

# The Psychology and Practice of Youth-Adult Partnership: Bridging Generations for Youth Development and Community Change

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**Abstract** Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) has become a phenomenon of interest to scholars and practitioners. Despite the potential of Y-AP to promote positive youth development, increase civic engagement, and support community change, the practice remains unfamiliar to many. Although research has increased over the past decade, the construct remains vague with an insufficient grounding in developmental theory and community practice. This article seeks to address these gaps by synthesizing data and insights from the historical foundations of Y-AP, community based research, and case study. We propose Y-AP as a unifying concept, distinct from other forms of youth-adult relationships, with four core elements: authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocity, and community connectedness. We conclude that Y-AP functions as an active ingredient and fundamental practice for positive youth development and civic engagement. Directions for future research are offered.

**Keywords** Youth participation · Positive youth development · Organizing · Civic engagement

## Introduction

Relationships and social transactions among young people and adults in community settings have become a focus of research and practice (Evans and Prilleltensky 2007;

Seidman 2011; Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2008b). A growing body of research on youth civic development indicates that when youth take on leadership roles within organizations and communities—through initiatives that involve them in governance, organizing, activism, media, and research—youth development is enhanced and civic engagement is promoted (Christens and Peterson 2012; Flanagan and Faison 2001; Youniss et al. 1997; Sullivan and Larson 2010).

Within the context of youth civic development, youth-adult-partnership (Y-AP) has become a phenomenon of particular interest. Conceptualized as both a developmental process and as a community practice, Y-AP involves citizens across generations working together to address common concerns. Grounded in the frame of ‘free spaces’ (Evans and Boyte 1992), Y-AP emphasizes that healthy communities and organizations are dependent on the voluntary contributions of its members. All individuals are needed and deserve support in finding their proper role, regardless of age. At their best, Y-AP emphasizes mutuality and respect among youth and adults, with a goal-oriented focus on shared leading and learning (Camino 2000). Youth and adults are challenged to bring their own perspectives, experiences, and networks into the partnership. By doing so, they can potentially promote community change by stimulating critical discourse, skill development, participatory inquiry, and collective action (Linds et al. 2010; Prilleltensky 1989).

Wong et al. (2010) offer a typology of youth-adult relationships. They conclude that the pluralistic form of Y-AP is most optimal because the “shared control between youth and adults provides a social arrangement that may be ideal for both empowering youth and community development” (p. 109). From a developmental perspective, Li and Jullian (2012) and Hamilton and Hamilton (2005)

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emphasize that, especially for teenagers, “prescriptive” mentoring relationships, (i.e., where adults maintain a high degree of control), fail to engage youth and often lead to tension and discontent. These authors conclude that “developmental relationships”, characterized by a balance of power among adults and youth, are most likely to promote youth development.

But not only youth benefit from these relationships. Under certain conditions, youth contributions to organizations and communities may also promote adult and staff development, as well as strengthen local institutions, policies and programs (Benson et al. 2006; Mitra 2009; Sherrod et al. 2010; Youniss and Levine 2009; Zeldin 2004). It is for these reasons that Y-AP has become increasing salient in recommendations to strengthen philanthropy (Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth 2002), local governance (National League of Cities 2010), nonprofit management (Kunreuther et al. 2009), social justice campaigns (Linds et al. 2010), and school reform efforts (Framework for Success for All Students 2006).

Despite the potential for Y-AP to promote positive youth development, increase civic engagement, and strengthen community settings, there remain barriers to theory building, research, and practice. Even with its relatively rich history, Y-AP remains unfamiliar to many. Conceptual challenges and inconsistencies in construct definition have limited efforts to synthesize extant scholarship. Although research has increased over the past decade, there is an insufficient understanding of the core elements that underlie effective Y-AP (Wong et al. 2010; Zeldin et al. 2005).

The purpose of this article is to help fill those gaps. We begin by tracing the ways that Y-AP has become a phenomenon of interest to policy makers, practitioners, and scholars over the past 40 years. From this review, Y-AP emerges as a focal, cross-cutting construct, an active ingredient for positive youth and civic development. This leads us to define the construct in ways that are consistent with recent research and field-based conceptualizations of best practice. Finally, we bring together the perspectives of community practitioners and researchers to explore the core elements of Y-AP. Two brief case examples are presented to illustrate these core elements.

