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Determining the Quality of Youth-Adult Relationships Within Community-Based Youth Programs

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Abstract
There is a lack of research on assessing how society views youth voice and participation in youth programs. Youth taking on leadership roles and interacting with adults have shown success in establishing positive youth-adult relationships. This article introduces the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale, a new measure that assesses the perceptions and experiences of youth and adult participants working together in various community-based efforts. The scale serves as a means to empower participants by enabling them to evaluate their own experiences to determine the quality of these experiences and acknowledge areas that need strengthening.

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Introduction

There has been some difficulty in assessing where society stands in terms of recognizing the value of positive youth-adult relationships (Benson, 1997; Gilliam & Bales, 2001). One challenge is the lack of research on the practice of incorporating youth voice and participation in youth programs. Youth are well informed about their neighborhoods and can serve as worthy contributors when working with adults as community partners.

One characteristic researchers noted as fundamental to successful youth-adult relationships (e.g., mentoring) is the quality of interactions between youth and adults (Dubois & Neville, 1997; Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Grossman & Johnson, 1999; Herrera, Sipe, McClanahan, Arbreton, & Pepper, 2000; Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Rhodes, 2002). Researchers have asserted that the process of youth-adult participation can provide action-based learning experiences that enable youth to contribute through decision-making processes at the community level (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Israel & Ilvento, 1995; Mayo, 2000; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000; Villaruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003).

Although previous empirical studies have provided insight into the benefits of youth decision making, very little reference is directed toward various types of relationships that may exist between youth and adults. A few scholars have presented models that attempt to explain how youth skills can be evaluated and utilized in leadership roles (Hart, 1992, 1997; Mitra, 2000). These models also present a hierarchical framework, where certain positions are perceived as positive and others perceived as negative, thereby posing the threat to practitioners who may feel as though their program may be unacceptably low in certain areas (e.g., youth leadership and adult involvement).

This article introduces a new measure that assesses perceptions of youth and adult participants working together on various types of community-based efforts. The Involvement and Interaction

Rating Scale is presented as a useful instrument to identify the strengths and weaknesses within existing youth-adult groups. Participants can also use the scale to rate the quality of their own experience within their group, based on specific criteria or themes.

The scale gives practitioners a way to assess which category along the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships model (e.g., Adult-Centered Leadership, Youth-Adult Partnership; see Jones, 2004) best describes their group. After the assessment, if practitioners want to realign a group into a different category, they can be intentional about adding certain activities that foster specific linkages to categories along the continuum. For example, an Adult-Led Collaboration may want to increase the level of youth voice within its group. This could be done by employing some of the strategies of a Youth-Adult Partnership or Youth-Led Collaboration, which incorporate higher levels of youth engaging in discussions that lead to decision making.

Identifying Various Relationships

Within the literature and practice, there remains a lack of clearly defined criteria for what signifies various types of relationships among programs (e.g., 4-H/Youth Development Programs, YMCA) and community-based efforts (e.g., Youth-Adult Partnerships or a community collaborative designed to address community issues), from those that are adult-centered (i.e., only allowing youth to participate) to those that are youth-centered (i.e., youth lead with little or no adult involvement).

Two scholars have presented models to better explain how youth skills can be utilized in leadership roles. Hart's (1992, 1997) Ladder of Children's Participation offers choices where young people may choose to participate at the level most suitable for her or his ability.

The other model involves a pyramid that displays a hierarchy of three varying forms of student (youth) voice: information, collaboration, and autonomy (Mitra, 2000). Mitra's research focused on older students (i.e., high school juniors and seniors) who had formed ideas about educational change, particularly at the high school level. The information level of the model depicts the minimal and most common form of involvement, where students share their ideas with adults who sequentially interpret the data without youth input. The next level, collaboration, is where students and adults work together to define problems, interpret data and execute action plans to promote change. The final level, autonomy, is where students are self-directed to design and implement their own plans. This model serves as a clear indication that student voice can be solicited and utilized in numerous forms, thus allowing students to serve as valuable contributors in youth-adult relationships.

Both Hart's (1992, 1997) ladder and Mitra's pyramid (2000) attempt to explain how youth skills can be utilized in leadership roles with increased autonomy. However, Hart's ladder is geared towards the involvement of children, not emphasizing the importance of adult interaction with youth in their role as mentors and being experiential learners throughout the process. In contrast, Mitra's pyramid does address youth and adults collaborating together, but centers on groups within a school or classroom. Although Mitra's concepts can be adapted from an environmental context, community organizations are much more varied; therefore, many programs may be inappropriately classified if only three categories were utilized.

