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Getting to Social Action: The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) Project

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This article describes the social action component of the Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention through its community-based prevention research (CBPR) initiative. YES! is designed to promote problem-solving skills, social action, and civic participation among underserved elementary and middle school youth. The after-school program focuses on identifying and building youths' capacities and strengths as a means of ultimately decreasing rates of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and other risky behaviors. The article discusses the conceptual models of risk and intervention and factors contributing to successful social action work, including group dynamics, intragroup leadership, facilitator skills, and school-community contexts. Attention is focused on how the nature of the projects themselves played a key role in determining the likelihood of experiencing success. Implications and recommendations for other youth-focused empowerment education projects are discussed, including the effective use of Photovoice in such projects.

Keywords: social action; empowerment education; Photovoice; youth work

Community health education and health promotion increasingly reflect strength-based approaches that identify and build on individual and community assets (Goodman et al., 1998; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1990) to address high rates of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; antisocial, violence-related, and other risky

behaviors in youth (Futterman, Chabon, & Hoffman, 2000; Sanders-Phillips, 1996; N. Wilson, Battistich, Syme, & Boyce, 2002; N. Wilson, Syme, Boyce, Battistich, & Selvin, 2005).

An increasing appreciation of the potential of youth as critical thinkers and problem solvers has led to a number of new programs that apply an asset-based approach (Blaine et al., 1997; Tencati, Kole, Feigher, Winkleby, & Altman, 2002; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, & Dow, 2004), using problem posing as a way of engaging youth in collectively working on issues that they themselves identify as topics for school or community-level change (Schensul, LoBianco, & Lombardo, 2004; Wallerstein, 2002; Wallerstein, Larson-Bright, Adams, & Rael, 2000). Exemplifying this alternative approach, the Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project was designed to promote problem-solving skills, social action, and civic participation among underserved elementary school youth in West Contra Costa County, California (N. Wilson et al., 2006). The YES! project model is well grounded in earlier empowerment intervention efforts and has partnered with key individuals from these earlier efforts on the design, training, and implementation of the YES! program. YES! has adapted many elements of the earlier Adolescent Social Action Program (ASAP) in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Wallerstein et al., 2004). ASAP was a youth-centered empowerment model prevention program implemented in more than 30 middle

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and high schools in vulnerable neighborhoods. The goals of ASAP were to reduce morbidity and mortality, encourage youth to make healthier choices, and use empowerment education, including facilitator-led critical dialogue about youths' experiences, to actively engage youth in social and political action in their schools and neighborhoods (Wallerstein et al., 2004). ASAP, in short, modeled the strengths-based empowerment approach that is central to the YES! program.

The YES! program has also incorporated the Photovoice method, defined as "a process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (Wang, 2003, p. 179; Wang & Burris, 1994). In the YES! project, youth use their own photographs as the starting point (trigger) for personal writing and facilitator-led in-depth discussions, leading to social action. Formation and implementation of an action plan is a central part of the Photovoice method, which has been used effectively with diverse groups (Strack & Magill, 2004; Wang, 2003; Wang & Pies, 2004).

Following a brief description of the community context in which the YES! program operates, we provide an overview of the program and describe the conceptual risk and intervention models on which the project is based. We then explore the factors that influence the ability of youth groups to identify common themes and develop and implement social action projects to address their concerns. Implications and recommendations for other youth

empowerment and social action-oriented programs are discussed, with special attention to the challenges posed by such approaches with preteen and teen populations.

► **COMMUNITY CONTEXT**

The urban youth in the YES! project's densely populated school district are faced with high rates of poverty, substance abuse, homicide, teen births, and high school dropout rates and live in neighborhoods whose high unemployment rates (American Factfinder, 2000; Community Health Assessment Planning and Evaluation Unit, 2003) may contribute to feelings of lack of control, hopelessness, alienation, powerlessness, depression, and a decreased sense of purpose in life (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergast, Slaven, & Linder, 1994; Link & Phelan, 2000; Mirowsky, Ross, & Reynolds, 2000; Sanders-Phillips, 1996; Wallerstein, 1992; N. Wilson et al., 2005). Such feelings are often grounded in the harsh realities of life in low-income neighborhoods. However, they may also reflect what Lerner (1991) called "surplus powerlessness"—the degree to which feelings of hopelessness and inability to bring about change exceed the actual degree of powerlessness inherent in the situation. In contrast to these troubling facts of life are positive factors, such as multi-ethnic neighborhoods rich in cultural and civic organizations, and a tradition of organizing and community building around environmental health hazards and other problems (Community Health Assessment Planning and Evaluation Unit, 2003; El-Askari et al., 1998; Minkler, 2000).

