

---

# Moving Beyond Youth Voice

Youth & Society

43(1) 44–63

© 2011 SAGE Publications

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0044118X09351280

<http://yas.sagepub.com>



Joyce Serido,<sup>1</sup> Lynne M. Borden,<sup>1</sup>  
and Daniel F. Perkins<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This study combines research documenting the benefits of positive relationships between youth and caring adults on a young person's positive development with studies on youth voice to examine the mechanisms through which participation in youth programs contributes to positive developmental outcomes. Specifically, the study explores whether youth's perceived quality relationships with adults contribute to strengthening of youth voice and in turn how the two combine to affect youth's perception of the benefits of program participation. The findings derived from survey data regarding 748 youth who participated in youth–adult partnership programs in 29 states suggest that young people who develop positive relationships with adults perceive they have more voice in the program and in turn perceive more benefits to program participation. Implications for research and practice are presented.

## Keywords

youth voice, supportive relationships, youth–adult partnerships, positive development, program participation

A growing body of research points to the importance of youth voice in promoting positive youth development (Mitra, 2003; Perkins & Borden, 2006; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000). The research also shows that positive interactions with nonfamilial adults may be particularly beneficial in helping young

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Arizona

<sup>2</sup>Pennsylvania State University

## Corresponding Author:

Joyce Serido, University of Arizona, The Norton of School of Family and Consumer Sciences, P. O. Box 210078, Tucson, AZ 85721-0078

Email: [jserido@email.arizona.edu](mailto:jserido@email.arizona.edu)

people to acquire skills they need to thrive in adulthood (Scales, Benson, & Mannes, 2006). Though empirical studies have found links between program factors and youth outcomes (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006), less is known about the processes through which these factors promote positive development (Benson, 2003). This study responds to the need to understand the mechanisms through which program participation contributes to positive outcomes for youth.

In a previous study, Borden and Serido (2009) found that youth became active participants in their community when they felt they had both a powerful voice in program decision making and supportive relationships with adult staff. In contrast, youth who felt they lacked either a strong voice or adult support did not feel connected to the program, despite ongoing participation. In this study, we will examine the associations among youth voice and supportive relationships with adults to understand their separate and combined effects on perceived benefits of program participation

## **The Importance of Youth Voice in Positive Development**

When youth have a voice within contexts that affect them, opportunities for positive youth development emerge (Perkins & Borden, 2006). Though many youth programs emphasize the importance of youth voice, opportunities to practice using their voices is often limited to asking young people about their concerns and desires for the program. In their 2001 report, Fredericks, Kaplan, and Zeisler concluded that although increasing numbers of youth are involved in service-learning programs, many youth are not compelled by their experiences. The report posits that youth voice is an essential component of successful service-learning programs; that is, youth voice requires active involvement in planning, implementing, and problem solving during their experiences. When a program promotes authentic and meaningful involvement, youth have opportunities for connection to others, self-discovery, and empowerment (Krueger, 2005), which in turn leads to more positive youth outcomes.

Youth voice means that youth are respected for their ideas and opinions and feel free to state them within an organization or program (Fredericks, Kaplan, & Zeisler, 2001; Mueller, Wunrow, & Einspruch, 2000). In examining developmental outcomes of both youth-driven and adult-driven approaches, Larson and colleagues (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005) found that both program approaches contributed to increased youth self-confidence and positive interactions with adults. Common to both approaches was the emphasis that

adults placed on listening to and obtaining feedback from youth. When adults acknowledge and listen respectfully to ideas of young people, youth feel that they belong (Mitra, 2004). Furthermore, in seeking input and providing opportunities for young people to act on their ideas, youth become actively involved in the process of democratic decision making (Camino, 2000; Larson et al., 2005). Research documents the benefits of engaging youth in shared decision making with adults (Jones & Perkins, 2005; Mitra, 2004). For example, Mitra found that when students were given a platform for their voices to be heard, feelings of connection and responsibility toward their schools increased, or as she states, "Becoming a critical democratic participant yields a discourse of emotional pride and protection for public institutions" (p. 674). This approach allows youth to practice being a part of a larger institution and thus develop civic responsibility.

