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Youth-Adult Research Collaborations: Bringing Youth Voice to the Research Process

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As researchers seek to understand and design after-school learning environments, it is important that young people themselves be part of the inquiry process. Young people, in collaboration with adults, are well situated to design and carry out research about their schools, neighborhoods, and after-school programs. Such partnerships not only produce important findings and useful knowledge; they also support broader youth development goals by incorporating youth voice into program decision-making and by providing youth the opportunity to effect community change (Horsch, Little, Chase Smith, Goodyear, & Harris, 2002). Despite increasing evidence of the benefits of youth participation in community development and institutional change (Youniss et al, 2002; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000), it is still uncommon for researchers to collaborate in the research process with youth themselves.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. We first address a conceptual gap by offering a framework for understanding youth-adult research partnerships. We then use this framework to examine two research projects in which university researchers (ourselves included) collaborated with youth to examine their neighborhoods, schools, and after-school programs. We

conclude with a discussion of the benefits, challenges, and implications of youth–adult research collaborations.

THEORIZING YOUTH–ADULT RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Why Do We Need a Framework?

Methods such as participatory action research, empowerment evaluation, and inquiry-based reform have been designed to ease the tensions between researchers and practitioners and to improve understandings of local context and processes (Fetterman, 1996; Fullan, 1993; Rapoport, 1985). These techniques recognize the importance of local knowledge and expertise in formulating and answering research questions. However, these research methods have focused primarily on working with adult practitioners, program participants, and school personnel. Research methodology remains a domain in which young people's "competence and ability to participate is undervalued" (Hart, 1992, p. 17).

Although examples of youth–adult research partnerships are rare, a growing number of groups have engaged young people in the research process across a variety of contexts—from schools to community youth organizations to after-school programs (Fielding, 2001; Horsch et al., 2002; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 2001; Meucci & Schwab, 1997; Penuel & Freeman, 1997; Schwab, 1997; Youth IMPACT, 2001). Studies of these projects highlight the benefits of working with young people in the research process, such as improved access to youth perspectives. However, they do not provide a framework for understanding what youth–adult research partnerships might look like or the relevant dimensions to consider in such efforts.¹ It is this gap in our understanding of youth involvement in research that we address here. Our framework highlights some of the tradeoffs that arise when involving youth in research in different ways and illustrates how research purposes influence decisions about how to collaborate with young people.

Framework for Understanding Youth–Adult Research Partnerships

Research with youth takes varied forms across multiple dimensions. Here we offer a framework through which to analyze our own work in or-

¹Fielding (2001) developed a framework for conceptualizing student involvement in school improvement efforts that reflects the range of ways in which students can be engaged in research projects, from data sources to researchers. Fielding's framework serves as an important starting point in understanding how youth and school personnel can work together to improve schools. In focusing on the school setting, however, Fielding does not offer a more global framework for understanding youth–adult research partnerships that span neighborhoods and other contexts in youth's lives. Also, the relationship between an adult, university-based researcher and a young person in a local community may be quite different from that between teachers and students in a school.

der to illuminate the benefits and challenges of working in partnership with youth researchers. Drawing from literature on research methodology and youth development, we develop a typology of strategies for conducting research with youth (see Table 7.1). This typology begins with the most familiar research strategies, those that involve youth as "informants."² These represent the most common approaches to studying youth development in after-school contexts and have played an invaluable role in building the knowledge base in this area (for a helpful review

TABLE 7.1
Framework for Understanding Research With Youth

	<i>Youth as Research Informants</i>	<i>Youth as Research Assistants</i>	<i>Youth as Research Partners</i>
Youth–Adult Relationship	Little to Some Interaction	Quasipartners	Full Partners
Youth Development	Limited	Basic Skills	Youth Development
Expertise/ Knowledge	Adult researchers are experts; decide what is important; create knowledge	Adults are experts on questions; youth not necessarily knowledge creators	Youth are experts on questions; local knowledge valued; youth generate knowledge with help of adults
Ownership	Situated primarily in research institutions	Attempts to share	Fully shared
Audience	Academic, policymaking, research audience; adults have control over data use and presentation	Mixed audience; youth may have some say in data use and presentation	Primarily local audience; may extend to others; shared control over data use and presentation
Ecological Validity	Varies from study to study	Improved	Improved

²A wide variety of approaches—from survey research to ethnography—fall under this category. The relationship between researchers and informants in ethnography, for example, is likely to be more developed than that in a survey design. Similarly, researchers within this category may develop techniques to support youth learning and development. Rather than explore the multiple distinctions within this category, however, we treat it broadly in order to distinguish it from approaches in which youth are more actively involved in the research process.

of this development research, see Eccles & Gootman, 2001; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998).

We focus on the difference between this approach, in which youth's role in the research process is largely to respond to adult inquiries, and more participatory research strategies, which involve young people as "research assistants" or as "research partners." This second distinction—between youth as assistants and as partners—is an important one; it clarifies the different types of collaborative research relationships adults can form with youth and the decisions and challenges that need to be addressed in implementing these strategies. Although we do not argue that such collaborative research should replace conventional methods of research about youth or after-school programming, we highlight the promise and challenge of this unfamiliar terrain. In the sections that follow, we outline the dimensions that give shape to these distinct research strategies.

Youth-Adult Relationship. One of the first dimensions that must be considered when conducting research about or with youth is the nature of the youth-adult relationship. What roles will youth have? What will the interaction between youth and adults look like? Most social science research that includes youth falls under the *youth as informants* category. In this case, adults determine the research relationship and the youth-adult interaction, which may vary from little interaction between an adult researcher and a youth respondent (e.g., filling in a survey) to greater interaction (e.g., in an adult-led focus group or interview).