## Foundations of Youth-Adult Partnership

### Historical Perspectives

Citizen voice is a cornerstone of democracy. However, arenas of civic life—participation on public advisory groups, nonprofit boards, and community coalitions—are typically characterized by age segregation. This context

contributes to spatial isolation among generations, a lack of understanding among the younger and older members of communities, and a delay in the assumption of “adult” responsibilities by young people (Hine 1999; White and Wyn 1998). Age segregation has long been identified and questioned. Hollingshead (1949), for example, observed that within the sociology of communities, adults perceive a need to “segregate children from the real world” and to “keep the maturing child ignorant of [this] world of conflict and contradiction” (p. 149). Twenty-five years later, the President’s Science Advisory Committee (1974) concurred:

“Professionalism and bureaucratization have sharply narrowed the range of youth’s contacts with adults outside of leisure. The forces that have isolated young people and cut off certain options once available to them have not, thus, been necessarily mean or reactionary. Paradoxically, they have been, at least in original intent, enlightened and altruistic... What was once done to protect youth from manifest exploitation, now serves to reinforce the ‘outsider’ status of youth, to the point where they deprive youth of experience important to their growth and development.” [p.130].

The National Commission on Resources for Youth (1974) brought this perspective to policy by stating that youth and adults should work together on concerns that matter. This Commission identified criteria that continue to be salient in research and practice. According to the Commission, inter-generational partnerships emphasize:

“... planning and/or decision-making affecting others, in an activity whose impact or consequence extends to others, i.e., outside or beyond the youth participants themselves. There is mutuality in teaching and learning, where each age group [youth and adults] sees themselves as a resource for the other and offers what it uniquely can provide.” [p. 25]

These ideas were expanded by the National Task Force on Citizen Education (1977). After synthesizing research and expert testimony, this Task Force highlighted that youth participation in decision-making was an influential strategy for increasing civic and political knowledge, promoting personal efficacy, and encouraging later democratic action. It recommended that Y-AP be a central design element for community programs and institutions, including public schools.

Viewing young people as community resources mirrored the historical moment. Kenneth Keniston (1971), for example, explained that youth activism during the 1960s was caused by societal rejection resulting from inherent tensions between the next generation and normative

standards. The Commissions were not simply products of their times, however. Each was backed by an extensive review of developmental theory and empirical research. Building from the theoretical work of Dewey (1938), Erikson (1968) and others, the Commissions saw the antecedents of youth contribution and activism not simply as a reaction to society, but as a developmental search for identity, connection, and meaning.

With hindsight, the 1970s were the zenith of Y-AP as a cornerstone of youth policy. Labeled as ‘experiential civic learning’ when implemented in communities and as ‘education for citizen action’ when offered within schools, the practice became embedded within settings across the country (Hamilton 1980; Newman 1975). Subsequent growth, however, has been uneven. In the 1980s, a burst of reports were generated that questioned the scholarship and policy recommendations of the previous decade. Exemplified by *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), these reports reflect fears of foreign competition and declining academic standards. Rather than providing opportunities for structured learning through contribution, this Commission recommended increased time in the classroom, with more conventional instruction and testing of basic skills. This approach closely paralleled the War on Drugs which sought to inoculate youth from substance abuse through increasing their knowledge and resistance skills to ‘just say no’ to risky situations (Humphreys and Rappaport 1993). The idea of youth and adults working together to solve social problems and build community was eclipsed. Similar policies remain in force today. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, for example, as well as the Bush administration’s 2004 decision that requires after-school funds to be used solely for academic enrichment, have further diminished policy support for experientially-based civic education and for the practice of Y-AP (Levine 2007).

The primary exception to this policy trend is the Corporation for National and Community Service. Authorized by Congress in 1993, the Corporation was created to promote voluntary service to community, while concurrently, earning credits for higher education. Programmatically, the Corporation creates incentives for organizations to create intergenerational partnerships that promote civic responsibility, community contribution, and social justice. Organizations that were launched or sustained with Corporation funding include AmeriCorps, City Year, Teach for America, KaBoom!, Habitat for Humanity, Foster Grandparents, Public Allies, and YouthBuild (Sagawa and Halperin 1993). Although the Corporation’s efforts have achieved bipartisan support in the past, House Republicans have voted several times in recent years to eliminate the Corporation altogether, and its funding has been reduced.

## Building a Community Infrastructure

In spite of policy setbacks at the federal level, a community infrastructure of support for youth participation is being created. Private foundations, most notably the W. K. Kellogg, Surdna, and National 4-H Foundations, complemented the efforts of the Corporation by launching national demonstration projects. Initiated during the 1990s, these projects focused on creating new roles for youth within community organizations which involves them in governance, organizing, evaluation, and citizenry. All of the projects integrate youth into key forums of decision making. Some invited youth onto boards of directors while others engaged them in program planning, implementation, training, and evaluation (O’Donoghue et al. 2002; Zeldin et al. 2000). As part of these projects, scholars and practitioners collaborated in developing curricula and training programs around the emerging umbrella phrase of “youth-adult partnership”. A sampling includes: *Youth-adult partnerships: A training manual* (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development 2003), *Building effective youth-adult partnerships* (Advocates for Youth 2001), and *Creating youth-adult partnerships* (National 4-H Council 1997). These resources brought some consistency and legitimacy to the practice.

