Growing with youth: A lifewide and lifelong perspective on youth-adult partnership in youth programs☆,☆☆

Thomas Akiva [a],[*], Julie Petrokubi [b]

[a] *University of Pittsburgh, United States*
[b] *Education Northwest, United States*

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ABSTRACT

Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) shows promise for positive youth development, yet research seldom examines how youth programs employ Y-AP as a developmental practice. This paper provides a developmental ecological perspective on Y-AP in programs and communities with data collected across a mid-sized city. In Study 1, interview data suggest adult practitioners hold three distinct goals for Y-AP: voice, decisionmaking, and leadership. We identify program practices for carrying out YAP including building positive adult-youth relationships, engaging youth in first-hand learning, and addressing developmental progression; i.e., gradually increasing opportunities and responsibilities as youth age. In Study 2 we investigate this practice of supporting developmental progression with a case study focused on adolescent opportunities and supports in a multi-age program. Study 2 findings present a picture of YAP opportunities highly integrated into program operations; in particular, integrated into the multiage context. These studies offer insight into strengthening program and community capacity for Y-AP.

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1. Introduction

Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) refers to a group of youth and adults working together to make decisions or take action on important issues in their program, organization, or community (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008). Youth programs are suitable settings for Y-AP because operational decisions in youth programs are often flexible in ways that allow for youth involvement in decision-making. Unlike school, youth programs usually lack content coverage requirements and therefore it is possible for youth to have a say in program offerings and direction. Y-AP in programs may include youth involvement in choices about programmatic offerings, participation in governance through youth advisory boards, youth involvement in hiring or other typically adult-only activities, and older youth leading activities for younger youth (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014). However, much remains to be learned about the scope and nature of Y-AP in youth programs in the U.S.

A handful of studies provide evidence about the prevalence of Y-AP in youth programs, including a study of 979 youth in 63 programs (Akiva et al., 2014), a study of youth program director surveys from 198 programs (Deschenes et al., 2010) and an evaluation of Beacon Centers, a program model that features youth councils (LaFleur, Russell, Low, & Romash, 2011). Across these studies, youth involvement in determining the activities offered was relatively common, but youth involvement in organizational governance was much less common. Youth involvement in staffing decisions, a typically adult-only activity, was examined by only one study and found relatively uncommon (reported by 19% of youth and 20% of adults; Akiva et al., 2014). This suggests that limited youth decision-making may be relatively common in youth programs but full Y-AP implementation as described in literature may be relatively rare.

Studies have produced evidence that involving youth in decision-making in programs can lead to benefits for youth in multiple areas, including program motivation and retention (Akiva et al., 2014; Deschenes et al., 2010), belonging and improved relations with adults (Mitra, 2009; Zeldin, 2004), empowerment, (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), and efficacies and skills associated with leadership (Akiva et al., 2014; Larson & Angus, 2011; Larson et al., 2005). Research also suggests that Y-AP may lead to improved organizational decision-making in youth programs (Zeldin, 2004). Indeed, although research on Y-AP has not yet been extensive, to our knowledge all extant studies find benefits. However, despite these promising findings, several obstacles may be preventing Y-AP from widespread adoption.

One of those obstacles may be the challenge of labelling a complex phenomenon that applies in multiple settings with diverse goals. Rather than a specific program model, Y-AP is set of principles and practices that may be interpreted differently by practitioners in various settings.

Zeldin, Christens, and Powers (2013) described Y-AP as consisting of authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness. In a more targeted conceptualization, Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, and Sulaiman (2014) measured Y-AP using two dimensions: youth voice in decision-making and supportive adult relationships. The combination of these two dimensions—the opportunity for youth to join adults in a supportive context to make shared decisions about things that are typically decided solely by adults—is perhaps the distinctive feature of Y-AP that makes it both valuable and uncommon.

Although the term Y-AP has shown some recent resonance in both research and practice-focused publications, it is by no means the only word or phrase used—particularly in practice. For decades, multiple terms have been used to describe Y-AP and the programs that employ it, including *decision-making, empowerment, engagement, involvement, leadership, participation, youth-in-governance*, and *voice*. These terms are often used interchangeably in practice; i.e., "youth leadership program" and "youth decision-making program" may refer to the same program. Lack of agreement about terms is a common problem across social science—the so called *jingle* and *jangle* fallacies (Peck, 2007). However, the abundance of terms may inhibit research on this practice, collaboration across programs, and the integration of Y-AP into mainstream society.

Y-AP challenges conventional norms about relationships between youth and adults, and requires both groups to shift their skillsets and mindsets. Research suggests that quality Y-AP occurs in organizations which foster a "culture" of youth participation and partnership (Zeldin & Petrokubi, 2008; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair, 2003). Without clearly delineated examples of how the concept is operationalized in everyday settings such as youth programs there is a risk that Y-AP will become a "boutique" practice that few youth get a chance to experience. This paper contributes to this research base by examining the prevalence of Y-AP opportunities across a city and investigating how adult practitioners in this community perceive and implement the practice in diverse youth programs.