Youth as research assistants and *youth as research partners* strategies require a mental changing of frames (Mittra, 2001) about the role of youth (and of adults) in the research process. For this approach to be successful, researchers need to redefine and reshape prevailing notions of youth and adult roles so that youth-adult interactions become more equal and more focused on shared decision-making and shared work (Camino, 2000). (Similarly, there has been a strong push within participatory action research and empowerment evaluation literature for increased collaboration and democratic partnership between researchers and local participants; e.g., Fetterman, 1996; Rapoport, 1985). Such partnerships recognize and draw on the strengths that adults and youth bring to the research process. Adults may share their expertise about research methods, for example, whereas youth contribute their knowledge about their schools and neighborhoods. Also, academic or policymaking audiences may be more accessible because of the connections of adult researchers, and youth involvement may bring greater legitimacy and relevance for practitioners and local community members. This type of collaborative partnership may be especially critical for youth in terms of decreasing the alienation of local people from the research and program planning process (Hart, 1992). Rather than assuming that the data collected by

adult researchers can speak for youth, in partnership relationships young people are involved as active participants in the research process.

We frame our understanding of youth-adult partnerships as including both "quasi" and "full" partnership arrangements. In quasi-partnerships, youth are involved as research assistants, collecting and analyzing data in response to direction by adult researchers. Generally, youth in this arrangement do not lead the development of lines of inquiry. In full research partnerships, youth and adults work together to generate research questions and to collect and analyze data. These two levels reflect different partnership configurations that can arise as adults and youth negotiate their relationship with each other. They are also a function of research purpose and method. Research aimed at tallying the number of youth organizations in a community, for example, might not benefit from the involvement of youth. Research seeking to assess the value of these youth resources, however, might engage youth either in quasi or full partnerships.

Youth Development. Building the strength and capacity of local participants is an important feature of participatory action research and empowerment evaluation (Fawcett et al., 1996; Fetterman, 1996; Hart, 1992; Linney & Wandersman, 1996; Mayer, 1996; Rapoport, 1985). In translating this into research with youth, we have chosen to use the concept of *youth development*. Learning and development are central aspects of any participatory project with youth (Camino, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Hart, 1992). We divide this learning into two general types—skill development and more comprehensive youth development.

Skill development refers to technical research skills such as interviewing, conducting observations, writing up field notes, and analyzing data. Often, however, youth-adult research partnerships are more than just opportunities to master discrete skills. Youth development relates to supports and opportunities that foster more general themes of agency and persistence as well as communication, cooperation, and collective action. Research partnerships offer youth *meaningful roles and responsibilities identified as central to youth development* (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000; Eccles & Gootman, 2001). In addition, these partnerships can stimulate empowering learning by allowing young people to understand problems and barriers to change and to develop strategies to overcome them (Hart, 1992). Although we make a conceptual distinction between basic skill development and youth development, the boundaries are not rigid and there is great interaction between them.

When youth are informants, youth development in the research process is limited as this is not often a primary goal of these strategies.³ When work-

³We recognize that youth development is often a goal of research, no matter which of these strategies it employs, in that researchers aim to improve practice and thereby improve the developmental effectiveness of after-school programs. What we wish to emphasize here is the developmental nature of the actual process of research.

ing in collaboration with youth, as in the youth as research assistants and youth as research partners categories, youth development is often a focus of the research process, either implicitly or explicitly. In other words, although youth development may not be the stated purpose, youth are still likely to be exposed to powerful learning experiences. When youth act as research assistants, their training and work often focuses on data collection and perhaps analysis. This level of involvement may provide youth with basic skill development, but not necessarily more comprehensive developmental supports and opportunities. When youth are involved as full research partners, they are more likely to have transformative developmental experiences as they are more engaged in defining and coming to understand research problems, questions and findings, are placed in positions of greater responsibility, and have more participatory and nonhierarchical interactions with adults.

Expertise/Knowledge. Conceptions of expertise and knowledge comprise the third dimension in our framework. Differences in expertise have been described as one of the "factors making for endemic tensions" in researcher-participant collaborations (Rapoport, 1985, p. 268). Variations in skills, expertise, and values may become institutionalized in training programs, which establish hierarchies of legitimate or credible knowledge that place scientific, theoretical, or academic knowledge above local or practical knowledge. This process is exacerbated in research on youth issues, as young people's knowledge and understandings are often undervalued or seen as invalid (Hart, 1992).⁴

In the youth as informants research strategies, expertise resides within adult researchers. Although they may focus their efforts on gaining information from youth or eliciting youth voice, adult researchers maintain the locus of control, determining what is important (e.g., by choosing research questions and designing survey instruments or interview protocols) and using data from youth to create knowledge. In addition, the primary aim of knowledge creation is often theoretical and intended to make a contribution to the scientific field, rather than having an immediate practical influence on program design or practice.

In the youth as research assistants strategy, expertise and knowledge is more mixed, but leans in the direction of adult researchers. Adults are still experts on what matters in terms of the research frame and questions;

⁴The valuing of local knowledge seems to be gaining more mainstream appeal, as evidenced by Lerner et al.'s (2000) discussion of the need to expand our ideas of what constitutes knowledge. They argue that scientific knowledge, historically the source of "basic knowledge," must be supplemented by community understandings of the relational interplay between knowledge and local context. Moreover, they maintain that knowledge is not just defined by "scientist-derived data," concluding that, "a learning collaboration between scholars and community members must become a part of the knowledge generation process" (p. 13). (See also Greeno et al., 1999, and Zeldin, 2000, for related discussions.)

however youth are seen as expert data collectors, knowing what contexts matter and how best to uncover information. While engaged in the data collection process in this way, youth researchers may or may not be seen as knowledge creators.

