# Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities: Combining Theory and Practice in a Community-Level Violence Prevention Curriculum

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*This article describes the development and evaluation of an after-school curriculum designed to prepare adolescents to prevent violence through community change. This curriculum, part of the Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities (YES) program, is guided by empowerment and ecological theories within a positive youth development context. YES is designed to enhance the capacity of adolescents and adults to work together to plan and implement community change projects. The youth curriculum is organized around six themed units: (a) Youth as Leaders, (b) Learning about Our Community, (c) Improving Our Community, (d) Building Intergenerational Partnerships, (e) Planning for Change, and (f) Action and Reflection. The curriculum was developed through an iterative process. Initially, program staff members documented their activities with youth. These outlines were formalized as curriculum sessions. Each session was reviewed by the program and research staff and revised based on underlying theory and practical application. The curriculum process evaluation includes staff and youth feedback. This theoretically based, field-tested curriculum is designed to be easily adapted and implemented in a diverse range of communities.*

**Keywords:** *violence prevention; curriculum; adolescent; youth empowerment; ecological theory; Positive Youth Development; community development*

Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities (YES) is a community-level youth violence prevention program that engages youth and adults in carrying out community change projects designed by youth. YES integrates empowerment and ecological theories to create positive youth development and community change, resulting in peace promotion and violence prevention. The basic premise of YES is that community change efforts to prevent youth violence will be most successful if youth are involved in the process (Checkoway, 1998; Kirshner, McLaughlin, & O'Donoghue, 2002). The *short-term goals* of the YES project are to (a) empower youth to engage in community change, (b) build the capacity of neighborhood adults to create positive developmental settings, (c) engage youth and neighborhood adults in community change, (d) connect youth and neighborhood organizations with resources to promote and sustain their efforts, and (e) create settings for intergenerational interaction. The *long-term goals* of YES are to (a) modify environmental conditions that contribute to youth violence; (b) promote social norms supportive of community participation and nonviolence; (c) increase

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perceptions of neighborhood safety among residents; (d) develop opportunities for youth involvement in community change; and (e) reduce the incidence of youth violence (perpetration and victimization).

Adolescent violence remains a serious public health problem. Despite a relative decrease in the prevalence of violence among adolescents compared with the peak rates of the 1990s, it continues to be a major contributor to premature mortality and morbidity of adolescents and young adults throughout the United States (Kretman, Zimmerman, Morrel-Samuels, & Hudson, 2009). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), homicide is the second leading cause of death overall for young people aged 10 through 20 (CDC, 2009). In 2006, the CDC documented 3,209 homicides among youth in this age group, an average of nearly 9 murders per day (CDC, 2009). Although most epidemiologic data focus on homicide, violence accounts for a large proportion of injuries among adolescents. In 2007, more than 450,000 youths aged 10 to 20 sustained violence-related injuries (CDC, 2009). Members of racial and ethnic minorities are at an even greater risk of being victims of adolescent violence. Among 10- to 20-year-olds, homicide is the leading cause of death for African Americans, accounting for more than 45% of all deaths in 2006 (CDC, 2009).

Community-level approaches to violence prevention are an emerging area of research. Examples of such programs include changing the physical settings in which people interact (e.g., removing abandoned structures), changing policies that affect behavior (e.g., restrictions on alcohol advertising), and changing the social environment (e.g., community policing) (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). Wandersman and Florin (2003) reviewed community-level interventions for substance abuse, arson, teen pregnancy, and other health issues. They found positive effects for several individual programs but had mixed results for cross-site evaluations of community coalitions. Gielen and Sleet (2003) describe community-level theories and methods for injury prevention, including empowerment and community-based participatory research, and report on the Injury Free Coalition for Kids, which achieved a 46% reduction in violence-related hospital admissions among the focus population. Checkoway et al. (2003) identify youth as competent citizens and suggest that increasing youth involvement in community-based organizations will contribute both to positive youth development and community improvement. They point out that the public perception of youth is frequently negative and that researchers reinforce this notion by focusing on risk factors and problem behavior. The YES curriculum is designed to empower youth to be effective community-change agents in partnership with adults.

## ▶ THEORETIC FRAMEWORK

### Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory includes processes that enable effective participation in community change efforts (Zimmerman, 2000). Processes applied at the organizational level suggest internal structures for engaging individuals in decision making and external policies for creating social change (A. Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). Empowering processes are ones in which opportunities to increase capabilities and confidence, learn and practice skills, exert control, and influence decisions are fundamental (Zimmerman, 1995, 2000). For adolescents, these processes may include interacting with positive adult role models, working in a safe and supportive environment, and making real contributions to organizational and community life. A process is empowering if it helps youth develop the cognitive and behavioral skills necessary to critically understand their social environments and become independent problem solvers and decision makers (Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, settings designed to empower youth require opportunities for involvement in prosocial and meaningful organizational activities designed to enhance

community. In turn, these opportunities help them gain vital skills, responsibilities, and confidence necessary to develop into productive healthy adults and to avoid health-compromising behaviors such as violence. Notably, Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert (2000) found that including youth in decision making resulted in greater innovation and productivity and a stronger sense of connection to the community among both youth and adults. Our curriculum includes sessions designed to empower youth by helping them gain skills for developing community change projects, identify and secure resources for the projects, and work with adults to implement change efforts. The underlying intention of these sessions is to prepare youth to take leadership in the YES program and to influence their community context.

### Ecological Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory emphasizes the role of multiple levels of social context and organization in youth development, and he terms the levels as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to family, school, neighborhood, and other settings where youth may interact with both peers and adults. The mesosystem refers to the interactions and relationships across two or more microsystems. Thus, youth grow up within a family but are also influenced by school and neighborhood contexts. The exosystem is that part of the social context in which youth have no active role but which may affect their development, including policy-making organizations (e.g., school boards) and the media. The macrosystem refers to the cultural context that shapes behavioral patterns, beliefs, values, and norms. The chronosystem refers to particular circumstances of the historical time period within which the individual lives. The transition from a manufacturing to service economy, for example, has had a profound effect on the life-circumstances of young people from communities dependent on manufacturing jobs. Bronfenbrenner's model is a useful framework because it helps focus attention on the multiple contexts in which youth interact with others and how those different contexts may interact to create positive youth development. This framework suggests that efforts to increase youth involvement in contexts where youth do not typically interact may be beneficial for healthy development. Finally, this ecological model incorporates the role of culture and the notion that cultural identification may be a vital aspect of positive youth development. YES engages youth as individuals affected by, and affecting, their school and community contexts (micro- and mesosytems). Through their work on community improvement, they interact with the exosystem by connecting with local leaders and the media. The macrosystem is addressed through cultural activities designed to foster positive racial and ethnic identities. Community change projects are a response to a chronosystem, which has depleted the resources of a once-prosperous community.

