



Supportive developmental systems for children and youth: A theoretical framework for comprehensive community initiatives



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ABSTRACT

This special issue gathers comprehensive community initiative (CCI) researchers to discuss findings from cutting-edge research and provide directions for future work. To introduce the special issue, this article provides a brief review of the existing research on CCIs and the current CCI movement. Further, we recommend a conceptual framework for the study and implementation of CCIs based on relational developmental systems theories of development (e.g., Overton, 2013), wherein the developmental system for youth comprises key developmental supports that a young person needs to thrive and recognizes the agency of the youth. When the developmental supports across these contexts are aligned with the strengths and needs of each young person, a *supportive youth system* is formed. We argue that using a theory of change consistent with this framework will increase the likelihood that a CCI will have a positive impact on children and youth.

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Pervasive inequalities exist in the United States across academic, health, social, and civic outcomes. Historically, these inequalities have disproportionately affected low-income communities and communities of color (Sampson & Bean, 2005; Wilson, 2013), and often leave these communities without much-needed resources. This lack of resources has resulted in disparities in multiple types of outcomes, including lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates, as compared with high-income, predominately white communities (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2014). To close these gaps, policymakers, foundations, and practitioners have looked to comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) as a means to understand the needs and strengths of individuals and their communities, to strengthen the capacity of the community to address those needs and strengths, and subsequently, to attend to the complex needs and strengths of children and youth. Predominantly, youth-focused CCIs have been used to support youth growing up in low-income and historically disenfranchised communities, where these pervasive inequalities exist (Lin & Zaff, 2010).

CCIs are based in communities, organized by a group of institutions and individuals, and tailored to support a given community's unique strengths and needs, with the intention of organizing multiple actors to pursue a common agenda toward a common goal or goals (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, & Dewar, 2010). When those goals are oriented toward young people, CCIs can position themselves to create the conditions within which all young people in a community have the opportunity

to thrive (academically, socially, emotionally, physically, vocationally, and civically).

Ideally, CCIs create a sustained coordination of organizations and agencies that have a shared vision, agenda, and goal(s) for a community, where those at the collective table work together to restrict duplication of services, and match community needs to organizations' capacities (Backer, 2003; Kubisch, 2010; Fishman, Farrell, Allen, & Eiseman, 2000), thus building an infrastructure that supports systemic, community-wide change. Indeed, a strong infrastructure enables a community to provide tangible benefits to children, youth and families (even if specific direct-service programs are not sustained) by directing existing or new resources to the needs of the community's population (Mancini & Marek, 2004). In other words, if one program closes, a high-quality CCI can compensate by identifying the need quickly, and leveraging other resources to meet it. In addition, a CCI can identify and more efficiently address additional needs by coordinating services and supports or developing new ones.

What we believe is missing from the literature on CCIs is a framework that provides a clear rationale for implementing youth-focused CCIs and that recognizes the agency of youth in their own development. Relational developmental systems models (RDS; Overton, 2013) may be the most appropriate model to guide the development of CCIs. As detailed below, from the RDS perspective, development is defined by the mutually influential relations between an individual and his or her context. Therefore, an RDS framework would provide a theoretical structure for researchers to use to examine how and whether the conditions in a community meet the developmental needs and leverage the strengths of children, youth, and families. An RDS framework would also provide a shared understanding from which practitioners can build a body of practical

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knowledge. In light of these benefits, this article provides a link between RDS theory and research on CCIs to understand why CCIs are an appropriate method for supporting young people and how development occurs within community contexts. We posit that implementing strategies that are guided by an RDS framework should increase the likelihood that a CCI will optimize the developmental outcomes for each young person in a CCI community. We also introduce the articles in this special issue, which represent some of the cutting-edge of research and theory on youth-focused CCIs.

Our purpose is to describe CCIs as a potentially powerful means for supporting young people, particularly young people growing up in economically disadvantaged communities, and highlight how an RDS framework can complement and strengthen existing efforts and optimize their outcomes. This introductory article is not focused on the structures and processes of the CCI that can lead to success (e.g., building trust among CCI members, creating a shared mission, vision, goals, and accountability, developing protocols so that entities within a community work together). While we recognize that structures and processes can have substantive impacts on the outcomes the CCIs seek to achieve (Brown, Hawkins, Arthur, Abbott, & Van Horn, 2008), our focus is on theoretical and empirical guidance that CCIs can use, once sufficient structures and processes are in place to act, so that they are more likely to achieve their goals. Previous research findings assessing the relations among CCI strategies and community-level child and youth outcomes have been mixed (for an exception, see Hawkins et al., 2009). Therefore, we believe that while prior efforts have been thoughtful and well-intentioned, they have not taken the developmental needs and assets of youth and families into account, resulting in limited efficacy. The other, complementary articles in this special issue provide additional guidance on the formal and informal processes and structures that CCIs can implement to increase their chance of success.

