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# “It Was Like We Were All Equal”: Maximizing Youth Development Using Youth-Adult Partnerships

Elizabeth H. Weybright  
Nathan Trauntvein  
Mary Katherine Deen

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Quality relationships between youth and adults are critical for effective youth development programming. However, not all youth-adult relationships equally contribute to positive development. Of the differing types of relationships, youth-adult partnerships, characterized by opportunities for youth voice and supportive relationships with adults, are associated with positive youth development outcomes. Available research supports this claim finding participation in a youth-adult partnership is associated with outcomes such as greater empowerment, psychological agency, and community connectedness. However, little empirical work has qualitatively explored youths' experience in a youth-adult partnership and its contribution to youth development outcomes. The purpose of the current study was to understand the experience of youth participating in a youth-adult partnership and how this experience was associated with positive youth development outcomes.

A qualitative case study approach was used to collect interview and activity observation data from 29 youth between the ages of 14 and 18 years old who participated in a youth-adult partnership while implementing a 4-H Youth Development program. Youth were asked generally about their experience in the partnership including what worked well, what challenges they experienced, and how they overcame these challenges. From these interviews and observations, six themes emerged that captured what worked well, including mutual respect, independence or autonomy in teaching, having an adult as a supportive mentor or coach, shared responsibilities or partnerships with adults and peers, friendship with adults and peers, and having fun. Three themes appeared related to challenges including communication, logistics, and preconceived notions of working with adults. Youth responses aligned with the Essential Elements, 4-H's conceptualization of positive youth development, indicating positive outcomes had been experienced.

Youth-adult partnerships represent one approach for promoting positive youth development while engaging young people. These partnerships have the advantage of being adaptable to a variety of content areas. Findings provide

insight into how parks and recreation agencies might design and organize their programs to maximize the effectiveness of youth-adult partnerships. The paper concludes by reviewing the application of youth-adult partnerships to a parks and recreation context, examples of how parks and recreation are already using youth-adult partnerships, and providing suggestions for how to implement this approach in other communities.

**KEYWORDS:** *Youth-adult partnership, Positive youth development, Extension 4-H*

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Positive, supportive relationships with adults are essential in promoting youth development. In particular, supportive relationships are highlighted as one of the three critical aspects of an effective positive youth development program (Lerner et al., 2011) and should be incorporated into community programming to maximize youth development outcomes (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Given that four out of five youth aged 12 to 17 years old participate in at least one organized activity outside of school, adults in youth-serving organizations play a key role in the lives of youth (Child and Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, 2012). However, not all youth-adult relationships contribute equally to youth development. This may be due to the varying nature of these relationships which exist on a continuum from adult-led to youth-led depending on the degree of involvement and balance of power (Jones & Perkins, 2005). In the middle of this continuum lies the youth-adult partnership, which is characterized by youth voice in decision-making and a supportive adult relationship (Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2015).

Despite suggestions that youth-adult partnerships contribute to youth development, little empirical work has evaluated this contribution to broader positive youth development outcomes (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). Studies that have addressed youth-adult partnerships often do so through the adult partner (e.g., Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008) or by conducting youth surveys (e.g., Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornblug, & Collura, 2015) rather than letting youth share their experiences using their own voice. Using Zeldin's (Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015) conceptualization of youth-adult partnerships, the current study used a qualitative, instrumental case study approach to 1) better understand the experience of youth participating in a youth-adult partnership within a 4-H Youth Development program and 2) how youth experience is associated with the 4-H Essential Elements, 4-H's conceptualization of positive youth development. The paper concludes by reviewing the application of youth-adult partnerships to a parks and recreation context.

## Literature Review

### Youth-Adult Partnerships

As mentioned previously, youth-adult relationships exist on a continuum from adult dominated to youth dominated (Jones & Perkins, 2005). On the adult-dominated end are adult-centered leadership and adult-led collaboration. Adult-centered leadership includes programming completely conceived and driven by adults without opportunity for youth input. Adult-led collaborations allow for some youth input, but at the discretion of the

adult. At the youth-dominated end of the continuum exists youth-centered leadership, which are programs solely run by youth and youth-led collaborations where adults are sought by youth as needed. Youth-adult partnerships are located centrally on the continuum as a balance point between solely adult- or youth-led.