The youth as research partners strategy draws on the expertise and knowledge of young people and their communities. Youth are seen to have fuller contextual knowledge; they become experts, determining what questions are important as well as the appropriate data collection strategies. As analysts of data, young people become creators of new knowledge. In addition, the rationale for the research is determined in collaboration with youth. As a result, research will typically lead to the creation of practical knowledge that can contribute to meeting needs that are valued by youth themselves. As in other dimensions, the purpose of the research will strongly influence the types of knowledge and expertise desired and therefore the research relationship between adults and youth.

Ownership. We define *ownership* as a phenomenon in which people care about the research activity, are engaged in it, take responsibility for the outcome, and, in most cases, literally "own" the data that has been collected. This concept helps distinguish conventional research from newer models of participatory action research with youth. In research traditions where youth are informants, ownership is situated primarily in research institutions. The youth themselves often have limited knowledge of the purpose of the research project, and thus have little incentive to care deeply about its results (even if the results may have long-term consequences that are quite relevant to their lives). In contrast, in research projects that collaborate with youth, shared ownership is a key goal, especially if the research partnership aims to benefit from the local expertise and unique insights of youth.

Community Youth Mapping (Academy for Educational Development, 2001) is one example of a research endeavor in which youth ownership is promoted. Youth mapping is a strategy that enables young people to work together and with adults to document the places and resources available to them and their families. Goals and strategies are developed locally, depending on the needs and priorities of the community. Examples of participatory action research also seek to share ownership with youth by collaborating on research design and implementation (see, e.g., Meucci & Schwab, 1997). In both of these cases, youth are not merely research assistants trained to collect data, but instead share responsibility for the direction and purpose of the project.

The degree to which authentically shared ownership is achieved depends on the relationship between youth and adult researchers. Attempts to share ownership with youth as research assistants tend to be one-sided because

the youth themselves do not design the project. They may carry out research activities, but without being involved in research design, they may not care deeply about or understand the broader goals. In contrast, when working with youth as research partners, ownership is more likely to be fully shared because the research design itself is a collaborative endeavor.

Audience. The audience for and dissemination of research findings is another dimension that distinguishes research strategies, and it follows logically from distinctions about ownership. Traditionally, the audience for research on youth issues is found in academic, philanthropic, and policymaking communities, whether advancing theory or identifying implications for practice. In either case, consumers of the research are likely to be professionals who are familiar with the vocabulary and techniques of scholarly reporting. It is much less common for the audience of youth research to be youth themselves or residents of the communities where they live. This dimension, too, would be one that distinguishes working with youth as research partners from the other two research strategies. Although youth as research assistants may be more likely to have mixed audiences—including community members and university researchers—it is still motivated by the leadership and goals of adult researchers. By contrast, the goal for youth as research partners is more likely to reach a primarily local audience, comprised of youth, parents, youth workers, and teachers.

In addition, dissemination activities associated with each research strategy raise important questions: Who gets to use the data that is collected and how? Whose voice counts in relating the findings? Who speaks in the name of youth (Baksh-Sooden, 2001)? Methods in which youth are informants typically speak to academic audiences; research findings are compiled and presented by adult researchers skilled in speaking to such audiences. When adults engage with youth as research assistants, youth may have limited involvement in determining how data is analyzed and presented. For example, they may be asked to do preliminary data analysis, but adults would produce the final results. In the youth as research partners strategy, youth are central to decisions around how the data is used and presented. Young people play a critical role in dissemination and opportunities are created for youth to speak for themselves through a variety of forms tailored to reach a more local programmatic and policymaking audience.

A youth program that we observed as part of a multisite study of after-school centers provides one example of local audience and dissemination. A group of students identified sexual harassment as an issue that they wanted to change in their school. With the assistance of an adult facilitator, the students began a year-long project involving interviews with administrators, surveys of students, and research on school district policy. The results of their research were communicated to students in workshops

at schools across the district and through a handbook given out to all students. The group succeeded in persuading the school board to revise its policies and procedures regarding sexual harassment. In sum, the findings, which were substantial, were channeled back to the constituency that was most affected by the problem. Although there was most likely theoretical significance to the research as well, what was most important to the youth activists was to make sure they reached the audience that would be most impacted by the study.⁵

Ecological Validity. Researchers of youth development have grown increasingly critical of methods and experiments that are isolated from the natural contexts in which youth lead their lives (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Zeldin, 2000). Many well-designed laboratory experiments and survey instruments are criticized for lacking *ecological validity*, referring to the extent to which research maintains the integrity of the real life situations it is designed to investigate (Cole, 1996). Do the environments in which the research takes place, and the variables in question, represent the everyday lived experience of people being studied—"the actual ecology of human development" (Lerner et al., 2000, p. 14)? Ethnography is one answer to this criticism; it represents an effort to understand the local realities and culturally specific meanings that contextualize youth's experiences (Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison, 1996).

Unlike ownership or audience, ecological validity is not a dimension that necessarily differentiates the three research strategies. After all, the job of skilled adult ethnographers is to gain insider knowledge through spending time in a particular setting and developing trusting relationships with the people there (Johnson, 1997). Even surveys and experimental tasks have the potential to reflect the lived experience of research informants (Cole, 1996). Nevertheless, collaborating with youth to conduct research has the potential to strengthen ecological validity in ways that adults may be unable to do alone. In work with youth as research assistants, youth can reach peers who are not readily accessible through familiar channels such as the school or after-school youth center. Also, youth researchers may have an easier time than adults seamlessly integrating themselves into an activity for observation.

