

# **Implementing Middle School Youth-Adult Partnerships: A Study of Two Programs Focused on Social Change**

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## **Abstract**

Youth-adult partnerships position youth and adults in roles of equal leadership of initiatives in their schools and communities, supporting a dynamic that runs counter to traditional patterns of youth-adult interaction. This article describes the piloting of two youth-adult partnership programs aimed at supporting the development of such relationships with different core foci at the middle grades level – one on community health and the other on school pedagogical change. In comparing the challenges and opportunities of implementing these programs in the middle grades environment, we find that while youth participants perceived positive developmental outcomes as a result of their participation, adults observed difficulties in supporting the implementation of these initiatives when the goal was cultural or social change. We discuss the implications of this finding, both in terms of examining how middle grade student voice is limited and delimited, as well as suggesting opportunities to better support student-directed efforts to address inequity in their schools and communities.

## **Introduction**

Industrial era models of schooling encourage the fulfillment of traditional teacher-student relationships that position youth as the passive recipients of adult efforts to educate them (Au, 2007; Cuban, 2007; Sahlberg, 2010). This reification of student and teacher roles has become even more pronounced in an era of high-stakes testing in which students are encouraged to submit to a model of teaching that promotes endless test preparation and in which non-testable skills such as the cultivation of leadership, civic responsibility, or social emotional learning critical for positive youth development are often pushed out (Au; Mitra & Serriere, 2012). It is no wonder that many students report feeling powerless at school, alienated, and ultimately, disengaged (Kupchick & Catlaw, 2015; Mitra, 2008a; Putnam, 2001; Rubin & Silva, 2003).

While efforts must be taken to address these feelings at all school levels, combatting these feelings at the middle grades level is critical to preventing under-achievement and the potential for drop-out in later grades (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Schlechty, 2001). In the middle

grade years, youth undertake the important task of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, which requires engaging in new ways of thinking about themselves, their role in the world, their ability to exert influence on those around them, and their sense of belonging and self-confidence. Schools play an important role in influencing youth development as middle grade students navigate this transition. One powerful way that schools can aid positive youth development during this time is through the inclusion of youth as decision-makers and change-makers in both the classroom and in school governance (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2005). Often referred to as student voice, youth-adult partnership, youth leadership or student consultation, these terms cover many activities, but fundamentally include adults consulting with youth about their education and can encompass the cultivation of individual youth's leadership skills to youth working with adults to organize for school change and reform (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Fielding & Rudduck, 2002; Mitra & Kirshner, 2012; Wheeler, 2000).

Youth-adult partnership, or youth and adults working as equal participants towards a common goal, is a practice drawn from the youth

development literature that has been shown to have benefits for young people by giving them opportunities to assume new roles in leading and teaching in their communities, build new connections with both peers and adults, and assume new responsibility for their community and environment (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Wheeler, 2000; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). Youth-adult partnerships disrupt traditional relationships between young people and adults by working from an assumption of youth capability and agency, rather than passivity, and the value of young people's ideas and leadership (Mitra, 2008a; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). While there is a growing body of research that points to the benefits to young people, teachers and school culture from including students as decision-makers in school environments, cultivating successful youth-adult partnership or student voice practices can be especially challenging at the middle grade level in which many adults still harbor doubts about youth readiness for voice and decision-making responsibilities. Despite a recognition by adults working with middle grade youth of the importance of developing young people's voices (Downes, Bishop, & Nagle, 2010), there is often a disconnect between this desire and the actual practice of soliciting student perspectives on meaningful issues within the community, particularly school reform (Rubin & Silva, 2003).

To address this disconnect, practitioners sometimes solicit help from outside organizations to build capacity and support their efforts (Mitra, Perkins & Sanders, 2010). Based in Vermont, UP for Learning is one such intermediary organization that partners with schools to support "unlocking the power of partnership for learning", and specifically, promoting and sustaining youth-adult partnerships in schools. While UP for Learning has worked for many years with Vermont's high schools, the organization has recently expanded its efforts to support the expansion of student involvement in school decision-making and youth-adult partnership at the middle school level through the adaptation of two of its high-school programs, the "Great Expectations" program and the "Getting to Y"

program. Both programs use these partnerships as a platform to cultivate youth leadership as well as involve youth in the redress of social and school-based inequality and injustice.

Through one-day "train the trainer" style seminars, UP for Learning provides small groups of educators and youth from middle grade schools the facilitative leadership skills and information they need to implement a project or campaign that models authentic youth-adult partnership principles for their school and invites more students and educators to become interested in the potential of youth-adult partnership for transforming teacher-student relationships and elevating regard for student voices in schools. Thus, each of these programs seeks to fulfill the dual purpose of addressing school and community equity issues as well as transforming youth-adult relationships by promoting youth leadership and voice. However, evidence from high school youth-adult partnership programs have shown that given that the strength of traditional mental models of student-teacher relationships in most schools, there are many factors which may create obstacles for the expansion and integration of these practices beyond the group itself, including unsupportive administration or faculty, lack of group organization, competing institutional priorities or insufficient time or resources (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2008a; Mitra, 2005). Few studies, however, have examined these issue within the context of middle grade schools.