Kelly (1987) also describes an ecological model that is helpful for developing sustainable, locally relevant, and long-lasting community change. Kelly's model considers the *adaptation* of settings to changes in the external environment; the *interdependence* of the many parts of a system and how change in one part may influence other parts; the *resources* necessary to make a program work (e.g., staff skills, structured materials); and the history of change efforts in the community and how the intervention will continue into the future (i.e., *succession*).

Our program addresses these issues in several ways. First, the curriculum is designed to be adaptable to different populations, include various exercises so that the most relevant ones could be tailored for a specific context, and provide alternative approaches depending on the skills and interests of the teacher. The notion of interdependence is integrated into the program by suggesting various organizations that may be sought for community support, considering the ways in which the community projects may fit into the existing fabric of a community, and critically examining both the intended (e.g., increased intergenerational interaction) and unintended effects (e.g., local media attention) of the program. The program explicitly addresses how the interdependence with other organizations may be helpful for resource development (e.g., relationships with local businesses and youth-serving organizations), and what resources may be necessary to make the program work (e.g., for donation of tools or plants; volunteer help). Finally, understanding the many and differing demands across school districts over time, we self-consciously developed the program to be as flexible (adaptable) as possible so that it could survive the test of time.

Together, empowerment and ecological theory provide a conceptual and operational framework for developing settings designed to engage youth in positive activities and prepare them to become effective community change agents. They also help focus attention on youth strengths and assets, and include community involvement as a means for individual and environmental change. Empowerment theory provides a framework for the process to engage youth in meaningful community change activities and achieve positive

youth development. Ecological theory is a useful framework to guide the development of settings because it helps focus attention on (a) the multiple levels of the social context and organizations within which youth develop, (b) the processes by which the intervention is placed in a community, and (c) the role that the physical environment may play in preventing or facilitating community violence. In short, these theories provide the conceptual foundation for establishing attributes of settings for enhancing positive youth development.

### Positive Youth Development

Researchers have found that participation in activities that provide opportunities for youth to develop social and cognitive skills, a sense of competence, and socioenvironmental mastery (i.e., prosocial youth involvement) plays a role in healthy adolescent development and resiliency (Catalano et al., 1996; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Ramirez-Valles, Zimmerman, & Juarez, 2000; Zimmerman & Maton, 1992). They have also suggested that participation in out-of-school programs provides youth with affirmative social attachments, companionship, support, self-confidence, and perceived control. These assets and resources may help youth develop social, academic, and emotional skills; remediate skill deficits; and establish connections with positive adult role models, prosocial peers, and community institutions (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Marsh, 1992; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine [NRC/IOM], 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Wallace, Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston, 1995; Wallace & Williams, 1997). Furstenberg and Hughes (1995), for example, found that youth with greater links to the community than their peers were more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and achieve stable economic status. Marsh (1992) suggests that these effects are due to self-concept and sense of control fostered through participation in out-of-school programs. Researchers have also found that the presence of community organizations for youth is associated with less violence (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 2003; Kawachi, Kennedy, & Wilkinson, 1999; R. D. Peterson, Krivo, & Harris, 2000; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Eight features of positive youth development settings described by the NRC/IOM (2002) include appropriate structure; support for efficacy; positive norms; opportunities for belonging and skill building; supportive relationships; safety; and integration with family, school, and community. Thus, settings that create opportunities for interaction with positive adult role models, skill development, and working on community change are expected to result in healthy development.

Positive youth development also includes the promotion of cultural identity and pride. It is vital for healthy development for youth to understand, appreciate, and embrace their cultural heritage with pride and confidence that their ethnicity is valued, and has an affirming history of traditions and contributions to knowledge. Cultural identity may also be vital for youth to develop a sense of community and connectedness to others. Accordingly, ethnic identity development helps youth develop positive social norms, provides opportunities for belonging to a larger community of like individuals, and leads to the creation of supportive relationships. Several studies have shown that cultural identity is vital for positive youth development. Caldwell, Zimmerman, Bernat, Sellers, and Notaro (2002) found that African American racial identity helps to mediate the relationship between maternal support and depression. Similarly, Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, and Zimmerman (2003) found that racial identity buffers the negative effects of discrimination on mental distress among adolescents. Others have also found that racial identity is associated with positive school outcomes (Chavous et al., 2003) and reduces the effects of risks associated with alcohol use (Caldwell et al., 2002). Zimmerman et al. (1995) reported that cultural identity enhanced the effects of self-esteem for reducing the likelihood of alcohol use among Native American youth. Thus, engaging youth in the community change process requires efforts to help youth gain a better appreciation of and pride in their cultural history.

Application of empowerment and ecological theories in the context of the positive youth development movement requires structures to create the opportunities for youth to develop skills necessary to be effective change agents, but these structures must also be flexible enough to allow for youth input and control. We have developed a curriculum for the Youth Empowerment Solutions for Peaceful Communities program that is designed to engage youth in active learning to develop the skills necessary to be effective community change agents, address community change at multiple levels, focus on youth as resources for change, and create opportunities for interaction with adults in the community.

### ▶ THE YES INTERVENTION

The YES program seeks to increase social integration and cohesion through intergenerational community participation, provide adult supervision, monitoring and mentoring for youth, promote social norms supportive of nonviolence and community involvement,

**Activities**

**Youth Empowerment**
- Leadership
- Community awareness
- Cultural identity
- Planning

**Development Projects**
- Community art
- Community gardens
- Community events

**Adult Capacity**
- Role modeling
- Support
- Limit-setting
- Skill development

**Short-Term Outcomes**

**Youth Outcomes**
- Less violent behavior
- Less exposure to violence
- Increased perceived safety
- Modified social norms about violence

**Community Outcomes**
- Social cohesion
- Intergenerational interaction
- Improved physical environment
- Adult-supervised activities
- Positive perceptions of youth
- Neighborhood participation