► **INTERVENTION: THE YES! PROGRAM**

The YES! project is a 3-year after-school program and research project based on the principles of individual and community empowerment (Wallerstein, 1992; Zimmerman, 2000) and community-based participatory research (Castelloe, Watson, & White, 2002; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Empowerment education incorporates in its approach components of positive youth development, as stated by various interventionists and researchers. In collaboration with others, Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (2004) defined positive youth development programs as approaches that seek to address one or more of 15 objectives. Included in positive youth development are: opportunities to build competence (skills and resources for developing healthy options, developmentally appropriate skill-building activities), confidence (opportunities for making decisions, positive self-identity), connection (primary or secondary support, bonding with others, relationships with caring adults and peers), character (a sense of

responsibility for self and for others), caring (a sense of belonging), and contribution to the community (participation in meaningful community work). Empowerment education adds the participatory strategy of youth identifying their issues, and planning and engaging in social action to change underlying conditions that cause distress and ill health. Link and Phelan (1995, 2000) suggested that merely addressing the symptoms of problems without changing the fundamental underlying cause of problems may explain the persistent relationship between socioeconomic status and disease outcomes. They noted that individuals use available resources to cope with potential risk and create strategies to deal with risk and maximize opportunities. Mirowsky et al. (2000) pointed out that people with fewer resources have a reduced capacity to overcome more difficult and serious hardships in their lives. These resources, and levels of neighborhood poverty, are directly related to levels of health, sense of well-being, and sense of control over one's life. The importance of the role of power and control in the lives of children also has been discussed, with Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson (2001) noting that the major focus is on affective and cognitive dimensions of powerlessness, rather than on social and political dimensions of power. These investigators define *power* and *control* as having opportunities to (a) access materials and resources that satisfy basic human needs, (b) exercise participation and self-determination, and (c) experience competence and self-efficacy.

The goal of the YES! program is to help vulnerable children have healthy, fulfilling lives and a sense of hope for the future. We hypothesized that children's active involvement in participatory approaches to social action will help them develop a stronger future orientation, while helping to create a sense of cohesion, efficacy, and perceived influence over their world. We further hypothesized that having a sense of future will promote healthy behaviors and increase children's awareness of some behaviors as healthy or as risky (evaluation of these data are forthcoming).

► CONCEPTUAL RISK AND INTERVENTION MODELS

The YES! conceptual risk model states that individuals living in distressed neighborhoods have higher levels of exposure to environmental and social disorder (N. Wilson et al., 2006). According to the model, this increased exposure leads to negative changes in beliefs and attitudes, which in turn result in decreased health-promoting behaviors. In young adolescents, violence; use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs; early school leaving; antisocial behaviors; unwanted pregnancy; and depression

are problematic, in terms of youth development, and as markers for later health outcomes (see Figure 1).

The YES! intervention model (Figure 2) posits that participation in YES! groups has a positive influence on beliefs (e.g., future orientation and efficacy at the personal and group levels) and teaches a repertoire of behaviors (e.g., collaboration skills) that, in turn, positively influence proximal outcomes, such as willingness to use conflict resolution skills, and group collaborative decision making, in the pursuit of meaningful community participation, ultimately resulting in increased health and wellness outcomes (N. Wilson et al., 2006). Although these models are presented as linear, they are interactive.

We now describe the application of empowerment education as a strategy for early adolescents to generate health-related social action.

► PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Participants

In the fall of 2003, participants were recruited in five elementary schools with underserved minority populations. Because we contend that exposure to social and environmental disorder in the community places these children at risk, we recruited through presentations to all fifth-grade classrooms. All volunteers from whom we received caregiver consent and student assent were assigned to same gender groups of 6 to 10 students. Together with a small number of continuing sixth graders from the pilot year, there were 122 participants in 13 groups.

Facilitators

Critical to the success of the YES! project was the careful selection and training of high school and college-aged group facilitators, which has been discussed elsewhere (N. Wilson et al., 2006). Pairs of facilitators worked with each group. Apart from providing instruction in the curriculum, facilitators guided the groups in their decision making and project development. Facilitators received training in the goals of empowerment education, facilitating critical dialogue, community-organizing strategies, group management, multicultural understanding, familiarization with health issues in the community, and child development.

Curriculum and Preliminary Activities

Detailed weekly curriculum guides charted the session agendas up to the point where groups developed their social action projects. The YES! curriculum (Dasho &

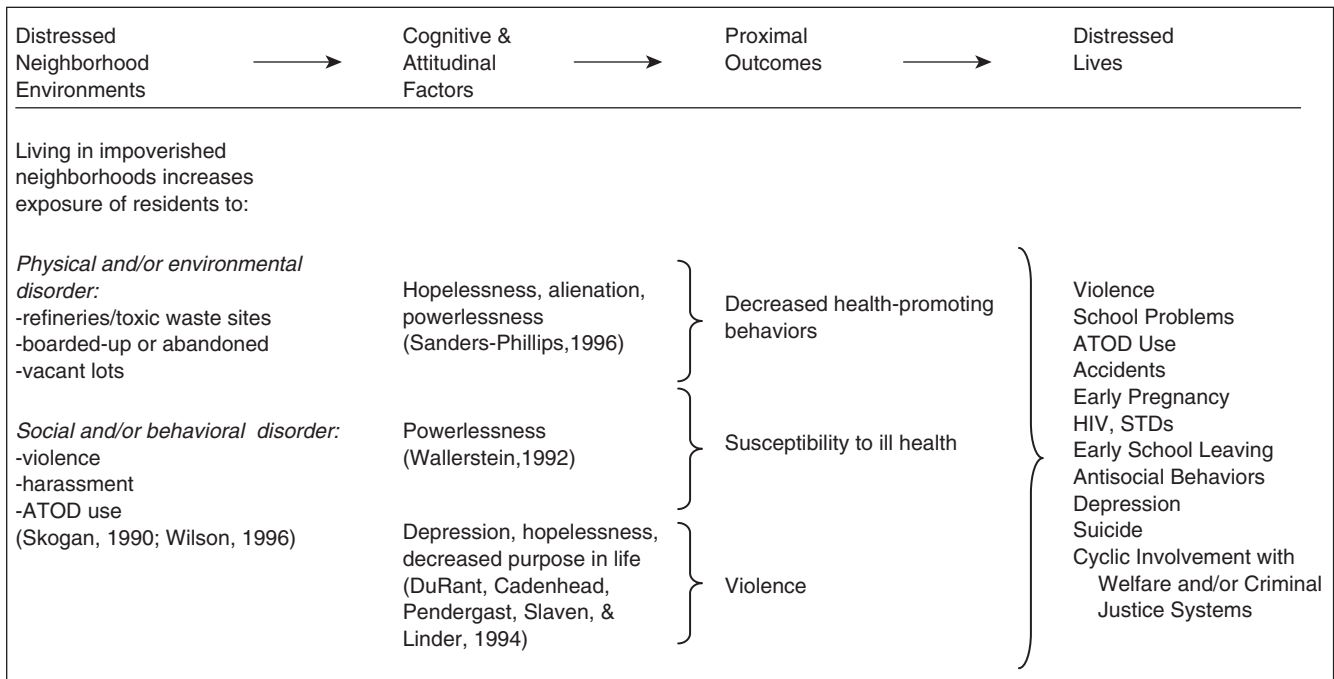


FIGURE 1 Conceptual Risk Model

NOTE: ATOD = alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

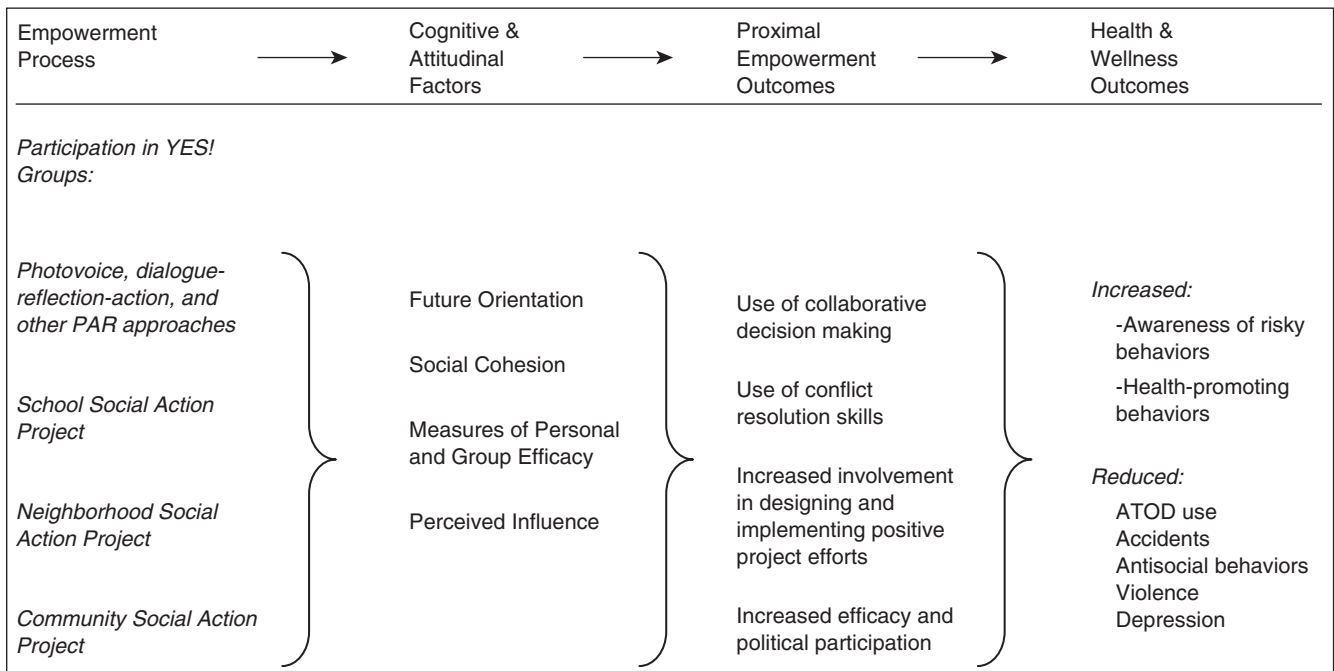


FIGURE 2 Intervention Model

NOTE: PAR = participatory action research; ATOD = alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