In this study, we discuss the experiences of educators and youth implementing youth-adult partnership initiatives in their schools through examining their implementation of two UP for Learning middle grade pilot programs and specifically look at both the program aims and school structures that influence that implementation and the subsequent positioning of youth as agents of change for their schools and communities. Campbell and Erbstein (2012) suggest that youth-adult partnership efforts have the potential to create change on multiple levels, including individual changes for participating

youth as well as changes in the school or community. Therefore, the research questions guiding this inquiry were:

- 1) How do youth-adult partnership practices affect positive youth development of middle grades students?
- 2) To what extent are youth-adult partnerships at the middle grade level able to position youth as social and school change agents?

### Conceptual Framework

To explore the unique opportunities and challenges in the establishment and expansion of youth-adult partnership and student voice practices at the middle grades level, we use concepts from the literature on positive youth development to examine perceptions of the outcomes of positioning youth as partners with adults in decision-making. Our study draws

specifically upon the “ABCDE”s of youth development – agency, belonging, competence, discourse and efficacy – to understand how youth-adult partnership influences youth leadership development and school/community culture change in the middle grades (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). These concepts originate from psychological and youth development research, as well as previous studies examining both elementary and middle school youth engaging in student voice work. Building from a belief in positioning youth as assets to their schools and communities, these concepts describe the skills that youth need to be successful in both school and in their lives and are an important outcome of including youth as decision-makers and change-agents in school. Table 1 provides a summary of these five components of youth development, as well as a brief definition of each term and the specific ways that youth might display these qualities as they participate in youth-adult partnership activities.

Table 1

*Definition of the ABCDEs of youth developmental assets*

Youth developmental asset	Conceptual definition
<b>Agency</b>	Acting or exerting influence and power in a given situation
<b>Belonging</b>	Developing meaningful relationships with other students and adults and having a role at the school
<b>Competence</b>	Developing new abilities and being appreciated for one’s talents
<b>Discourse</b>	Exchange of ideas and diverse opinions to work toward a common goal
<b>(Civic) Efficacy</b>	Cognitive belief that one can make a difference in the world, and the responsibility to do so.

(From Mitra & Serriere, 2012)

Agency refers to youth’s ability to influence their circumstances (Larson, Walker & Pearce, 2005). Youth-adult partnership practices have been shown to create opportunities for youth to engage in influential leadership activities that can

increase their belief in their own agency (Mitra, 2004). Youth-adult partnership work can also create a sense of belonging in students by increasing their feelings of connection to their peers (Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2004), as

well as by increasing their opportunities to build positive relationships with both adults and community members by providing students and teachers alternative ways that subvert engrained or patterned of interaction (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000; Goodenow, 1993; Mitra, 2004).

Additionally, youth-adult partnership work has been shown to increase students' competence by providing them with the opportunity to address new types of problems in schools that move beyond those contrived in the classroom and to engage in community-based problem-solving, as well as to identify, display and use their unique talents (Villarruel & Lerner, 1994). Students often are able to experiment by assuming a variety of new roles as a result of their participation in these groups, including leader, teacher, visionary, and supporter (Larson et al., 2005; Perkins & Borden, 2003).

While these three concepts of agency, belonging and competence are concepts commonly found in discourse and research on positive youth development, Mitra and Serriere (2012) in their work on student voice with non-high school aged students add the assets of discourse and efficacy. Student voice initiatives may provide youth with the opportunity to develop their ability to articulate their thoughts in public forums, to address a wide range of audiences, and to develop the ability to speak confidently and persuasively in a context of community diversity and democratic deliberation (Gutmann, 1999; Parker, 2003). Related to this ability is civic efficacy, or the cognitively and socially constructed belief that one is able to make a difference in the world (Bandura, 2000). Civic efficacy centers around one's self belief in the importance of making a difference in the world (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

The ABCDEs as a framework are helpful for understanding changes in both youth and school practice that result from the programs based around youth-adult partnerships because of its articulation of the changes one can expect to see in students and schools engaging in student voice practices. For instance, research has indicated

that in organizations where attention is given to cultivating these youth assets is strong, youth have opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Costello et al., 2000; Pittman, Irby & Ferber, 2000); to engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993; Takanishi, 1993); to develop closer and more intimate connection with adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Takanishi); and to assume more active classroom roles (Costello, Toles et al.).

**Background on the Great Expectations and the Getting to Y programs.** UP for Learning's Great Expectations program, originally introduced in several Vermont high schools, invites youth and adults to work together as partners to change their school culture around expectations for learners. Schools face many challenges in remodeling their cultural and pedagogical practices to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, including the maintenance of high expectations that students feel ready and able to meet. The program's theory of action positions youth-adult groups to become messengers to their school communities of the latest research around the relationship between learning and the brain, the role of self-expectation and others' expectations on academic performance, and a critical examination of both youth and adults ingrained beliefs about ability. Much of the program focuses on educating youth and adults about the difference of growth and fixed mindsets about student ability – both with regard to self-expectation and beliefs about others (Dweck, 2006).