As Y-AP became more visible, youth were increasingly invited into community-wide efforts. They became members of interagency advisory boards, prevention councils, nonprofit boards, school boards, and community foundations (Camino 2000; Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth 2002). Indeed, in a few cities, such as Austin, Hampton, Portland, and San Francisco, there are explicit mandates that youth be involved in policy making and fund allocation (Frank and Dominguez 2007; Sirriani 2005; Zeldin et al. 2008a). The National League of Cities (2009) has identified five “established trends” among municipalities: forming a youth council, appointing youth to municipal boards and commissions, hosting a youth summit, conducting community assessments, and promoting youth service. They report finding four “emerging innovations”: using new media to engage young people, adopting a bill of rights for children and youth, developing initiatives to encourage youth to vote, and putting youth in charge of developing teen centers and skate parks.

## Perspectives from Contemporary Scholarship

Much of the contemporary theory and research has been assembled in journal special issues of journals and edited volumes: *Youth participation in communities and institutions* (O’Donoghue et al. 2002), *Growing into citizenship* (Sherrod et al. 2002), *Youth-adult relationships in community programs* (Zeldin et al. 2005), *Youth as important civic actors* (Kim and Sherman 2006), *Beyond resistance!*

*Youth activism and community change* (Ginwright et al. 2006), *Youth activism as a context for learning and development* (Kirshner 2007), *Emancipatory practices: Adult/youth engagement for social and environmental justice* (Linds et al. 2010), and *Youth civic development* (Flanagan and Christens 2011).

Despite the different disciplines and orientations reflected in this scholarship, the volumes share at least three perspectives. Foremost, they all frame youth participation as a collective construct. Kirshner (2007, p. 370) observes that “much of the literature about youth activism foregrounds the accomplishments of youth themselves. But this emphasis on youth obscures the fact that activism groups typically embody cross-age collaborations...” Indeed, it is under the conditions of shared work, shared norms and common values that youth become motivated to be involved (Sherrod et al. 2002; Zeldin et al. 2005).

A second theme revolves around power and social justice. There is a strong emphasis that civic engagement be conceptualized and researched in relationship to specific economic and social conditions as well as a collective response to the social marginalization of young people (Flanagan and Christens 2011; Ginwright et al. 2006). Kim and Sherman (2006) observe that social movements in the United States have typically not been age inclusive. They claim that isolation and extreme power imbalances have contributed to a deep generation gap among social justice leaders. The proper response, according to Linds et al. (2010), is a greater emphasis on emancipatory relationships “that involve a commitment to understanding systemic change, and barriers to it. Along with this understanding, to be effective in their struggle, youth and adults alike must learn how to participate together in the processes of change” (p. xvi).

The third theme involves the processes and outcomes of strong Y-APs. There is a consensus that joint work, common values, shared power, and a focus on collective issues contribute significantly to positive outcomes. As youth participate in organizational and community life, with adults as their collaborators, they begin to see themselves as powerful civic actors (Flanagan and Christens 2011). These experiences can make potent contributions to many aspects of positive youth and civic development including empowerment, critical consciousness, personal and social well-being, initiative and purpose (Christens 2012). Participation of this nature not only predicts adult civic engagement, but also creates contexts that strengthen organizations and communities (Zeldin et al. 2005; Sherrod et al. 2002).

### Conceptualizing Youth-Adult Partnership

Over the past 40 years, the practice of Y-AP has emerged as a foundational practice for positive youth and civic

development. Nonetheless, the notion that youth can contribute to civic life, in partnership with adults, has yet to become a public idea. Why? Most certainly, the norms and structures in the United States do not readily exist to mobilize the potential of youth. But Cutler and Taylor’s (2003, p. 6) observation is also insightful: “The straightforward act of youth and adults working together is often bedeviled by misunderstandings over seemingly obvious words.” Consider, for example, the terms “youth participation,” and “youth engagement.” These phrases do not reflect the collective nature of developmental relationships or the balancing of youth and adult power that undergirds program implementation (Li and Jullian 2012). These terms may also be confusing because they have established meanings in the child development and after-school literature (see Fredricks et al. 2004). Practitioners often use the phrases “youth-directed” and “adult-led.” This distinction can be used to broadly orient practice, but offers insufficient clarity to guide research and evaluation (Camino 2005; Wong et al. 2010).

### A Working Definition of Y-AP

We believe that scholarship has reached a level of maturity that allows the field to operationalize Y-AP with stronger conceptual rigor and community applicability. Grounded in the main themes emanating from the historical, community, and empirical foundations of Y-AP, we offer this working definition: *Youth-adult partnership is the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.*

This working definition has two primary strengths. It integrates the critical features of interpersonal interactions, specifically role, relationship, and activity (Bronfenbrenner 1979), while integrating cross-disciplinary scholarship from human development, community psychology, and civic engagement. The definition is also setting-neutral. It can be used to empirically analyze settings across a variety of community contexts (e.g., youth groups, organizing, governance, volunteering, coalitions) while providing touchstones for program implementation and community action.