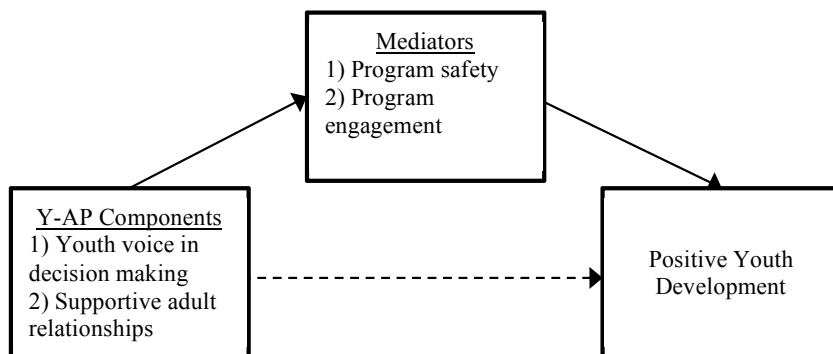
Although the term “youth-adult partnership” (Y-AP) is relatively new, the idea behind it is not. In the 1970s, the National Commission on Resources for Youth was promoting youth participation in a partnership model which emphasized youth voice through “... opportunity for planning and/or decision-making...” (1976, p. 25) and “...mutuality in teaching and learning...” (1974, p. 227). The factors of mutuality in teaching, learning, and decision-making formed the basis for the initial conceptualization of Y-APs put forth by Camino (2000). Over time, Zeldin and colleagues have refined this definition and in 2013 felt the research on Y-APs had advanced enough to warrant formal definition as the practice of:

- (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013, p. 388).

However, even Zeldin refers to this as a “working definition,” suggesting further evolution will occur over time.

### Zeldin’s Model of Youth-Adult Partnerships

In 2015, Zeldin and colleagues posited Y-APs were comprised of two main components: 1) youth voice in decision making and 2) supportive adult relationships (Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015). In this model, they also identified program safety and engagement as factors that mediate the relationship between the Y-AP components and positive youth development (PYD) outcomes (see Figure 1). Each component and mediator are reviewed below.



*Figure 1.* Zeldin’s Model of Youth-Adult Partnerships (Zeldin, Krauss, Kim Collura, & Abdullah, 2015)

Although the term youth voice lacks a consistent conceptualization, it ideally refers to the process by which youth not only have the opportunity to communicate, but are exposed to adults who value and respect their message (Maynard, 2008). Zeldin specifies youth voice within the context of decision-making, such that youth have a say in program planning, feel their message is taken seriously by adults, and are encouraged and expected to express their concerns, ideas, and opinions (Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014).

For decades, supportive adult relationships have been acknowledged an important aspect of youth development programs (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998)

as illustrated by inclusion as one of the 40 developmental assets which promote PYD (Benson, 1997). In the 1990s, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine developed the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth and tasked them with identifying what common contextual features promote youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). One of the eight identified features was “supportive relationships,” which were characterized by warmth, caring, and mutual respect where adults were available to the youth. Zeldin conceptualizes supportive adult relationships as a shared balance of power, and reciprocal learning, trust, and respect (Zeldin et al., 2014).

Mediators of program safety and engagement often go hand in hand. Physical (e.g., environmental hazards, injury) and psychological (e.g., harassment, exposure to violence) safety, has been identified as a “prerequisite to . . . positive development” in youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 91) and is another of the 40 developmental assets promoting PYD (Benson, 1997). When youth feel uncomfortable or unsafe within a program or youth-adult partnership, participation may be diminished and developmental goals thwarted (Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015). Therefore, to be engaged, youth must first feel safe. To sustain this engagement, youth should not only feel satisfied with their initial experience, but the program must provide ongoing opportunities for personally meaningful engagement. Within the Y-AP, youth engagement is enhanced by opportunities to engage in decision making with adults. As youth identify shared interests and work toward a common goal with adult partners, they become more engaged, potentially developing a sense of ownership and connectedness to the program as a whole (Zeldin, Krauss et al.). Therefore, the components of the Y-AP, as proposed by Zeldin, inherently build in key factors that facilitate youth engagement.

### **Youth-Adult Partnerships and Developmental Outcomes**

When youth-adult partnerships include the components specified by Zeldin, positive developmental outcomes for youth can be maximized. Prior research indicates youth who participate in a youth-adult partnership experience greater empowerment, psychological agency, and community connectedness while developing problem solving, and decision-making skills (Akiva et al., 2014; Krauss et al., 2014; Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015).

Within 4-H Youth Development, PYD is guided by the 4-H Essential Elements. Adopted by 4-H nationally, the Essential Elements provide for consistency in the design and structure of 4-H programming and are deemed “necessary attributes of youth programs striving to create environments conducive to optimizing youth development” and therefore promoting PYD (Martz, Mincemoyer, & McNeely, 2009, p. 2). These four Essential Elements include belonging—a positive relationship with a caring adult in a safe and inclusive environment; mastery—engagement in learning and opportunity to build competence; independence—opportunity to see oneself as an active participant in the future through self-determination and; generosity—opportunity to value and practice service for others (Martz et al., 2009). Although the field of youth development and much of its associated research has focused on PYD as conceptualized by the Five Cs (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring; see Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000), these overlap with the 4-H Essential Elements (see Heck & Subramaniam, 2009; White, Hrnčirik, & Weybright, in press). In previous evaluations of 4-H Youth Development programming, youth report experiencing the Essential Elements (Lee, Beard, & Straquadine, 2003; Taylor-Powell & Calvert, 2006) and other positive developmental outcomes such as increased self-confidence (Goodwin, Carroll, & Oliver, 2007).

