). Others thought they could **convince people through writing or taking photos** (n=7). Some participants also expressed a **high level of self confidence** (n=7). A few responses were coded as **other** (n=5)

Table 3.1. Perceptions of individual efficacy: "Yes" response codes.

Code	Quote	n
Persuade people in power	<i>"I would change the principal's mind."</i>	15
Convince people through writing or taking photos	<i>"I'll write on a piece of paper why I want to change it. I'd show it to the principal."</i> <i>"Take a picture of what's wrong and sent to the janitor so they could paint it or we could."</i>	7
High level of self confidence	<i>"I could tell people what to do and they would listen."</i>	7

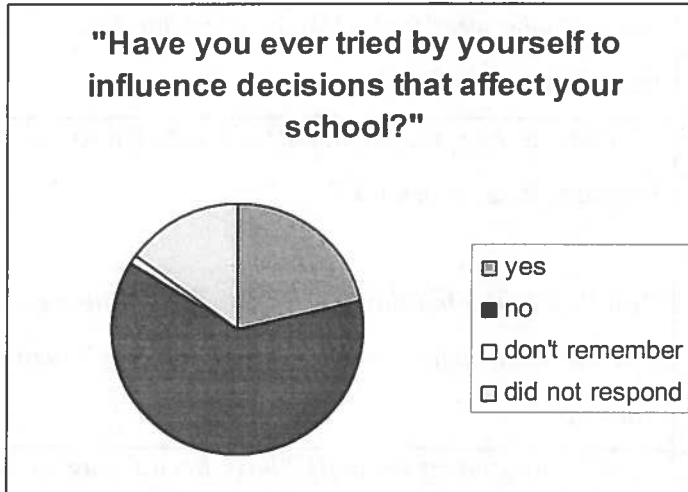
Those who said no described a range of reasons. Most commonly, participants expressed a **need for help and assistance** (n=24). **Perceived powerlessness** was also important (n=18). Another perception was that **getting the consensus of a lot of people was important** before making change (n=8). **Fear** was also a factor for a few (n=8), as well as **low self confidence** (n=5). Nine responses were coded as **other**.

Table 3.2. Perceptions of individual efficacy: “No” response codes.

Code	Quotes	n
Expressed a need for help and assistance	<p><i>“I think because I am just one person they don’t listen to me. With a group, I can make an impact and they would listen to me more.”</i></p> <p><i>“I would like to have a partner. They say two heads are better than one- so that way.”</i></p>	24
Perceived powerlessness	<p><i>“They’re so powerful that I can’t even tell them something. The president [of the student council] made all the rules herself.”</i></p> <p><i>“Because it’s the principal’s choice, not ours.”</i></p>	18
Getting the consensus of a lot of people is important.	<p><i>“Because we all have to agree on something.”</i></p> <p><i>“Because everybody has different ideas to help the school.”</i></p>	8
Fear	<i>“I’d be scared, I don’t want to be the boss or nothing.”</i>	8
Low self confidence	<i>“Because I’m not that smart.”</i>	5

To the follow up question "Have you tried?" 20/93 (22%) said yes while 58/93 (62%) said no. 1/93 (1%) did not remember and 14/93 (15%) did not respond.

Figure 3.2. Experience of individual action.



Those who said yes, they had tried by themselves to influence decisions that affected their school were then asked "what happened?" Many described an instance where they **persuaded friends or classmates** to do something differently (n=12). Others spoke about a time when they **talked to someone in power** about their concern (n=7). Thirteen participants discussed the **success of their efforts**, with the majority feeling successful (n=9) and some feeling unsuccessful (n=4). Four responses were coded as **other**.