**Long-Term Outcomes**

Reduction in youth violence and improved health & develop-mental outcomes among youth
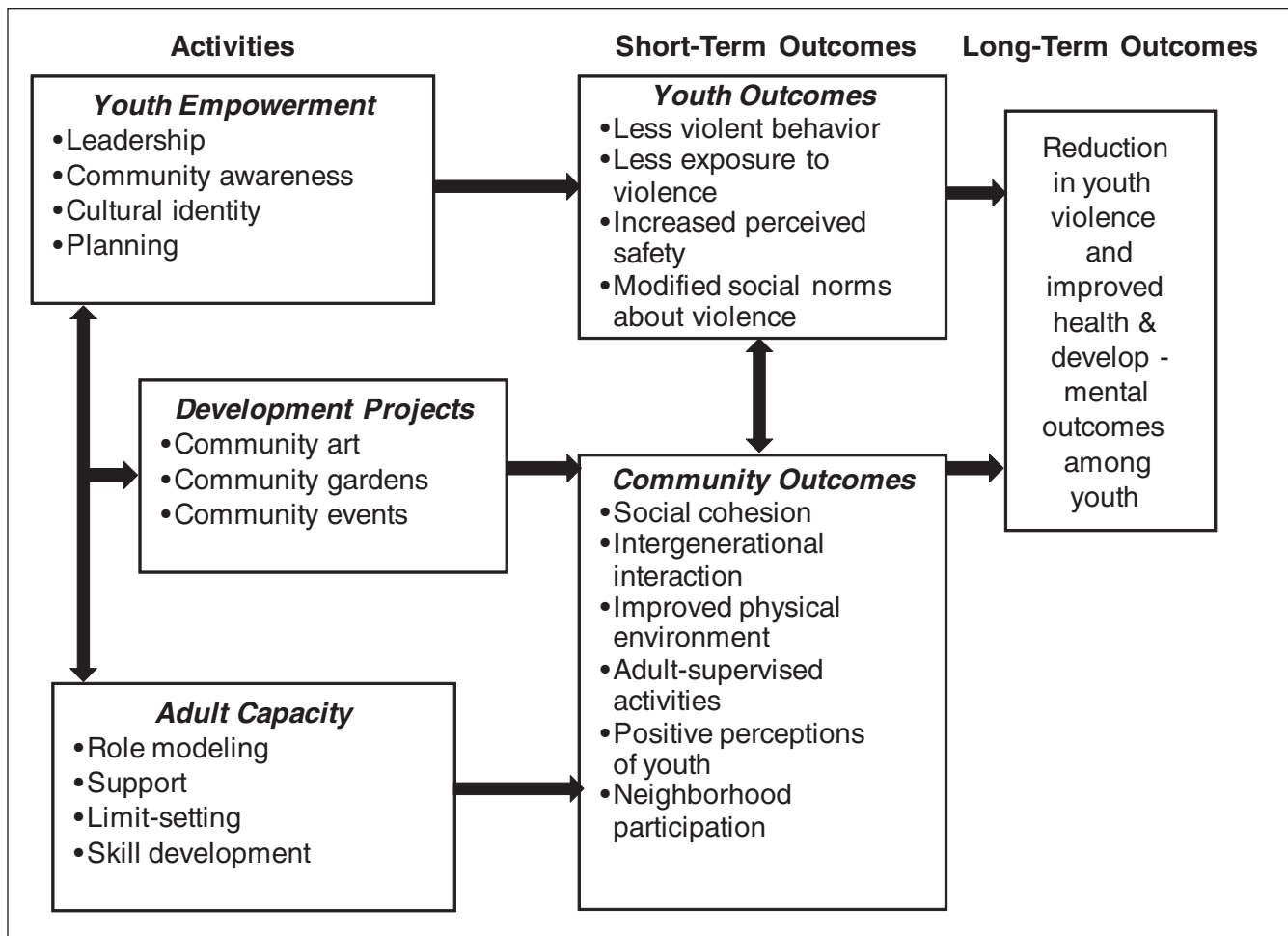
FIGURE 1. Change model for YES Activities and Expected Outcomes

and improve the physical environment. The intervention is built around three primary components as illustrated in Figure 1. (a) Youth Empowerment: Youth are organized in teams and partner with community organizations to develop community assets, including safe spaces for leisure, recreation, and social interaction among youth and adults. YES prepares youth for community service by providing them with training in citizenship and character development, and rewards and sustains their participation by offering opportunities for supervised recreation and summer projects. (b) Adult Capacity Building: YES prepares neighborhood adults to work with and engage youth by providing training designed to enhance their capacity to partner with youth on community development projects. (c) Community Development: YES promotes community

development by assisting neighborhood organizations and youth to plan and carry out community development projects.

The program recruits approximately 60 seventh- and eighth-graders each year from an urban school setting. Almost all of the participants are African American, which reflects the demographic composition of the area. The program staff recruits approximately equal numbers of males and females and students with a wide range of academic and disciplinary records. The YES participants meet twice a week for 1½ hours after school. During this time, they participate in the majority of the activities from the curriculum, which is the focus of this paper. We also recruit and train adult advocates from the local community to assist the youth in carrying out their projects during the summer months.

### Curriculum Development

The YES curriculum was developed through an iterative process that involved collaboration between the front-line program staff, the research team, and the youth themselves. During the 1st year of the YES program, the program staff and research team developed activities, based on the theoretic framework, to engage youth in leadership development, cultural enrichment, community assessment, and project planning. These activities were informed and adapted based on feedback from the youth participants. During the 2nd year of the program, the staff briefly documented the activities in each session using a lesson plan format. These lessons plans were codified into a thematic curriculum, which was field tested and revised based on the experiences of the staff members in implementing the curriculum and the reactions of the participating youth.

Beginning at the end of the 3rd year and continuing into the 4th year of the program, the curriculum was further revised and formalized. Formalizing the curriculum involved several steps. First, information about existing program activities was compiled and a list of program objectives was created. The objectives described the concepts that the youth should understand and the skills they should acquire by the end of the program. Second, the objectives were organized into sessions, and the sessions were grouped into thematic units. Third, detailed lesson plans were written based on the session objectives. Many of the activities included in each session were developed by the YES staff and youth. Additional activities were added to ensure that the youth were able to build the necessary confidence and skills to implement the projects and to ensure continuity in the curriculum. Some of the existing activities were modified to make them both interactive and easy to implement.

We consulted other youth violence prevention curricula as potential sources of activities. We found however that these curricula were focused on individual-level changes to prevent violence (e.g., anger management strategies); therefore, the activities in these curricula were of limited relevance to the YES program and were not used in the development of the curriculum.