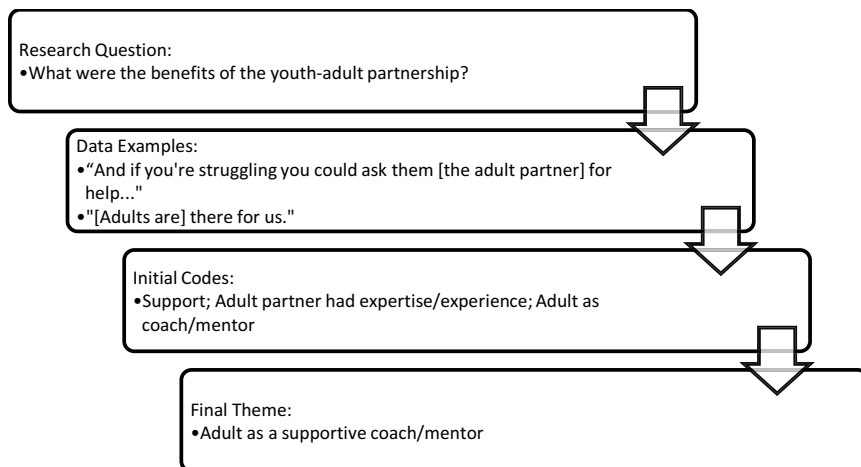
### **The Current Study**

For decades, supportive relationships have been understood to be associated with PYD (Benson, 1997). Although the idea of youth and adults working together is not a new one, research on Y-APs and associated outcomes has been slower to develop (Akiva et al., 2014). Available theory and empirical work suggests these partnerships and their characteristics are associated with PYD (e.g., Camino, 2000, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2013; Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015) but few studies have allowed youth to share in their own words.

Given this gap, the purpose of the current study is to understand the experience of youth in a youth-adult partnership. Specifically, we present findings from a qualitative, instrumental case study of a 4-H Youth Development program utilizing youth-adult partnerships to better understand the youth experience and its association with the 4-H Essential Elements.

## Methods

Due to the lack of youth perspective on the experience of participating in a Y-AP and the desire to understand the experience of youth, the current study employed a qualitative, instrumental case study research design where the unit of analysis was bounded by participation as youth-partners in the 4-H Food Smart Families program. An instrumental case study was chosen due to its purpose of understanding a specific issue (Creswell, 2013), or in our case, youth-adult partnerships. Largely following Yin's (2014) approach to case study research, prior to data collection, literature on Y-APs was reviewed and informed data collection and analysis. In alignment with Yin's principles of data collection, multiple sources of data were used, data were organized and documented using an electronic database, and a chain of evidence was maintained. Two types of data were collected. Individual and group interviews comprised the bulk of data collected while direct observation of the Benefits and Challenges Activity from the Youth-Adult Partnership curriculum (see Arnold & Gifford, 2014) served as the second source. Case study documents and data were organized and housed in an electronic database and shared between project staff. During the research process, a chain of evidence was developed (see Figure 2 Audit Trail) depicting the connection between data and final theme.



**Figure 2.** Audit Trail Example from Interview

To understand the experience of the Y-AP from the youth point of view, group and individual interviews were conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Leveraging the dynamics of the group, group interviews were used to understand ideas or feelings about Y-APs by way of interactive discussion (Sim, 1998). In addition, group interviews allowed for a cost-effective and efficient approach by collecting data from multiple individuals within one setting. Using group interviews in an adolescent population provides a less formal and structured environment facilitating disclosure of "experiences and perspectives that may be less readily available via one-on-one situations" (Clark Jones & Broome, 2001, p. 90) and reducing problems of social desirability (Wilkinson, 1998). By identifying the meanings and interpretations of youth, we were better able to understand their individual

perspectives and the shared beliefs of the group (Clark Jones & Broome; Morgan, 1993). When groups were not feasible due to small sample size, individual interviews were conducted. Although individual interviews did not allow for group interaction, they provided opportunities for greater depth of individual response.