The program was originally designed for high school level youth and has been rolled out at five Vermont high schools in the past two years. Youth and adult teams must plan and facilitate dialogue-driven events at their schools for both their peers and faculty members such as discussing video clips, putting on skits about how the brain works and inviting participants to transform statements that reflect a fixed mindset to ones that reflect a growth mindset. In 2013, UP for Learning decided to redesign this program for the middle school level in order to both expand their middle

level program offerings and to support the development of youth-adult partnership relationships earlier in students' school experiences.

Similarly, UP for Learning's Getting to Y program, an initiative run in conjunction with the Vermont Department of Health, is designed to position youth-adult teams as leaders of community reflection on the existence of resiliency, healthy behaviors, and an asset-based approach to community change. The stated goal of the Getting to Y program as articulated in the Getting to Y program guide is to "reduce the high risk behaviors of young people, by increasing healthy behaviors or assets." The program's theory of action is to position youth as researchers, making them the experts on their community's health data, and positioning them to share that expertise with their school and community.

To accomplish this, UP for Learning trains teams of youth leaders and adults to work in partnership through an action-research cycle, beginning with an analysis of their individual school's data from the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Surveys (YRBS). The Vermont YRBS are two state-wide surveys which collect school-level data from every educational institution in the state of Vermont and measure youth risk and resiliency factors for both middle and high school age students. Youth-adult teams lead middle grade students in an analysis of the survey to identify community assets and challenges around healthy behaviors. These assets and challenges become the jumping off point for a Community Dialogue night to which youth, parents, and faculty are invited to talk about healthy behavior in their community. Finally, youth-adult teams then use these discussions to craft action plans to increase healthy behaviors of those around them. For the past five years, high schools across Vermont have participated in the Getting to Y program. In the program's sixth year, the Getting to Y program was piloted for the first time with middle school youth-adult facilitation teams using the recently available middle school YRBS data.

Both of the programs are based on three key ideas, all derived from current research on youth development: a) dialogue driven change; b) an asset-driven or strengths-based approach to learning and c) youth-adult partnership. We discuss each of these key concepts in more detail.

**Dialogue driven change.** The dialogue driven approach is derived explicitly from the work of developmental psychologists such as Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Maslow (1968), whose work centers around the ways in which individuals need to feel a sense of belonging within a community. The program marries this work with that of social scientists and organizational theorists such as Margaret Wheatley (2011) and Michael Fullan (2007), whose work suggests that such belonging is achieved for youth within schools when democratic processes are in place that allow them to be heard.

**Strengths-based or asset-driven approach.** All of UP for Learning's programs are based in a strengths-driven approach. The Getting to Y program is also based in the research from the Search Institute on community development and the 40 adolescent developmental assets (Benson, 2007). The concept of developmental assets links both internal and external factors in youth's lives to create a framework for supporting positive youth development (Benson et al., 2012). Getting to Y teams frame their approach to the data in the idea of reducing risk by increasing and leveraging developmental assets.

**Youth-adult partnership.** Additionally, the program is based in research on the potential of youth-adult partnership to engage students in both their learning and in community development (Mitra, 2008a, 2008b; Wheeler, 2000; Zeldin et al., 2005). Youth-adult partnerships exist when youth and adults engage in equitable, cooperative relationships to work towards a specified end (Wheeler, 2000). In the case of the Getting to Y and Great Expectations programs, student leaders and teachers work together in order to facilitate groups of other middle school students and teachers in either a

cycle of action-research based on their analysis of the YRBS data or dialogue about the culture of expectations within the school. As a form of student voice, youth-adult partnerships have been shown to increase students' sense of agency, belonging, self-confidence, public speaking ability and engagement with school (Mitra, 2004).

It is clear from these descriptions, drawn from the curricular materials of the programs themselves, that their theories of action are inclusive of activities and outcomes that are considered to fall within the realm of positive youth development as well as aims which fall within the realm of activism by seeking to subvert social and cultural practices that contribute to inequity within the school environment. However, the Getting to Y program generally focuses youth and adults efforts outwards towards the community at large, while the Great Expectations program focuses youth-adult efforts inwards toward the pedagogical practices of the school.

## Methods

Data for this qualitative study were collected as part of evaluations of two programs conceived and conducted by the intermediary organization UP for Learning. Both programs were introduced to the middle grades level in the Fall of 2013 after having enjoyed several years of sustainable implementation at the high school level. These evaluations, while conducted separately, were

guided by similar questions, including a) assessing middle school teams response to the training provided by UP for Learning; b) understanding the challenges and opportunities of implementing these initiatives at the middle grades level; and c) assessing the changes in attitudes, beliefs or behaviors of students or staff, both on the facilitation teams and in the school at large, as a result of implementing these youth-adult partnership programs.