Jones and Perkins (2004) developed the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships model that specifically targets community efforts (Figure 1). This model includes five key categories to identify groups consisting of varied levels of youth and adult involvement. The continuum focuses on individual choices, and enables organizations to exist at any point depending on the level of engagement of youth and adults. Each level serves a purpose, and neither is better than other levels because their functionality is dependent on the purpose they serve. The categories on the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships include: Adult-Centered Leadership, Adult-Led Collaboration, Youth-Adult Partnership, Youth-Led Collaboration, and Youth-Centered Leadership. The categories are described in detail below.

Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships

The continuum model was derived from an extensive literature review on types of youth-adult relationships that provide insight on how specific youth-adult relationships are positioned along the continuum (see figure 1). Therefore, the emphasis of this article is to demonstrate how the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale can be employed to distinguish between the various youth-adult relationship categories of the continuum model.

Figure 1.
Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships
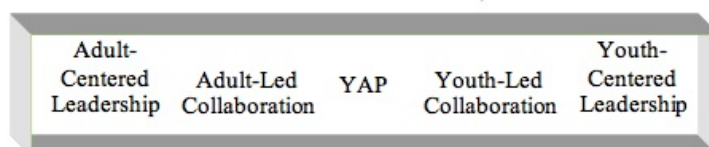
An Adult-Centered Leadership relationship consists of programs that are conceived and driven completely by adults, without employing any youth decision making. An Adult-Led Collaboration includes programs or situations where adults provide guidance for youth, but the youth have some input in decision making, albeit limited by adults' discretion.

The Youth-Adult Partnership category is located centrally on the continuum. This is a point of stasis where a partnership is achieved between youth and adults. Youth and adult participants have equal chances in utilizing skills, decision making, mutual learning, and independently carrying out tasks to reach common goals.

Youth-Led Collaborations are programs or projects where youth primarily develop the ideas and make decisions while adults typically provide needed assistance.

Youth-Centered Leadership includes programs or activities led exclusively by youth, with little or no adult involvement (for more specific details on the model, see Jones, 2004).

Assessing Community Efforts Through Youth and Adult Involvement

Research studies on group interaction have revealed that positive outcomes (e.g., positive perceptions, strong social ties) can occur when individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to accomplish common goals (Allport, 1954; Brewer & Miller, 1984; Pettigrew, 1998). Researchers and practitioners have also found value in examining how participants perceive their own experiences within youth-adult relationships (Herrera et al., 2000). The Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale is an instrument that allows youth and adult to measure their perceptions of their experiences when interacting at some level in youth development programs or working together as community partners. The instrument assesses three constructs: youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction.

The constructs used were selected and adapted from existing literature and instruments (see Camino, 2002; Yohalem, 2002; Zeldin, Day & Matyzik, n.d.) to more accurately fit the uniqueness of this investigation. Some of the rating scale's items were based on the mentoring and youth-adult partnership literature and modified to accomplish the objectives of assessing various types of youth-adult relationships as identified on the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships (Jones & Perkins, 2004).

A high rating in youth involvement also indicates that youth worked primarily with their peers to carry out a task (e.g., organizing an event and collecting signatures for a petition) related to the project. The individual items of the youth involvement construct assesses whether young people demonstrate high or low levels of youth voice and decision making, responsibility, and commitment to the project. Adult involvement, the second construct, entails adults working together in a given situation (e.g., raising funds or handling other administrative duties). This construct also utilizes items that measure adults' support, through their commitment to nurturing youth voice and decision making and their dedication to the project.

A high rating of youth-adult interaction indicates that youth and adults work collectively, engaging in one or more components of a project and fully exercising an equal opportunity to utilize decision making and other leadership skills. High youth-adult interaction would also reflect civility and mutual respect for one another. Jones (2004) also used the measure to conduct a comparison of individual responses between the various groups to determine the differences in relationship quality, experiences, and level of youth and adult involvement to further distinguish the contrasts between the various types of relationships. Table 1 lists the items used for each of the three constructs.

