



# Engaging diverse Canadian youth in youth development programs: Program quality and community engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Youth development programs are key tools in promoting community engagement, which is a core feature of positive youth development. However, further research is needed on program quality and outcomes for diverse samples of youth. We examined program quality (positive features and youth-adult partnership) within youth programs, as predictors of three indicators of community engagement in a diverse youth sample ( $N = 321$ ; Mean age = 16.2 years;  $SD = 3.0$ ). Both positive program features and youth-adult partnership were positively related to youth civic participation, sociopolitical empowerment, and sense of community. Among our background variables, only LGBTQ status, perceived income, and age were related to community engagement. Positive associations between program quality and community engagement held across sample characteristics. Findings add to the limited research on youth development programs and youth's community engagement.

## 1. Introduction

Youth community engagement is a core feature of positive youth development (Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015). It has been linked with higher academic performance, prosociality, and lower drug and alcohol use in youth (Lawford & Ramey, 2017; Peterson, Peterson, Agre, Christens, & Morton, 2011; Vézina & Poulin, 2017). Youth development programs are key tools in promoting community engagement; however, it is unclear *how* and *for whom* these programs matter (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). In the current study, we examined two indicators of program quality (positive program features and youth-adult partnership) as predictors of youth's community engagement. We also explored how these potential associations differed across a diverse youth population, including age, immigrant status, ethnicity, LGBTQ identity, rural residence, and perceived income.

## 2. Youth development programs and community engagement

Community engagement is a complex construct typically involving communities in decision making and planning (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2015).

Youth community engagement is reflected by youth's behavioral participation (i.e., civic engagement), sense of empowerment within the community (i.e., sociopolitical control; Peterson et al., 2011), and sense of support and community belonging. Civic engagement has been defined as “a process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern” (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013, p. 1894) and includes political participation (e.g., participating in a political event; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2007). Sociopolitical empowerment in the community can be defined as youth's perceptions that they have the ability to influence policy decisions in their communities (Peterson et al., 2011). Finally, sense of community reflects youth's feeling of belonging and support within the community (Peterson et al., 2011).

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Youth development program researchers (e.g., Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016) have identified program characteristics, including Eccles and Gootman's (2002) positive features of development settings, as being key to community engagement and positive youth outcomes. These program features are safety; belonging; family, school, and community connections; structure; supportive relationships; positive social norms; efficacy; and skill-building. Zeldin and colleagues (Krauss et al., 2014; Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2016) found that some of these program features predicted sociopolitical empowerment in a sample of Malaysian youth. Evidence for associations with civic engagement and sense of community, however, is needed, across additional contexts and youth characteristics.

Zeldin et al. (2016) also reported connections between indicators of positive youth-adult partnership in youth programs and sociopolitical empowerment. Youth-adult partnership involves youth and adults in collaborative work to forward a cause or improve a community or organization (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Zeldin et al. (2013) have described it as incorporating two dimensions: supportive youth-adult relationships and youth voice in decision making. Supportive youth-adult relationships involve mutual trust and a balance of power. Youth voice involves youth's perceived influence over an initiative, and their ability to express their ideas and opinions. Youth voice and youth-adult relationships, as aspects of youth-adult partnership in programs, have been linked to youth's agency, empowerment, identity development, and prosocial helping behaviors (Ramey, Lawford, & Rose-Krasnor, 2017; Ramey, Rose-Krasnor, & Lawford, 2017; Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014), and thus can be considered one potential indicator of program effectiveness. This is also in line with the Youth Program Quality Assessment model for youth development (Smith et al., 2012), which places youth's opportunities to have a voice and take on leadership and planning roles at the highest level of program quality.

In addition to Zeldin et al.'s (2016) findings that youth-adult partnership was linked to sociopolitical empowerment, studies by other researchers also suggest that youth-adult partnership supports youth community engagement. Akiva, Cortina, and Smith (2014) found that youth voice in decision making was related to self-perceived efficacy, likely reflecting a sense of empowerment. Ozer and Douglas (2013) found that youth voice predicted socio-political skills and community engagement motivation. More research is needed, however, to clarify links between youth-adult partnership and other community engagement components.