### **Participants**

The sample for the current study was taken from a roster of all teenagers (14–18 years old) who participated as youth partners in the implementation of 4-H Food Smart Families (FSF) presented by Youth Advocates for Health. Of these 61 teenagers, 29 (48%) participated in the follow-up qualitative data collection with 24 participating in one of four group interviews and five in an individual interview. Making up the current sample, these 29 youth (59% female) represented nine different counties throughout Washington State. Participants were recruited via phone call, email, and/or word of mouth with one reminder for non-responders. County Extension staff recruited group interview participants while project evaluator recruited individual interview participants. All participants received a \$25 Visa gift card as an incentive for participation. The university-affiliated research office found the project was exempt from the need for IRB review.

### **Youth Advocates for Health (YA4-H!)**

The 4-H Food Smart Families (FSF) program was implemented under the broader umbrella of Washington State University YA4-H!. Adopted from Oregon State University, YA4-H! develops youth as leaders and advocates for health in partnership with adults. This methodology can be applied to a variety of content areas and, in the current study, was used to implement the 4-H FSF project. Using youth-adult partnerships, 4-H FSF supported youth as teachers and advocates for health to teach younger youth (8-12 years old) nutrition, cooking, and budgeting lessons using Choose Health Food Fun and Fitness (CHFFF; Cornell University, 2014). Since the focus of the current paper is on the implementation of the youth-adult partnership, we will focus primarily on the YA4-H! program model.

To develop meaningful and sustained youth-adult partnerships, YA4-H! uses a three-step implementation model of 1) a statewide training for youth and adults, 2) community-based recruitment and training, and 3) implementation of chosen curriculum. First, youth and adults attended a statewide 12-hour train the trainer event, which is viewed as critical to the success of the youth-adult partnership. This training was intentionally designed to cover: the 4-H Essential Elements (integrated throughout; Martz et al., 2009), youth-adult partnerships (four hours; Arnold & Gifford, 2014; Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005), teens as teachers (four hours; Arnold, Gifford, Deen, & Edwards, 2015), and the chosen subject matter content (four hours of CHFFF). The youth-adult partnership curriculum focused on topics of an exploration of power balance within the relationship, understanding the benefits and challenges of the partnership, and understanding and appreciating personal traits (Arnold & Gifford, 2014). Team-building activities were interspersed throughout the training.

To develop relationships between youth and adult partners and among the larger project group, the statewide training (i.e., Step 1) was held over a weekend in a geographically central location and attended by one adult and two youth partners from participating communities. The training was facilitated by an experienced youth and adult team who had been involved in prior implementation of YA4-H!. Upon conclusion of the training, youth-adult partners returned to their communities to recruit and train additional youth partners (i.e., Step 2). Once youth-adult partners were trained, the chosen curriculum was implemented to complete Step 3 of the implementation model.

### **Procedures**

The 4-H FSF program ran from January to September 2014. Direct observation data were collected during the implementation of the Benefits and Challenges Activity. This activity took place during a statewide training of youth-adult partnerships where youth

and adults, in separate groups, identified the benefits and challenges of working with one another. Project staff observed and noted youth and adult responses. Interview data were collected between October 2014 and January 2015. Guided by related literature, a semi-structured protocol was developed for consistency across interviews with the purpose of understanding the experience of youth partners. Given this, protocol questions covered topics of nutrition, the youth-adult partnership, skills gained from being a teen teacher, and physical activity. The current study focuses on questions and responses related to the youth-adult partnership including the youths' overall experience (i.e., "What was your experience like in the youth-adult partnership?"), what worked well (i.e., "What aspects of the youth-adult partnership worked well?"), and what were the challenges of the partnership (i.e., "What were the challenges of the youth-adult partnership? How did you overcome these challenges?"). Follow-up probing questions were left to the discretion of the facilitator.

Participation in a group, as compared to individual interview, was determined by the number of teens interested in participating within a given geographical area. In areas where one or two teens demonstrated interest, an individual interview was conducted over the phone lasting, on average, 20 minutes (ranging from 12 to 26 minutes). Five individual interviews were conducted with youth from three different counties. In areas where a group of youth demonstrated interest in participating, group interviews were conducted lasting, on average, 50 minutes (ranging from 43 to 60 minutes). Four groups, ranging in size from five to eight participants ( $M = 6$ ), were conducted with youth from six different counties (two interviews included youth from two neighboring counties). The project evaluator led two group and all five individual interviews while two county Extension faculty who were directly involved with the project each conducted one group interview in their respective communities.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were conducted until no new information was obtained, or data saturation had been achieved (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Analysis was guided by the steps for generating best qualitative evidence (similar to grounded theory approach; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) including data immersion, coding, creating categories, and identifying themes (Green et al., 2007). Three project staff members read, and re-read, through all transcripts (i.e., data immersion), independently coded (i.e., coding), and collectively developed and refined an emergent coding scheme using prior theory, empirical work, and curricula as sensitizing information (i.e., creating categories; see Audit Trail in Figure 2).