To explore these questions, schools in both the programs were recruited to participate in these evaluations. We invited all six schools participating in the Great Expectations program and the nine schools participating in the Getting to Y program to be a part of each evaluation. Of these, 10 schools chose to participate, including several schools that were unable to implement the program fully on returning to their schools. Of the four non-participating schools, two schools declined to participate and three schools could not be reached after successive attempts to contact their adult advisors.

As can be seen in Table 2, these evaluations drew from a variety of data sources which were integrated for the purposes of this study's research question in order to identify common and divergent themes between these two programs. In the following sections, each of these data sources is discussed in detail.

Table 2

### *Data Sources for each program*

<b>Great Expectations Program</b>	<b>Getting to Y Program</b>
5 out of 6 schools participated in study	5 out of 9 schools participated in the study
5 interviews (phone/email) with adult advisors	5 interviews (phone) with adult advisors
2 phone-based focus groups with 7 students	4 phone-based focus groups with 13 students
2 school-based observations	2 video-based observations

**Interviews and focus groups.** Six phone-based focus groups were conducted with both youth and adults participants, ranging in size from three to seven participants. In total, 19 students participated in these focus groups. Additionally, individual interviews were conducted with adult advisors at participating schools, resulting in 10 individual interviews. Adult advisors' roles in their schools ranged from the principal to classroom teacher to substance abuse advisor. Most of the participating youth were in the seventh or eighth grades at their schools, with a small number of groups including sixth graders. Focus groups and interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 45 minutes and were conducted over the phone. In the case of one focus group, the speaker phone made it very difficult for the interviewer to hear and therefore the teacher did a lot of paraphrasing of what the participating students said. Where possible, however, the original words of the students are reported. Interviews and focus groups were centered on understanding the experience of youth and adults in translating the curriculum of the respective programs into action-plans. In the case of the Great Expectations curriculum, these conversations focused on presentations to and dialogues with students and faculty around research on mindsets and expectations. In the case of the Getting to Y program, these conversations were centered around the team's approach to planning and facilitating a Data Analysis Day and a Community Dialogue Night at their schools, as well as understanding how youth understood the concept of "healthy behavior" and leadership as a result of participating in this curriculum and on their leadership team.

**Observations and document analysis.** In addition to interviews, observation of UP for Learning's one-day trainings for both programs in October of 2013 allowed the researchers to establish a base line for both the dynamics of the youth-adult partnership groups at each school and the primary engagement of youth with the content of the training and an understanding of the curriculum. During this time, the observing researcher did not participate, but sat separate from the activities and took

detailed field notes. Additional observations were conducted through two school-based site visits to observe planning meetings and presentations to students at two of the schools participating in the Great Expectations. Video footage of similar presentations conducted by schools participating in the Getting to Y program were also reviewed. Additionally, both programs' curriculum documents as well as other materials such as videos and handouts designed to support implementation were reviewed.

The data from all of these sources were analyzed using a constant comparative method with a focus on the questions guiding this study (namely, the youth development outcomes for middle grades students and the positioning of youth as agents of change), where unique concepts discussed by the participants were assigned codes and then as new codes are created, those codes were compared with previous codes, added to and revised to reflect the evolving nature of that concept (Saldana, 2013). These codes included categories related to conceptual understandings related to strengths-based thinking, leadership, and personal growth, the process of translating the training into action, working in youth-adult partnership, and working with the broader community. Using these, detailed narratives were constructed for each school participating in each program and these narratives were compared and condensed to construct master narratives for each program (Polkinghorne, 1995). Themes regarding youth leadership development and school culture change were then drawn from these narratives.

## **Findings**

In the Fall of 2013, UP for Learning invited Vermont middle schools to participate in two one-day training initiatives designed to launch these two programs. Six schools attended the Great Expectations initiative training and nine attended the Getting to Y initiative training. The all-day trainings were attended by school groups of 5 to 12 middle grade students, along with one or two adult advisors. Many of the groups participating in both programs were made up of students participating in existing leadership groups at their

schools, such as student councils, student leadership teams, or participants of the state-sponsored Vermont Kids Against Tobacco program. Focus groups with student participants revealed that students selected for participation in these standing groups were generally not elected, but rather recommended by teachers or were selected through a rigorous application process. As a result, the groups were generally not representative of middle grade students at these schools, but rather consisted of students who had demonstrated burgeoning leadership skills or who were sufficiently motivated and organized to complete the application process.

**Translating training to implementation.** For many of the participating middle grades students, the modeling of successful facilitation by participating high school students at UP for Learning's one-day trainings was inspirational. At the Great Expectations training, the high school facilitators conducted a question and answer panel at the conclusion of the day and allowed aspiring middle school facilitators the opportunity to ask whatever questions they had regarding how to be a successful facilitator. As one of the adult advisors recounted, "The activities were run by students, and I know afterwards my kids felt very confident in coming back and leading some of those activities themselves." Another adult advisor for a Getting to Y group mentioned that the student trainers were her group's favorite part of the day.