Wilson, 2003) was designed to cover four domains: team building, photography, empowerment education-based activities, and the steps involved in developing a group-identified social action project. Group formation and photography were emphasized during the first 6 to 7 weeks. Activities included team building to create a sense of group cohesion and identity, basic instruction on how a camera works, and concepts of photographic composition.

The core of the empowerment education activities was the use of Photovoice leading to group critical dialogue to generate a social action project. In Photovoice, participants represent their world with photographs that they then analyze to surface their meaning. The format for reflecting on the photographs is to respond in writing (a “freewrite”) to the following questions (which are referred to by the acronym SHOWeD): What do we See in this picture? What’s really Happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does it exist? What can we Do about it? (Shaffer, 1983). To prepare for this intellectual work, the groups first did preliminary activities to learn to take documentary pictures and to write about images. The groups described their school environment by drawing a large map of their school, on which they posted the photos of qualities or characteristics of their school (e.g., clean or dirty, scary or peaceful, friendly or unfriendly, etc.). Student groups brainstormed for places in their school that they felt represented the qualities. We also prepared participants for writing or “freewrites” by asking them to create storyboards, using a sequential series of stick drawings while working from a picture they had taken of their family, to imagine past and future events causally related to the picture and to describe their concerns and hopes about these imagined pictures. The purpose of the freewrites was to pose questions that supported deeper level thinking of cause and effect.