To ensure trustworthiness, strategies including investigator triangulation, triangulation of data, and efforts to reach maximum variation in the sample were used. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Investigator triangulation occurred during the generation of codes (as described previously) as well as when applying the coding scheme to transcripts. An additional six project staff members independently coded using the developed coding scheme. This coding scheme was updated as needed to reflect unanticipated information and all nine project staff then convened to identify broader themes present in the categories (i.e., identification of themes). Any discrepancies within codes were discussed among coders until an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability was achieved (i.e., ~80%; Creswell, 2013). Data triangulation was inherent in the case study approach due to comparing and corroborating interview and direct observation data. Efforts to achieve maximum variation of the sample included targeting data collection in diverse counties. Group interviews were held in the Western, Central, Southern, and Eastern regions of the state. The Western group interview was comprised mostly of youth residing within a local housing authority who identified as Muslim, the Southern group interview included Hispanic youth in a predominantly agricultural area, the Eastern site was in the second largest city in the state, and the Central site was comprised of White youth from predominantly agricultural communities.

Within the current study, we focused on youth experience of the youth-adult partnership. Given this, we concentrated on themes related to the youth-adult partnership and how these related to conceptualization and prior empirical work on youth-adult partnerships.

## Results

### Experience of the Youth-Adult Partnership

A total of nine themes emerged. Related to what worked well in the Y-AP, six themes were identified, including mutual respect, independence or autonomy in teaching, having an adult as a supportive mentor or coach, shared responsibilities or partnerships with adults and peers, friendship with adults and peers, and having fun. Three themes emerged related to the challenges of the Y-AP including communication, logistics, and preconceived notions of working with adults.

### What Worked Well?

Youth reported they felt as equals in the relationship with their adult partners, stating they experienced mutual respect and shared programming responsibilities. Multiple youth commented on the equality of the relationship with statements such as "... she [the adult partner] didn't try to control anything, and we worked together, and it wasn't as if she was a superior, it was like we were equal," and "I felt really respected and I know she felt respected, too." Youth respected and valued the experience and insight adults' brought to the program, especially when working collaboratively. Youth noted working with not only their adult partner to share responsibilities, but with other peers as one "big brain" where "everyone just combines their knowledge." This sharing also consisted of equal contribution to decision-making as one youth noted "...there were different opinions... and we were able to talk through them... and it wasn't like... 'I'm the adult and you're the teen.'"

Youth experienced independence or autonomy in teaching and leading activities. Youth felt they were allowed to independently plan and teach without the uninvited input of adult leaders. Multiple youth noted the adult leader was present, but let the youth independently lead making comments such as "They let us teach health," and "...when it came to the actual teaching, we were pretty independent and were able to do things with, like, our other teen teachers." One youth noted the availability of the adult stating:

...she didn't say 'You do this, this, this, and this.' She said, 'What would you like to do? Are you comfortable with this? Maybe we'll help with this if you can't get it, I can step in.' And that was really good and then we kind of got into a rhythm of doing it where she would just... kind of sit back and let the teens step up and do it.

Another youth noted how support and independence were connected, stating "... she [the adult partner] let me lead, but was really helpful when I needed help."

Even though youth were leading activities, the adult partner remained available as a supportive coach or mentor. At times, this meant the adult was available to assist the youth if needed. For example, youth stated

... if you're struggling you could ask them [the adult partner] for help... and ... being able to say, 'I need help,' and she'd help me. And if we were lost or confused she helped us. She didn't, like, leave us on our own if we didn't get something.

Additional youth noted "[adults were] there for us" to "help make sense [sic] of things" and "give us direction."

Other times, this took the form of scaffolding the experience for youth where the adult acknowledged the current skills and abilities of the youth and adjusted support accordingly. Numerous youth noted how their adult partners provided individualized feedback, saying, "She [the adult partner] would tell us what we did right, um, at the end of the lesson and our strengths and give us recommendations..." Another youth stated, "After the lectures she would talk to us and she'd have taken notes. She'd talk to us about ways we could improve for the next lesson and stuff like that."



Finally, youth appreciated the opportunity to work collaboratively not only with adults, but to develop relationships with peers and adults and have fun. Multiple youth reported they had developed new friendships with their peers. “We [the youth] were all very close and we kind of became friends and it was a lot of fun.” In addition to developing new friends with peers, others developed friendships with their adult partner. One female youth stated, “... it was really cool to work with her [the adult partner] and she is also super nice and awesome so it made it a lot easier and it was fun instead of just being, like boring, and trying to get through [the program].” Other youth commented on his enjoyment, stating, “...it always doesn’t have to be serious, but it also can be fun.”

### **What Were the Challenges?**

Youth were also asked about the challenges to Y-APs and how these challenges could be addressed in the future. Although few challenges were identified and not all youth were able to identify challenges, three themes emerged including logistics, communication within the partnership, and preconceived notions of working with adults.