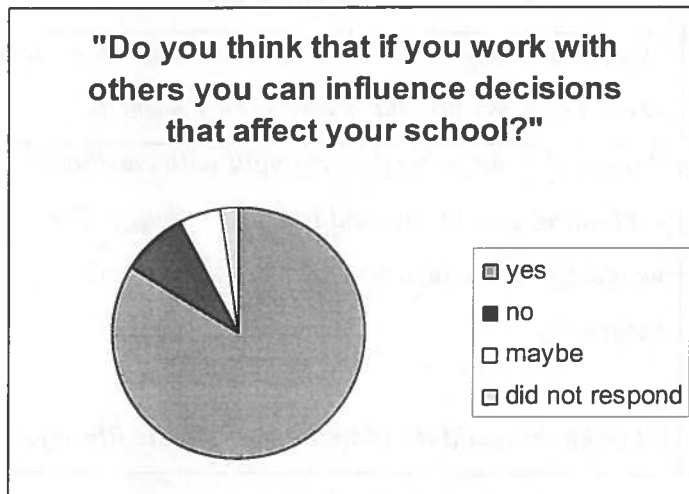
Table 3.3. Individual action: "Yes" response codes.

Code	Quote	n
Persuaded friends or classmates	<i>"I told some students that we have to make the school cleaner otherwise kids might get sick. I told this boy who went to the lake by the school that there might be bacterias."</i>	12
Talked to someone in power	<i>"I talked to her [the president] she listened to me because she's my friend." "I talked to the building supervisor to get them to tear down the school and rebuild it. I haven't heard back yet."</i>	7
Felt successful	<i>"[With the student council] I have been trying to stop fights and no one has been hurt in the last couple of months."</i>	9
Felt unsuccessful	<i>"I tried to get these boys to stop picking on this other boy, but they didn't listen to me and they just pushed me away."</i>	4

Group efficacy

To the question “do you think that if you work with others you can influence decisions that affect your school?” 78/93 (84%) respondents said yes and 8/93 (9%) said no. 5/93 (5%) said maybe and 2/93 (2%) did not respond to this question.

Figure 3.3. Perceptions of group efficacy.



Of those who said yes, many said that **people working together can get more done** than one person alone (n=34). Participants also felt that **a group of people has more power** and is listened to more than a single person (n=32). There was also a belief that **a group of people comes up with better ideas** (n=19). Some respondents were very **concrete**, describing how they would make a plan and take it to those in power (n=20). Fifteen responses were coded as **other**.

Table 3.4. Group efficacy: “Yes” response codes.

Code	Quote	n
People working together can get more done	<i>“With more people would be more better because I would be faster with teamwork.”</i>	34
A group of people has more power/is listened to	<i>“There’s a lot of people at this school. If there was something everyone agreed on, then we could make a difference, otherwise we could not.”</i>	32
A group of people comes up with better ideas	<i>“Get ideas, help each other out, thinking- learn how to do it as a group, that’s how it may happen.”</i>	19
Described a concrete plan	<i>“Yes, we could go to the principal with cardboard explaining why we needed to change things. They would listen because maybe they didn’t know before.”</i> <i>“I think we could do something about the library.”</i>	20

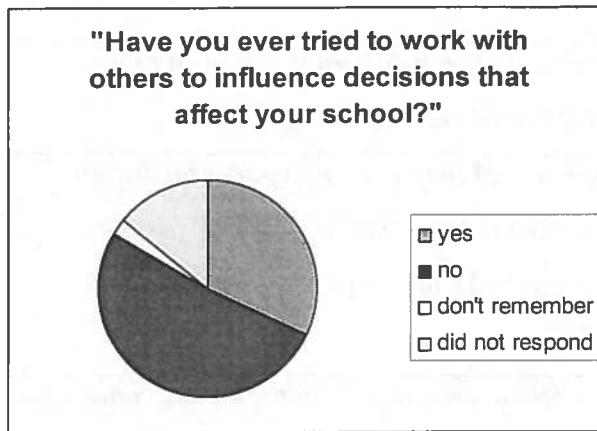
Of those who said no, a few felt that **people don’t want the same things** and couldn’t agree (n=3). Another view was **perceived powerlessness** (n=4). Two responses were coded as **other**.

Table 3.5. Group efficacy: “No” response codes.