Our working definition also provides a conceptual foundation from which to differentiate Y-AP from other types of youth-adult interactions. Perhaps the most salient differentiating feature is that Y-AP focuses on *multiple youth working with multiple adults*. Y-AP is not one adult interacting with one youth, which is the traditional mentor or apprenticeship model (Hamilton and Hamilton 2005). Its essence is found in the dynamics of group interaction, with



young people developing multiple relationships—some deep and some cursory—with a variety of adults. Similarly, the emphasis on “collective, democratic action” and “shared work” underscores that the *assignment of roles and division of labor is not determined by age, but instead, is based on the specific motivation, skill, and network that each individual brings to the endeavor*. Unlike apprenticeship, where adults retain accountability due to position and professional skill set (Halpern 2005), Y-AP builds from the specific assets that participating adults and youth bring to the table. Shared work—including collective deliberation, planning, action, and reflection—is fundamental to Y-AP. It is through these processes that diverse groups can construct the shared meaning and intention that underlie democratic efforts and civil society (Hess 2009; Kirshner 2009).

The working definition of Y-AP states that the practice aims to “promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.” This contrasts with service where individual-level learning objectives are most often the driving design feature (Morton 1995; Nokes et al. 2005). Y-AP sets its goals in relation to specific local problems and social inclusion (Prilleltensky 2010). In the spirit of Dewey and the experiential education movement, youth are theorized to gain the greatest educational benefits through democratic action on issues that matter deeply to them. *Y-APs are designed, therefore, to support youth (and adults) as agents of their own development. Within that context, the participants are expected to collaborate, choosing objectives and commitments on issues that matter deeply to both parties.*

The remaining parameter of the working definition is that Y-AP occurs “over a sustained period of time.” *Y-APs are not bound by semester, season, or project.* Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Y-AP is that their duration is often open-ended. Consistent with the flow of organizational and community change, one activity begins, another then takes priority, and another is put on the “slow track.” There is an expectation that youth remain involved for a certain task or responsibility, but that over time, some participants will cycle in and out depending on time availability and interest. Others will take on new roles, with progressively more challenge and responsibility, within the ongoing organizational initiative or community campaign (Libby et al. 2005; Zeldin et al. 2008a, b)

### The Core Elements of Y-AP

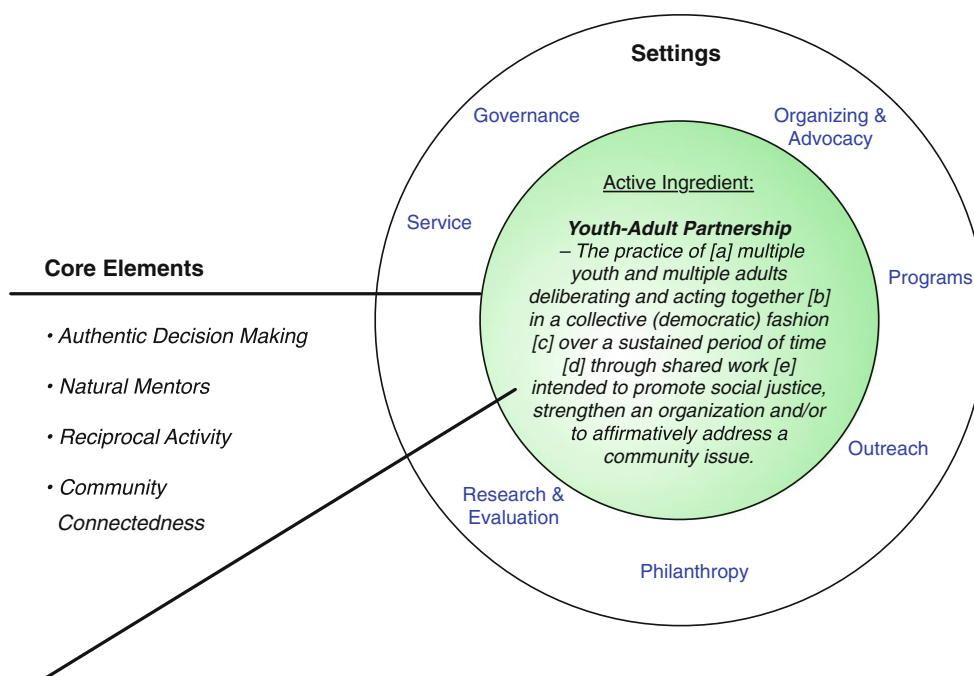
Our claim is this: Y-AP is a social regularity (Seidman 1988)—a specific constellation of activity, role and relationship—that underlies positive youth and civic development. It is an “active ingredient” (Li and Jullian 2012) that

manifests its significance at the “points of contact” (Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom 2010) where youth and adults interact within community settings. We believe there is broad support for this claim from historical, community, and empirical research perspectives.