Logistical challenges centered on transportation and organizing schedules. Not all youth had a driver’s license and/or a car, and consequently, youth acknowledged transportation was an issue. To address this, sometimes the adult partner transported youth while other times, youth rode with one another. This became a barrier to the Y-AP as, at times, youth were unable to attend scheduled teaching times and had to work collaboratively with adult partners to make sure all teaching days were covered. Youth discussed this challenge within a group interview conversation.

Youth 1: “...the transportation to [city]... because when we all started none of us could drive except for [Youth 2] maybe. But you couldn’t drive the rest of us so we wouldn’t have been able to get down there.”

Youth 2: “Also, I would have had to borrow my mom’s car.”

“Working with each other’s schedules” was a challenge youth identified due to busy after-school schedules and the difficulty of finding times where youth and adult partners were available. One youth touched on two themes stating her challenge was “the time before even the lessons and communication about when we needed to be places and where we needed to be. ...our youths were busy so there were a lot of cancellations.” Quickly and efficiently communicating information, such as program logistics or last-minute changes, was difficult as youth and adults tended to use different forms of communication. For example, many youth preferred texting to reading and answering emails but perceived many adults had a “technology barrier” and would not be as comfortable texting. Youth commented on this stating “Well, with us youth we’re not as well with emailing.” This was discussed in more detail in one group interview conversation when discussing receiving emails from their adult partner.

Youth 1: “... it was like, ‘Oh, did you see the email we sent last week?’.. What?”

Youth 2: “What are you talking about?”

Youth 3: “Or it’d be like, ‘Did you see it?’ Yeah. ‘Did you respond?’ No.”

(Group laughter)

Youth 3: “I’ll do it later. And then it never happens.”

Other challenges were identified related to youths’ preconceived notions of working with adults in the partnership. Youth stated adults may not “allow youth to take initiative” and have difficulty “...accepting changes,” or “considering others points of views.” However, these comments came only from the Benefits and Challenges Activity and were not noted during the interviews.

### **Alignment with Components of Youth-Adult Partnership**

Although data sources did not explicitly target Zeldin’s two components of youth-adult partnerships (i.e., youth voice and supportive adult relationship), both emerged in

individual participant responses or the broader coding scheme. Aspects of a supportive adult relationship can be seen in themes related to the youth-adult partnership such as mutual respect, shared responsibilities, and adults as a supportive coach or mentor (see quotes above). Although youth voice did not emerge in the coding scheme, it was reflected in two youth comments. These two youth felt comfortable expressing their opinion during the program, even when they were not in alignment with their adult partner or peers. One youth noted how he and his adult partner compromised while another female youth stated:

The other people I worked with, one of them was really upset, that it hurt, it hurt her morals that we'd have to teach the kids it was still ok to eat fast food. And I like, I made, ya know, a point of saying where we were teaching... we're in areas where it's kind of a low-income area and sometimes you just can't judge people for eating fast food.

Zeldin also identifies mediators of program safety and engagement. Program engagement was facilitated by the high degree of involvement and leadership by youth in program preparation and delivery. Psychological engagement (i.e., personally meaningful activity integrated with the self; Dawes & Larson, 2011), even when not present initially, was developed through the program. For example, one youth stated he joined for external reasons "... because my dad told me I should try it. And so I told him I would only try it because they keep bugging me about it, but I ended up liking it..." Program safety, or lack of safety, was not reflected in youth comments but rather was inherently built into the program through standard procedures such as screenings/background checks, adult and youth codes of conduct, and prohibiting misbehavior such as bullying.

### **Positive Youth Development Outcomes**

Another aspect of the qualitative protocol that was not explicitly targeted, but that emerged, was PYD outcomes. When reviewing youth responses, they illustrated each of the four 4-H Essential Elements. This is not a surprising finding given that the current study involved a 4-H Youth Development program, which uses the Essential Elements in program design and structure (Martz et al., 2009).

Intentionally engaging youth with adults (and other youth) within a positive environment where they were treated as equals facilitated belonging as evidenced by youths' comments and themes regarding their relationship with the adult partner. The greater level of engagement afforded by the youth-adult partnership allowed for youth to develop a sense of mastery over not only the curriculum content but also in leading or teaching a group of younger youth. Greater levels of confidence in aspects such as leadership and communication were evident in all group and most individual interviews. For example, one female youth stated, "I was really shy to talk in front of a whole bunch of people but... I could do it now without being shy." Also within the partnership, youth felt a sense of independence and autonomy in their teaching (as previously reviewed). Finally, generosity emerged in a concluding protocol question asking youth to reflect on the best part of their experience. Seeing the impact the youth made on younger youth was mentioned in four out of the nine interviews. One female youth stated she enjoyed seeing the younger youth "actually remember things that you told them which is very cool to see. I feel like wow, I'm actually informing them about something and they're actually taking it in... [I'm] watching them learn."