Code	Quote	n
People don’t want the same things	<i>“The other people would probably want to do something different from me.”</i>	3
Powerlessness	<i>“We could make a decision, but if it affects the school Ms. Brady [the vice principal] won’t let us do that.”</i> <i>“It still wouldn’t change anything.”</i>	4

Finally, participants were asked if they had ever tried to work with others to influence decisions that affect the school. 29/93 (31%) said yes and 47/93 (50%) said no. 2/93 (2%) said maybe and 13/93 (14%) were left unmarked.

Figure 3.4. Experience of group action.



Those who said yes, they had tried, were asked "what happened?" Some described **working through student groups** or the student government (n=12). Others related a time when **a group brought ideas to a person in power** (n=10). Nineteen discussed the **success of their attempt**, with most feeling successful (n=14) and a few feeling unsuccessful (n=5). Six responses were classified as **other**.

Table 3.6. Group action: "Yes" response codes.

Code	Quote	n
Worked through student groups or the student government	<i>"I worked with the school supervisor and the [student council] president to get the bathrooms painted."</i>	12
Brought ideas to a person in power	<i>"We wanted air conditioning. We went to a [school] board meeting and got it."</i>	10
Felt successful	<i>"At this school they were going to stop drama classes, so we drew "sorry pictures" for the teacher- to bribe her- and we still have the classes!"</i>	14
Felt unsuccessful	<i>"We wrote a news article in the school newspaper to try to change lunches...kids don't like how lunch tastes so [they] get hungry. But [I] couldn't change it."</i>	9

Table 3.7. Summary of Interview Findings.

Interview Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The majority expressed a strong belief in group efficacy as compared to individual efficacy. Participants felt that working with a group increased their productivity, power, and quality of ideas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only a minority had attempted to influence decisions at the school, either individually or as part of a group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues of power and powerlessness were brought up frequently as reasons why they couldn't influence decisions or as part of strategies for making change.

Focus Group Results

Defining control

Before beginning the discussion of control at school, neighborhood and societal levels, participants developed their own definitions of control, which can be assumed to apply to the themes below. The following list was generated by the group:

Facilitator: What does control mean to you?

Group responses:

Power

Take charge,

Hit people,

It means like can you control your anger,

Change,

Take control of something in your life, feelings, controlling fear.

Lack of control

A broad based lack of control at all but superficial individual levels emerged as the most powerful finding of the focus group, despite facilitator prompting to express a greater sense of control.

When participants suggested areas they might have control or influence over, they or other students quickly identified the limitations and constraints of their own power, or the consequences of their actions.

E : ... what kind of control do you have in school?

J : Homework, you can do it or not.

L: That's true.

E: But you have to do it sooner or later, or you get bad grades.

M: ...we could do surveys and stuff like that, take complaints to the principal.

L: No, you'll get expelled.

At the societal level, some participants felt they fully lacked control, while others disagreed and felt that kids had some agency.

D: We can't control what they say. The president is in charge, the governor just does some of the laws. We can't do anything.

S: No, they don't listen to little kids.

C: We can talk to adults and adults will kick them out.

E :Yeah – We can go persuade them.

However, at the school level the perceived powerlessness was actually more pronounced than at the national level.

Facilitator: You guys were all talking about how you can control the President and Governor, but you can't control things at school?

L: They can't expel us.

Individual control

With prompting students admitted to having some control over their own thoughts, feelings and to some extent actions at the individual level.

L: You can say no.

Facilitator: to what?

Multiple students: Drugs, crack, sex, protect yourself.

E: We can control our thoughts. Like we think the President is stupid – we can think what we want.

Kids Making Change

Despite their general perceptions of low control, some participants identified ways that young people might be able to influence decisions at the school and state/national level. Often these suggestions were followed by negative responses from the original speaker or another student.

The concept of **power in numbers** was brought up by a few students in response to a question about kids' influence over the governor of California.

E: Yeah, we can go persuade them.

M: Yes. There are more of us. Then we can get tanks. But they'll lock us up.

Persuading supportive adults was another mechanism identified by multiple students as a way to make change at the state/national level.