Empowerment and ecological theories were considered throughout the formalization process. Educational theories and strategies also informed the development of session structure and activities. An introduction and conclusion were included in all sessions to prepare the youth for the session activities, to spark their interest, to help them remember the session activities, and to connect sessions to each other (Borich, 2004). Whenever possible, connections were made between the sessions' main points and the lives of the youths involved in the program in order to increase the salience of the activities. All skill-building sessions included explicit teaching and opportunities for guided and independent practice. Active learning strategies such as think-pair-share (McTighe & Lyman, 1988), four-corners discussions (Kagan, 1989) and gallery walks were included throughout the curriculum to make the sessions more active and engaging. To increase focus, effort, and persistence, the youth set goals at the start of the program and revisited them throughout program implementation (Locke & Latham, 2002; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollack, 2001). Cooperative learning activities were employed throughout the curriculum to enhance individual effort, promote positive relationships, and increase self-esteem and social competence among participants (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Each unit also contained opportunities to celebrate progress and achievements, and participants were encouraged to consider how their work helped them achieve the goals they set for themselves. The end result was a curriculum grounded in both theory and practice. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model for the curriculum.

### Curriculum Components

The curriculum contains six units, which build on each other: Youth as Leaders, Learning About Our Community, Improving Our Community, Building Intergenerational Partnerships, Planning for Change, and Action and Reflection (Figure 2). African American cultural activities and themes are woven into each unit to reinforce positive identity and self-esteem of the youth participants, and suggestions for adapting these activities to other cultures are included. The curriculum also includes an appendix of optional skill-building lessons that are useful but not essential for program implementation (such as lessons on goal setting and presentation development).

The short-term goals of YES are addressed throughout the curriculum (Figure 2). Units 1 to 6 incorporate activities to empower youth to engage in community change. Units 4 to 6 engage youth and adults in community change, connect them with resources, create settings for intergenerational interaction, and build the capacity of adults to create positive developmental settings. Although the session plans are detailed, the curriculum is not intended to be rigid. Instead, it serves as a tool that can be adjusted as necessary given the context and circumstances of a particular community and intervention.

The first unit, *Youth as Leaders*, introduces participants to the YES program, builds group norms and
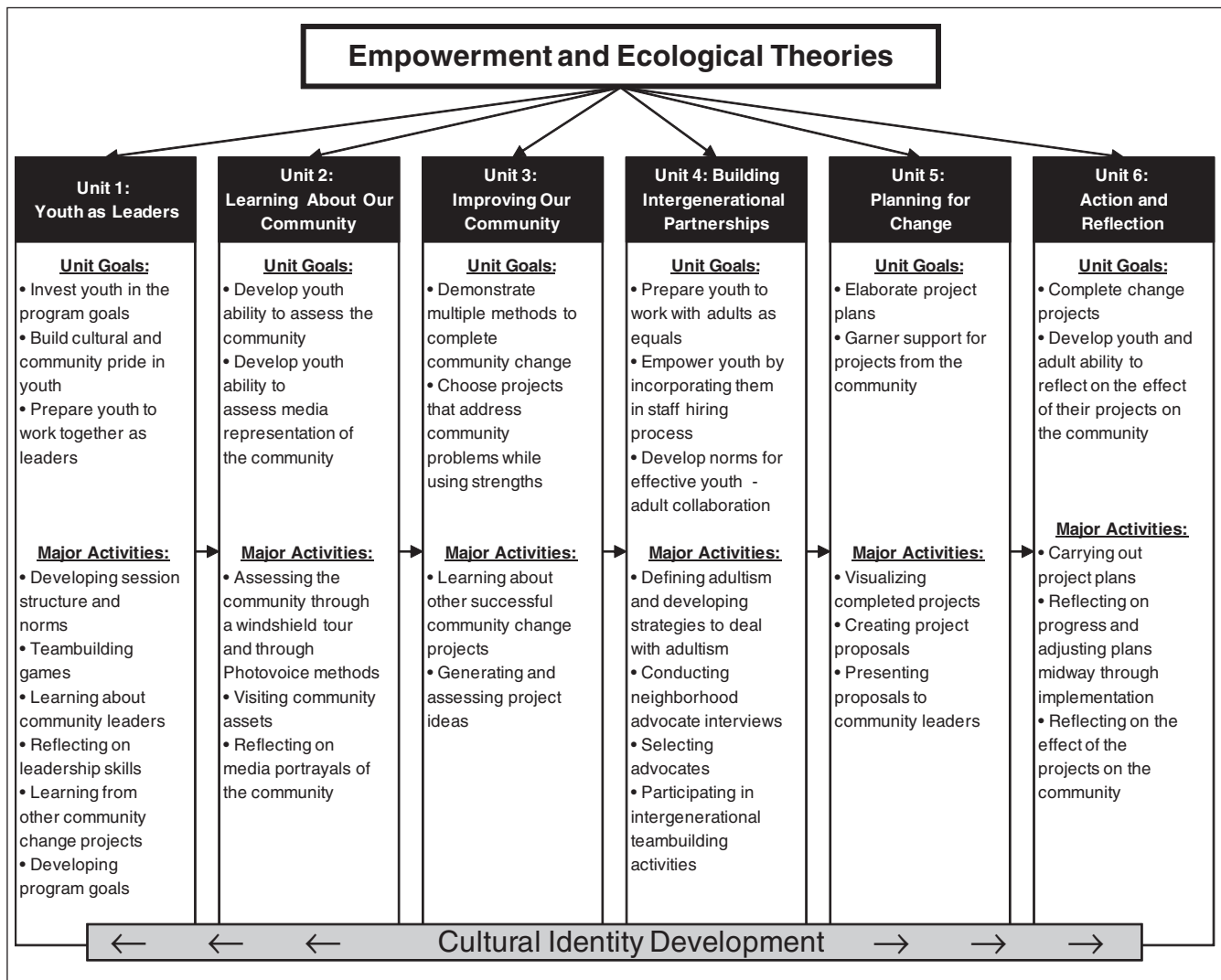
## Empowerment and Ecological Theories