## **Discussion**

Youth-adult partnerships represent one approach for promoting positive youth development and have the advantage of being adaptable to a variety of contexts. Given this, Y-APs are ideal to transfer to a setting such as parks and recreation. Examples of youth-adult relationships within existing parks and recreation agencies will be reviewed as well as how they connect with themes from the current study. Research-based guidelines for developing Y-APs in parks and recreation will also be presented.

### **Youth-Adult Partnerships in Parks and Recreation Settings**

Collectively, study findings and previous research provide valuable youth perspective for organizations considering formally implementing Y-APs. The benefits of strategies such as Y-APs to PYD in park and recreation programming could be widespread, as park and recreation agencies provide substantial public access to youth programming (Quinn, 1999). Youth reported experiencing PYD outcomes as conceptualized by the 4-H Essential Elements. Results from the current study supported Zeldin's (Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015) two components of Y-APs of youth voice and supportive adult relationships. These components can also be seen in the following parks and recreation examples.

**Benefits.** Study findings suggest it is essential that youth feel their voices are being heard and have an opportunity to feel engaged. This emerged through themes of mutual respect, shared programming responsibilities, and independence or autonomy in teaching. Key aspects of youth voice included soliciting youth input and making youth equal partners in decision making. Parks and recreation have made use of youth councils that provide opportunities for youth voice with the potential for Y-APs. For example, in Boston, the Mayor's Youth Council provides an opportunity for youth from every neighborhood in the city to engage in dialogue and workshops related to addressing community issues specific to youth. In this case the mayor and other department heads regularly meet with youth to provide opportunities for youth and adults to jointly make decisions (Boston, n.d.).

Recreation youth sports provides another ideal setting for implementing Y-APs, especially in older, adolescent-aged sport programs. In many cases, coaches may already be using some of the concepts of Y-APs. Often coaches assign responsibilities to certain players (i.e., team captains) to organize and run portions of practice or team functions. Soliciting increased involvement from team members and allowing them to be more involved in the decision making process can lead to greater individual empowerment, psychological agency, and a stronger connection to the team (Akiva et al., 2014; Krauss et al., 2014; Zeldin, Krauss et al., 2015).

Having a relationship with a supportive adult is also important in the Y-AP as evident in themes such as adult as a supportive coach or mentor, mutual respect, and developing friendship with adults. In the Y-AP, the relationship with the adult is built around mutual trust, respect, and shared power. The Parks and Recreation Department of Saint Paul, MN has successfully used youth and adults to work toward shared goals through the Saint Paul Youth Commission (Saint Paul, n.d.). In this commission, youth are paired with adult community organization partners to identify priority issue areas and implement projects addressing these issues. For example, in 2015, Youth Commission members worked with a local social services organization to evaluate the impact of teen access to public transit. As a group, they presented results to the local school board and Mayor's office suggesting distribution of city bus passes to youth would provide greater ease of mobility to employment and participation in extracurricular activities (Tigue, 2015).

**Challenges.** Implementing youth-adult partnerships is not without its challenges. When programming for busy youth, it is crucial to be able quickly and effectively communicate and proactively troubleshoot logistics. More broadly, youth and adults may need additional support when first working with one another to acknowledge and move past preconceived notions (Camino, 2005).

Having an effective method of communicating between youth and adults is important to developing and maintaining the relationship and keeping youth engaged. The current study found challenges existed based on method of communication. For example, if texting is the preferred method of communication for youth, sending emails to notify cancellations may be ineffective and lead to frustration for all parties involved. Many youth-serving agencies have modified their communication approaches to include social media. For example, the City of Pullman Parks and Recreation Department uses Facebook to communicate event details such as location, time, and cancellation information including cause and rescheduling details. Logistics can be proactively addressed, as the Saint Paul Youth Commission has done, by holding meetings at a consistent date, time, and location, and providing youth a free bus pass to travel to and from meetings (Saint Paul, n.d.).

Both youth and adults come to the relationship with assumptions about one another. For example, adults may be hesitant to relinquish control to youth they perceive as less experienced and knowledgeable while youth may feel they will have difficulty relating to an adult who is much older and perceived as “out of touch.” Because some adult leaders may have difficulty relating to youth over certain topics, it may be helpful to find individuals who have content specific expertise and introduce them to youth leaders to serve as content specific resources. Previous research assessing the challenges of Y-APs suggests it may be necessary to seek out adults outside of the youth organization who have specific expertise areas to bring topic area credibility to the relationship (Zeldin et al., 2008). This approach is used in the Saint Paul Youth Commission where youth must work outside of the Parks and Recreation Department with other community organizations to jointly complete projects.