### 2.1. Youth community engagement in diverse populations

Youth's community engagement also might be linked to youth's demographic or background characteristics. There is research to suggest that some groups may feel disengaged or be excluded from opportunities for community engagement. Research on youth members of youth councils, for example, have highlighted the lack of diverse representation (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016). Still other researchers, however, have found that community engagement indicators were not related to demographics. For example, in a sample of US high school students, Christens, Peterson, Reid, and Garcia-Reid (2015) found that sociopolitical empowerment did not differ by age, income, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status. Stepick, Stepick, and Labissiere (2008) similarly found that immigrant and nonimmigrant youth demonstrated very similar levels of civic engagement. Delgado (2016) has argued that there is inadequate research on youth's demographic characteristics and at least some forms of community participation. Given findings that sense of community may be a protective factor for some minority youth groups (Garcia-Reid, Peterson, Reid, & Peterson, 2014), further exploration of factors that might promote youth's engagement seems warranted.

As noted, past research suggests that Eccles and Gootman's (2002) eight positive features and youth-adult partnership foster youth's

community engagement. However, whether there are individual differences across diverse youth populations with respect to these potential associations is unclear. In an ethnographic study, Theriault and Witt (2014) found that Eccles and Gootman's (2002) eight positive features contributed to youth's positive development, in a program serving LGBTQ youth ages 12 to 19 years. However, Serido, Borden, and Wiggs (2014) found that youth voice in youth development programs was related to greater barriers to continued participation for ethnic minority youth. Somewhat similarly, Pritzker, LaChapelle, and Tatum (2012) found that high-school-aged Latino/a youth who were engaged in community-based participatory research demonstrated complex changes in community engagement outcomes. For example, youth experienced greater community attachment and awareness, as well as intention to become more civically engaged. At the same time, civic attitudes and behaviors did not change, perhaps reflective of youth's frustration with adults in their community.

Specifically in LGBTQ youth populations, a body of work by Wernick and colleagues is relevant. Wernick, Kulick, and Woodford (2014) conducted a qualitative exploration of experiences of LGBTQ youth in a theatre-based youth group. They found that, as youth participated in the project, they gained a larger sense of community, sociopolitical self-efficacy, and commitment to collective empowerment. Similarly, Ferguson, Teixeira, Wernick, and Burghardt (2018) found that LGBTQ youth who were engaged in community activism projects built stronger community relationships over time. These findings suggest associations between youth-adult partnerships and positive experiences in programs, and community engagement.

Despite these recent studies, in general, reviewers have concluded that research on diverse populations in youth development programs is lacking (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). It is also limited by confounds among variables (e.g., race and income; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012) and inconsistent findings (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). Reviewers (e.g., Ciocanel, Power, Eriksen, & Gillings, 2017) have identified a need to examine socioeconomic status, age, resource access, and ethnic minority status in considering program effectiveness.

### 2.2. Theoretical foundations

At least two current theoretical models are useful in exploring the processes of youth's experiences and organizational contexts in youth programs. Richards-Schuster and Timmermans (2017) developed a model of adults' roles and skills in program settings in order to focus on the "how" of programs involving youth-adult partnerships. Their model included the organizational environments and qualities that can promote civic engagement. Adult roles included training youth, legitimizing youth's ideas for youth themselves and in adult contexts; challenging youth to think critically and positioning their ideas in a larger political context; sustaining youths motivation; and providing "glue" to support and maintain youth's work over time. Relative to the current study, their framework highlights adult skills in relationship-building with youth, in addition to amplifying youth's voice, as key skills across adults' roles. Additionally, as noted by Richards-Schuster and Timmermans (2017), adult allies' roles in creating opportunities for youth's voices, and in social justice work, go hand in hand with the equitable inclusion of diverse and marginalized groups of youth.

Rose-Krasnor (2009) also has described a youth engagement framework, involving components of activities, initiating sustaining factors for youth's involvement, and youth outcomes. Initiating and sustaining factors can occur at individual, social, and systems levels. Both Rose-Krasnor's (2009) and Richards-Schuster and Timmermans' (2017) models incorporate factors sustaining youth's involvement and consider social and systems levels. In the current study, these factors would include features of the program setting and the strength of the youth-adult partnership.

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