| Unit 1:<br>Youth as Leaders | Unit 2:<br>Learning About Our Community | Unit 3:<br>Improving Our Community | Unit 4: Building Intergenerational Partnerships | Unit 5:<br>Planning for Change | Unit 6:<br>Action and Reflection |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Unit Goals:**<br>• Invest youth in the program goals<br>• Build cultural and community pride in youth<br>• Prepare youth to work together as leaders | **Unit Goals:**<br>• Develop youth ability to assess the community<br>• Develop youth ability to assess media representation of the community | **Unit Goals:**<br>• Demonstrate multiple methods to complete community change<br>• Choose projects that address community problems while using strengths | **Unit Goals:**<br>• Prepare youth to work with adults as equals<br>• Empower youth by incorporating them in staff hiring process<br>• Develop norms for effective youth - adult collaboration | **Unit Goals:**<br>• Elaborate project plans<br>• Garner support for projects from the community | **Unit Goals:**<br>• Complete change projects<br>• Develop youth and adult ability to reflect on the effect of their projects on the community |
| **Major Activities:**<br>• Developing session structure and norms<br>• Teambuilding games<br>• Learning about community leaders<br>• Reflecting on leadership skills<br>• Learning from other community change projects<br>• Developing program goals | **Major Activities:**<br>• Assessing the community through a windshield tour and through Photovoice methods<br>• Visiting community assets<br>• Reflecting on media portrayals of the community | **Major Activities:**<br>• Learning about other successful community change projects<br>• Generating and assessing project ideas | **Major Activities:**<br>• Defining adultism and developing strategies to deal with adultism<br>• Conducting neighborhood advocate interviews<br>• Selecting advocates<br>• Participating in intergenerational teambuilding activities | **Major Activities:**<br>• Visualizing completed projects<br>• Creating project proposals<br>• Presenting proposals to community leaders | **Major Activities:**<br>• Carrying out project plans<br>• Reflecting on progress and adjusting plans midway through implementation<br>• Reflecting on the effect of the projects on the community |

← ← ← **Cultural Identity Development** → → →

**FIGURE 2. Framework for the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) Curriculum**

team identification, provides examples of youth leadership, engages participants in leadership roles within the program, involves participants in setting goals for the year, and motivates them to work toward these goals. Early in the program, the curriculum includes opportunities for youth to complete their own small change projects. These projects provide a way to engage the youth in the program and to allow them to experience early success. The activities in this unit incorporate empowerment theory by giving participants an opportunity to establish their group norms and develop goals for the year. They also reflect principles of positive youth development by providing a setting with a consistent structure, support for active participation, and opportunities for developing a group identity and mastering new social skills. The staff foster supportive relationships with the youth and provide a safe environment within what is often a chaotic context at school and in the neighborhood.

The second unit, *Learning About Our Community*, provides participants with the skills to identify and assess conditions in their community that may either contribute to or prevent youth violence. The participants take a guided windshield tour of their community and discuss the assets and liabilities that they observe. In conjunction with the windshield tour, YES participants are given cameras and asked to record images that represent the community characteristics that cause or are affected by youth violence. They use Photovoice[1] methods (Wang & Burris, 1997) to document

and assess environmental factors that may exacerbate or prevent violence. The Photovoice and windshield tour activities provide youth with a voice to identify community strengths, promote critical dialogue, enhance knowledge about issues through youths' perspectives, and inform policy makers. This unit incorporates empowerment and ecological theories by providing youth with opportunities to depict and reflect on their own environment. It introduces the participants to the idea that neighborhood conditions may influence the behavior of residents, including themselves and their peers.

The third unit, *Improving our Community*, provides youth with opportunities for learning vicariously about other successful community change projects, and youth brainstorm their own project ideas. Learning about others' successes can serve as a way to build the self-efficacy of the youth (Bandura, 1997), and improved self-efficacy is an important motivator as youth work toward the major community change projects. Youth learn about other improvement projects completed in their community, and they also learn about hip hop and other alternative ways to promote community change. The community tour and Photovoice images from the second unit also provide a catalyst for brainstorming ideas for community improvement projects that address community problems while making use of community assets. This unit includes empowerment and ecological theories because it asks youth to consider a variety of methods for promoting community change while providing them with the opportunity to determine on their own how they want to work to improve their community.

The fourth unit, *Building Intergenerational Partnerships*, introduces the concept of adultism, which is described as "behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement" (Bell, 2008). This and subsequent sessions help prepare the young people for working in equal partnerships with adults. The YES participants develop questions and interview the adults who wish to work with them as neighborhood advocates. This unit also includes an intergenerational team-building session. This unit focuses on youth empowerment by providing the youth with skills for communicating with adults and expressing themselves with confidence. It also gives the youth real decision-making power.

During this time, the adult advocates begin to participate in the training that prepares them to interact with young adolescents in ways that reinforce positive youth development and youth empowerment. The content of this training is described by Checkoway (n.d.) in a manual published by the Kellogg Foundation.

The fifth unit, *Planning for Change*, takes the participants through the process of transforming their ideas for community change projects into concrete proposals that include a description of the project, project goals, a budget, and a timeline. The youth articulate how their proposed project relates to violence prevention. These sessions provide practical tools for setting goals and priorities, developing action plans, and building support for project implementation. This unit also prepares youth to communicate their proposals to peers and adults. This unit brings together youth empowerment and ecological theories: youth are empowered to take initiative and leadership in the community, and they use an ecological perspective in developing their proposals and relating the effects of their project to community change.

The sixth unit, *Action and Reflection*, encompasses the implementation of the community change projects. Because youth change projects vary greatly, this unit is supplemented by an appendix that provides implementers with examples of change projects that have been completed in Flint, including tips on organizing project logistics (e.g., supplies needed for a mural project). The only formalized session plans in this unit provide structures for the youth and adult participants to evaluate and reflect on their work. They assess the progress of their community change projects and make any modifications as necessary. At the end of the projects, they evaluate their work and reflect on their experiences. The participants use an ecological framework to think about how their projects have affected themselves, their neighborhood, and their community as a whole.

## ▶ METHOD

Curriculum evaluation and revision were continuous processes that occurred before, during, and after field testing. The program staff, research team, and youth shared feedback on the curriculum regularly through both formal and informal mechanisms.

### Staff Evaluation

*Formal reviews of sessions prior to implementation.* One research team member and two program staff members reviewed all sessions within each unit and provided feedback using a standard form. They assessed the session objectives (Are they clear and appropriate?), the session activities (Are they engaging? Will they work with the YES youth? Are they necessary to achieve the session objectives? Is the order of activities appropriate?), the instructions for the session leader

(Are they clear? Are they complete yet concise?), the handouts (Are they useful and clear?), and time (Is the appropriate amount of time allotted for the session activities?). This feedback was compiled and used to revise the curriculum before and after field testing.

*Session observations.* At least one research assistant observed YES sessions weekly during the initial field testing. The research assistants used a standard rating form to assess session activities as they were implemented. The ratings focused on the effectiveness of the activities in engaging the youth and in helping them achieve the session objectives. The research assistants also assessed the handouts used and the time allotted to the session activities. They noted any changes that program staff made to the session plans and any extraneous factors that might have influenced implementation (e.g., a school crisis).