Table 1.
Items Used for Youth Involvement, Adult Involvement and Youth-Adult Interaction Constructs

Construct Item
Youth Involvement
1. Youth take lots/little initiative in working on projects.
2. Youth are sitting around with nothing to do/busy with several tasks.
3. Youth arrive to meetings on time/late.
4. Youth are given major/few responsibilities for specific tasks.
5. Youth rely on themselves/adults to make key decisions.
6. Youth have full access/little access to information needed to make decisions.

7. Youth always/never have opportunities to discuss their concerns of group decisions.

8. Youth frequently/rarely share ideas about things that matter to them.

9. Youth do/do not have an equal vote in the decision-making process.

10. Youth do/do not help one another in developing new skills.

11. Youth are/are not fully committed to their duties.

12. Youth are excited/have little interest in their involvement with this project.

13. Youth are/are not concerned with community change.

Adult Involvement

14. Adults display a willingness to accept and nurture/control youth leadership.

15. Adults tend to want to guide/be followers of youth leadership.

16. Adults always/never listen to the suggestions of youth.

17. Adults never/always totally take over when working on projects with youth.

18. Adults learn/do not learn new skills from one another.

19. Adults always/never take the ideas of youth seriously.

20. Adults do/do not encourage youth to come up with their own ideas.

21. Adults are excited/have little interest in being involved with this project.

22. Adults are very concerned/not concerned with community change.

Youth-Adult Interaction

23. Youth and adults get along well together/argue.

24. Youth appear comfortable/uneasy around adults.

25. Adults appear comfortable/ uneasy around youth.

26. Adults do/do not actively and consistently consult with youth on project activities.

27. Adults do/do not provide direction and mentoring for youth.

28. Youth always/never go along with the decisions of adults.

29. Youth and adults often/rarely agree on most decisions.

30. Youth rely on adults' experiences/their own experiences when making decisions.

31. Youth and adults work together/separately on project tasks.

32. Youth and adults indicate mutual learning/learn little from one another.

33. Youth and adults frequently/rarely help one another develop new skills.

34. Adults are very considerate/not at all considerate of youth opinion.

35. Youth are very considerate/not at all considerate of adults' opinions.

36. Youth and adults always/never engage in respectful conversations.

37. Youth do/do not trust adults to handle power responsibly.

38. Adults do/do not trust youth to handle power responsibly.

Note. For more information on the rating scale, please contact the lead author.

Rating Scale Development

The Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale rates relationship quality on a 10-point scale that assesses the three previously discussed constructs (i.e., youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction). The scale ranges from: 1-2 (very poor); 3-4 (poor); 5-6 (fair); 7-8 (good); 9-10 (excellent). The 38-item rating scale includes bipolar (i.e., positive and negative) statements to measure participants' perceptions of their experiences (i.e., "Youth are fully committed to their duties/Youth are not committed to their duties"; "Adults always listen to the suggestions of youth/Adults never listen to the suggestions of youth"). Parallel forms were developed for youth and adult participants.

Due to the length of the rating scale, bipolar statements on a 10-point scale were used to minimize response bias (Tuckman, 1994). This scale also allowed more variance in the responses, being that the sample size was relatively small. In addition, having two (bipolar) statements provides clarity of the items for the youth as well as the adult participants. If one statement is unclear to a respondent, there is a chance that they may be able to understand the opposite item and give a more accurate response. Negative statements were reverse coded to reflect positive aspects.

The authors considered a confirmatory factor analysis to determine if there was a goodness of fit for the items and the specified constructs. However, the sample size used for this procedure (N= 108) was smaller than recommended for this form of multivariate analysis. General guidelines have ranged from a minimum of 100 participants for less than 10 variables/items to 10 participants per item (Kachigan, 1986). Thus, to meet the guidelines, the sample size for assessing the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale would be approximately 380 participants. The authors are continuing to gather data in order to establish more validity and to accurately report the results of a factor analysis model at a later point in time.

Expert Panel Review

The Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale was reviewed by a panel of seven individuals (five faculty members, two graduate assistants) with knowledge in survey design and/or knowledge about youth-adult relationships. Members of the panel hold doctoral degrees in the areas of adult education, agricultural and Extension education, educational theory, and policy and human/child ecology. These experts were asked to review the instruments for content validity and to examine the items for cultural sensitivity.