C: We can talk to adults and adults will kick them out.

D: When it comes to voting time, we could have our parents vote for someone else, because this one's a liar. Someone who's telling the truth.

E : But our parents might not listen to us, they might want a different president

that we do.

Participants also offered numerous suggestions for tactics to reach those in power. These **ideas for taking action** involved indirect methods, such as letter writing, and organizing strategies such as boycotts.

C: Kids can send letters to Congress or the Supreme Court.

M: There's a lot of us, we can stop eating and buying their stuff.

D: We can write letters to the district about things, like different food. The food is nasty.

Routes to Power

In discussions of control at all levels, participants expressed the sentiment that some people have more power than others. At the neighborhood level, participants described two distinct ways that gang members in their community maintained control.

Control of material resources was the first route to neighborhood power.

L: They have money, guns, drugs, so they control the neighborhood.

Control through fear was also identified by one student as a factor.

E: For me, they control the neighborhood because everyone's afraid of them.

Race and Racism Shape Control

The group participants (all of whom were African-American or Latino/a) repeatedly brought up issues of race as a factor in politics and neighborhood dynamics.

At the societal level, participants displayed an analysis of the influence of race on

state and national politics.

S: *Bush or Arnold Schwarzenegger won't listen to black people.*

E: *That's racism.*

C: *Yeah, that's not right. Like giving schools money, or things like that.*

E: *Why don't black people run for President? They're ignorant.*

Race also came up at the neighborhood level. However, when discussing their neighborhoods, race seemed to play a different role. Predominately non-white neighborhoods were viewed as less desirable. Quotes from two African-American students highlight these perceptions.

M: *My neighborhood's about to be controlled by black people. They're moving in.*

It's going to be the projects.

C: *We're scaring all the white people out.*

Perceptions of the Neighborhood

Control over the neighborhood environment was generally felt to be determined by a few powerful actors (primarily gang members) within the neighborhood, rather than being shared equally by neighborhood residents. Outside forces were not considered to play a significant role.

L: *My neighbors control the whole neighborhood, they're the top gangsters.*

It was clear from the discussion that while participants attended the same school, they did not all live in the same neighborhood.

C: My neighborhood's quiet and boring. The security guard is lame; he chased me because I threw a rock.

Descriptions of neighborhood violence dominated the discussion, without facilitator prompting.

L: It's good because there's no cops, can't grab you, but then also there's no cops there if someone robs you.

M: Of all places I've lived, this is where there's the most drugs and guns.

E: It's ghetto, it's interesting. I've been around it all my life, it's still cool.

The Role of YES!

Participants felt overall that participation in the YES! group had not significantly altered their perceptions, actions or relationships, despite repeated prompts by the facilitators to think about possible ways in which YES! may have helped them think differently.

Facilitator: Does YES! Make you more social or like you feel better talking in public?

Several children: Nah.

When a student offered a suggestion of how they individually might have changed as a result of YES! they were quickly contradicted by other group members.

M: I think I'm more social, talking more in public.

L: That's just part of growing up again.

One area that participants agreed on the influence of YES! was in the realm of photography.

C: It helped me take better pictures.

There was disagreement on the influence of YES! on friendships and relationships between group members. This was clearly complicated by conflicts within the group that occurred the day before the focus group was held.

E: It's made our friendship stronger.

(Some children agree, others disagree. J says they haven't been getting along, have been having problems.)

Table 3.8. Summary of Focus Group Findings.

Focus Group Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people perceive a profound lack of control over most aspects of their lives.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived control is greatest at the individual level, limited at the state/national level, but most constrained at the school level.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kids can influence some decisions by working in groups, persuading supportive adults, and using organizing tactics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The neighborhood environment is controlled by a small number of people who live there who have material resources and use fear.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race and racism play an important role in participants' lives.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants don't think that YES! has influenced their perceptions or behavior.