*Formal ratings of activities and handouts.* Staff rated the activities and handouts within each session, giving each activity a rating of E (poor) to A (excellent). The ratings were then averaged and used as a guide for identifying areas for improvement.

*Curriculum retreat and workgroup.* Near the end of field testing, all members of the program staff and research team met for a half-day retreat to discuss the curriculum and plan for further revisions and additions. The meeting was used to identify issues with the curriculum and its implementation, discuss change strategies to address the issues, and prioritize sessions to determine which sessions are most essential to accomplish program goals. The retreat was also used to decide how best to incorporate cultural identity development and activities into the curriculum.

After the retreat, we created a curriculum work group to discuss specific issues and plan curricular improvements. The work group included both research and program staff, in addition to the primary authors of the curriculum. The group met weekly to discuss specific changes (e.g., the optimal layout of the session plan, the usefulness of a particular activity). The work group reviewed subsequent drafts to reach consensus on a final version.

### Youth Evaluation

*Process evaluation of the project.* Youth participated in a formal review of the program at the end of each summer for the first 2 years. This included both quantitative ratings and focus group discussions about the curriculum, staff, and other aspects of the program.

They made formal ratings of activities in the curriculum using a questionnaire format. They used a 5-point satisfaction scale (1 = *the worst*, 5 = *the best*) to rate different aspects and activities of the curriculum. Twenty-two youth completed these ratings each year (different youth each year). The questionnaire also included open-ended questions about ideas for improvements for program staff and neighborhood advocates, the best and worst things about the program, and what they had learned from the program. We also held a focus group discussion with the youth at the end of each summer. The discussion focused on the entire program and did not stress the curriculum directly. Nevertheless, the youth mentioned issues about the curriculum that we incorporated into the revisions.

*Curriculum Activities Evaluation Questionnaire.* At the end of the third iteration of the curriculum and its implementation, 18 youth completed a 21-item questionnaire about specific activities in the curriculum. They used a 4-point rating scale (1 = *I did not like it at all*, 4 = *I liked it very much*). This survey was conducted at the end of the school year and was specifically directed at components of the final version of the curriculum.

## ➤ RESULTS

The curriculum feedback ranged from specific suggestions (e.g., "Be sure to include a place for a name on this handout") to broad comments about the curriculum overall (e.g., "Include more dialogue and fewer handouts in the sessions"). All of the feedback provided about the curriculum overall and about each session individually was compiled, and all suggestions were considered during curriculum revisions. Table 1 reports the main themes from this feedback, with specific examples of the type of changes suggested.

### Program and Research Staff Feedback

The feedback provided by the research team and the program staff focused on suggestions for improving the sessions to better suit the needs and interests of the youth, and suggestions for adjusting the curriculum to make it as clear and easy as possible for session leaders to implement. Overall, the staff members thought that many activities were engaging and would work well with the youth, but they also noted that some of the sessions did not engage the youth adequately. They suggested that the sessions needed to be made more fun and interactive by including more discussion time during sessions and more hands-on activities (e.g., art

**TABLE 1**
**Results of the Curriculum Evaluation**

| Theme | Issues | Source |
|---|---|---|
| Sessions need to be more flexible | More time is needed for informal interaction between adults and youth<br>Youth need time to wind down from the school day<br>Youth need more time to process the session activities—include fewer activities in each session | Staff member |
| Session activities must be more engaging and less school-like | There are too many handouts—worksheets make the youth feel like they are in school.<br>Youth want to talk more and write less.<br>Youth do not have enough opportunity to move around.<br>There are not enough creative activities like art projects.<br>Some activities need to be more culturally relevant for the youth. | Staff member<br>Youth |
| Celebratory and fun events should be added | Youth lose interest in after-school programs if they do not include fun activities (that are not necessarily instructional).<br>Youth want to spend time doing fun things like watching movies, going on field trips, playing games, and having parties. | Staff member<br>Youth |
| Cultural identity activities should be tied in more closely with other activities | The relationship between the cultural identity activities and the other program activities is not made explicit.<br>Cultural identitiy activities should be especially prominent in the first two units. | Staff member |
| Session structure and instructions must be simplified | The istructions are too dense and are difficult to read.<br>Some instructions are too complicated and difficult to understand.<br>It takes too long to sift through the intructions for each session. | Staff member |

projects). Some session were too long and could not be completed in the time allotted to them in the curriculum. They also suggested that the number of handouts and forms used in the sessions should be reduced, and that each session needed to cover less material.

Program staff members also felt that it was important to include "snack and relax" time at the beginning of every session to allow time for informal interaction between youth and adults and to give the youth time to wind down after school. They found this time to be especially critical whenever a significant violent event occurred at school or outside of school. Both the research team and the program staff felt that the cultural component of the curriculum needed to be more integrated with the other sessions in the curriculum. Originally, the curriculum included a specific unit on cultural issues, but staff was unequivocal that the idea of culture needed be to be woven throughout the curriculum with some more prominence in the first two units of the program. They felt that the youth develop confidence as a result of the development and reinforcement of a positive cultural identity, and that this confidence is crucial to develop before the youth begin to plan and implement their projects. Yet, they also felt this was an important enough message to sustain throughout the curriculum.

Staff members also provided positive and constructive feedback about the structure and clarity of the instructions provided for session leaders. They noted that the detailed instructions and handouts included with every session were helpful and especially necessary for those with less (or no) teaching experience.

They also liked having a list of the necessary materials and planning notes at the beginning of each session. The staff members also pointed out that the curriculum provided them with a structured framework that guided their work in preparing the students to do their community projects. They noted that the content of the sessions was well connected to the goals of the project and that the flow of the curriculum for preparing youth with skills for planning and implementing their projects was logical and took into account appropriate developmental issues. Staff members did note however that the session instructions were sometimes complicated and too dense to be quickly and easily comprehended by busy program staff. In particular, the staff members felt that the instructions were too detailed at times, and they found that they spent too much time reading and sifting through the session plans. To ease the burden on program implementers, program staff members felt that session instructions should be simplified and shortened.