What are the core elements of Y-AP? What is it that allows Y-AP to positively influence young people? Classic developmental theory provides initial insight. Consider, for example, the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) who speaks to the importance of ongoing interactions characterized by “reciprocal activity” and the shifting of power “in favor of the developing person” (p. 60). Sprinthall (1994) emphasizes role-taking experiences in challenging relational contexts that are balanced with opportunities for reflection and adult support. Maton and Salem (1995) conclude that individuals gain greater control over their environment when they exercise voice and assume responsibility in settings that are characterized by a system of shared beliefs, a climate of emotional support, opportunities to take on diverse roles, and leadership that is committed to change. In brief, Y-AP, at its best, fully encompasses the types of interactions that underlie human development and psychological empowerment.

These parameters are useful but may not be sufficient to guide practice. As Camino (2000) reports in her influential study introducing the concept of Y-AP, the crux of the matter for practitioners “lay not in articulating whether youth and adults should work together, but how they should do so.” (p. 14). Implied in the voices of these practitioners is that effective implementation must be guided by broad principles and classic theory, but ultimately demands greater specificity of the core elements through which Y-AP operates. We therefore propose an empirically based anatomy of Y-AP. We draw on Schor and Farrow (2011) method of integrating theory with evidence from diverse sources of research, evaluation, and community practice. This integration resulted in four core elements of Y-AP: authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness (Fig. 1).

To illustrate these core elements, we provide examples from two case studies. Austin Voices for Youth and Education (AVEY) established in 2002, brings Austin’s residents together to strengthen communities and public schools (see Zeldin et al. 2008a, b). Y-AP is the guiding principle and strategy at AVEY, according to organizational staff. AVEY relies on Y-AP to bring citizen voices to issues of educational reform and community capacity building. Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) in San Bernardino, CA (see Christens and Dolan 2011) engages in community organizing through faith-based institutions, schools and neighborhoods, with a focus on public safety, education, and opportunities for working-



**Fig. 1** Conceptual framework for youth-adult partnership

class families. ICUC was composed almost entirely of adult participants for 15 years. It recently began implementing an intergenerational model with youth and adults collaborating on advocacy, participatory research, and collective action.

#### Authentic Decision Making

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is premised on the principle that youth have a right to be heard in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity (Landsdown 2001). Thus, youth voice is not only about expression, but more centrally, it is about recognition by powerful others and by inclusion in consequential deliberations. This implies that youth should actively participate at the center of collective decision making (see Table 1 for examples), rather than at its margins (Camino and Zeldin 2002; National League of Cities 2010).

Broad empirical support underlies decision making as a core element of Y-AP. For example, the opportunities to participate in decision making and to take on leadership roles have been found to attract and retain low-income and minority youth in community programs (Ginwright 2007; Deschenes et al. 2010). Active participation and recognized voice are consistently found to be influential processes underlying the development of agency as well as confidence to achieve one's personal goals. As youth begin to exercise agency through collective ventures, they not only strengthen their sociopolitical awareness, but also

experience gains in psychological empowerment, both of which contribute to civic and political participation (Christens and Kirshner 2011; Larson and Hansen 2005; Watts and Flanagan 2007). Additionally, youth participation in group decision making has been found to facilitate mastery, skill development, confidence, identity exploration, initiative, and emotional wellbeing (Dworkin, Larsen, and Hansen 2003; Mitra 2004; Youniss et al. 1997; Zeldin 2004).

#### Natural Mentors

Decision making by youth occurs in contexts that are not only goal-directed but also relational and emotional. Y-AP involves youth interacting with multiple adults including community leaders, youth workers, community organizers, civil servants, and neighbors. Youth can clearly differentiate among adults. They seek out relationships with the potential to be both instrumental and respectful. Those adults who are willing to work collaboratively are referred to as "adult partners" or "allies" (Camino 2000). "Adults in power" is used in some settings to refer to those adults who have influence or capital that young people hope to access (Christens and Dolan 2011). Adults who "just don't get it", in the eyes of youth, are to be avoided (Zeldin et al. 2000).

