

# Empowering youth to change their world: Identifying key components of a community service program to promote positive development

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## Abstract

Prior to graduating from high school, the vast majority of youth in the United States will take part in at least one community service activity. Although it is frequently assumed that community service is inherently beneficial to those that take part, the activities and processes of youth service programs tend to be unsystematic and vary widely. In addition, empirical assessment of youth service programs is inconsistent and often lacks methodological rigor. The present paper addresses these concerns in a preliminary evaluation of both the process experience and the outcomes of a theoretically grounded school-based community service program for urban adolescents. The evaluation focuses on identifying key components of a youth community service program, assessing whether the program was experienced as it was intended, and providing preliminary data on participant outcomes. Findings indicate that the program was experienced as both empowering (i.e., guided by student initiative, preferences, and strengths) and promoting a sense of community (i.e., encouraged cooperation and collective decision making). Results also suggest that taking part in the community service program increased youths' self-reported empathy and intent to be involved in future community action, as compared to a group of matched controls. Implications and recommendations for developing and evaluating service-learning or community service programs in the schools are discussed.

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## Introduction

In the past two decades, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent to encourage youth community service in the United States (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006a; Kennedy, 1991). Indeed, numerous foundations have been established to promote the development of programs for a wide age range (e.g., Need In Deed, Youth Service America, National Youth Leadership Council, Learn and Service America, *Learning in Deed and The Education Commission of the States* (2001)) and most states include community service in their educational standards and goals, make it a graduation requirement, or provide funding and resources for school-based service programs (*The Education Commission of the States*, 2001). It is therefore not surprising that 64% of all public schools report that they recognize or organize community service activities for their students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000) and close to eleven million youth ages 12 to 18 say they have engaged in community service as a school activity or requirement (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006b). Further, a third of high school students report taking part in community service on a regular basis (Youniss et al., 2002). These statistics – in conjunction with the plethora of websites, training guides, and other related resources available – reflect what has become a national ethic of youth service in the United States.

Reviews of youth service activities (e.g., Billig, 2000, 2006; Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Shumer, 1997, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1996a), assessment of specific programs (e.g., Allen, Kuperminc, Philliber, & Herre, 1994; Sandler, Vandegrift, & VerBruggen, 1995; Verlande, Starling, & Wallerstein, 2002; Yates & Youniss, 1996b, 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1999), and multi-site program evaluations (e.g., Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Corporation for National and Community Service, 1999) suggest that involvement in community service is related to healthy outcomes across multiple realms. Thus, the literature on youth community service activities indicates that adolescents who are actively involved in their community have a stronger self-image (e.g., greater self-esteem and self-efficacy) and value themselves more highly than adolescents who do not take part (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Shumer, 1997, 2005). Young participants in community service programs have also reported improved interpersonal relationships and skills, such as social relatedness, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, sense of community, empathy, nurturance and altruism (Yates & Youniss, 1996a).

### *Limitations of past studies*

Although the available literature on youth service programs suggests positive effects for involved youth, these findings are tempered by limitations in program design and research methodology (Metz & Youniss, 2005). Specifically, deficits in two key areas impede our understanding of the processes and outcomes of successful youth service activities: (1) many community service programs still do not include a controlled evaluation component and (2) the design of youth service programs is often unsystematic and varies widely across facilitators, settings, and time.

### *Methodological limitations*

Initially, the benefit of youth service was often supported by anecdotal evidence alone (e.g., Lynch, Condon, Newell, & Regan, 1990; Patchin, 1994). Of those programs that did

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