### Youth Feedback

The feedback provided by the youth during the focus group discussions, in the open-ended questions from the questionnaire and from informal conversations with them, generally addressed the level of engagement they had in session activities. They also made suggestions for ways to better match the sessions to their interests and needs. Overall, the youth reported that one of the best parts of the program was that they were able to work to improve their community. They also liked activities that were fun and allowed them to be active (e.g., creating artwork, taking photographs, and going on field trips). Some participants each year indicated that the sessions on culture were their favorite activities. They felt that some activities were boring, however, and they disliked activities that reminded them of school (e.g., completing worksheets, filling out forms, desk work). They also indicated wanting to participate in fun activities unrelated to the curriculum such as playing games, watching movies, and having parties. In the words of one participant, they wanted the program to involve "having fun making things right for [our city]."

As part of the questionnaire, youth were asked to rate several curricular components, and their ratings are presented in Table 2. Community development projects received the highest ratings in Years 1 and 2 ($M$ = 3.90 and 3.89, respectively). Cultural identity development received the lowest rating in both years but improved from 2.67 in Year 1 to 3.00 in the second implementation. Both program planning and ice breakers

**TABLE 2**
**Means and Standard Deviations for Youth Rating of Program Activities for Year 1 and Year 2**

| | Year 1 (n = 22) | Year 2 (n = 22) |
|---|---|---|
| Session | | |
| Community development project | 3.90 (1.18) | 3.89 (1.32) |
| Program planning and training | 3.62 (1.32) | 3.11 (1.29) |
| Ice breakers | 3.70 (1.03) | 3.05 (1.28) |
| Cultural identity | 2.67 (1.02) | 3.00 (1.20) |
| Photovoice | 3.40 (1.17) | 3.29 (1.49) |

NOTE: 1 = *the worst*; 2 = *it was okay*; 3 = *one of the better activities*; 4 = *one of my favorite activities*; 5 = *the best*.

received an average rating of 3.4 across both years. The percentage of youth who reported cultural identity development as one of their favorite activities or the best (i.e., a rating of 4 or 5) almost doubled from Year 1 to Year 2 (19% to 32%). Conversely, the percentage of youth rating the ice breakers a 4 or 5 decreased from 60% to 36%. The community development projects had the most ratings of 4 and 5, whereas program planning activities were highly rated by 48% of the youth in Year 1 and 41% in Year 2. Finally, most youth (59%) indicated that the sessions were the right length of time, although 32% reported that the meetings could be shorter. More than one half (64%) reported that two sessions a week was the right number.

Table 3 presents the results of the youths' ratings of the final iteration of the curriculum. Overall, the youth reported liking all aspects of the program as no components received an average score lower than 3 ("I liked it"). The components that received the highest scores were the windshield tour, interviewing adult advocates, and choosing their projects. They also rated goal setting, team-building field trips, and their initial community change project very highly. The lowest ratings were for African American biographies (3.17) and cultural identity and enrichment (3.24), but these components also had among the largest variation in ratings as any of the items. Notably, however, only biographies, affirmations, and cultural identity received a rating of 1 ("I did not like it at all"), and each had only one such rating. We did not address male–female differences in our analyses because the numbers of participants was not large enough to reveal meaningful results.

**TABLE 3**
**Youth Ratings for Final Iteration of the Curriculum and Activities (n = 17)**

| Session | M (SD) |
|---|---|
| Unit 1: Youth as Leaders | |
| Ice breakers | 3.29 (0.61) |
| Team building | 3.69 (0.48) |
| Norm setting | 3.41 (0.71) |
| Goal setting | 3.76 (0.56) |
| Talking about leadership | 3.53 (0.62) |
| Writing about leadership | 3.47 (0.64) |
| Unit 2: Community | |
| Windshield tour and pictures | 3.85 (0.38) |
| Writing about pictures (Photovoice) | 3.54 (0.66) |
| Community assets and liabilities | 3.59 (0.62) |
| Choosing project ideas | 3.82 (0.39) |
| Unit 3: Building Intergenerational Partnerships | |
| Strategies for working with adults | 3.29 (0.69) |
| Interviewing adult advocates | 3.81 (0.43) |
| Team-building field trips | 3.77 (0.44) |
| Skits about working together | 3.69 (0.48) |
| Unit 4: Planning for Change | |
| Project flags | 3.62 (0.51) |
| Writing project proposals | 3.47 (0.87) |
| Proposal presentations | 3.50 (0.82) |
| Unit 5: Action and Reflection | |
| Community change project | 3.73 (0.46) |
| Cross-cutting activities | |
| African American biographies | 3.17 (0.86) |
| Cultural identity and enrichment | 3.24 (0.83) |
| Affirmations (self-esteem–building activity) | 3.29 (0.92) |

NOTE: 1 = *I did not like it at all*; 2 = *I only liked it a little bit*; 3 = *I liked it*; 4 = *I liked it very much*.

### Curriculum Revisions

As a result of the evaluation feedback, we made several revisions to the curriculum and began implementation for a third time. We also made revisions during the third implementation as we obtained feedback from the youth on the final iteration. These changes focused on the four main themes to address session detail and density, incorporate more curricular flexibility, create more active engagement, and integrate cultural awareness issues throughout the curriculum.

*Simplified session plans.* We began every session with a summary of session activities so that a leader will be able to understand the gist of the goals for the session at a glance. We also shortened some of the instructions and reduced the number of examples. We redesigned the sessions to be a series of shorter steps with brief instructions for each. We also used more boxes to highlight strategies for presenting the session material definitions, and other useful information (e.g., helpful hints, more detailed instructions). Overall, these revisions made the pages less dense by increasing white space, reducing the number of words on each page.

*Incorporating flexible time for informal interaction.* We revised the curriculum so that each session provided time at the beginning for youth to discuss issues on their minds, including feelings about things currently happening in their lives, questions about the program, or anything else they wanted to talk about (e.g., the presidential election). This time was also useful for processing events that may have happened during the school day (e.g., fights, bullying) or since the last time they met as a group.

*Active engagement.* We revised sessions that were school-like (where the youth worked on a task at a desk) so that they include more active involvement and interaction. We reduced the number of handouts, increased time for active discussion, and included more activities that involved movement and creative work. We incorporated art projects, for example, into some cultural learning activities. We also incorporated fun activities into session plans to make them more engaging and interesting and less academic. We identified, for example, films that might provide useful points for discussions that focus on unit themes such as teamwork, leadership, violence, culture, and community. We developed field trips to provide opportunities for youth to learn more about assets in their community and their cultural heritage. We also built in time for celebration of achievements such as completing a unit in the curriculum, the beginning of their work on the projects, and accomplishments along the way to completion of their projects. One way we have incorporated celebration is by allowing the youth to choose an activity such as having free time at a gym or going to a movie.