Overall, there has been little systematic research done to evaluate the impact of CCIs on positive youth development (Lin & Zaff, 2010). The majority of CCI evaluation efforts have shown little effect on targeted community-level outcomes such as poverty reduction or educational achievement (Lin & Zaff, 2010), but a few studies have shown declines in alcohol, drug, and tobacco use, and violence (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2009). One possible reason for the lack of optimal outcomes is that many community leaders create CCIs, and determine the strategies they will use, before understanding the needs and strengths of a community or without establishing an underlying developmental theory for why their strategies would be beneficial. In contrast, we argue that if the needs and resources are taken into account when planning and implementing a CCI, and solutions are designed based on developmental system theories and research, the efforts will be more likely to optimize community-level outcomes. The following section uses a developmental systems perspective to describe why CCIs are potentially important mechanisms for change.

Starting from the inside out: Children develop within a system of relationships

To understand how CCIs may lead to beneficial changes in developmental outcomes, we start with young people at the center of a diverse ecosystem, and appreciate the interdependent, individual strengths, relationships, and contexts that shape development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Human development is characterized by the dynamic relation(s) between an individual and her or his context (Lerner, 2013; Overton, 2013), and adaptive developmental regulations (i.e., mutually beneficial relations between a person and his or her context; Lerner, 2004) are more likely to occur when contextual supports are aligned with individual characteristics (Brandstädter, 1998). Examples of outcomes that have been achieved by such alignment include higher rates of academic achievement, civic engagement, and prosocial behaviors, and lower rates of incarceration and teen parenthood (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Cunha & Heckman, 2006; Scales et al., 2008).

In addition, consistent with the idea of mutually beneficial relations, young people who benefit from the developmental supports apparent in their ecologies are more likely to give back to and improve their communities and broader societies (Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss & Levine, 2010).

Defining development as the relations between youth and context as does not imply that “context” is homogeneous. Instead, as expressed by the Bioecological Framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), an instantiation of RDS theories, youth are embedded within a multi-layered ecology (from the most proximal relationships with parents, peers, and other adults in a community, to schools and youth development centers, to the more distal such as public policy and cultural norms), with the person–context relation occurring among all of these layers. Building off of the Bioecological Framework, the Phenomenological Variant on Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spenser, 2006) proposes that a primary component of a developmental system is the self-system; the individual’s meaning making process as related to their lived experiences. Thus, as Spenser and colleagues (e.g., Spenser, 2006; Spenser, Dupree & Hartman, 1997) suggest, growing up in adverse, stress-inducing environments (e.g., having few developmental supports and exposed to high levels of violence and racism; Spenser, 2006), is detrimental to how youth perceive themselves and to the development of their self-systems. The meaning attributed to these experiences and the self subsequently, and recursively, negatively impact the individual’s relation with their surrounding environment. Thus, theory and research suggest that development is optimized when supports across multiple contexts within a community are brought into alignment with the needs and strengths of the children and youth in the community (Brandstädter, 1998; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles et al., 1993; Nation et al., 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

A child and youth-focused applied extension of these RDS models is what we call a *youth system*; the set of key developmental supports that a young person needs to thrive that are present across and within contexts (family, school, and all aspects of a community). When these supports are brought into alignment with the needs and strengths of a young person in a community, a youth system becomes a *supportive youth system* (Zaff, 2011). For example, when a young person struggles in math, parents, teachers, peers, and school administrators could potentially provide supports that capitalize on conceptual and behavioral aspects of a youth’s life experience to contribute to success, such as a culturally appropriate formal and informal curricula (Cooper, 2011). A task for CCIs, then, is to create the conditions so that all young people in a community experience a supportive youth system.

Consistent with the tenets of RDS theories (Lerner, 2013; Overton, 2013), we propose that a supportive youth system: 1. Recognizes and encourages the inherent agency of youth and their families (e.g., in deciding what is best and most viable for their own families and future goals); 2. Incorporates the multiple contexts within which youth develop (e.g., school, home, community) and provides complementary supports across these contexts and aligned across time; and 3. Is comprised of the entire ecology within which a young person lives and grows, including informal developmental contexts (e.g., the culture of a neighborhood or the power of peer influences) and formal institutions (e.g., youth development organizations, schools, social services). Lerner (2013) proposes that because there are potentially infinite combinations of individual–context relations, it should be possible to find combinations that form ecologies that provide supports consonant with a given individual’s characteristics, resulting in adaptive developmental regulations (Brandstädter, 1998). This interindividual variation (or diversity) in intraindividual change (i.e., within person development) becomes the basis for why CCIs are a potentially powerful intervention to create the conditions to support all young people. Thus, youth-focused CCIs are positioned to create the conditions within a community to support its young people. Instead of focusing on one or a few discrete programs that might only provide opportunities for a subset of youth in the community, a CCI has the potential to alter organizational, policy,

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