### **Application to Youth-Adult Relationships**

Youth-adult partnerships can be utilized in an assortment of settings and with a variety of youth adult relationships, as is often illustrated in summer camps. For example, the Chicago Park District (2014) includes both junior counselors and recreation leaders in their summer day camps. Junior counselors are 13- to 15-year-old volunteers who report to the director while recreation leaders have to be at least 16 years old, receive a two-day training, and work with the director to collectively plan camp activities. In this structure, the junior counselor role is more of an adult-centered leadership, while the recreation leader may include components of both a youth- and adult-led collaboration. The recreation leader position may include situations led by adults where youth provide input and other times where the youth needs to make immediate decisions about camp activities while consulting the adult Director.

### **Disseminating Youth-Adult Partnerships into Communities**

Successful implementation of youth-adult partnerships in a parks and recreation organization shouldn't be limited to one individual, but rather must be supported more broadly throughout the agency. Zeldin (2008) identified three management goals, including 1) focused attention on the purpose and outcomes of Y-APs, 2) continued translation of the Y-AP vision into practice, and 3) developing shared ownership to facilitate long-term sustainability.

As with any new initiative, some degree of buy-in must be developed among staff. To communicate the purpose and outcomes of Y-APs, it is helpful to have a “champion” at the administrative level who can advocate and educate for the use of Y-APs, both initially and over the long term. An equally important aspect is matching the approach of using Y-APs with programmatic interests. This means Y-APs can be tailored to the context as appropriate, for example ranging from youth council participation to equally contributing to program development and implementation.

Translation of the vision of Y-APs into effective programs arguably comprises the bulk of implementation. Education and training must occur to develop a shared knowledge base and understanding of the value in using Y-APs and what implementation would look like on a day-to-day basis. Materials such as manualized curriculums (e.g., Arnold & Gifford, 2014), examples from other agencies, sample policies, and success stories are all useful to build knowledge. Small, structured opportunities to collaborate with youth can help adults personally experience successful partnerships with youth. These tasks serve to develop a sense of shared ownership in the approach of using Y-APs so it becomes a standard practice rather than a new initiative. One aspect of this is having some degree of infrastructure in the form of policies such as how to recruit and train youth and clearly identifying what role(s) youth will play. While it may not be realistic for youth to have an equal say in all aspects of programming, having dedicated avenues where youth voice is shared, heard, and acted upon is important. This can help minimize differing expectations among staff and youth. Other infrastructure aspects can be quite simple such as seating youth among adults so the physical environment is conducive to engagement.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study adds to the growing research on Y-APs, a few limitations should be noted. First, data presented were collected as part of an overall evaluation of the 4-H Food Smart Families program. Given the programmatic focus on the content area of nutrition and the approach of Y-APs used, PYD outcomes were not explicitly targeted for data collection. Despite this, evidence of PYD emerged organically in youth responses. Future studies should directly measure the constructs of Y-AP and PYD and their relationship to one another. Second, the case study approach could be strengthened by using additional sources of data such as quantitative survey results or direct observation of Y-APs implementing the nutrition curriculum. Additional case studies should be conducted of Y-APs in other programs for results to be generalizable beyond the current project.

Third, although a number of similarities exist between 4-H Youth Development and parks and recreation organizations, we did not actually evaluate the use of Y-APs within a parks and recreation setting. The next step of the current study is to test the application of Y-APs within a parks and recreation setting using a systematic approach. For example, it may be more appropriate to use a broader continuum of youth engagement ranging from youth-led programs (e.g., youth-led sporting programs) to programs where youth and adults have equal power and voice (i.e., youth-adult partnership). Parks and recreation agencies lack the broader, national organizational structure provided by Extension and 4-H making systematic approaches challenging. However, if evidence-based approaches can be developed, these could then be applied across parks and recreation settings and agencies. Finally, data used in the current study came from a small, but geographically diverse, sample of youth who had self-selected into participating in 4-H Youth Development programming. Future studies should more broadly evaluate participation in Y-APs.

### Conclusion

The current study reviewed youth-adult partnerships including how youth experience the partnership and how it is associated with positive youth outcomes and illustrated how this approach could be translated to a parks and recreation setting. While no one approach will fit all organizational needs, the main tenets of youth-adult partnerships including youth voice and supportive adult relationships can be thoughtfully implemented within a variety of parks and recreation programs to broaden the positive impact on youth. Parks and recreation agencies are an ideal avenue for implementing youth-adult partnerships given their broad reaching programs and desire to promote youth development. By sharing evidence-based approaches across youth-serving organizations, we can work together to promote the health of youth within our communities.

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