*Integration of the cultural component throughout the curriculum.* Originally, the cultural component was included as separate sessions or as brief activities within a session that were not necessarily related directly to the other session activities. We found ways to incorporate cultural activities into sessions and related them directly to the session content. We also

included some specific sessions that focus only on cultural identity, but they are now integrated into the overall flow of the curriculum. Lastly, we ensured that the cultural component was especially prominent in the first two units of the curriculum to help set the tone for the remainder of the curriculum to maintain this theme.

## ► CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

We learned several lessons as we developed and implemented a curriculum that empowers youth as community change agents, engages them in the multiple ecological systems, and connects them with adults to achieve their goals. The process evaluation of the curriculum at the various phases of implementation provided us with invaluable feedback for improving it. Subsequent feedback after a second implementation helped us further hone the curriculum so that it could have the broadest appeal and be implemented in a variety of settings

First, and perhaps most importantly, we learned that youth found the most engaging aspects of the curriculum to be those that were not simply an extension of school. To be engaging and enjoyable for youth, the sessions had to incorporate active learning, provide fun activities for the participants, and allow time for them to discuss issues of concern to them. This finding is consistent with empowerment theory in that youth favored activities that gave them more control over the learning environment. Including fun activities is an important way to keep youth engaged in an after-school program, but we also needed to ensure that the activities remained focused on program objectives. This was especially notable in the youths' ratings of the final curriculum. Not only did the more active components receive the highest ratings but the youth were in most agreement about these as evidenced by the smaller variances for these items. The value of making the curriculum an active learning experience may be best illustrated by the ratings for the windshield tour and picture taking versus those for writing about the photographs taken. The former received the highest ratings, whereas the writing received ratings somewhere in the middle of all the components. These experiences engaged youth in critical reflection on their micro- and mesosytems, providing them with a basis for understanding and acting on their environment. Notably, critical reflection also helps empower youth by enhancing their cognitive skills for understanding their social environments and becoming effective problem solvers and decision makers.

Second, we learned that the curriculum must be user-friendly for people who do not have prior experience teaching. As an after-school program, YES is unlikely to be implemented by formally trained teachers. On one hand, the curriculum needed to be detailed and specific to increase the probability that it would be implemented as intended (i.e., fidelity of implementation). On the other hand, staff members who are not trained as teachers require sessions that allow some latitude to address the needs of the youth and are somewhat less scripted. This was a challenging task because the curriculum had to be both comprehensive and detailed, but also easily readable and implemented. Finding this balance required multiple feedback sessions and resulted in greater flexibility in the curriculum.

Third, we also found that staff members needed some flexible time to be sensitive to the youths' needs, and that this time needed to be incorporated into the curriculum. Providing this flexibility may be especially critical in school environments with stressors such as poor achievement, violence, and student and staff turnover. Notably, Grossman and Bulle (2006) report that including time for informal and social interaction is useful for promoting positive youth–adult relationships. Notably, this is also consistent with Kelly's (1986) concept of adaptation. Our experience is that it is essential to begin each session by giving the youth a chance to raise issues, talk about concerns, or ask questions. For some sessions, this took more time than others, but it largely depended on what youth experienced in school or in their neighborhoods. On days when there were large group fights at school, youth typically required more time to debrief their experiences. Yet staff members tied the conversation back to the program (if not that day's curricular agenda) by linking it to the goals of the program of helping youth work to make changes in their community to prevent violence and promote peace. Although such flexibility may compromise fidelity and make it more difficult to test unequivocally the effects of a curriculum, we learned that not addressing the youths' need to discuss issues would reduce their motivation to participate in the program and undermine the overall program goals. Our first task was to engage youth, and to do that we had to meet the youths' needs at any given time. This helped us earn their trust, demonstrated that the program was really about them, helped them develop ownership of the program, and established their commitment to it. Thus, we revised the curriculum to build this flex-time into the program and to help implementers maintain fidelity with the intended aspects of the curriculum. This flexibility, however, may disrupt the flow of the curriculum and impede completion of the curriculum. We implemented two strategies to address these potential problems. First, we built in extra time throughout

the program time frame to allow for adapting the program to local needs while allowing for the full curriculum to be implemented. Second, we included optional enrichment activities (e.g., field trips, community service projects) that could be eliminated if time runs short.

Finally, although the cultural identity and enrichment activities were rated among the lowest (though improved over time), we found that these issues are a useful grounding element for a curriculum designed to involve youth in community health promotion projects. Culture in our case referred mostly to African American heritage but also included aspects of youth culture. We found that we could not include cultural issues as a separate part of the curriculum because we could not remove ethnic identity and youth culture from the everyday lives of the youth with whom we worked. As a critical component of the macrosystem, cultural factors affect all aspects of youth's experience; separating these elements resulted in a disjointed curriculum. In fact, when we incorporated the cultural elements throughout the curriculum, we also observed an increase in youth satisfaction for this curricular component.

A vital part of any program is adequate documentation so that it may be replicated from one year to the next and from one setting to another. The development of a curriculum provides the foundation necessary for such replication because it provides a standardized resource to guide practitioners who may want to implement a program in their area. The YES curriculum was developed iteratively and with ongoing feedback from both the practitioners implementing the program and the youth receiving it. This enabled us to develop a curriculum that can be implemented by teachers and non-teachers that is also acceptable to youth. Notably, the process for obtaining feedback was also consistent with empowerment theory because it empowered the youth to be both influential and valued in the revision process.

Further research to test the efficacy of the YES curriculum at the individual and community levels is the next step necessary to evaluate the usefulness of the curriculum. We are planning a comparison group design to test the effects of this curriculum compared to other after-school programs on the short- and long-term outcomes depicted in Figure 1. In addition, the evaluation will examine changes in cultural identity and awareness, leadership efficacy, attitudes about violence, and sense of community. We will then examine if these factors mediate the effects of the curriculum on the short- and long-term outcomes. We will also evaluate sex differences as they may be particularly relevant for many aspects of the program content especially cultural identity and group engagement. Analysis of differences in how male and female youth perceived

the program will also be conducted to further develop and modify the curriculum. Although the next step for the curriculum is to evaluate its effectiveness, this description of the development of an after-school curriculum designed to prevent youth violence through community change provides a vital first step for establishing a practical and theoretically driven resource to address a persistent public health problem.

## NOTE

1. Photovoice is a participatory research method based on health promotion principles that involve participants in taking pictures, writing narratives, and influencing policy. It has been used in projects throughout the world as a means of promoting community change from the grass-roots (Wang & Burris, 1997).

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