The Photovoice assignment involved taking pictures of assets and/or issues at the school that either promoted (assets) or prevented (issues) health, safety, or happiness at the school. Facilitators assisted students who appeared to have difficulty in understanding the assignment or who had difficulty actually writing.

After doing and presenting their freewrites individually, group members engaged in facilitated discussion about the effects of the assets and issues at the school. In these discussions, or “critical dialogues,” facilitators strove to elicit deeper thinking from the group, often employing the questions from SHOWeD. The intent of critical dialogue is for the group to consider why these individual experiences are public concerns, and to clarify their underlying root causes. Through these discussions, the group was to explore the social context

and the “causality” involved in conditions to frame the purpose of social action.

Each group ranked the importance of issues and assets they had identified according to the following criteria: Which idea might make the biggest difference at the school? Which idea might have a chance to succeed? What are the reasons this project would or would not be a good idea? Which idea would you want and be able to work on? After voting to determine the high-priority topics, the groups considered the goal of potential projects to address these topics. The facilitators provided additional criteria to consider: Is the project worthwhile? Is it winnable? Does it exclude other kids in the school? Can we finish it? Can we afford it? The groups researched these questions and then, in a subsequent session, chose a topic by consensus or by voting. Facilitators introduced examples of community-organizing strategies such as using presentations or media for awareness campaigns, petition drives to influence policy, and organizing volunteer community action. The groups posted comments about potential project ideas on flip chart pages placed around the room to get all group members’ input, discussed these responses, and then determined the specific method for the project. Each group presented its project to school personnel for support and approval.

► SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

The groups came up with four distinct types of social action projects: (a) awareness campaigns about conditions at school, for example, poster campaigns concerning potential teacher layoffs, a school vote to have the school district fix a shack on campus that was graffiti- and bullet-hole laden (three groups); (b) school behavior campaigns, for example, skits on subjects such as why rumors cause fights, good and bad ways to get attention, the importance of talking to adults about what is bothering you (five groups); (c) clean-up projects, for example, painting bathrooms to remove graffiti, cleaning up litter on a playground (two groups); and (d) projects to improve school spirit, for example, school spirit t-shirts and a yearbook (two groups). Finally, one group was unable to move beyond creating an exhibition of its issue and asset photographs.

Even though some groups used similar methods for their social action project (i.e., skit presentations or petition drives) the depth of the projects varied tremendously. The degree of success group members experienced with their projects was determined by the interaction of a variety of factors, including group dynamics and task readiness, leadership within the groups, and situational conditions in the schools (e.g.,

project support by key school personnel). It is beyond the scope of this article to address how this constellation of factors played differentially in each group. Instead we focus in some detail on the question of how to determine the success of the projects and factors that inhibited success. An important part of the YES! program was that the groups establish their own criterion for measuring success of their projects.

As discussed previously, the intent of the curriculum was to have the groups come up with consensually determined measures of success for their social action projects. We found that most groups did not conduct a thorough evaluation of their project because they finished at the end of the school year. Consequently, the most salient criterion from the youth perspective was twofold: "Was the project completed?" and "Did we try?" For example, rather than conducting a survey to see if their presentations affected attitudes in the school, groups relied on their own feelings about how the presentation went (e.g., "They liked it," or "They laughed at us 'cause we messed up.") The group that created the yearbook did not like its appearance because they could not afford "quality" materials, yet they vastly outdistributed the "t-shirt" group who, in contrast, thought they were successful because they liked their design. However, many groups were able to point to measures of success such as the number of people who signed a petition or volunteered to help at a clean-up event. Group members typically analyzed their own success solely in terms of their level of effort (e.g., "We worked hard.") rather than by examining the ways in which their action plan was or was not effective. Whatever the groups' intentions and level of effort, appropriateness, ambitiousness, and opportunity, it is also valuable to consider the project within the social and environmental climate that placed constraints on the group social action projects.