Several adult advisors reported that the modeling of activities using the loop-input method (Woodward, 1988) which has students participate in the activities that they are going to then facilitate themselves, followed by a period of reflection, was helpful in exciting the student groups also and creating a sense of empowerment amongst the students. As one adult advisor told us, "There was a buzz in the car afterwards on our way home. The [students] have continued to talk about it – they found it all really fascinating."

Following the return to school, however, participants at non-implementing schools reported that the usual well-documented set of

organizational challenges that often frustrate formal student voice or youth-adult partnership efforts were quick to create obstacles (Mitra, 2008a; Mitra & Biddle, 2014). Some schools faced a lack of adult support for their efforts, including principals with leadership priorities that were focused on other sets of issues or too few teachers willing to help get the events that these groups wanted to plan off the ground. One adult advisor told us:

The kids went. They had a great experience. But we were also in the midst of a new contract this year, so the extracurricular contract didn't come out. I didn't even know if we were going to have a club stipend to run this. It fell into a perfect storm of reasons why this got pushed to the back burner in terms of things we worked on.

Another advisor noted the loss of momentum that happened as the year moved forward:

[It was challenging] because I think we were really energized by the conference and excited because there were other students but then it's February and we're still meeting once a week on early Tuesday morning and everyone's still very distant from the conference at this point.

In order to address the research questions being explored in this study, the following narratives focus on the experiences of the eight schools (three Great Expectations schools and five Getting to Y schools) which were able to overcome some of these well-documented organizational challenges and translate the components of UP for Learning's training into implemented programming. Evidence from non-implementing schools, such as email updates from adult advisors or schools declining to participate in the study, suggests that it was these factors – time, money, or lack of sufficient adult support – which primarily contributed to the failure of these schools to implement.

Of the five schools which participated in this study of the Great Expectations program, only



two schools – Red Leaf Middle School and Slate Middle School – were able to fully implement the Great Expectations program while Pinewood Middle School was able to partially implement it, meaning that the group was able to plan activities but there was little follow through on the activities themselves. A greater number of schools seemed to have been able to move forward with the Getting to Y program, hosting a Data Analysis Day and organizing a Community Dialogue Night. By examining schools which were able to overcome these beginning challenges, we can better understand the additional factors which affected these programs' implementation and reception in these middle grade schools.

**Implementation and the uneven development of the ABCDEs.** Students in both the Great Expectations and Getting to Y focus groups expressed happy surprise at the new skills and abilities they saw developing in themselves as a result of their participation. In the following sections, these are discussed in relation to the ABCDEs of youth development. However, we found that the types of skills that students saw themselves developing were different in the Great Expectations and the Getting to Y programs, despite the programs' similarities. We discuss this in the context of the observations of the programs' adult advisors, who discussed some of the contextual difficulties of the implementation of these two programs and the complex positions that they found themselves in vis-a-vis supporting youth's roles as change agents in their schools and communities.

***Perceptions of youth's development of belonging and discourse.*** Developing a sense of belonging can be an important outcome of participation on youth-adult partnership initiatives and is constituted by developing meaningful relationships between other students and adults at the school and in the community. Students in the Great Expectations focus groups barely mentioned new connections to their peers or adults at all, opting instead to talk more about the dynamics of their groups and the factors that led to group attrition or how the group dealt with stress. However, all of the Getting to Y students in

the focus groups were very positive about their experiences both planning and leading their peers through data analysis sessions and communities through their dialogue nights, despite the fact that a worry expressed during the one-day facilitator trainings was that, "Other students won't listen to us," or reports from adult advisors that students felt intimidated by the public speaking components of the program. Some students' trepidation about assuming the new leadership and educative roles required of them with the support of their adult advisors seemed to be mitigated by the actual doing of leadership of activities for peers and adults in their school and greater communities, as well as help from adult advisors in reflecting on how to organize and assume roles that were appropriately challenging but not overwhelming.

The lack of confidence participating Getting to Y students expressed about their peers seemed to shift over their participation in the program, as the action-research cycle based in the YRBS data gave youth leaders new opportunities to interact with peer and adults around issues of health, stimulating dialogue on these topics about what healthy and risky behaviors they observed in their own communities. In focus group discussions, student leaders told us that they were surprised at the engagement and interest of their peers in community health issues and how respectful their peers were of student leaders' desire to stimulate dialogue and create action plans designed to address their collective concerns. As one student said, "Some were really interested in it and some weren't, but when they were interested, they were *really* interested and they *really* cared about what we were saying." This sentiment was repeated over and over in the focus groups with student participants. It was clear that the opportunity to hear from peers who they considered unlike themselves was meaningful for students. In an expression of new sympathy for educators, another student observed, "It really made me realize how challenging it is to keep all the kids' attention, not just for one day but every day."

Developing discourse is the ability to speak persuasively, exchange diverse opinions and work

towards a common goal. Although several adult advisors expressed the belief that the students in their groups were “leadership-y” or more vocal than other non-participating students in their school, it was clear from observing both of the one-day trainings in the Fall of 2013 that students in both programs did come to this work with differing levels of comfort around public speaking and self-expression. Some students were jumping out of their seats to answer questions at the training while others sat quietly, reticent to participate in even the small group discussions with peers at their own school.