Discussion

Implications

This study attempted to illuminate youth participants' perceptions of control and efficacy, in order to guide future study of the impact of empowerment education programs for youth. Interview and focus group data reveal important facets of how young people perceive their control and influence over decisions that affect their lives. The data also raise a number of questions regarding issues of power and efficacy for youth. This section will discuss some of these questions.

How do young people view power?

These findings reveal that young people think critically about power in a way that most adults are probably unaware of. Participants frequently raised issues of power and powerlessness in both interviews and focus groups. Students discussed multiple forms of power, such as that held by school authorities or elected student officials, power created when a group of students worked together, power over the neighborhood through fear and control of resources, and social power expressed through tactics such as petitions and boycotts.

While interviewers and focus group facilitators tried to approach the issue indirectly, preferring terms like "influence" and "control," the youth were often the ones to explicitly bring up the concept of power. Young people clearly have a power analysis that shapes their beliefs and actions. How fixed these constructs are, and how representative they are of actual power relations in society remains somewhat unclear.

Does perceived control reflect actual control?

Are these interview and focus group results an accurate assessment of what students are capable of, or are they an underestimate or overestimate of student power?

Empowerment researchers have noted a difference between actual power and how an individual or a group perceives their power. Most research focuses on perceived power, partly because it is easier to measure, and partly because our social values prioritize individual motivation. In their work, Israel and Checkoway et al (1994) highlight these challenges to assessing empowerment. We often ignore the role of structural conditions which constrain efficacy. In analyzing these results, it is important to consider ways in which youth might express a sense of more or less power than an outside observer would see.

Youth may have overestimated their power in part in an effort to please adult interviewers, expressing views they felt they “should” have. Interviews revealed a strong belief in group efficacy as compared to individual efficacy. Participants felt that working with a group increased their productivity, power, and quality of ideas. A significant number also expressed feelings of individual efficacy. It is difficult to know how deeply these beliefs of efficacy are held. In stressing the power of groups over individuals, students may have been stating what they thought interviewers wanted to hear, given the value that both the YES! program and elementary school classrooms place on teamwork. However, historical examples of social change described in school usually focus on the personal efforts of a few brave individuals (i.e. Rosa Parks) rather than emphasizing the broad social movements they were a part of. Given this depiction, students might be expected to overemphasize individual efficacy instead of group power.

On the other hand, youth may also underestimate their own power through pessimism or negative thinking. A lack of knowledge about the political system, few role models involved in political organizing, and disempowering messages from adult authority figures may all contribute to this dynamic. More importantly, the structural forces in their environment also contribute to a lowered sense of control. That is to say, poverty, racism, and other forms of structural violence may exaggerate perceived powerlessness as well as create a real lack of power. In the focus group discussion, the sentiment of powerlessness was especially clear.

This discussion is complicated by the fact that adults may see their view of youth power as “objective” or more correct, when actually young people may be accurately assessing their own power. As a facilitator of the focus group, I wanted to believe that youth were more efficacious than they described feeling. I found myself becoming frustrated when they expressed sentiments such as “we can’t do anything.” However, those with more social power, in this case, adults, may be unable to see the consequences for youth who speak out or try and make change. There appears to be a difference between youth and adults in their perception of the obstacles to youth taking action.

How will taking action affect perceptions of influence at school?

Only a minority of participants had tried to influence decisions at school, either as individuals or with groups. This indicates that for the majority of respondents, their answers were not grounded in life experience, either positive or negative.

This reveals a way in which YES! might concretely change perceptions of control. With YES!, students will participate in a Social Action Project where they identify and

try to change an issue affecting their school.

The sixth-grade focus group participants, all of whom had previously participated in a group project to change the school through YES!, expressed predominately negative views on students' power for change. This may have been due to their experiences with YES!, but was also probably affected by other life factors and a negative group dynamic which emerged early in the focus group. It is difficult to generalize based on only one focus group, however, the meaning drawn from participation in the Social Action Project will have important consequences for the YES! program.