Appropriateness

A foundational idea of empowerment education is that participants need to collectively identify the root cause of an issue to design an appropriate strategy for practical action. Thus, the first constraint was the appropriateness of the project given the problem. The curriculum emphasized the centrality of critical dialogue for identifying the "problems behind the problem" or the underlying causes of the groups' issues. Facilitators varied, however, in their success at prolonging these discussions. For example, when group members became excited about a project, they often resisted discussing more abstract concerns about whether the project addressed symptoms or root causes. Although

charting criteria was a good tool to help dissuade groups from undertaking something too costly or impractical, there was no way to reinvestigate their "causal model" when the social action projects were consensually chosen. Facilitators did exert some preemptive control when project suggestions seemed inappropriate. Because all projects needed support of school principals or their representatives, the projects also needed to be appropriate for the school institution.

Ambitiousness

The second constraint on a project's potential for success was the ambitiousness of the project. Several groups had unrealistic ideas about what could be accomplished in the time available for their social action projects. Typically groups were not ready to begin their projects until there were just 4 weeks remaining in the school year. Because schools closed for the summer and cofacilitators were unavailable during that time, there was no possibility of extending projects into July.

Aside from the limitations of time, some groups misjudged the "degree of difficulty" of projects they proposed. Intermediate success goals were determined so that the group members could feel successful if they met some, but not all, of their goals. Working to avoid quixotic efforts, facilitators used dialogue to help the groups to decide on projects that would not encounter strong resistance within the school community. For example, although complaints about school food were rampant, groups were able to see that this could not be addressed late in the school year. Nonetheless, the groups' enthusiasm for their topics often led to scheduling additional group meetings, having facilitators take the lead on work that would have been done more slowly by group members (e.g., editing skit scripts), or to cutting down the original scope of the project. On the underachieving end of "ambitiousness" was the group that only produced an exhibit of its assets and issues photographs.

Opportunity

The third constraint on success was the opportunity that occurred within the school community context. Several social action projects benefited from situational conditions. For example, one group had conflicts deciding on the content of their skit and was not ready to present it until the last day of school. The principal gave them the opportunity to present at the final assembly.

Because the facilitators were not part of the school staff, they had a limited understanding of potential opportunities or resources available within the school. Although YES! program staff often were in a better position to

find out about school-based resources, ideally, group members would have the experience of researching the resource possibilities. The school spirit t-shirt project became feasible because a school staff member had access to a silkscreen studio. A group's bathroom painting project did not require a planned fund-raising activity because a janitor was able to quickly supply free paint. On the other hand, some groups were thwarted when they were not allowed access to school resources or use in-school time to meet. Finally, one group, which was enthusiastic about its plan to clean up a creek behind the school that had been used as a dumping ground, was thwarted by numerous obstacles, including the requirement that U.S. \$1 million of insurance be purchased in advance of the clean up. Although this group was able to considerably narrow its project (creating a rap song about the need for and performing it as part of their informational efforts at a school fair), this more limited effort did not generate the level of excitement of their original proposal.

► DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The experiences of the first cohort of the YES! project with the social action component of this program suggest a number of challenges and recommendations that may be useful for health educators and others interested in adapting and applying this model in work with preadolescent youth. The key to empowerment interventions is that group dialogue and reflection leads to action. This project has grappled with finding the appropriate scope of that social action for early adolescents. Although Wang and Burris (1994) maintained that the Photovoice method should result in change at the policy level, others have noted that children have limited social capital to initiate such change (Strack & Magill, 2004) and that community service would be a desirable outlet. By limiting the boundaries of the community to the school, YES! afforded its participants an appropriately familiar arena and ready allies (school staff and other youth).

Time was a significant constraint for the ambitiousness of the social action projects and for the YES! program itself. In particular, youth programs will discover that scarce time forces a compromise in the time allocated to photography, Photovoice freewrites, critical dialogue, and conducting the social action projects. Photography is an incentive for participation and a vehicle for Photovoice. Participants wanted to spend more time taking pictures, and facilitators reported not having enough time to engage participants in critical dialogue about pictures or to assist reluctant writers in expressing their ideas in freewrites.