Youth working as research assistants or partners also play a crucial role in interpreting data, helping to strengthen the ecological validity of interpretations. Youth perspective in analysis could help get at, for example, whether low levels of youth participation in an after-school program signal lack of youth interest in organized activities generally or the fact that the particular

⁵This example is discussed in greater depth in Sherman (2003).

offerings are not interesting to them and why. Or, in analyzing focus group or interview transcripts, youth researchers may draw on unique frames of reference that enable them to offer alternative, and perhaps more accurate, interpretations of the data. Furthermore, in work with youth as research partners, the research questions themselves are likely to reflect a true problem or puzzle in the community being studied, as reflected in the sexual harassment example mentioned.

Collaborating with youth participants in the communities being studied, then, can strengthen ecological validity. It is important to recognize, however, that youth participation does not guarantee ecological validity, as differences in social status, gender, race/ethnicity, and class are salient for youth as well. *Youth* as a category is not homogeneous, and it would be a mistake to assume that all youth share essential attributes.

These six dimensions provide a framework through which to explore the complexities involved in working with youth as researchers. The framework points to some of the possible benefits of youth–adult partnerships for research in after-school settings, such as transformative developmental opportunities for the youth researchers and strengthened ecological validity for the research enterprise. Such joint inquiries can gather information about what youth value about these settings and link researchers and community members in meaningful ways. The framework also raises important questions about the possible limitations or tradeoffs inherent in such collaborations. Decisions about which research strategy is most appropriate are closely connected to research purpose. It may be inappropriate, for example, to choose a youth as research partners strategy for a large-scale, multisite investigation aimed at drawing conclusions across sites rather than focusing specifically on local context and practice. In the following section, we present two cases in which university-based adult researchers worked with young people to conduct research on their neighborhoods, schools, and after-school programs. These cases help to illustrate further the rewards and challenges involved in developing youth–adult research collaborations.

YOUTH–ADULT RESEARCH COLLABORATION: EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE

Program Profiles

The Youth Ethnographers Project: Evaluating After-School Contexts.

The Youth Ethnographers Project (YEP) was one component of a qualitative evaluation of five after-school youth centers in a major west-coast city. YEP had its strategic roots in the “junior ethnographers” who assisted in Heath and McLaughlin’s research on the operation and contribution of youth serving urban community based organizations (see McLaughlin, Irby,

& Langman, 1994/2001). In that research, approximately 10 young people who participated in the organizations in the study were hired to go places and ask questions that the adult research team could not. Youth were given brief training in the use of interview protocols and tape recorders and in how to prepare a research memo. Members of the research team living onsite supervised the youth and data were forwarded to Heath and McLaughlin at Stanford. The value of the junior ethnographers was considered primarily in terms of access. The data they provided from late-night meetings, road trips, and other settings inaccessible to the research team as well as data from formal interviews proved invaluable in constructing an understanding of program and neighborhood contexts. Although youth were data collectors, the adult researchers assumed primary responsibility for developing lines of inquiry and interpretation.

Similarly, YEP was developed to complement the efforts of adult researchers by adding a youth component to the larger evaluation project, which was designed to examine youth’s experiences in after-school youth centers and the role the centers played in their daily lives. During the first part of the evaluation, adult researchers (ourselves included) relied on focus groups and case study interviews with youth as well as informal observations of the after-school program activities. The YEP aspect of the evaluation was added in the 9th month, with the hope that youth researchers would be well-situated to collect data and solicit perspectives that were otherwise unavailable to us. In addition, partnering with young people was consistent with the objectives of the study, which sought to highlight youth’s opinions and experience. Further, we felt that working with youth researchers would provide us with corrective feedback about our research direction: Were we looking in the right places? Were we asking the right questions?

A total of 21 youth were selected to work as youth ethnographers in the five after-school program sites. They varied in age, gender, race, ethnicity, and class background. Overall, there were 13 middle-school students, 7 high-school students, and 1 college freshman (who worked as a mentor at one of the youth centers and lived in the neighborhood where it was located). All youth took part in a day-long training session that introduced them to the research goals of the broader evaluation and taught them interviewing and observation skills that they would use in their work. Research workshops emphasized a range of skills, both conceptual and technical. For example, although we wanted to be sure that youth could draw a conceptual distinction between description and interpretation—that is, “the room had a mural on the wall showing kids playing” versus “the room was pretty”—we also wanted to make sure that youth felt comfortable with basic procedures, such as asking permission to record an interview and operating a tape recorder.

The long-term direction of the YEP research was deliberately left open to allow for flexibility in responding to the interests and questions of the youth

at each site and to local neighborhood and after-school contexts. For this reason, youth (and their adult coordinators) at the different sites worked fairly autonomously, focusing on different aspects of the research. For example, one site focused almost entirely on understanding after-school opportunities for youth in the neighborhood, whereas others looked at youth's experiences in school, or the reasons why some youth did not spend time at the after-school center.

The YEP project spanned 5 months, with site meetings every other week and cross-site meetings held twice throughout the project. Roughly 3 months were spent on data collection and the remainder was dedicated to data analysis. Youth read through interview transcripts and field notes and worked to cull themes from the data. Adult research coordinators wrote memos summarizing the main conclusions drawn by each team of youth ethnographers. These memos were then incorporated into the 2 years of data collected by adult researchers.

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning: Exploring Community Resources for Youth. Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) is an after-school program based in the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University that trains young people to become researchers and advocates. Participants identify a problem they care about, gather evidence pertinent to that problem, and make recommendations based on their findings. It bears some similarity to participatory action research (Penuel & Freeman, 1997) as well as "youth mapping" programs that are aimed at training youth to identify resources and needs in their communities (Academy for Educational Development, 2001). Because it is responsive to youth's interests and concerns, the YELL curriculum is not limited to studying after-school environments, but instead can include community and school issues. Nevertheless, lessons from YELL are pertinent to our framework because it is an example of a youth-adult research partnership. This section discusses the YELL program's 2000-1 pilot year in Redwood City, a mixed-income city located near the Stanford University campus.⁶

The background for the YELL project in Redwood City is important: Redwood City was undergoing a multiyear effort to improve youth development resources and opportunities, and community leaders wanted input from youth themselves. In collaboration with the JGC, it was decided that YELL would be housed in a middle school, where JGC staff would recruit and train 8th graders (13 to 14 years old) for the project. One adult coordinator ran the project with the help of two undergraduate assistants and one graduate researcher.