Why was the focus group more pessimistic than interviews?-

The similarities and differences between interview and focus group responses raise interesting questions about the extent of control. Overall, the focus group described a much higher level of powerlessness, whether working in groups or as individuals, compared to interview respondents. This may be due to a greater honesty in a focus group setting where they knew the facilitator. On the other hand the negative and pessimistic group attitude that characterized the session may have been shaped by inter-group dynamics, biasing responses towards powerlessness.

Focus group participants were sixth graders who had already participated in YES! for one year and taken part in a social action project; this may also have impacted their perceptions regarding what could and could not be accomplished at school. Interview responses, while more optimistic, may represent an exaggeration of participants' real abilities. The difficulties in distinguishing between perceived and actual control make interpretation of these differences challenging.

How do age/developmental stage influence these results?

Were youth able to fully reflect on these complex concepts, or was their thinking overly concrete? For all questions, a significant proportion of students responded very literally, with a plan or example. Their answer may have only related specifically to their concrete example rather than expressing their general feelings about control. However, the examples given by participants were similar for focus group and interview respondents. Both brought up persuading supportive adults, working in groups, using written materials and photos, and adopting tactics such as letter writing or boycotts. These are similar strategies to those brought up by Valaitis (2002) in her study of children's views on community, where she describes ways that young people see that they can make change.

Developmental stage may also influence participants' ability to see the impact YES! is having on their lives. Focus group participants clearly expressed that they did not feel changed by participation in YES! However, as group co-facilitator over a two year period, I saw clear changes in group cohesion, decision making skills, and problem solving ability that could not be explained solely by normal developmental progression. The ability to reflect on personal and group changes might not be fully developed for these youth, limiting their ability to perceive results of YES! Because the group was going through a difficult time interpersonally, participants' views of the program may also have been more negative than on a different day.

As facilitator, my own bias in favor of the YES! program led me to push the group towards saying that YES! had influenced their lives. However, participants refused

to alter their views. My actions, while poor facilitation techniques in hindsight, indicate these negative sentiments were fairly robust in participants' minds.

I still believe there is value in asking participants to describe any perceived impact of the program, especially at the end of three years. Waiting longer, until former participants are in high school, and then asking them to reflect back on YES!, may also provide important insight. It is also possible that participants accurately assessed the role of YES!; two hours a week may not be enough to make real change in their lives, given the structural barriers they face.

Recommendations

Issues of power should not be ignored in work with youth

These results reveal that youth are aware of the role of power and control in shaping their political efficacy. This means that we as researchers and interventionists must also think critically about these issues in the design and vision of our projects. Just because it is difficult to find a way to ask about control, it doesn't mean we shouldn't bring it up. We must be aware that young people have a power analysis that influences their actions.

Our society is deeply ambivalent about the amount of power young people should have, and that comes across to youth, despite rhetoric around empowerment. Until we engage in open discussion about the opportunities and pitfalls of giving youth power to make change, the efficacy of empowerment interventions such as YES! will be limited.

Concrete examples will help younger participants answer questions about control

When asked an abstract question, many participants responded with a concrete example. Most probably, this reflects their stage of intellectual development where literal thinking often predominates over abstraction. Too often, developmental stage is brought up as a justification for not discussing complex issues with young people. Instead, we can use knowledge of developmental stages as an asset to form questions about control.

Knowing that youth are thinking concretely, we can design questions to assess control and efficacy more accurately.

Use multiple methods of data collection to explore control

Because these are relatively new areas of study with youth, we need to be creative in how we approach data gathering and analysis. The fact that interview and focus group responses differed significantly does not suggest that one source was wrong, but instead highlights the need for a greater variety of approaches in studying these issues. The more ways we look at how youth view power and control, the better our understanding will be.

One idea would be to conduct in depth one-on-one interviews with participants that focused on jointly reading and discussing a story or news article about youth involved in political change. In this way, a concrete example could be used as a catalyst to discuss more abstract ideas. Also, to get around the fact that young people may want to give the “right answer” to adult interviewers, we could try using a peer interviewing system, where young people would be directly involved in the process of knowledge generation. This approach, while challenging, would incorporate the principles of participatory research and empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 1996; Israel, Schulz et al.