Having a voice may be particularly important for vulnerable youth who are often marginalized by society (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Conner, 2005). Repeated negative experiences may engender these youth with a sense of self-doubt and a mistrust of adults (Halpern, 2006). Engaging marginalized youth in program decision making and action has the potential to counter the effects of these experiences, contributing to the competencies and confidence of the youth and a sense of belonging to the community (Zeldin, 2004).

### *Supportive Adult Relationships*

The role of caring adults in promoting and supporting positive development has long been documented (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982). This work has provided a foundation for much of today's understanding about how nonfamilial adults can foster positive youth development. For many youth, community programs offer an alternative setting for developing a positive sense of self. Community programs provide opportunities to develop personal relationships with nonfamilial adults and their peers through ongoing interactions across different settings, for example, recreation, jobs, sports, and community service. For instance, Hirsch's (2005) work found that young people who built strong positive relationships with program staff identified community programs as a "second home." This is of particular importance for youth who lack supportive family environments or who feel marginalized from conventional school programs. O'Donoghue and Strobel (2006) noted, "Youth and adults speak to the importance of supportive relationships characterized by genuine caring and understanding, as well as honest feedback and challenge" (p. 8). They further note that many young people cite personal

relationships with caring adults as a factor in changing the direction of their lives. Indeed, Perkins and Borden (2003) in their comprehensive review of resiliency found that a caring nonparental adult is the most common protective factor among resilient youth (Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1982). In addition, positive relationships with adults help to foster a sense of self-worth and a sense of well-being in young people, crucial factors in a young person's development. Supportive relationships with adults help young people form positive relationships with peers and other adults. Positive interactions with adults offer youth a way to participate in their own development (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Larson, 2000). In this sense, supportive relationships between youth and adults provide direct benefits to youth.

The youth–adult relationship within a program may best be understood as a mentoring relationship (Hirsch, 2005), where the program staff often serve as important mentors to the young people in their programs. However, not all mentoring relationships are effective (Liang & Rhodes, 2007). Liang and Rhodes suggest that to be effective mentoring relationships must be authentic, consistent, and enduring, with both the young person and the adult receiving benefit from the relationship. Furthermore, positive relationships within a program are more likely to occur when there is adequate planning and support (Liang & Rhodes, 2007). Hirsch noted that supportive relationships with adults “provide a bridge between the youth's natural social environment and the outside world, creating similar processes that function to engage and then socialize youth to positive identities” (p. 133). Clearly, when community programs promote supportive youth–adult relationships the potential for positive development is strong. Thus, supportive relationships between youth and adults also provide indirect benefits to youth by encouraging them to practice using their voice to learn how to express their thoughts and ideas in ways that can be heard outside the program.

## **Pathway to Positive Development**

Youth-centered and entertaining activities are important factors for attracting youth to participate in community programs (Gambone & Arbretton, 1997; Huebner & Mancini, 2003), including at-risk youth and youth of color (Perkins et al., 2007). Programs offering activities appealing to youth, for example, concerts and dance classes, and those that provide a safe place for meeting and hanging out with friends may be especially important for attracting harder-to-reach adolescent populations (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003).

Our research interest, however, is in understanding the processes through which participation in youth programs contributes to positive developmental outcomes. Based on the literature and our own work with marginalized youth (Borden & Serido, 2009), we propose a pathway from participation to positive outcomes that begins with supportive and caring adults. Cabrera and Padilla (2004) suggested that successful youth outcomes often depend on young people's ability to surround themselves with individuals who support their goals and aspirations. These relationships then set the stage for youth to benefit from their participation. From this foundation of caring adult relationships youth are able to explore new interests and discover their talents working with adults who are there to acknowledge their successes and to encourage them when they fail. Through this ongoing interaction, youth find their voice (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). Finally, as their voices become stronger, youth develop a sense of belonging (Carruthers & Busser, 2000; Halpern et al., 2000) that encourages them to take ownership of the program and its success (Larson et al., 2005).

