Can Adults Accept Youth as Equal Partners in Communities?

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Abstract: Communities benefit from meaningful involvement by individuals of all ages, but adults don't always perceive youth as legitimate, crucial contributors to community decision-making processes. The purpose of the study reported here was to determine if adults who participated with youth in the Horizons program changed their attitudes, opinions, and behaviors when working with young people on community issues or projects. Results indicate a positive change in adult attitudes, opinions, and behaviors when working with youth following the Horizons program community conversations and leadership training.

The Energy of Today's Youth

Today's youth are full of ideas and energy, and often want to make positive changes in their communities. Youth are very much aware of the problems that face their communities and will help solve problems if empowered through participation (Rennekamp, 1993; Zeldin, 2000; Rasmussen, 2003; Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007). Unfortunately, young people are not often allowed ample opportunities to make their own decisions or to be part of the community decision-making process. Adults often have good intentions but are not accustomed to working with young people on issues affecting organizations and communities.

Twenty-one communities in North Dakota recently completed an 18-month community leadership development program that encourages youth involvement alongside the adults. This program, called

Horizons, works to develop local leaders to address challenging community issues such as poverty and demographic decline. Youth and adult partnerships have become an outcome of this program in many communities.

Communities participating in Horizons are required to complete two programs; (a) a Study Circles community conversation on poverty; and (b) LeadershipPLENTY®, a program to develop local leaders. In these programs, youth and adults are encouraged to work together to discuss ways to partner and work on efforts affecting their town. Both youth and adults can take leadership roles, but it is suggested they work together, in partnership, on community activities and projects.

After completing both the Study Circles conversations and the LeadershipPLENTY® material, adults in each participating rural community were asked to complete a survey to determine any changed attitudes, opinions, or behaviors when working on community discussions or projects with youth. The survey provided information as to whether true partnerships were forming and whether the adults were able to change their attitudes, opinions, and behaviors towards youth involvement in community work.

Overview of Youth-Adult Partnerships

Those in Extension who plan community development and leadership programs should, and often, work to engage youth in their processes. Even if youth and adults participate together in leadership learning activities, the question is often raised whether or not youth and adults can be true partners in community projects, or whether adults believe that fewer mistakes are made in carrying out any program if adults perform the tasks themselves (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007).

The process of community development is one that involves all segments of the community, including residents young and old. Wilkinson (1991) defines community as a "locality, a local society, and a process of locality-oriented collective actions" (p. 2). The interactional theory of community developed by Kaufman (1959) and later refined by Wilkinson (1970) views the community as an interactional field that serves as the primary setting for contact between individuals and society. One aspect of this theory is the community field, where the focus is to build the knowledge, skills, and capacity of the residents and then interconnect them with organizations to solve critical issues for their community (Wilkinson, 1991). Youth and adults working together can assist in capacity building within this community field.

Community development often requires partnerships, and a true partnership exists when each person's contribution is valued. A true youth-adult partnership exists when each party has an equal chance to use skills, make decisions, communicate openly, and carry out tasks to reach common goals (Rennekamp, 1993; Isreal & Ilvento, 1995; Camino, 2000; Jones & Perkins, 2005).

Communities benefit from meaningful youth involvement, but communities often fall short of totally engaging those citizens who will be most affected by decision making (Rasmussen, 2003; Wolf, 2001). Previously held negative beliefs regarding age and lack of experience of youth have challenged youth involvement in communities. If young people are not viewed as essential contributors because of these misconceptions and stereotypes, the expectations and opportunities are lowered for them by adults (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007).

Rennekamp (1993) indicates that young people today are significantly aware of the vast array of problems that surround their communities and lives. "Although there has been a recent call for greater involvement of young people in helping address these problems, few adults seem to have accepted youth as having the desire or ability to make significant contributions to their resolution" (Rennekamp, 1993, p. 1). Young people can and will participate in community problem solving if included. Collaboration with adults on community

issues can lead to enhanced skills, confidence, stronger communication skills, increased status, and ownership of the very issues they seek to resolve (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Camino, 2000).

Adults can also benefit from meaningful youth involvement. Adults engaged in youth-adult partnerships begin to perceive young people as legitimate, crucial contributors to organizational decision-making processes. Adults in these partnerships have increased commitment and energy related to the organizations they are involved in. They feel more effective and confident in working with and relating to youth, and gain an increased understanding of the concerns or needs of youth (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000). Adults in these partnerships report more positive perceptions of youth involvement and youth-adult interaction than adults in adult-led collaborations (Jones & Perkins, 2006).

In a study commissioned by the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Involvement (Zeldin et al., 2000), youth were shown to benefit from meaningful adult involvement in youth-adult partnerships because the adults in these partnerships often challenge youth to bring about further learning. Youth report appreciating access to and connections with a more complete range of human, community, and financial resources that adults provide. They also acknowledge the benefits adults bring, such as past lessons learned and a range of administrative and programming skills (Zeldin et al., 2000). Positive ongoing relationships with adults assist in nurturing youths' leadership potential (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Among organizations in Zeldin's study, those involving youth at all levels of decision making were most likely to achieve positive outcomes, principles, and practices when youth involvement became embedded within organizational culture. Young people help clarify and bring focus to an organization's mission. Adults and organizations involved in youth-adult partnerships become more connected and responsive to youth in their communities (Zeldin et al., 2000).

