

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



The Role of Empowerment in Youth Development

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Empowerment, sociopolitical control, wellbeing, positive youth development

POPULATION GROUP

All youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Civic Engagement and Youth Leadership; Strong Supportive Friends and Family

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“When young people develop confidence that they can exert influence on the sociopolitical systems in which they take part, it can mediate the impact that those systems have on their perceptions of well being and their patterns of behavior. Yet, the development of confidence and perception of control in the sociopolitical domain may depend, to some extent, on the support a young person receives in family, school, neighborhood and other social settings.”

1. What is the research about?

Currently, there is limited literature on the relationship between sociopolitical control and positive youth development. Much research has focused on the ways that social and political issues impact young people but few studies consider the active role that youth can play to address these issues. It is important to acknowledge that youth are aware and involved in social and political issues, and it is important to explore how this may impact their development.

This study examined whether sociopolitical control, known to be a key indicator of psychological empowerment, influenced developmental outcomes for youth and in what ways. The researchers defined sociopolitical control as “a construct that encompasses perceptions of self efficacy, motivation, competence, and perceived control to the sociopolitical domain” (p. 624). In other words, sociopolitical control can be understood as the level of influence youth have over both social and political issues within their community. The researchers wanted to know if sociopolitical control is a significant factor in positive youth development.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in a northeastern US state. It involved one school district in a mid-sized city that was known for being a low income district with high rates of crime and substance abuse.

3. Who is this research about?

This research was focused on high school youth between the grades of 9-12. The students involved were of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with only 3% of participants identifying as Caucasian. 629 high school students participated.

4. How was the research done?

This research employed a needs assessment survey questionnaire that was given to participants. This assessment involved students answering questions on seven factors of ecological support: sociopolitical control, social support, family cohesion, self esteem, school importance, psychological symptoms and risk behaviours. Students rated their responses on a 3 to 6-point scale depending on the question. The responses were then analyzed by using a path model, looking for both negative and positive correlations between each factor.

5. What are the key findings?

Key findings involved examining correlations between the seven factors that were investigated in the assessment. Youth with high family cohesion tended to have more social support, had higher levels of sociopolitical control and had higher self esteem. When youth had positive family cohesion and high self esteem, they were less likely to exhibit psychological symptoms or risky behaviours. Family cohesion was also an important factor for youth understanding the importance of school.

Youth who reported high levels of sociopolitical control also understood school importance and had high self esteem. Youth displaying high levels of sociopolitical control also showed less signs of showing psychological symptoms and risk behaviours. Lastly, youth who reported high levels of self esteem and perceived school importance were also less likely to show signs of showing psychological symptoms and risk behaviours.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This research is important as it recognizes the relationship between youth involvement in social and political issues with positive youth development. Youth workers need to consider this research when developing programs and policies that seek to promote positive youth development. Youth workers should include opportunities for sociopolitical development for youth, aiming to engage them in community change processes. Youth engagement can be done at every level, whether locally through grassroots youth organizations or government organizations that are involved in sociopolitical issues. Through youth engagement, much can be done to improve current systems.



Christens, B. D., & Peterson, N. A. (2012). The role of empowerment in youth development: A study of sociopolitical control as mediator of ecological systems' influence on developmental outcomes. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 41(5), 623-635.