## Plan of Analysis

Using the proposed pathway to positive outcomes as a framework, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Supportive relationships with adults form the basis for positive outcomes through program participation; thus, we expect youth who report more positive relationships in interacting with adult staff will also report more benefits to program participation.

*Hypothesis 2:* Youth who feel they have a stronger voice in the program assume more program ownership and will, therefore, report more benefits from their participation.

*Hypothesis 3:* While both supportive relationships with adults and youth voice will provide direct benefits of participation, we expect that supportive relationships with adults will also indirectly contribute to youth perceived benefits of program participation by encouraging youth to express their opinions and ideas more freely.

In other words, we expect that youth voice will account for the association between supportive relationships with adults and benefits of program participation.

## Method

### Sample

The participants in this study are part of a larger national initiative entitled Engaging Youth Serving Communities (EYSC). The goal of the National 4-H Council Initiative is to enhance developmental opportunities for youth through three core program areas: (1) youth programs that provide positive youth development experiences, (2) engaging youth as partners in civic governance and decision making, and (3) providing training and resources to youth and adults to increase their capacity to work together as full partners. Staff from 4-H Youth Development Program offices within the Land Grant Universities Extension System applied and administered these projects. The major aims of the national evaluation were documenting (a) the effectiveness of local EYSC sites in the three core program areas, (b) the national reach of EYSC programs consistent with the core program areas, and (c) the process, strengths, and potential improvements for national initiatives like EYSC.

The data for this study come from the 748 youth who participated in youth–adult partnership programs and who also completed the youth in governance evaluation survey. Thus, this study included a convenience sample (Patton, 1990) of youth who participated in the EYSC initiative from 29 states. The majority of the participants in the survey were female (68%). Participants were in the age group of 10 to 19 years, and the average age of the participants across the sample was 15.1 years. Regarding ethnicity, 76% of the youth self-identified as White, 8% as African American not of Hispanic origin, 7% as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 3% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% as Hispanic, and 4% as Other. The majority of youth reported being in a youth–adult partnership program for 1 year or less (80%).

Overall, the 410 adult staff participants in the youth in governance evaluation survey were on average 42.3 years old, with 1.5 years of experience with the youth governance program, and had more than 10 years of experience in 4-H. The majority of the adult staff were White (79%); 6% were African American, 4% were Native American; 3% were Asian; and 2% were Hispanic. Ethnicity was missing for 4% of the participants. Because participation was both voluntary and anonymous, we were unable to link youth and adult responses.

### Procedure

A key objective of the study was to understand the perception of program qualities held by individual participants in programs across the United States.

Thus, the national evaluation team included researchers experienced in positive youth development and survey evaluation who collaborated to design instruments assessing documented program components important in enhancing youth development. The survey was developed to collect information for each of the three program areas (i.e., after-school, youth governance, and training), based on the goals and content of each program. To facilitate collection of data from individual participants across the nation, the research team chose a Web-based study design, with a paper-and-pencil option to accommodate sites with limited computer and/or Internet access. Because the evaluation data were to reside at the University of Arizona, all study procedures and documents associated with the project were reviewed and approved by the human subjects committee at the University of Arizona.

After receiving human subjects committee approval, the evaluation team collaborated with a Web site designer in the creation of a site that would accommodate the complexity of a multiprogram multistate evaluation study. During this time, the evaluation team conducted numerous conference calls to train state EYSC coordinators and the project directors in each site in survey administration procedures (as noted previously, these individuals were staff from 4-H Youth Development Program offices within the Land Grant Universities Extension System and thus had completed Human Subjects Certification). In addition to training sessions, the evaluation team provided ongoing consultation as needed to state and local EYSC coordinators about the evaluation process.