The panel concluded that the items were representative of the content and were appropriate to assess perceptions and experiences of youth and adults interacting and/or working together within community-based youth development programs. An evaluation team from the practitioner-based United Way's Center for Youth Development (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) also reviewed the instrument. Adaptations were made based on feedback from the panel and the evaluation team.

Reliability Analysis

As a measure of reliability for the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale, a post-hoc test was conducted by the researcher, which reported an overall Cronbach's Alpha of .94. The instrument contained three groups of items that measured the constructs: youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients for each of the constructs were as follows: Youth Involvement (.83), Adult Involvement (.84), and Youth-Adult Interaction (.87).

Understanding Levels of Involvement and Interaction

Community participation levels vary, thus resulting in different experiences for youth and adults. Factors contributing to participation may include participants' abilities and willingness to commit to such a project. Table 2 notes the various relationship descriptions and the level (i.e., high and low) of youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction expected to exist among participants engaged in community programs and projects. These constructs were selected as measures of involvement because they include all participants as they work in subgroups (i.e., youth working with youth, adults working with adults) or as a cohesive unit (youth and adults working together as partners). Investigating each level of involvement separately helps to attain a more accurate assessment of the group dynamics that may occur.

Table 2.
Level of Youth Involvement, Adult Involvement and Youth-Adult Interaction Potentially Existing among Various Youth-Adult Relationships

Youth Involvement	Adult Involvement	Youth-Adult Interaction	Description
↑	↑	↑	Youth-Adult Partnership – High levels of youth involvement, adult involvement & interaction

↑	↓	↑	Youth-Led Collaboration – Youth take the lead with little adult direction; Adults become motivated when interacting with youth
↓	↑	↑	Adult-Led Collaboration – Adults take the lead, while youth begin as only participants; Youth become engaged when interacting with adults on activities
↑	↓	↓	Youth-Centered Leadership – High youth participation; Little or no involvement/interest from adults
↓	↑	↓	Adult-Centered Leadership – Little involvement (decision-making) or interaction from youth; If involved, youth may serve only as passive participants
↑	↑	↓	Participatory Separation - This indicates that youth and adults both display high levels of involvement/interest on separate tasks, but the participants are not effectively working together
↓	↓	↑	Social Participant Interaction - Situation where there is little involvement in the group beyond social interaction when participants come together (i.e., youth/adults socializing at a community cookout)
↓	↓	↓	Youth-Adult Isolation - No interest in partnering; No progress towards a common goal is achieved; Relationships can not exist in this situation

Note. ↑ = High; ↓ = Low

Conclusion

The purpose of the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale is to assess the perceptions and experiences of youth and adults interacting together at some level within youth development programs. However, the scale's use does not have to be restricted to a structured youth program (e.g., 4-H/youth development, school projects), but can be used to determine the strengths and weaknesses of a youth-adult partnership created to address community issues (e.g., neighborhood peace rally, organizing a faith-based initiative). Specifically, the measure assesses youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction to determine the appropriate category of a group's youth-adult relationship, based on the Continuum of Youth-Adult Relationships.

The scale also serves as a means for participants to evaluate their own experiences, which may be helpful in determining the quality of experiences and areas that need strengthening. For example, a youth service provider may sense that a program is of high quality because youth and adults seem to be working well together. However, a more accurate assessment could be conducted by allowing the participants to complete the rating scale to discover whether they rate their experiences as high or low (i.e., positive or negative).

The youth service provider can also utilize Table 2 to discover whether the youth and adults perceive high levels of youth involvement, adult involvement, and youth-adult interaction among their group. If the findings reveal that the group is experiencing an unsatisfactory relationship, the results of the group members' responses should give some indication as to what component(s) of the relationship needs improvement (whether more motivation for youth or adult involvement or more emphasis on youth-adult interaction.). Empowering participants to assess their experiences provides a youth service provider with pertinent information to determine what may be necessary to improve or maintain the quality within youth-adult relationships.

An asset of the Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale is that it empowers youth and adults to participate by evaluating their own experiences (thus minimizing the assumptions of the researcher or youth development professional), while allowing a more specific identification of characteristics that exist among various youth-adult relationships. The Involvement and Interaction Rating Scale provides a meaningful and practical tool that contributes to the literature on youth-adult relationships, including youth-adult partnerships. In turn, it allows us to move closer to determining the criteria for achieving positive development for all youth.

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