Youth have clear ideas regarding the ideal characteristics of adult partners. In a New York State study, youth participants reported the desire to work with adults who are non-judgmental, passionate, and well organized (Goggins

**Table 1** Core elements of youth-adult partnership: authentic decision making and natural mentors

	Authentic decision making	Natural mentors
Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY)	AVEY matches youths' skill and interest with different opportunities. The aim is to scaffold youth through "pathways" of Y-AP. Young people are expected to take on progressively greater responsibility. For example, AVEY supports organizing groups in high schools to take on campus issues. With more experience, these youth facilitate community dialogue processes, such as workshops and candidate forums. The most experienced youth are hired as consultants to work with staff and residents on key tasks such as program development, research, fundraising, and event planning	AVEY is a "youth-centered" organization that recognizes the need for complementary leadership roles for adults. Adults are "conductors" who provide coaching and strategic support for carrying out collective action. The high stakes of community change require both youth and adults to be at the top of their game. Youth appreciate the high expectations and personal attention. They are also challenged by interactions with residents and elected leaders. Youth can readily identify multiple adults with whom they have developed respectful relationships through shared work
Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC)	ICUC youth deliberate on their own, with adult allies, residents, and local leaders to select the community problems which focus their organizing efforts. The focus has been on reducing community violence and increasing educational opportunities for youth. When addressing a new issue, youth will typically lead a series of "research actions" with local decision-makers and elected officials to build an understanding of the issue from the perspective of adults with power, to create their own analysis of the issue, and to identify possible solutions. Youth and adult staff then facilitate public meetings to catalyze action	ICUC staff organizers guide youth, formally and informally. For example, youth receive formal training from staff on how to chair and conduct public meetings. Youth also have the chance to collaborate with staff (youth and adults) who are skilled in organizing. "Showing, not telling" is a basic training philosophy with the aim of helping youth claim their own power. Informal teaching and support also occur as the youth form relationships and networks with local decision-makers and residents. Older youth leaders become natural mentors to newer members as they become involved. As ICUC youth organizing has matured, youth leaders have become full-time staff and board members

et al. 2002). In a similar study conducted in California, youth defined adult partners as those who are positive communicators, active listeners, and act their age. They seek adults who can help them look to the future and connect them to social and employment networks (Murdock et al. 2010). A National League of Cities study (2010, p. 32) found that "adult partners must be able to empower without abdicating, support without taking over, and encourage without preaching."

Youth's expectations for their adult partners are consistent with the developmental processes that characterize effective "natural mentoring" by non-familial adults outside of formal mentoring programs (Sterrett et al. 2011). As contrasted with formal or structured mentoring in which adults take the lead in creating the parameters of the adult-youth relationship, natural mentoring occurs without a defined program, and by the mutual consent of those involved under conditions of more equal power (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Hamilton et al. 2006). Situated outside the most proximal stresses facing youth, natural mentors can use their independence and perceived stability for unconditional support and professional and social networking (Rhodes et al. 2006). Natural mentors sometimes help youth focus on their future in the face of adversity (Hurd and Zimmerman 2010) and serve as successful professional and educational role models (Chang, et al. 2010). They have been found to be especially consequential for youth living in low-income and other challenging

environments (DuBois et al. 2002; Werner and Smith 1982).

The presence of adults capable of functioning as natural mentors is elemental to the creation of successful Y-APs in community and organizational settings. From this perspective, Y-AP can be conceptualized as a context rich with potential natural mentors (see Table 1). Youth have choices. They can form different types of relationships with different adults. In one study, youth serving on county boards formed their most valued mentoring relationships with adults outside those to whom they had been formally assigned (Collura 2012). Collaborative relationships with non-familial adults can develop through community-based research efforts that involve youth as partners in action research (Jacquez et al. 2012). Ginwright (2010) reports that some youth, particularly those living in vulnerable situations, search out natural mentors poised to facilitate emotional healing through instrumental activity such as activism. The emphasis on connecting healing with instrumental activity is summarized by Halpern (2005):

"The consequences of accumulated hurts and insults are best addressed indirectly in the context of relationships that are about something else – that is, joint work on a task or project, or in a discipline – that are, in some respects, incidental. In such relationships, adults take youth seriously, but treat them matter-of-factly (p. 15)... When an adult leader or instructor focuses on the work rather than the adolescent, he/she

is communicating a number of things, but most importantly that he/she views the adolescent as a person who can and should be doing the work” (p. 17).

### Reciprocal Activity

Co-learning is often identified by practitioners as a core element of Y-AP. Grounded in the principle of mutuality, and reflecting the belief that youth and adults often bring different perspectives and experiences to shared agendas, there is an emphasis on creating structures and norms for collective reflection and critical thinking among intergenerational groups (Libby et al. 2005) (See Table 2 for examples). Studies of community practice have identified the efficacy of free and deliberative spaces where individuals are encouraged to share information, question assumptions, solve problems, and build social networks (Evans and Boyte 1992; Schön 1987). The National League of Cities (2010), building from Camino’s (2005) analysis of Y-AP implementation across diverse community settings, describes co-learning as follows:

“The key to the youth-adult relationship is understanding partnership. In many such relationships, the adult either dictates the agenda and controls what occurs, or leaves the young people alone and abdicates responsibility for what occurs. In a partnership, the adult ally and young people work ‘shoulder to

shoulder’ sharing ideas and expertise, translating information about one another’s worlds, creating a mutual agenda, and taking joint responsibility for the outcome” (p. 31).