⁶The collaboration between the university and Redwood City is ongoing. Cohorts of community youth researchers continue to be involved.

Program participants came from a cross-section of neighborhoods, which varied in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Of the 13 participants, 10 were Latino and 3 were European American. The program met twice a week after school for approximately 7 months. After initial trainings in various research methods, youth participants split into three research groups—video documentary, interviews, and survey. Each group collected and analyzed information about youth's experiences in their neighborhoods and schools. The research, however, was just the first step—upon completion of data analysis, the group worked to turn their findings into recommendations, which were presented to city government and school officials. In all, the youth researchers made four presentations to Redwood City agencies, including community groups, schoolteachers, and the city council. These presentations led to further opportunity for young people to participate in local decision-making bodies.

Assessing Youth-Adult Research Partnerships

These different projects offer a compelling contrast for our purposes in this chapter because they varied on several dimensions. On the whole, we characterize YEP's strategy as one of youth as research assistants and YELL's as youth as research partners, although of course there is some gray-area between these two designations. In examining the strengths and limitations of each of these projects, we do not suggest that one strategy is in all cases better than the other. Here we lay out two approaches as they played out in different settings to give a better sense of the options available to researchers who wish to include youth in the process.

Youth-Adult Relationship. Adults in these projects made an intentional effort to develop a different kind of relationship with youth than the typical one between researcher and informant. In both cases, there was an effort made to have youth help lead the process and, in this sense, act as partners of the adults. In YEP, we collaborated with youth in the process of doing research by asking them not just to carry out interviews, but also to develop protocols and give feedback about the study. Youth ethnographers' descriptions of the project acknowledged this effort to work together. In a representative example, one young person described the project as "a research project conducted by Stanford students who work together with students from various middle and high schools to gather information on a community center."

There was a similar collaborative approach in YELL, in which youth played an active role in shaping the direction of the research.

Nevertheless, it is more accurate to describe the youth-adult relationship in these projects as quasi-partnerships. In the case of YEP, this distinction

stems from the genesis of the project: Adult researchers approached youth seeking their help in answering some of the research questions of a broader research study. YELL was different in that youth had much greater latitude in selecting their topic and making decisions about the direction of their work. Still, the project was initiated by adults who sought a youth perspective on resources available in Redwood City. Because YELL is ongoing, we may see it transform, as young people take on greater responsibilities for its leadership. For example, in its second year (2002–2003), four 9th-grade youth served as mentors and facilitators for the new cohort.

A second factor that complicated the relationship in both projects had to do with the fact that these programs were offered as employment opportunities to the youth. Although stipends were important as incentives for participation as well as recognition of legitimate work, they made the relationship between adults and youth sometimes appear to be like one typical of employer and employee. One result was that some participants thought of it primarily as a job. For example, one YEP participant wrote, "I think I did take this project very seriously because it was like a real job." Another wrote, "I enjoyed . . . bragging about having a job." Although the fact of having a job itself does not preclude a sense of partnership, it added an employer–employee dimension to the relationship that reinforced the power differentials between adults and youth.

These examples show that the goal of creating adult–youth partnerships can be complicated by the realities of actually running a project, with stipends, training, work expectations, and the like. Adults are required to manage a sensitive balance between treating youth as partners while also being guides and teachers.

Youth Development. In YEP, where youth were treated more like research assistants, youth researchers showed improvement in their skills as interviewers and observers. They reported learning several basic research skills: interviewing, asking follow-up questions, and using a tape recorder. However, adult coordinators did not get a strong impression of more personal or transformative developmental changes.

At the same time, YEP demonstrates that the line between basic skills and youth development is quite blurry. For example, in a questionnaire administered to youth at the end of the project, youth ethnographers offered a range of responses to the question, "What have you gotten out of this experience?" Some responses focused on basic skills like learning to use a tape recorder or how to cash a check. Others focused on the content of their research, such as learning that "the Youth Center isn't a cheap scam acting like it's helping kids but really getting money for just sitting around" or "learning what people thought about school and their neighborhood." And still others described what they would take in a more personal way,

linking it to career motivation or an understanding of the position of young people in society. Interpreting this range in responses is difficult because of the significant age differences of participants. Nevertheless, the diversity of responses reflects how permeable the category of *youth development* can be and shows that different individuals may draw different lessons from the same general experience.

Youth's perceptions of what they learned showed similar diversity in YELL. On one hand, participants talked about learning specific skills, such as public speaking, working with others, and conducting interviews. In addition, however, they discussed more intangible changes in their own personal maturity and in their sense of connection to community. For example, members talked about becoming less shy, developing better reputations among teachers because of their role as YELL participants, and gaining self-confidence relative to high-achieving students in the school. Several also described a new sense of connectedness to their neighborhoods and communities. In reflecting on the city council presentation, one youth said that it was "the first time I actually got my point across to other people." Another student talked about a newfound appreciation of her own neighborhood: "I never thought my community was . . . really fancy or anything, but since coming from some of my friend's neighborhoods, I think my neighborhood is pretty good." Others developed a new perception of inequalities in Redwood City:

I didn't know that there's a really bad side of Redwood City. I never actually seen it up close . . . So I see it and I was just, like, whoa! I never knew it was like that . . . So now I think something has to be done about that. I don't think enough people know how it looks. So more people should know what else is going down.