Methods

The population for the survey described here included adult participants in the Horizons programs in 21 rural North Dakota communities. Ten of the 21 communities that involved youth chose to complete the youth-adult partnerships survey. A total of 162 adults completed the survey.

The survey items were selected from existing assessments and inventories (Creating Youth-adult Partnerships, 1996; Making It Work, 2002) and revised to meet the needs of the study reported here. Statements of attitudinal or behavior change were developed, and the survey was constructed using a four-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The first series of questions related to attitudes and opinions of adults towards youth when working on community efforts together. The second series of questions related to the actual behaviors of adults when working with youth on community efforts. Internal validity measured by Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was 0.92.

Data Collection

The survey on youth-adult partnerships was distributed to participants in each Horizons community at the conclusion of the Study Circles and LeadershipPLENTY® training. A retrospective post- and pre-test methodology (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005) was used for this survey to identify pre- and post- scores for each participant. Demographic information including age, gender, and ethnicity was included in the survey.

The Results

A paired sample *t-test* was used on each survey item to determine the difference in pre- and post- test scores. Adults reported changes in both attitudes and behaviors related to youth-adult partnerships after participating

in the Study Circles and LeadershipPLENTY® programs through Horizons. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of a select group of survey items as well as the mean scores of the pre- and post- for each item.

Table 1.
Comparison of Adult Attitudes and Opinions Regarding Youth-adult Partnerships Before and After the Horizons Study Circles and LeadershipPLENTY® Training

Survey Item	Mean Score Before	Mean Score After	Mean Difference	T-Value
I believe that every community is filled with useful opportunities for young people to contribute	2.95	3.37	.42	8.29*
I believe that being in youth/adult partnerships will help develop a positive attitude about community's future	3.15	3.54	.39	7.60*
I believe that my role is partner, not parent or authority/expert	2.95	3.28	.33	6.58*
I believe that in community decision-making, youth and adults should make decisions together	3.21	3.53	.32	6.57*
I believe my attitude toward working with youth to help community is positive	3.22	3.51	.29	6.88*
* Indicates mean scores were statistically different at $p < .001$				

Table 2.
Comparison of Adult Behaviors Regarding Youth-adult Partnerships Before and After the Horizons Study Circles and LeadershipPLENTY® Training

Survey Item	Mean Score Before	Mean Score After	Mean Difference	T-Value
I am motivated to work with a team of individuals for our community's future	3.07	3.52	.45	9.11*
I help youth participate in the creation of rules and guidelines	2.85	3.25	.40	7.91*
I promote youth/adult partnerships to others in community	2.89	3.28	.39	8.41*

I have experienced the competence of youth working as partners with adults first hand	2.97	3.32	.35	6.81*
I am a member of a board, council or committee, where youth are equal partners	2.46	2.77	.31	6.10*
I have worked with youth on a project to make community better	2.82	3.13	.31	5.74*
I intervene supportively when young people are not respected and rights denied by adults	3.01	3.31	.30	7.59*
I work with youth to create a sense of community, to construct a place where they feel trusted, respected and empowered	2.91	3.19	.28	6.04*
I treat youth with the respect and dignity of an equal	3.18	3.38	.20	4.51*
* Indicates mean scores were statistically different at *p < .001*				

Implications and Follow-up

In the study reported here, adults reported a statistically significant change of attitudes and behaviors after discussing community issues with youth in the Horizons program. Adults were motivated to work with youth in the future on concerns affecting their community. One adult participant revealed in an open-ended survey question, "I have learned that youth have excellent ideas that will benefit the community," while another stated, "I have learned to really listen to what everyone has to say and consider it instead of trying to impose my belief system on others."

Because the youth and adult work was conducted as part of the larger Horizons program which, required participation of both youth and adults, the study suggests that a specific, deliberate program involving both youth and adults may be necessary to build awareness of youth-adult partnerships to both groups. As adults become more aware of the partnerships and potential implications, they may further support and engage youth-adult partnerships throughout the community. When adults allow youth a greater voice in collaboration, the community gains new ideas and more contributors to assist in building community capacity. As this collaboration takes place, youth will also have the opportunity to further enhance their skills, confidence and ownership.

The survey reported here did not address the attitudes and behavioral change of youth under the age of 18 involved in the Horizons program. A similar survey with a sample of youth involved in Horizons would further address potential changes in their attitudes and behaviors.

A follow-up study will be conducted to determine the extent to which youth-adult partnerships are continued after the completion of the Horizons program. Focus groups will be used to determine whether there are true, long-lasting youth-adult partnerships developing in communities.

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