The state and local EYSC coordinators explained the purpose of the study and data collection procedures to both youth and adult participants at their site and provided letters of invitation. Parents of youth participants were notified by mail in advance that their children would have an opportunity to evaluate their programs through an anonymous survey that took approximately 10 min to complete. The survey assessed participants' perceptions of program context and skills learned to obtain a better understanding of the program's effectiveness. The surveys involved neither participant identification nor sensitive questions.

The EYSC project coordinators (from the 4-H program) trained adult volunteers (nonstaff) in the local sites to assist participants in navigating the Web site or taking paper-and-pencil surveys as appropriate at each site. Surveys were completed by the county-based 4-H agents, local program adult volunteers, and the youth participants. Following Human Subjects protocols, assent from youth and adults was obtained through an oral invitation to participate in the evaluation of the programs. Potential participants were given verbal assurances that their participation was completely voluntary.

Over the course of 14 months (November 2003–January 2005), participants logged into the Web site using an assigned identification number and password. After entering their project's state and county, they were directed to the appropriate sections of the survey. Where necessary, site coordinators and local volunteers administered paper-and-pencil surveys and subsequently entered the data into the Web site. Completed paper-and-pencil surveys were sent to the University of Arizona, in accordance with confidentiality policies.

## Measures

The evaluation instrument was a 44-item survey measuring respondents' perceptions of youth involvement in the programs as well as knowledge and attitudes of adult staff. The survey focused on five constructs related to decision-making and leadership experiences as well as experiences of youth working in partnership with adults. Because youth governance is a relatively new topic area in positive youth development, the survey team drew upon emerging research in this area (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; National Youth Employment Coalition, 2001; Zeldin, Day, & Matysik, 2001) to modify a recently developed instrument (Perkins, 2002) that measured youth voice, youth engagement, and youth responsibilities (*Youth–Adult Partnerships/Governance*; see also Perkins & Borden, 2002).

**Relationships with adults.** This scale consists of four items measuring youth perceptions of the quality of youth–adult relationships on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *almost always* (5). Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .80. Sample items include "How much can you trust the adult committee members?" and "How much do you feel you have access to the information needed to participate fully in the committee decision-making process?"

**Youth voice.** This was a 6-item scale that measured youth perceptions about their impact on the program using a 5-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *almost always* (5). Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .88. Sample items include "How often are your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions taken seriously by the other committee members?" and "How often do you have the opportunity to discuss concerns about decisions a committee team makes?"

**Benefits gained.** Youth were asked to indicate the benefits they received from program participation on 4 items measured on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5). The scale was reverse coded so that higher scores reflected greater benefits from participation. Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .83. Sample items include "learn new skills" and "feel a sense of personal fulfillment in working to improve your community."

Table 1. Descriptive Analyses and Intercorrelations of Variables

Variables	1	2	White (n = 485) M(SD)	African American (n = 51) M(SD)	Native American (n = 42) M(SD)	Asian/ Pacific (n = 17) M(SD)	Hispanic (n = 14) M(SD)
1. Relationship with Adults	----		4.00(.70) <sup>b</sup>	4.03(.66) <sup>b</sup>	3.21(.66) <sup>a</sup>	3.94 <sup>b</sup> (.56) <sup>b</sup>	4.09(.59) <sup>b</sup>
2. Youth Voice	.58*	----	3.76(.75) <sup>b</sup>	3.54(.85) <sup>b</sup>	2.98(.74) <sup>a</sup>	3.63 <sup>b</sup> (.52) <sup>b</sup>	3.98(.48) <sup>b</sup>
3. Benefits Gained	.27*	.35*	4.03(.72)	4.19(.68)	3.74(.50)	4.06(.70)	4.05(.44)

Note: N = 748. Letter superscripts <sup>a</sup> and <sup>b</sup> indicate significant ethnic group differences using Tukey comparisons.