Although this section does not offer a comprehensive analysis of youth's learning in these projects, these examples show some of the variety of insights and lessons that youth derived from their experiences and suggest the rich ways that youth can benefit from taking part in them.

Expertise/Knowledge. YEP and YELL were both based on the premise that youth have expert knowledge about the environments in which they spend their time. We reasoned that they would have insights and ideas that would not occur to outside researchers. In both projects, to ensure that their knowledge and expertise was utilized, youth were asked to design interview protocols, choose the location of their observations, and help analyze their data. Additionally, in both programs, youth were given a substantial amount of room to be creative in determining valid research topics. Facilitators wanted to see where youth would lead them and tried to foster this as much

as possible. For example, in YEP, one youth ethnographer raised the issue of gentrification, even though it was not a topic included in the research questions. Her coordinator encouraged her to pursue this line of research, which resulted in interesting observations about the changing face of the neighborhood and the implications of this for youth.

Yet despite these efforts, the extent to which youth knowledge and expertise was tapped in YEP was limited by the project's design. The research questions preceded youth's involvement in the study, and, in this sense, efforts to empower local knowledge and expertise were inhibited by adult's control over basic components of the research process. Moreover, although youth were involved in some initial analysis of their data, this was folded into the larger analysis and meaning-making process of the adults, preventing young people from having a deeper role in knowledge creation. There were other constraints as well: Without in-depth training and ongoing support, it may have been difficult for some youth to see themselves as "experts" in the data analysis process.

YELL had greater success in engaging the full range of youth's knowledge and expertise. As mentioned earlier, YELL participants were expected to come up with not just the research protocols, but also the general research design and questions. Youth chose to address the question: "How can we make Redwood City better for youth?" One example of how YELL provided a forum for youth to articulate their knowledge can be seen in a video documentary that several of the participants created. The youth who made this video wanted to provide visual "proof" of the way things were in their neighborhoods. Unlike the YELL participants who used surveys and interviews for their research, it was less important to the videographers to make generalizations about all youth in West City, but instead to provide evidence of their own experiences and living conditions in their neighborhoods.

A brief description of the video gives a sense of the kinds of knowledge that youth articulated. To make this video, the group ventured out after school into different neighborhoods and taped images of places that they cared about. The first line of narration conveyed its central theme: "Redwood City is like two different cities." The video then cut to a two-part montage of neighborhood scenes, in which images of parks and new buildings were contrasted with images of litter, gang graffiti, and freeway obstruction walls (adjacent to low-income housing where some of the youth researchers lived). This theme of "two cities" was picked up throughout the video. A later segment showed a new technology office building from the road. The voiceover said, "We're driving down Silicon Valley. A couple blocks ago there were really bad houses and litter, but now look at all the clean brand new buildings."

In sum, the video expressed a perspective that Redwood City is really like two cities, in which one part has open parks, shiny new office buildings, and

well-maintained roads, while the other is burdened by poorly maintained housing, gangs, and litter. By questioning a standard story of prosperity in Redwood City, the youth adopted roles not merely as data collectors, but as critical thinkers with a political message to communicate.

One potential drawback of this kind of expertise, however, is its aura of opinion and advocacy rather than detached social science. As a research document, the video did not make an effort to corroborate its stance by seeing if other youth in Redwood City felt the same way, but instead argued a particular position. Nevertheless, although the video offered a more subjective form of evidence than surveys or interviews, it was an example of the youth telling a story about something they were experts on—their own experience growing up in Redwood City.

Ownership. Although "ownership" is a somewhat intangible dimension to analyze, it is possible to ascertain differences in ownership by looking at how youth participants talked about the project and their degree of engagement in it. In YEP, adult researchers tried to share ownership with youth, but the adults did not reach a point where they felt that ownership was fully shared. In an internal evaluation of the project, YEP coordinators felt that lack of ownership by youth was a major weakness of the project. For example, coordinators noticed that youth ethnographers seemed removed from the research questions and outcome of the study:

I don't think that they felt a strong connection to the research questions or strong ownership of the project. It was more about "what do *you* want to know, what do *you* want to find out?" instead of, "*we* should ask this, or *we* should try to find out that."

I'm not sure how much the youth felt that they determined the research questions, and so I'm not sure if they were really interested in the answers they were getting in the interviews.

The YELL facilitators also placed great importance on organizing the project so that youth would feel responsible for its outcomes and a sense of ownership over its direction and results. In general YELL was more successful in doing this. For example, youth participated in the analysis of findings and development of recommendations. Youth took responsibility for presenting the findings, and some extended these presentations by participating on city planning committees as well. Lastly, one of the messages that youth communicated—about inequities in the distribution of resources across parts of the city—is an indicator of their feeling of ownership over the message of the project.

It is important to point out that youth ownership carries risks as well. For example, the YELL researchers explored some topics that did not always correspond with questions of concern to community leaders or areas adults

saw as actionable. Adults have an important role to play in guiding youth's focus to relevant domains for action, rather than leaving research topics completely open for youth to specify. At the same time, adults who invite youth to engage in this process should expect the unexpected and be prepared to respond to findings and recommendations that emerge.

Audience. As suggested by the framework, our experiences with YEP and YELL varied in terms of their audiences and strategies for dissemination. In YEP, the audience was determined by adults, and more specifically by the sponsors of the evaluation. Because this audience, which included the community-wide initiative, its funders, its advisory council, and other stakeholders, was agreed upon even before the evaluation was begun, there was little room for youth to consider alternative arenas in which to share their findings. Nor were youth invited to determine strategies for dissemination. Moreover, as youth's findings were incorporated into the larger analysis conducted by adults, we did not provide a forum for young people to offer their own opinions about how the data they collected was used and/or presented.

