



Alignment of perceived needs across levels of a community



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ABSTRACT

Youth-focused comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) exist to create the conditions so all young people may have the developmental supports needed to thrive. Research shows alignment is a key ingredient for meaningful change in a community. The current study discusses the theoretical basis for the importance of alignment, and provides a method to measure alignment of perceived needs in the community using semi-structured interview data. Our results suggest a method of using the perceptions of multiple stakeholders to reveal that there are alignments and misalignments across the levels of a community. Direct service providers (DSP) and families had the most alignment, while the least alignment was between the CCI leadership and families. Further, DSP and families stressed basic needs (such as needing to pay bills and buy food, or needing transportation), while CCI leadership stressed the need for the creation and/or implementation of academic programmatic efforts to ensure positive developmental outcomes.

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Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) have been promoted over the past 30 years as entities that can bring together sectors and individuals to address complex problems that are believed to be immune to single interventions (e.g., Wolff, 2001). A key assumption of CCIs is that all facets of the community are interconnected and important to achieving positive change within the community (Kubisch, 2010). CCIs assess, design, and implement policies and programs that leverage the capacity of the community, and have traditionally targeted issues related to public health, social welfare, housing, education, and community development (Kubisch, 2010). In particular, CCIs focused on young people are positioned to coordinate efforts, resources, and funding across organizations to cultivate human, institutional, and social capital (together considered community capacity) that a community would need to resolve the needs of their young people (Chaskin, 2001). Community capacity has been shown to improve the available developmental supports and positive developmental outcomes for young people (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Unfortunately, relatively few youth-focused CCIs have been effective at attaining community-level impacts (see Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, & Allen, 2001; Kubisch, 2010; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000 for reviews).

However, community-level impacts have been found when CCIs are aligned across the levels of a community, with the vision and programmatic strategies of each level aligning with the strategies and implementation of actions and programs; and in turn, those actions and

programs aligning with the children and youth who are the focus of the efforts (e.g., Auspos, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2008; Spoth, Guyll, Redmond, Greenberg, & Feinberg, 2011). In this paper, we explore the degree to which three CCI's visions and perceived needs of the community are aligned with the needs identified by direct service providers, and youth and their families in the communities. To complement and extend the current literature, we present an in-depth examination of alignment of vision and perceived needs across levels of a community system. In our introduction, we discuss theory that supports the notion that misalignment creates roadblocks for success whereas alignment facilitates opportunities. Then we use cross-case qualitative analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to explore alignment and misalignment within three communities, and finally propose ways to improve alignment within CCIs.

Consistent with Relational Developmental Systems Theories that emphasize the importance of person \leftrightarrow multiple-context relations (RDST; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2012; Overton, 2013), alignment within and across levels of a community system should lead to a higher likelihood of achieving positive developmental outcomes (Brandtstädter, 1998; Zaff & Smerdon, 2009). However, CCIs do not often meet the ideal of alignment within and across levels, and instead show a lack of alignment or even misalignment across the levels of the community (e.g., among decision-makers, practitioners, and the families and youth at the center of the CCI's work; Auspos, 2010). Thus, we propose that one reason for modest or null effects of CCIs on youth outcomes is a lack of alignment. For the purposes of this study, we define alignment as sharing the same or complementary perceived

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community needs and how these needs will be met, across multiple levels of the community (e.g., community leaders, business leaders, parents, and youth).

The link between alignment of vision and action within and across levels of a community and impact has been explicit (e.g., Auspos, 2010; Nowell, 2010; White & Wehlage, 1995) or implicit in numerous studies of CCI (e.g., Fagan, Hanson, Hawkins, & Arthur, 2009). Auspos (2010) has discussed alignment in vision among members of collaborative units in numerous CCIs, and White and Wehlage (1995) found that there is often a lack of alignment between the decisions being made by the collaborative unit and the implementers of those decisions. In particular, Nowell (2010) found that misalignment across community collaborative stakeholders negatively impacted a collaboration's efforts to combat domestic violence. However, little research has been conducted on how to assess alignment. Therefore, we present an in-depth example of one way to assess alignment within three different communities.