\* $p < .01$ .

**Ethnicity.** Because the majority of youth participants self-identified as White (.76), these analyses included a series of dichotomous variables to account for differing effects by ethnic group. White youth represent the referent group, and separate dummy-coded (0/1) variables represent the each of the following ethnic groups: African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American.

**Control variables.** As findings in the literature link demographic variables to youth participation and developmental outcomes, these analyses also controlled for both age and gender.

## Results

### Descriptive Analyses of Variables

Preliminary analyses examined the relationships among the variables using intercorrelations and mean scores (see Table 1). The moderately high association between the two predictor variables suggests some overlap in the variance explained by the two predictors. The correlations between each of the predictor variables (relationship with adults and youth voice) and the outcome variable (benefits gained) were both moderate and positive.

A series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine mean score differences by ethnic groups on each variable (see Table 1, significant group differences are noted by subscript). The results showed that Native American youth ( $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) were more likely to feel that relationships with adults in the program were less supportive than Hispanic, African American, White, or Asian/Pacific Islander ( $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ;  $M = 4.03$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ;  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ;  $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ , respectively) ( $F(4, 612) = 13.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A similar pattern of results was found for

youth voice, with Native American youth ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) more likely to feel that their voice was not as strong as Hispanic, White, Asian/Pacific Islander, or African American youth ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.48$ ;  $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ;  $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ;  $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ , respectively) ( $F(4, 613) = 11.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There were no significant groups differences in benefits gained through program participation.

### *Separate and Combined Effects on Benefits of Program Participation*

To test the specific hypotheses about the separate and combined effects of supportive relationships with adults and youth voice on benefits gained from program participation, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regressions. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

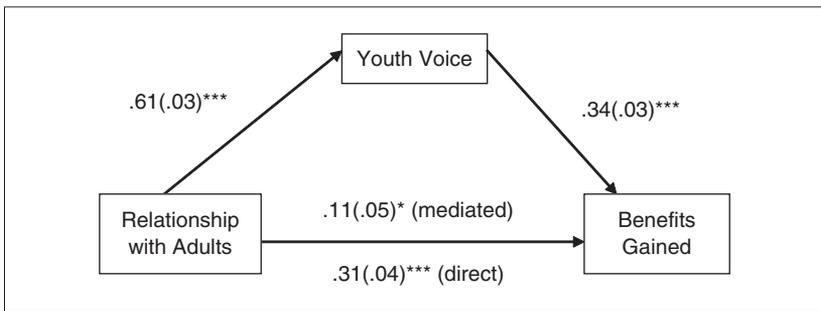
In Step 1, the demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, and ethnic group) entered the equation but did not predict benefits gained from participation, accounting for only 2% of variance in benefits gained. In Step 2, another variable, relationship with adults, entered the equation and was a significant predictor of benefits gained; thus, providing support for the first hypothesis that youth who report more positive relationships with adult staff will also report more benefits of program participation. Moreover, the variable accounted for an additional 9% of the variance in the dependent variable. In Step 3, youth voice entered the equation and was a significant predictor of benefits gained, providing support for the second hypothesis that youth who feel they have a stronger voice in the program will report more benefits from their participation. The addition of youth voice accounted for an additional 5% of the variance in benefits gained and the full model accounted for 16% of the variance in benefits gained. These results are consistent with previous studies on the direct effects of both supportive relationships with adults and youth voice on the perceived benefits of participation in youth programs. To assess the independent contribution of the two predictor variables, given the moderately high correlations between them, we reestimated separate regression models by entering the demographic variables and only one of the predictors. The model with relationships with adults as the predictor was significant ( $\beta = .31$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and accounted for 10% of the total variance in benefits gained. The model with youth voice as the predictor was also significant ( $\beta = .38$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and accounted for 14% of the total variance in benefits gained. The model with both predictors included (Table 2) accounted for a greater percentage of the variance suggesting that despite the overlap, each of the predictors is tapping into a distinct construct.