Students in focus groups for both programs discussed the ways in which they had been challenged to experiment with public speaking with a broader diversity of audiences than they had previously had experience with (peers and adults). One student said that a big take-away from the one-day training in the fall was how the high school students had, “talked and all that, and how they weren’t scared and all that.” Another Great Expectations student said, “I don’t really like speaking in front of people so it was a little challenging for me, but I just did it.” This student went on to say that different students were comfortable taking different levels of risk. In his words:

We had assigned everybody something to do, but then if somebody ... like some people didn’t feel comfortable reading to the classes, so they decided that they didn’t want to [do that].

At this school, the adult advisor intervened to help students brainstorm roles that involved different levels of public presentation that fit their level of comfort. For example, for some students, standing in front of the whole school was itself an intimidating challenge, while other students took charge of emceeding the presentation using the microphone and running a slide show. In the words of one adult advisor:

I would say one thing – I’m really proud of all of these students. For some of them, [they are] pretty comfortable talking in

front of anybody but for some of these students, they really stepped out of their comfort zone and they demonstrated their own growth mindset in order to facilitate not only in front of their peers but also in front of the faculty gathering. It was really wonderful and the faculty was incredibly impressed by these students.

Despite these varying levels of comfort, maintaining youth’s position as the messengers, however, was important to the adult advisors, even with these differentiated levels of challenge. As one teacher noted:

Adults can come up with all kinds of concerns and action plans and strengths but if the full community and the broad community don’t hear it from a student voice then it doesn’t make a huge difference.

**Perceptions of youth’s development of agency, competence and efficacy.** Both the Getting to Y and Great Expectations programs are designed to facilitate the positioning of youth as agents of change in their schools and communities, a positioning which is meant to enhance the development of their own agency, their sense of competence and their sense of civic efficacy. However, while Getting to Y students in our focus groups clearly expressed the ways in which participating in these programs had made them feel more responsibility to their community, their school, and more confidence in their ability to lead change, students participating in the Great Expectations program felt more ambiguously about both the outcomes of the program and their role in facilitating those outcomes. Complicating the narrative further, adult advisors of both programs questioned the support for students’ change-making abilities within the context of existing school practices and resources.

Overall, youth participants from the schools which were able to implement the Getting to Y program, with its orientation towards community health initiatives and awareness raising, reported

feeling more agency. Getting to Y students expressed feeling empowered by the clarity of the action research process embedded in the Getting to Y curriculum, which gave them a structure to work towards action in their community in a way that they might not have been able to navigate on their own. One student said:

It kind of helps you see what is happening in your school versus what you see. Like you can actually see results in what people do that you might not know about otherwise.

For another student, this “ability to see” shifted his perspective about his relationship to the community, or his sense of civic efficacy. In his own words:

I think that it’s changed my perspective...Before, I was sort of detached, I mean I really didn’t know about any of this stuff. I didn’t really have a role to kind of learn about it, kind of fix it, so it’s changed my perspective and view on things, now that I know than when I didn’t.

Students observed that the strengths-based approach of the program and the curriculum ensured that attention was spent on both opportunities as well as challenges for the community, helping youth evade the trap of deficit-based thinking and to focus on leveraging strengths to address challenges. As one student put it:

Before I was a part of Getting to Y, I didn’t know about any of these and ...it changed my perspective on how these problems can be serious. How it’s good to work towards the strengths because it makes all of our lives better.

For this young person, having the framework of strengths-based thinking made her feel more responsibility to her community. Within the context of an institution (school) which often emphasizes individual achievement and a society

that increasingly emphasizes individual over collective well-being (Au, 2007), students partnering with adults in the Getting to Y program demonstrated an awareness of and concern for the well-being of their communities as a whole, and particularly their peers. Students reported feeling a sense of responsibility for community and peer well-being. As one student said, “I’ve learned about myself that even if I don’t want to be a leader, sometimes I should be a leader to help others.”

However, adult advisors felt that the school’s ability to support youth in their new role as community change agents was limited. While adult advisors reported that the dialogic aspects of the curriculum resulted in powerful and meaningful conversations between youth and adults about healthy behaviors, the action projects which resulted from these dialogues produced a unique series of dilemmas for adult advisors in their implementation.

Adult advisors reported that the dialogic structure of the Getting to Y program allowed youth concerns to shine through more strongly to adults in their communities. For some schools, the dialogue that was stimulated by the curriculum sparked new awareness about issues specific to a school’s culture that could be changed to promote on-going dialogue about healthy behaviors. In one case, the adult advisor related that there had been four adult suicides within the broader community in which her school is situated, including some adults who had worked at the school. During some of the dialogue relating to the YRBS data relating to the number of students who had considered suicide, it came out that students felt that suicide was a taboo topic within the school. As this adult advisor said:

One of their comments was, ‘You know, no one wants to talk about suicide. Whenever we try to talk about suicide, everyone always gets quiet. Why doesn’t anyone want to talk about it?’ I didn’t realize we were doing that.