1.1. Y-AP in a lifewide, lifelong learning context

Y-AP has most often been described as an innovation for adolescents, without explicit attention to the context of developing youth. Considering Y-AP within the context of the lives of developing adolescents may be important for understanding its role in society. Specifically, we apply two lenses to our consideration of Y-AP—an ecological or lifewide perspective and a developmental or lifelong perspective.

Lifewide learning refers to the idea that youth develop and learn across the numerous settings in which they spend time, rather than only in school (Akiva, Kehoe, & Schunn, in press; Banks et al., 2007; Sacco, Falk, & Bell, 2014). This idea is rooted in an ecological perspective—which is a fundamental tenet of contemporary developmental science (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Lerner, 2006). The implication of the lifewide lens is that Y-AP opportunities may be considered as an important type of offering within the ecology of opportunities available in a given community. Such a community perspective might call, for example, for the availability of both adult-driven and youth-driven programs, both of which can be beneficial to youth (Larson et al., 2005). However, such a perspective would also suggest that Y-AP opportunities should be available in multiple locations, ample enough for most youth to access these opportunities.

The developmental, lifelong perspective suggests the importance of considering where Y-AP addresses youth in the lifespan; i.e., as a component of lifelong learning. Bronfenbrenner (1979) addressed this:

> Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in *progressively more complex* patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the *balance of power gradually shifts* in favor of the developing person (p. 60, italics added).

This view of how a child becomes an adult captures the spirit of Y-AP as a two-way relationship that progresses over time in complexity and shared power. In this view, Y-AP may be considered a step in a logical progression towards young adult agency.

The suitability of Y-AP for adolescence has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Akiva et al., 2014; Zeldin et al., 2013). The salience of autonomy and autonomy-related changes in identity that occur for many adolescents may make the shared decision-making aspect of Y-AP both motivating and developmentally appropriate. Cognitive changes associated with adolescence such as increased capacities for abstract thinking (e.g., Eccles, Wigfield, & Byrnes, 2005) may also make Y-AP a good fit for this life stage. However, consideration of Y-AP from a broader developmental, lifelong perspective may produce added benefits. For example, a youth program that serves multiple ages (e.g., elementary, middle and high school students) may provide decision-making opportunities for children and pre-adolescents in a way that allows for gradual increases in responsibilities and importance of decisions to be made as youth get older or more experienced.

Out-of-school time programs that serve multiple age groups (e.g., 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Camp Fire, Scouts, summer camps) sometimes make use of this idea of progression. As youth "age up" in a program, they tackle increasingly challenging tasks and take on new roles and responsibilities within the organization. For example, counselors-in-training programs are fixtures in many summer camps, designed to provide increased decision-making and leadership opportunities for returning campers (Katz, 2009). This idea of progression could also operate on a community, lifewide level. As youth eventually "age out" of programs they might move on to opportunities in other programs that offer a higher level of challenge, responsibility and autonomy (Akiva et al., in press).

In contrast to terms like "youth voice", the term "youth-adult partnership" intentionally highlights the importance of both youth and adult contributions, and the synergy that occurs when they work together. A base of research describes how adults provide critical scaffolding and support for youth development within the context of Y-AP (Jones, 2006; Kirshner, 2007; Larson & Angus, 2010; McIntosh & Youniss, 2010; Li & Julian, 2012). This has been referred to as "leading from behind" (Larson & Angus, 2011). From this perspective, adults in functioning Y-APs scaffold youth involvement and provide support to keep youth on track. Adults engage in behind-the-scenes work to set up interactions with other adults within and outside the youth organization and prepare youth for successful and well-planned meetings and activities (Evans, 2007; Petrokubi, 2014; Sullivan & Larson, 2009). Yet very little research specifically examines how Y-AP practices respond to the developmental differences across middle childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Further, most research focuses on Y-AP within a single setting and we know of no scholarship that addresses the availability of Y-AP opportunities across a locality.

1.2. The present research

This research investigates Y-AP in a mid-sized city from lifewide and lifelong perspectives. Our central aim was to investigate the actual practice of Y-AP in youth programs across a city and to consider how that practice fits in youth's developmental trajectories. Study 1 addresses the lifewide perspective, Y-AP across multiple organizational settings within a city, and Study 2 targets the lifelong perspective: Y-AP within a developmental trajectory. More specifically, in Study 1, we conducted interviews with adults from programs that included Y-AP-related ideas in their public program descriptions in order to better understand how adult leaders conceptualize Y-AP. In particular, we focused on goals for including Y-AP in programs and strategies for meeting those goals—i.e., the *why* and *how* of Y-AP in youth programs. In Study 2 we target a