1998; Minkler and Wallerstein 2003).

Further Study of Power and Control is Warranted

These results indicate the need for further study of issues of power and control for youth. The development of standardized, validated scales would be invaluable for this effort. However, those scales must be developed with an understanding for the very real constraints on youth control and the desire of young people to give the “right answer” to adult questioners.

Areas only touched on in the focus group, such as the role of race and racism and the neighborhood environment, were lightning rods for discussion. Both these topics deserve further study.

Limitations

Sample Size

The relatively small sample size makes it difficult to generalize from these conclusions. In addition, more focus groups would have been useful to see if the differences in perceived control between interviews and focus groups were consistent.

Interview Structure

The fact that interviewers transcribed the students’ responses rather than tape-recording or videotaping answers for more accurate transcription may have affected the data. In addition, each interviewer had a somewhat different style of questioning, prompting and transcribing answers, making it challenging to standardize interviews.

While no student was interviewed by the facilitator of their group, participants were aware that all interviewers were associated with the YES! program. This may have influenced how participants responded to questions. Some may have wanted to please the interviewer or give the “correct answer,” concerned that answering honestly would affect their ability to participate in YES! In addition, all interviewers were adults, which also may have limited what participants felt able to say.

Another limitation came with the structure of the questions. Little research has been done evaluating control in youth, so the questions used were not validated for work with this population. During many interviews, it was clear the student did not understand the question being asked, and prompting was necessary to obtain answers. The abstract nature of questions we asked may have been challenging to some participants.

The high number of unmarked answers for both “have you tried?” questions makes analysis challenging. These may represent “no” answers, a failure on the part of the interviewer to ask the question or a lack of participant response. Without further information, I am hesitant to place them in the “no” category.

Focus Group Dynamics

The focus group proceedings were complicated by several extraneous factors influencing participants and their group. First, the week before the focus group, participants had suffered a serious break in their interactions with each other. For a few weeks, students had been pressuring their group facilitators for time to “share their feelings with each other,” a thinly veiled attempt to insult one group member who several participants openly disliked. During the session, another group member became very

frustrated at people “picking on” the one person, and he threatened to resign from YES! This immediately prompted several other group members to say they would resign as well. The facilitators were fairly new to working with the group and not sure how to respond. The group ended with the status of many members unclear and tempers running high.

Students who I spoke to the night before the focus group expressed great anxiety regarding the future of the group, and frustration at other group members. They requested time during the focus group to “discuss their feelings.” I said that we would save some time at the end for this discussion. Other factors influencing the group included a heat wave taking place and the fact that students were in a period of mandatory standardized testing that week.

All of this may have contributed to the frustration and general negative sentiment that dominated the group’s discussion. This is not meant to discount the findings of low control, but it may have colored participants’ perceptions. In addition, an evaluation should not generally be done during times the group is functioning either extremely well or poorly, so as to give a baseline view of participants’ experiences. The recent breakdown and threatened resignations may have added to the pessimism seen in the discussion around the YES! program’s input in students’ lives. Further empowerment evaluation would benefit the YES! program analysis, but perhaps the end of the year, when participants are not enmeshed in the daily dramas of a group process, would provide more useful information.

My prior relationship with group members had both positive and negative consequences for the focus group. On the positive side, our pre-existing relationship

helped to put group members at ease, and may have allowed them more comfort in disagreeing with me or each other, and more honesty than they might have felt with an adult authority figure they did not know. However, our history of group-facilitator interactions led me to run the group more like a YES! meeting than a research project.

Conclusion

As we gain a better understanding of the meaning of control and political efficacy for youth, the YES! program and other empowerment interventions can look more critically at their own work, hopefully in a way that shapes both their research process and interpretation of findings. Urban, minority youth should not be merely targets of change for researchers, but instead must be the agents of individual and social change processes. Empowerment research can provide guidance, information and support for young people as they learn to think critically about issues of power and control. We must continue to study these topics, using creative multidisciplinary methods, in order to develop real empowerment.

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