**Table 2.** Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Benefits Gained

Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
<b>Step 1</b>			
Age	.01	.01	.04
Gender	.09	.06	.06
White	.06	.07	.04
African American	.23	.12	.08
Native American	-.22	.13	-.07
Asian/Pacific Islander	.09	.18	.02
Hispanic	.09	.20	.02
<b>Step 2</b>			
Age	.01	.01	.03
Gender	.08	.05	.05
White	.01	.07	.00
African American	.16	.11	.06
Native American	-.05	.12	-.02
Asian/Pacific Islander	.05	.17	.01
Hispanic	.01	.19	.00
Relationship with Adults	.30	.04	.31***
<b>Step 3</b>			
Age	-.00	.01	-.01
Gender	.05	.05	.03
White	.00	.07	.00
African American	.19	.11	.07
Native American	.01	.12	.00
Asian/Pacific Islander	.07	.17	.02
Hispanic	-.04	.18	-.01
Relationship with Adults	.11	.05	.11*
Youth Voice	.28	.04	.31***

Note: N = 748;  $\Delta R^2 = .02$  for Step 1;  $\Delta R^2 = .09$  for Step 2 ( $p < .000$ );  $\Delta R^2 = .05$  for Step 3. ( $p < .000$ ). \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

We further examined the combined association between relationship with adults and youth voice to consider what support exists for the third hypothesis, that youth voice mediates or explains the association between relationships with adults and benefits gained from program participation. Using the method outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), three separate regression analyses were estimated: (1) regressing the potential mediator (youth voice) on the predictor (relationship with adults), (2) regressing the criterion variable (benefits gained) on the predictor variable, and (3) regressing the criterion variable on both the predictor variable and the mediator variable. The result of the first



**Figure 1.** Model of the mediating role of youth voice in the association between relationship with adults and benefits gained through program participation

regression analyses (results not shown) revealed a significant association between youth voice and relationship with adults ( $p < .001$ ). The result of the second regression, benefits gained on relationship with adults (Table 2, Step 2) shows a significant association ( $p < .001$ ). The result of the final regression (Table 2, Step 3) shows a diminished association between benefits gained on relationship with adults, indicating that youth voice predicted benefits gained and partially mediated the effect of relationship with adults, decreasing the effect by 63%. Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the mediating and direct effects of the associations among the variables.

Taken together, these findings may suggest that opportunities to interact with adults benefit youth in multiple ways: first, by directly contributing to the perceived value of program participation and second, indirectly, by promoting youth voice.

**Discussion**

This study responds to the call to examine the processes through which participation in youth programs contributes to positive developmental outcomes (Larson et al., 2006, 2005). In this study, we combined research documenting the benefits of both supportive relationships with caring adults on a young person’s positive development with studies on youth voice to consider the combined effects of the two factors on perceived benefits of program participation. The findings provide initial support that young people who develop positive relationships with adults in community programs also strengthen their voice and in turn perceive more benefits to program participation. This process may empower youth and inspire them to find ways to simultaneously take care of themselves and the program.

Sherrod (2005) posited that the active participation of all citizens, including youth, is necessary in a democratic society. Yet young people seldom have the opportunity to exert decision-making power in conventional settings, such as family and school (Evans, 2007). Thus, working in partnership with caring adults can provide an outlet for young people to feel that they matter and have a place in society. Through their interactions with other adults and peers, youth discover ways to participate in the larger community. When adults are open to interacting with youth in positive and supportive ways, they promote youth development (Scales et al., 2006).