For another 7-12 school at which a high school student had committed suicide, the dialogue built into the Getting to Y curriculum served a similar effect, also cathartic as students and adults talked about this painful event during the Data Analysis Day.

However, many schools found that the action phase of the action research cycle, meant to be the launching point for social and cultural change in community health and well-being, was insufficiently structured to be able to support middle grade students' success at stimulating this change. While some groups undertook initiatives that were fairly straightforward, such as helmet use during contact sports and biking, others took on issues with complex socio-cultural legacies. A powerful example of this comes from one school at which the Getting to Y youth-adult team identified homophobia as a pervasive problem at their school. In the words of their adult advisor:

The group that looked at mean behaviors found that it was homophobia that is the source of these put downs or negative talk. They don't have any training... Do I stop and do a homophobia workshop with them or do they get to say they're going to do a kiva [structured dialogue/presentation] about homophobia? They can't lead that, really, because they don't have any training themselves on homophobia at all. It really won't go very far. Then it becomes, I don't want the school to say we've already tried that, the kids did a talk about homophobia. [The students] really have no knowledge and they're scared to even call the center that would give them more information about homophobia.

It was difficult for some adult advisors, many of whom were working alone with youth, to successfully scaffold students to success in these situations without sufficient time to discuss with students the underlying causes or the background of many of the social issues which were embedded in the YRBS data. Adult advisors discussed in their interviews the challenges of supporting

students to address these and other issues, such as body image with a group that wanted to address this issue by having everyone come to school dressed the same way, or substance abuse, in culturally and socio-emotionally sensitive ways.

By contrast, while the participating Great Expectations students described the concepts from the program as personally useful, it was clear from two observations of team's presentations to their peers that struggled to successfully communicate these core concepts to their peers and teachers. Furthermore, adult advisors observed that the nature of the change – changing perceptions about the brain and the way people learn – was a challenging, slow process that gave students little opportunity to see the fruits of their efforts.

The train the trainer approach that students found helpful in supporting their skill development in the Getting to Y program seemed to be more difficult for youth and adults to translate into successful action for change at their schools. Although the process was modeled in a similar way, the abstract content to be delivered was more complex and challenging for students to communicate. Because the abstract nature of the content itself seemed to be more challenging for the students, the adult advisors partnering with youth as part of the initiative were forced to assume more of an active role in facilitating the planning. Advisors told me in their interviews that striking a balance between youth leadership and adult leadership in this case felt challenging as they struggled to figure out how to best scaffold student efforts. As the Pinewood adult advisor said:

They're more than willing to do something with it. It's just been trying to find the right thing to do with them. By that, I mean kind of waiting for them to—I felt like I've been kind of going after them and saying, 'Hey! Why don't we do this? Or why don't we do that?' That's not really the point of Great Expectations. It's to get them to start thinking about what they want to do. How do they think this information is best given their peers and

stuff like that? It's been a balancing act I guess that way.

The stress of putting together the presentations caused attrition in both the Pinewood and the Slate groups. As one student said, "Some people didn't feel comfortable... so they decided that they didn't want to, so that kind of .. the people that would do it just kind of narrowed down to two or three people." Youth who made it to the end felt empowered by what they had accomplished, reporting surprised at their ability to "change the way classes are structured and everything." However, these feelings of agency were reported by students who had also chosen to stay in the program.

A takeaway for some of the youth was endurance in the face of uncertain leadership. "You kind of got to see how people work under stress," one youth said, "like, if people would do what they were supposed to do or if they kind of left it up to everybody else." In the end, instead of developing youth leadership capacity, the program's success at the schools which were able to implement it seemed to rely on students that already possessed sufficient confidence to continue to implement in the face of an uncertain and ambiguous process.

Participants from Slate Middle School were able to point to the clearest, most concrete example in terms of creating an actual change in the school culture. The adult advisor at this school explained this success, in spite of high student attrition from the project, in terms of the initiative's alignment with the school's own transformation priorities. Slate has been focusing on creating responsive classrooms and the faculty's professional development had largely been centered around concepts related to both expectations and more accurately identifying students' biological and cognitive learning needs. The message of the Great Expectations program led the faculty to institute "Brain Breaks" for the middle school, in which the seventh and eighth grade classes were given a short time periodically throughout the day to run around outside the school.

At other schools, however, youth-adult teams found gaining a foothold for change to be much slower. At Red Leaf, two hour-long events had been facilitated for both the seventh and eighth graders and for the faculty and at Pinewood, a sign campaign on the power of expectations had been mounted. Adult advisors at both these middle schools, however, suggested that there had been little done to capitalize on these efforts and no concrete changes could be discerned in school practice. The adult advisors at Redleaf felt that given the difficulty of the initial process, it was too difficult to also maintain momentum in the face of a school culture that did not embrace these views on ability. Similarly, at Pinewood, the adult advisor reflected,

It's slow change. I mean, I was trained to do things a certain way for three or four years (in my teacher training program). That stuff doesn't go away.