YELL participants, on the other hand, selected their audience and carried out the presentations themselves, choosing to share with school teachers, the school board, and the city council. It was important to the YELL participants that they speak to city leaders because that is where they saw the greatest likelihood of getting results based on their recommendations. There are limitations, however, to seeking a local, community-based audience, because the impact of the work can remain restricted in scope. Therefore, rather than assume that local audiences are the end purpose of this kind of research, we recommend that such partnerships engage young people in thinking through the benefits of connecting with broader audiences as well.

Ecological Validity. One of the strengths of YEP was its sensitivity to the settings youth move through in their daily lives. The advantages in this project were especially clear in youth's research on neighborhood contexts outside of the after-school youth center. Youth chose to observe places that would not have occurred to adults on the evaluation team or were inaccessible to them. By virtue of their familiarity with the routines and popular places in youth's lives, the youth ethnographers provided windows that were otherwise unavailable to adult researchers. For example, one youth chose to observe the field outside of her school where kids hang out in nonschool time, where they smoke and "let loose." This field represented an important space for young people, a place where, according to the youth ethnographer, they talk about their interests and worries about life. Another youth researcher documented his time spent after school hanging out at a local café

that was popular with his peers because of its safe atmosphere (but that, needless to say, did not offer "programs" for youth).

In addition to access to physical spaces, youth ethnographers in YEP helped to raise issues that might not have surfaced otherwise. One YEP coordinator, who had been conducting focus groups and interviews at the site for almost a year, learned of racial tension in the neighborhood from youth ethnographers that she had not heard about before. The youth ethnographers' research led the coordinator to explore this more fully in her own research at the site. In addition to accessing new spaces and issues, data collected by youth helped to triangulate the conclusions drawn by adults. For example, a major theme that arose in the adults' work had to do with the after-school centers as "safe places." The youth ethnographers' work provided further evidence of this finding, showing that, in fact, youth used these same descriptors when talking about the after-school centers with their peers.

The context of the YELL project was quite different from YEP in that it was not nested in a larger research study. However, in the work with YELL youth, ecological validity was an important founding assumption. That is, the organizers based the project partly on the belief that youth would focus on problems and questions that were real and meaningful to other young people. This posed complications, however, when it came to Redwood City, because of the diversity of neighborhoods within it. In other words, when talking about validity, whose ecology is being assumed? Youth who came from neighborhoods where gangs were prevalent assumed that gangs would be an issue everywhere. And for those youth participants from more affluent neighborhoods (including gated communities), the local issues were different—there the salient problems focused more on overcoming boredom.

One result of this diversity was that some YELL participants had stronger convictions about the problems in Redwood City than was reflected in the survey findings, which drew from a sample of youth from all parts of Redwood City. These youth had to reconcile their initial beliefs about Redwood City with the results of their research. A second result was that the YELL participants came away with a richer sense of the range of Redwood City's diversity. Those from affluent neighborhoods reflected on new insights they had learned about living conditions in other neighborhoods, such as differences in city services in the two places. One youth from a working-class neighborhood reported his surprise to learn that some parts had gangs and others didn't, because, in his words, "I thought gangs were all over."

This issue perhaps points to the problems inherent in assuming a natural "ecological validity" for youth across ethnic and class lines. Instead, when undertaking research work with youth, it is important to be open to the multiple environments that youth navigate, and to be aware that eco-

logical validity does not apply uniformly just because people share the same status as youth.

LIMITATIONS, BENEFITS AND IMPLICATIONS OF YOUTH-ADULT RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Our experience working with youth as researchers—whether as assistants or partners—has taught us important lessons about the limitations and benefits of working with young people in the research process, as well as practical implications for policymakers. The framework and analysis just presented highlight some of these, grounding them in the tensions and complexities of *real-world experience*. In proposing the significance of youth-adult research partnerships in general, we do not want to suggest that collaborative research replace conventional research strategies. Instead, we suggest that different models can play an important complementary role in the research enterprise. Here we synthesize some of the lessons we learned, and look more closely at the implications of these types of research strategies for after-school contexts.

Limitations

Before initiating a youth-adult research partnership, there are important methodological, ethical, and practical considerations that should be addressed. From a methodological standpoint, research collaborations with youth (or community members in general) do not always follow the same standards of rigor that are expected in university-based research. Sampling is not always systematic, thereby making generalization to other settings more difficult. Also, youth informants might feel pressured to respond in certain ways to youthful peers who conduct interviews and focus groups.⁷ Young people who are drawn to this kind of research project may be atypical, and therefore the *youth perspective that one gets from this form of study* may not reflect youth in general or even youth in the population studied. Also, more advanced analytic techniques, whether in ethnographic analysis or statistical methods, are not necessarily available to youth researchers. Finally, when community members (whether youth or adults) are involved in carrying out research, the possibility increases that interpretations of data may be biased toward community interests.

From the standpoint of advancing knowledge for a general audience, these methodological limitations should be considered when youth and adults engage in joint research. In our work with both YELL and YEP, it is

⁷This is not to suggest that bias does not also enter interactions between adult interviewers and youth.

true that specific local needs formed the basis for the work. The YELL participants had an explicit agenda of improving opportunities for youth in Redwood City. It is likely that some of the YEP researchers were biased by their desire to show their youth centers in a positive light. These issues arise in applied research that aims to have practical consequences for non-specialists. As is characteristic of other forms of “action” or “empowerment” research, this practical relevance is in fact a principle justification of the research endeavor. It is important to point out, however, that such efforts do not necessarily work at cross-purposes with the goal of doing valid research. In projects like this, therefore, it is important that youth and adult researchers pay careful attention to the distinction between evidence and speculation. As in other forms of social research, claims should be based on systematic data analysis.