Youth voice develops in the context of supportive relationships with adults. Halpern (2006) stated, "Although adolescents want and need space—to become themselves and to explore the world of peer relationships—they also want and need adult-mediated experiences—to explore interests and test abilities, to be challenged and to challenge themselves" (p. 204). Thus, programs promote youth voice by providing opportunities for youth to practice using their voice in the presence of supportive adults who are committed to youth, view youth as partners, and encourage youth empowerment and skill development (Walker, 2003; Yohalem, 2003). Furthermore, developing youth voice guided by supportive adults directs development toward positive ends (Larson, 2006). Rhodes and colleagues (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006) suggested that close relationships with adults act as a catalyst for positive youth outcomes by encouraging identity development. We see youth voice as an important component of identity development that emerges through ongoing interaction with others.

If positive youth development means preparing youth to successfully transition to adulthood, promoting youth voice means more than listening to what youth have to say. Youth must have opportunities to put their voices into action, thereby engaging in experiences that enable them to be producers of their own development (Lerner, 2002; Schneirla, 1957). This opportunity to take action for the betterment of community promotes the sense of mattering (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) that is often lacking in a society where the consumer power of youth is most salient. Indeed, sustainability of youth programs arises from "community-wide efforts that promote positive youth development for all young people, providing them with the opportunities to develop positive relationships, skills, competencies, and attitudes that will assist them in making positive choices for their lives" (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003, p. 400). Youth voice emerges through an ongoing process of social action to promote healthy development and integration into the community (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Youth

voice contributes to positive youth outcomes by helping young people to authentically engage in community initiatives.

### *Implications*

The individual and the community benefit when youth, through interaction with caring adults, know that they matter and make a difference. The association found between youth voice, adult relationships, and perceived positive benefits from participation has several implications for those individuals who design, manage, and evaluate youth programs. First, program staff must be deliberate in their actions to build strong relationships with youth in their program. Programs that have caring adults who build positive relationships with young people do so through thoughtful listening, caring, and overall concern for the well-being of the young people who participate (Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005). Youth program staff should ensure that every youth has opportunities to work alongside supportive adults within the program (Scheve, Perkins, & Mincemoyer, 2006). By building strong youth–adult partnerships, programs promote youth voice and ultimately provide the context from which a young person can benefit. Second, listening to youth is not sufficient for promoting positive youth outcomes. Program staff must provide opportunities for youth to act on issues that are meaningful to them and have an impact on their lives (Villarruel et al., 2003).

In this sense, adults are in a position to provide young people with opportunities to be integrated in a positive way into the fabric of their community. In doing so, youth learn to address community issues as a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. Finally, youth programs have the potential to promote the civic engagement of young people by providing opportunities to become meaningfully engaged in their community. By working in partnership with young people, program staff strengthens their communities for present and future generations.

### *Limitations*

Though this study provides unique information on the benefits of program participation for both practice and future research, these must be considered within the limitations of the present study. One limitation to the study is the cross-sectional nature of the data thus making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the meaning and the direction of the results. Whereas it is plausible that the path to benefits of participation begins with supportive relationships that set the stage for empowering youth, it is also possible that youth with stronger voices were more likely to establish positive relationships

with adults in the program. It is also possible that other factors contributed to a strengthening of youth voice. For example, certain youth may have been inspired to action by the goals of the program, or there may have been a better fit between certain individual strengths and program goals. Future studies should consider both alternate factors that may affect perception of program benefits as well as repeated measures from the same participants to assess how participation changes over time. Another limitation is the potential multicollinearity among the predictor variables, thus making it difficult to accurately estimate the separate effects of youth voice and relationships with adults. Though supplemental analyses demonstrate that each of the variables did make a separate and significant contribution, there was a substantial overlap between the measures of youth voice and supportive relationships. Future research would benefit from the development of more clearly defined and validated measures. Finally, the study relies upon self-report data to assess both program quality and benefits of program participation; thus, the findings may reflect a response bias (i.e., certain youth rating all measures positively). It would be helpful if future studies include both self-report measures of youth perceptions in addition to objective measures of both individual benefits of participation as well as benefits to the program.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study highlight the benefits of program participation by exploring the ways in which program factors combine to promote positive development. Cultivating positive youth–adult relationships offers an opportunity to better understand the young people who participate in community programs and to provide programs that better fit those individuals who participate (Wimer & Simpkins, 2006). Such an approach offers the potential for increasing the appeal of youth programs to a wider audience and maximizes the benefits of youth programs for the young people who participate.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