Co-learning may be grounded in the context of “reciprocity.” Reciprocity underscores the logic that human development is a self-directed process that both creates and is informed by reflective intentionality and collective action (Lerner and Walls 1999). Three recent syntheses, for example, indicate that youth development and empowerment is enhanced under conditions of reciprocity, particularly when youth believe that they have made a contribution to others, when the balance of power progressively shifts toward the youth, and when their life experiences have been validated by community systems (Benson et al. 2006; Hamilton and Hamilton 2009; Wong et al. 2010).

Reciprocity across levels also occurs through collective and reflective processes. In a multiyear case study of a high school, Fielding (2001) found that system change occurred through structures designed to promote co-learning among students, teachers, and administrators. A norm of “radical collegiality” slowly came to characterize the setting as adults better understood the concerns, language, and perspective of youth. In a study of community organizations, staff and board members reported making more confident decisions for the benefit of their organizations as a consequence of partnering with youth on key issues (Zeldin

**Table 2** Core elements of youth-adult partnership: reciprocal activity and community connectedness

	Reciprocal activity	Community connectedness
Austin Voices for Education and Youth (AVEY)	AVEY promotes reciprocal flows of information and action among students, residents, and elected leaders. At the individual level, staff strive to validate the lived experience and perspectives of youth. Activities that promote group reflection, collaboration, and mutual respect are a regular part of meetings. At the community level, AVEY serves as a “bridge” by documenting the concerns of residents and communicating them to policymakers. AVEY, according to community leaders, is “the group that gets the information out there so people know what’s going on and can be involved in it.”	All AVEY youth are involved in planning and collective action with their peers. Youth express pride in being “pioneers” who are creating opportunities for the next generation. Many report greater attachment to their schools and communities. Youth also appreciate the connections with adults. They feel valued as people and as citizens. They also appreciate the recommendations for jobs and the referrals to community services. One youth concludes: “That there is a group of dedicated adults is amazing. I didn’t know. I just knew I wasn’t satisfied with school and that is the reason I joined AVEY.”
Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC)	Some ICUC leaders were skeptical about the potential of youth organizing. As youth and adults learned to become more reciprocal in their tactics, and real policy change has occurred, youth organizing has flourished at ICUC. Many community issues are now addressed through intergenerational organizing, and many adults in the community have more positive perceptions of youth. ICUC increasingly looks to young people as a source of sustainability for the organization. Some older youth have stayed involved through college, sharing their experience and investing their time in the next generation of young leaders	Youth form tight-knit connections and a “second family” with their fellow organizers. Youth also become connected with key decision makers, such as councilpersons, professors, school board members, and form relationships of varying types with them. Some of these people become allies of the organizing initiative and sources of future opportunities for the youth (e.g., jobs, awards, letters of recommendation). This connectedness extends beyond contact with individual people. Youth feel as though they are important change agents responsible for helping to strengthen their schools and communities



2004). Similarly, when coalitions enact Y-AP as a planning strategy within communities, studies indicate that adults are increasingly motivated to include youth in further deliberations, and to advocate for youth voice throughout the community (Lewis-Charp et al. 2003; Morsillo and Prilleltensky 2007). Y-AP may be an especially powerful experience for adults who have previously been excluded from community leadership. Partnering with youth around issues of equity and justice may motivate many adults—community residents and program staff—to engage in self care and collective healing to address their own painful experiences with poverty, racism, and other sources of trauma (Camino 2000; Ginwright 2005).

### Community Connectedness

Community networks can offer a web of opportunity and scaffolding. Some practitioners value networks because they encourage new friendships among peers, a sharing of inter-cultural and ecumenical perspectives, and a sense of common cause (Christens and Dolan 2011). For others, the purpose is more instrumental, especially among those who lack access to social capital in their day-to-day lives (see Table 2 for examples). The connections formed through Y-AP can translate into opportunities for scholarships, awards, internships, and employment among low income and minority youth (Lewis-Charp, et al. 2003; Jarrett et al. 2005).

The access to social capital and relationships with diverse persons can enhance feelings of connectedness with adults and public institutions which, in turn, are strong predictors of civic engagement (Heck and Fowler 2008), adolescent health (Resnick et al. 1993), social trust (Flanagan 2003), and school achievement (Goza and Ryabov 2009). In one study, the most powerful predictor of community connectedness was when young people felt that they had meaningful roles allowing them to hold power and exercise their influence (Whitlock 2007). Similarly, youth who experience voice and power in intergenerational networks of program decision making have been found to have a stronger psychological sense of community (Evans 2007). The peer relationships, the work being done, and the feeling of being part of something larger result in strong feelings of group solidarity and membership (Kirshner 2009), and over time, to act with greater awareness of differences among diverse peoples (Watkins et al. 2007).