This last point raises a second, practical limitation: Research partnerships require training, support, and sensitivity to the developmental levels of youth. Accomplished researchers spend years mastering the techniques associated with rigorous research, whether experimental, ethnographic, or otherwise. Youth do not necessarily become experts in these skills in the short time that they are trained, and research reports from these partnerships may not always hold up to the same standards that would be desired by policymakers or academic journals. In addition, efforts to train and support youth take time and resources, which adult researchers may not have. To be effective, collaborative research projects require knowledge of how to do rigorous research *and* how to run a youth program, a doubly difficult task. One way to alleviate this is to include experienced youth development practitioners on any collaborative research project.⁸ It is also necessary to attend to the developmental levels of youth participants in structuring any research partnership. For example, during the YEP project, we learned that 12th graders thrived on levels of autonomy and independence that left 7th graders struggling. More important, however, than working with a uniform age group is accommodating youth’s developmental needs. Middle-school students were capable of doing effective research; they just required more training, structure, and support from the coordinators than did the high-school seniors.

A third potential limitation to consider pertains to the ethics of research collaborations. These kinds of projects raise dilemmas about who will have control over where and how information will be used. For exam-

⁸This constraint posed particular challenges in the YEP project where we learned, over time, that to be successful we needed to provide a structured program for the youth ethnographers that included group-building, trust, and relationship development, in addition to the research activities themselves. For specific resources on strategies for organizing youth-adult research projects, see the following websites: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (gardnercenter.stanford.edu) and Youth in Focus (www.youthinfoocus.net).

ple, we could imagine a situation where the information gathered by youth researchers is then used for other purposes, which the youth were not aware of when they were doing their fieldwork.⁹ There is certainly this risk in a collaboration of this kind, and it is an ethical responsibility on the part of adult partners to ensure that youth researchers are informed of the purposes of and audiences for their work. This risk is alleviated somewhat in a full-partnership model, as youth have substantially greater control over audience selection and data use. It is also important to emphasize informed consent when youth ethnographers interview their peers and observe activities in informal settings.

Benefits

Despite these legitimate concerns, youth–adult research partnerships, when organized around adequate training and support for young people, represent a promising direction for the field. This is especially true for those researchers and policymakers who seek a deeper understanding of the experiences of youth and who wish to engage youth in building institutions that make a positive difference in their lives. We have identified benefits of youth–adult research collaborations that fall in three broad areas: those accruing to youth, to research, and to policies and practices that affect after-school and youth development contexts.

Youth development is a critical dimension of working with youth as researchers both in terms of learning basic skills and more holistic development. There were tangible benefits for participants of the YEP and YELL projects themselves. They learned new research skills, earned a stipend (for many of them this was their first experience receiving a paycheck), and developed new understandings of their communities, schools, and after-school centers. YELL participants also gained access to seats of power in their communities through presentations to city policymakers.

The quality of research findings can also be strengthened by youth involvement. Working with youth as researchers brings access to information and perspectives that adult researchers would not have on their own. In this way, it taps into new expertise and brings new perspectives into the process of meaning-making and knowledge creation. Further, youth are positioned to bring issues and concerns to the attention of outsiders (or even adults who are insiders) that might have otherwise gone unnoticed, or at least unexamined. In this way, youth's participation helps strengthen ecological validity by bringing an insider's view to after-school contexts and youth's experiences, and by reminding us not to assume homogeneity in young people's experience, needs, or interests.

⁹Joseph Kahne made helpful comments on this point.

After-school programs (and youth organizations more broadly) can also benefit from youth involvement in research and evaluation, which can be useful both as a source of feedback for programming and as a programming opportunity of its own. By including youth voice, collaborative projects heighten the likelihood that research findings will be relevant to the needs of both youth participants and program staff. In addition, youth–adult research partnerships comport with youth development philosophy by engaging youth as resources in work that is important to their communities. These kinds of research projects, for example, share certain key features of effective learning environments, such as cycles of practice, performance, and feedback (McLaughlin, 2000). The benefits are mutually reinforcing because as youth involvement in research strengthens programming and knowledge about after-school contexts, program offerings that engage youth in such research provide greater opportunity for positive youth development.

Implications

Not all collaborative research projects with youth need to or should aspire to the full partnership variety. After all, YEP, which we described as a quasi-partnership, was successful in meeting limited goals related to data collection for a larger evaluation and providing new learning opportunities for the youth. However, the full potential of working with youth as researchers is most likely to be realized in a model that embraces them as partners throughout the research process. This requires a combination of sharing ownership of the project with the youth and supporting youth leadership and development in the project. Practically, this means designing projects that: (a) involve youth in an early stage of research question development; (b) provide a steady, consistent, program structure; (c) utilize periodic cycles of data collection and analysis; (d) allow time and resources for youth development as well as meeting data collection needs; and (e) provide opportunities for engagement that are developmentally appropriate.

Policymakers also have a role to play in the development of youth–adult research partnerships. Funding streams, for example, should support youth research. However, more is needed than simply funding youth research projects; it also means creating the space for policymakers to “hear” youth and act on their research findings. In Redwood City, for example, YELL participants were able to find an audience in a receptive city government, and subsequently new roles were created for young people to sit on a variety of city planning committees. Youth IMPACT (2000), a youth evaluation project in San Francisco, is another example that shows how policymakers can legitimate youth's research efforts. After completing a citywide study of youth serving organizations, these youth evaluators de-

veloped criteria for program quality that community youth organizations receiving public funds are now required to meet.

Adult responsibility to create opportunities for youth input more often than not is overlooked. Yet our experience makes it clear that changes in adult roles in relation to youth, in the nature of the "tables" set for policymaking, and in expectations for using youth research must go along with changed youth roles in the community. Otherwise, policymakers risk launching yet another pro forma "youth commission" or "youth voice" project and, in the process, deepening youth's cynicism about the value adults attach to young people and their contributions.

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