The lack of concrete change was challenging for middle school youth-adult teams as they worked to implement the Great Expectations program. In light of both attrition and few measurable wins, school teams struggled to maintain the momentum necessary to stimulate changes to school culture.

Although it was a struggle to see effort translated into meaningful change, some students reported feeling that their unique skill sets, or an opportunity to demonstrate competence, had an outlet through the Great Expectations program. For example, at the encouragement of her adult advisor during a site observation, one student shared with us that while she was not a particularly enthusiastic public speaker, she had been responsible for all of the unique drawings that were included on handouts for an activity that was facilitated by other students in her Great Expectations group. Her adult advisor went on to reiterate that finding ways for students to participate and connect with the work was important.

## Conclusion

While youth generally reported that their participation in the Getting to Y and Great Expectations programs had led to the development of some new skills and abilities, some adults partnering with youth in these programs remained skeptical about the readiness of school structures to support youth in translating this development into school-wide or community change. Furthermore, the experiences of middle grade youth-adult teams working with the Great Expectations and Getting to Y programs suggest that when it comes to implementing youth-adult partnership work in middle grade schools, a focus on traditional student leadership activities focused around community service and public service announcements may be more easily accepted and sustained than activities that seek to correct injustices or shed light on problematic pedagogical practices.

In discussing these two programs, it is possible to see how youth-adult partnership practice born out of the positive youth development literature with different foci (outside the school vs. inward) are met with different levels of acceptance and success. In the case of the Getting to Y program, an outward focus on school and community health yielded stronger feelings amongst participants that they were developing new skills and abilities as school-based youth-adult teams navigated a more service-oriented youth leadership process that tread youth development territory that felt more familiar to both students and faculty. The clear, data-driven process encouraged student leadership development and the outward focus on serving the community allowed youth-adult partnership processes to stray away from potentially ambiguous territory of attempting to change deep-seated beliefs about pedagogical practice. However, groups which veered into the territory of issue of social justice within schools (such as in the case of the group addressing homophobia) ran into implementation setbacks. As students attempted to address underlying issues of inequality, adults struggled to know how best to allow them space to explore these issues and unearth their critical

consciousness within the context of available time and resources.

Similarly, in the case of the Great Expectations program, an inward focus on changing pedagogical practice by having youth become the mouthpiece of research on expectations and ability proved difficult to move forward in schools with no specific pre-existing commitment to examining responsive classroom practices. The desire to draw attention to potentially unjust practices furthered through unequal expectations, when not aligned with school priorities, proved to be too counter-normative to existing school culture to be successful in the program's pilot year. As a result, even the goals of youth asset development suffered as groups without a clear direction and process forward lost members.

The comparison of these two cases improves our understanding of how middle grades student voice and youth-adult partnership practices are both enabled and limited by existing structures of expectations about youth leadership in middle grade schools. Middle grades youth-adult partnership that seeks uncritical engagement with traditional sites of student leadership – the promotion of community well-being, for example – are more easily piloted to success, particularly when that success is defined as positive developmental outcomes for middle grade leaders themselves, rather than the community as a whole. In this, our findings are supportive of those from other studies which have shown that while schools are often well-equipped to support the development of student leadership and youth-adult partnership towards community service and related activities, schools tend to fall short of involving youth in projects which enhance attention to injustice (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000; Lodge, 2005; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Given that youth that persevered in their participation, even in programs that struggled with their process, generally reported feeling that they had developed new skills and abilities, it is tempting to see why that might be considered a good enough outcome for a youth-adult partnership program.

The findings from this study go further, however, by suggesting a sort of paradox in middle grades student voice practice, drawn from the experiences of these participants: the importance of student voice for drawing attention to entrenched injustices or community silence on an issue (as in the case of suicide or ability), but also the lack of resources and time available within middle school structures, even those supportive of student voice, to support youth-led efforts to address injustice. This paradox is particularly acute when students' revelations about silences or inequities are not already a change priority for schools. The findings from these cases point specifically to the need for more explicit attention in middle grades schools to a) how to provide resources (time, in particular) to support the development of middle grades voices with regard to issues of social justice – the development of students' critical consciousness – and b) how we support inclusion of such efforts as integral to school's frameworks of desirable outcomes from middle grade youth leadership and youth-adult partnership (i.e., how the "success" of student voice or youth-adult partnership efforts is defined).

Integrating an explicit acknowledgement of the importance of the development of early teens' critical consciousness into our youth development frameworks and our expectations about authentic youth leadership would enable schools to better justify this use of time, better equip youth to articulate the challenges that they and others in their school community face, and provide teachers a basis for seeking assistance for supporting youth in this pursuit. Otherwise, these initiatives run the risk of simply enhancing the individual development of the middle grades students able to participate in these initiatives as they occur, rather than encouraging youth leadership and student voice practices that seeks the good of the school and community holistically. ❖

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