Positive changes in adult perceptions of youth are often the most immediate impact of Y-AP. Sharing successes with youth has been found to exhilarate adult partners and reinforce collective purposes, which contribute to feelings of organizational membership and commitment among minority staff (Ginwright 2005; Lewis-Charp et al. 2003).

Moreover, Y-AP becomes a source of generativity for adult partners as they extend their own experiences and skills to the next generation (Zeldin et al. 2008a, b). Y-AP also has the potential to motivate community leaders. As these adults interact with and observe young people in productive action, coalitions are inspired to take action on behalf of youth and community wellbeing (Evans and Prilleltensky 2007). Indeed, longstanding initiatives demonstrate that as Y-AP becomes an institutionalized norm, youth voice gets integrated into civic agendas and youth participation becomes an expectation (Petrokubi 2012; Sirriani 2005; Zeldin et al. 2008a, b).

### Discussion

Youth policy in the United States has long reflected a concern with protection, both of and from young people. This deep ambivalence, intertwined within the economic and social structures of the country, has resulted in the isolation of youth from organizational and community arenas of decision making and collective action (Meucci and Schwab 1997; Modell and Goodman 1990). This status quo has been questioned for over 40 years. Most recently, Mary McAlesse (2009), president of UNESCO, stated: “the cost of not doing so (involving young people in shared decision-making) will likely come back to haunt us as a civil society and a golden opportunity to move toward a fuller and more inclusive wisdom will have been missed.”

The notion that youth can collaborate with adults on things that matter appears to be gradually becoming a public idea. Y-AP is becoming a phenomenon of scholarly interest, with diverse inquiries converging to indicate that Y-AP is an active ingredient of positive youth and civic development. Extant scholarship also identifies the parameters of Y-AP: multiple youth and multiple adults, deliberating and acting in a collective or democratic fashion, over a sustained period time, through shared work on issues of concern to both parties. This constellation of role, activity, and behavior distinguishes Y-AP from other types of interactions between youth and adults. Finally, the synthesis of community practice with empirical study indicates four core elements of Y-AP: authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness.

We hypothesize that Y-AP is most influential when implemented as a unifying construct, that is, when the four core elements are present. We further hypothesize that development may be diluted when one or more of the elements is not available. Indeed, it is plausible that the Y-AP experience could have a detrimental effect on youth if the core elements are absent or the developmental quality

of the participation is poor (Ferreira et al. 2012). These hypotheses need to be directly tested, however. In addition to program-based empirical research, longitudinal investigations using multiple samples are needed to explore the core elements of Y-AP as they unfold in different ecological contexts and settings. Such inquiries will need to include youth of different age. The vast majority of research cited in this article focuses on youth in high school. The age range of youth extends to 35 years in many countries, however, especially in those regions where unemployment is high and transitions to adulthood are especially tenuous (World Urban Forum 2006). A broadening upwards seems to be occurring in the United States for similar reasons.

Scholars are increasingly working with practitioners to promote setting level changes that facilitate human development (Tseng and Seidman 2007). Y-AP, we argue, could be useful in conceptualizing settings and in establishing rubrics for quality implementation. To achieve this potential, however, foundational research needs to continue. If Y-AP is to become a focal point for the design of settings, it needs further observation and categorization. Extended case study methodologies, conducted over a sustained period of time, will help define and refine the parameters of Y-AP. Such research will also enhance our understanding of how Y-AP can be integrated into organizations and community groups (Zeldin et al. 2008a, b).

At the same time, we also believe that there is sufficient research and field experience to justify and guide the implementation of Y-AP into a broad array of community settings. It is evident that Y-AP promotes a reconciliation or an integration of individual and collective-oriented approaches to programming. A focus on Y-AP will spark the creation of settings that concurrently promote youth development, civic engagement, and community change.

We have sought to demonstrate that Y-AP is not exactly a new idea. There is, however, a new and heightened urgency in this era. As more communities and schools become “high risk” economically, and as more youth become disconnected from formal education and from employment markets for longer periods of time, the processes of youth development and community change are threatened. Y-AP can be conceptualized as an over-arching value and as a holistic practice for addressing the isolation of youth from the social capital and the passion for community participation that many adults bring with them. Promoting Y-AP in the mission and settings of civil society could provide youth with legitimate opportunities to build social networks, gain competencies, and experience a sense of connectedness even during periods of personal vulnerability and developmental risk.

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