Because critical reflection on actions taken is an integral part of empowerment work (Freire, 1973), time also is needed during the social action phase to enable this reflection, dialogue, and resultant learning to take place. One reason performing skits was so popular was that this is a way to physically realize the group members' social analyses. Programs may want to have facilitators with some experience in drama who can successfully coach these performances. Taking a cue from the ASAP (Wallerstein et al., 2004), however, skit performance and similar activities should also always be followed by dialogue with the audience so that the skit itself is used as a trigger for a meaningful discussion of the issues and assets portrayed and how the problem might best be understood and addressed. Our experience suggests that with this age group, and when the project has been decided on, 4 months (90 minutes \times 16 weeks) would be a good period of time to develop and evaluate a meaningful social action project.

The degree of empowerment group members experience may depend on the level of effort, which is somewhat determined by the group members, and the success of that effort, which may be heavily influenced by external factors. Therefore, it is essential for the projects to have multiple markers of success. Many groups did not have the opportunity to assess the impact of their work because, for example, they did not receive a response to their letters, or had not considered how to find out if the intended message of their skit had been understood by their audience and had no more meetings in which to consider how to do this before the semester ended. Based on this experience, the YES! project is now building a self-evaluation component into the social action planning process, and continuing to expand and modify the YES! curriculum to promote more richly developed social action projects.

An additional consideration in planning youth empowerment work is that, in an after-school context, program activities cannot be exclusively "school-like." Children this age demand a balance of play and physical activity to go along with discussion, writing, and groupwork. Building in time for parties, games, and other non-work-like activity is critical to participant retention and overall program success in meeting the needs of youth participants and achieving program goals (N. Wilson et al., 2006).

In summary, according to the YES! intervention model, each of the planned activities and group processes, (e.g., team building, social skill development, Photovoice, critical dialogue, democratic decision making, and participating in social action, reflection, and self-evaluation), contribute to individual and group efficacy. A program should not develop a scope and sequence of activities to

address these objectives separately but ideally, address them synergistically, embedded in the course of authentic action. For example, isolated team-building activities are less potent than teamwork in a meaningful project.

The YES! program provided the facilitators with a weekly curriculum up to the point of a group's selection of their social action project. It was essential that the facilitators have a clear understanding that they were to be the "headlight," or keeper of the vision, of the program if a group was stuck. Facilitators and program staff should continually discuss how to handle situations that might have an impact on empowerment. For example, who should make a decision, the group or the facilitator? That depends on several factors, such as the effect on the group's sense of efficacy and control, the relative importance of the decision, and the amount of time available to the group to gain the understanding or resources to make the decision. This uncertainty makes the facilitator's role challenging and exciting. Ultimately, a participatory action project with early adolescents cannot be contained in the casing of a curriculum but must be guided and nurtured as it grows.

► CONCLUSIONS

The YES! project offers a theoretically driven intervention, grounded in principles of empowerment and participatory research, and places a special emphasis on critical thinking and moving into action. Our experience with social action projects revealed much that may be useful to others interested in designing youth empowerment programs. First, youth workers should design programs to engage participants in social action early in the group's formation and allow sufficient time for completing and evaluating its project. Second, program plans must address the time constraints that limit the depth of the intervention, namely the duration and number of available sessions and the need to balance project-related work with recreational activities. Third, YES! was designed originally to involve participants for 3 years. However, any multiyear youth program will also face participant attrition, which alters the constitution of the groups and creates other challenges. Fourth, facilitators need to help youth look for the "problems behind the problem" and to move beyond their initial opinions to explore social context. Fifth, programs will be faced with time pressures and other constraints underscoring the need to monitor and address the appropriateness, ambitiousness, and opportunities of the projects as they are being proposed. Project staff should be prepared to help clear the path for social action projects to improve their likelihood of success. Despite the challenges presented, the YES! program's

strategies hold potential for refining programs that seek to involve preadolescent youth in identifying, designing, and conducting social action projects in the context of community-based prevention research.

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