Our proposition that alignment is an essential ingredient for effective CCIs is based on RDST (e.g., Overton, 2013), previous research and evaluations of CCIs (e.g., Auspos, 2010; Nowell, 2010), and frameworks that have been developed for the functioning of CCIs (e.g., Foster-Fishman et al., 2001; Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001). We start with the recognition that development is defined as the relation between an individual and her or his context (Lerner, 2012) and that individuals are embedded within multiple contexts or layers within their ecology (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Youths' ecologies extend from proximal relationships with other people (e.g., parents, teachers, youth workers, other adults in their communities), and organizations within which young people learn and grow (e.g., schools, faith-based institutions, youth development organizations), to more distal factors, such as public policies, economic conditions, and cultural norms (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Importantly, consistent with the tenets of RDST, all of these factors are part of an interconnected system, such that each piece influences other pieces and simultaneously influences the individual. In turn, the individual also exerts influence on the layers of the ecology that surrounds her (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

When applied to the lived experiences of youth, we call this system a *youth system*. When there is alignment among the contexts within the system and the individual strengths and needs of the individual (an ideal which we call a *supportive youth system*), the hypothesized results are adaptive developmental regulations for the individual and for the ecology around the individual (Brandtstädter, 1998); that is, a supportive youth system leading to benefits for the young person as well as benefits for the surrounding community. Extending this idea one step further, we propose that alignment within and across levels of the eco-system will facilitate the optimization of the youth system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Alignment within a given level of a system is necessary but not sufficient for alignment across the entire system. For example, research has continually shown that it is important to have member agreement and alignment on vision and how to reach that vision within a collaborative body (e.g., Auspos, 2010). However, less work has focused on the importance of alignment across levels of the system (e.g., shared vision and goals among collaborative members, direct service providers, and families).

Two CCI models provide illustrative examples of how to encourage cross-level alignment: Communities that Care (CTC) and PROSPER. The CTC community change system is a community collaborative model that focuses on identifying community needs, aligning relationships and contexts, choosing proven prevention programs, and implementing those programs with fidelity (Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur, 2002). In addition to on-the-ground efforts to create alignment across contexts, the CTC process has explicit protocols in place to emphasize alignment. For instance, a core component of the CTC process is that key partners learn about (and ultimately internalize) the *social*

development model. This model informs the community's selection and implementation of prevention programs and provides a frame through which to consider the creation of supportive conditions for youth in the community. In addition, the CTC staff conducts a needs assessment that is used to target the needs of the youth in the community. That is, instead of assuming that the council knows intuitively what issues youth in the community confront, the council surveys a representative sample of youth and asks them directly. CTC also explicitly encourages alignment across contexts through facilitating and emphasizing strong school-community relationships (Fagan et al., 2009). These core CTC components (coupled with choosing "proven" programs that address community needs and implementing the programs with fidelity) have resulted in significant and substantive impacts on reductions in incidence of alcohol, cigarette, smokeless tobacco, and overall acts of delinquency (Hawkins et al., 2008).

The mechanisms for alignment for CTC are similar in the PROSPER model, a university–researcher–community partnership model designed to facilitate the effective delivery of prevention and intervention programs in schools and within families. A core component of this model is the Prevention Coordinator, who aligns the work of a community council with the needs of the community. A long-term impact study of PROSPER has shown substantive impacts on child, parent, and family outcomes, including drug and alcohol use, among others (Redmond et al., 2009). Others who have studied single-site CCIs have documented similar processes for understanding the needs (and strengths) of a community, developing strategies, and obtaining buy-in from program providers, practitioners, parents, and young people (e.g., Anderson-Butcher et al., 2008; Bringle, Officer, Grim, & Hatcher, 2009).

These examples of successful collaborations impacting youth outcomes suggest alignment is integral. Researchers can also look to examples of unsuccessful initiatives to learn about the dangers of misalignment. For example, in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Annie E. Casey Foundation funded the New Futures Initiative, a five-city effort designed to improve the conditions within a community and support the community's young people. However, the initiative did not result in positive outcomes for youth, and teen pregnancy rates (a primary focus of the effort) increased during the program's tenure. In addition, it is questionable whether any structural changes (e.g., to policy or organizational capacity) implemented by the program were sustained over time (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1995). White and Wehlage (1995) concluded that there was misalignment between the vision of policymakers and the experiences of on-the-ground practitioners who worked with young people every day. They posited that desired change would occur if areas of misalignments became aligned. For example, a city agency that incorporates the lived experience of the youth in their community into policy changes would be more likely to have an impact on youth (White & Wehlage, 1995). In the case of The New Futures Initiative, those making the decisions and planning solutions tended to be senior-level officials in agencies and organizations, instead of a group of individuals who represented all aspects of a community.

We propose that a major reason for the lack of youth-level effects from most collaborative work is the misalignment across levels of the CCI. Specifically, we suggest that a lack of alignment across collaborative entities, agencies, practitioners (e.g., executive-level and direct service providers), youth, and their families will limit the impact on community capacity and on social outcomes. The focus of the present study is to describe a method for assessing alignment of perceived needs across levels of a community, including the CCI, those working directly with youth (i.e., direct service providers; DSP), and the youth and their families themselves. We focus on CCIs that have already been formed, have the same goal (all youth graduating from high school ready for college and/or career), and have agreed, as a community, to work together. We do not assess the connection of alignment to specific outcomes, but rather examine the alignment itself.

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