## Acknowledgment

The authors appreciate the assistance of undergraduate research team members, Arlie Roth and Amelia Harrison, who assisted with data input.

## References

- Anderson-Butcher, D., Newsome, W. S., & Ferrari, T. M. (2003). Participation in boys and girls clubs and relationships to youth outcomes. *Journal of Community Psychology, 31*, 39-55.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator–mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*, 1173-1182.
- Benson, P. L. (2003). Toward asset-building communities: How does change occur? In R. M. Lerner & P. L. Benson (Eds.), *Developmental assets and asset-building communities: Implications for research, policy, and practice* (pp. 213-221). New York: Plenum.
- Borden, L. M., & Serido, J. (2009). From program participant to community activist: A developmental journey. *Journal of Community Psychology, 37*, 423-438.
- Cabrera, M. L., & Padilla, A. M. (2004). Entering and succeeding in the “culture of college”: The story of two Mexican heritage students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 26*, 152-170.
- Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: New territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*, 11-20.
- Carruthers, C. P., & Busser, J. A. (2000). A qualitative outcome study of boys and girls club program leaders, club members, and parents. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration, 18*, 50-67.
- Diversi, M., & Mecham, C. (2005). Latino(a) students and Caucasian mentors in a rural after-school program: Towards empowering adult-youth relationships. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*, 31-40.
- Dworkin, J. B., Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2003). Adolescents’ accounts of growth experiences in youth activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*, 17-26.
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Evans, S. D. (2007). Youth sense of community: Voice & power in community contexts. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*, 693-709.
- Flanagan, C. A., Bowes, J. M., Jonsson, B., Csapo, B., & Sheblanova, E. (1998). Ties that bind: Correlates of adolescents’ civic commitments in seven countries. *Journal of Social Issues, 54*, 457-475.
- Fredericks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2006). Extracurricular involvement and adolescent adjustment: Impact of duration, number of activities, and breadth of participation. *Applied Developmental Science, 10*, 132-146.

- Fredericks, L., Kaplan, E., & Zeisler, J. (2001). *Integrating youth voice in service-learning. Education Commission of the States*. Retrieved on April 10, 2007, from [http://www.servicelearning.org/lib\\_svcs/lib\\_cat/index.php?library\\_id=4090](http://www.servicelearning.org/lib_svcs/lib_cat/index.php?library_id=4090)
- Gambone, M., & Arbreton, A. (1997). *Safe havens: The contributions of youth organizations to healthy adolescent development*. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.
- Halpern, R. (2006). After-school matters in Chicago: Apprenticeship as a model for youth programming. *Youth & Society, 38*, 203-235.
- Halpern, R., Barker, G., & Mollard, W. (2000). Youth programs as alternative spaces to be: A study of neighborhood youth programs in Chicago's West town. *Youth & Society, 31*, 469-506.
- Hilfingher Messias, D. K., Fore, E. M., McLoughlin, K., & Parra-Medina, D. (2005). Adult roles in community-based youth empowerment programs: Implications for best practices. *Family Community Health, 28*, 320-337.
- Hirsch, B. J. (2005). *A place to call home: After-school programs for urban youth*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Huebner, A. J., & Mancini, J. A. (2003). Shaping structured out-of-school time use among youth: The effects of self, family, and friend systems. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*, 453-463.
- Jennings, L. B., Parra-Medina, D., Hilfingher Messias, D. K., & McLoughlin, K. (2006). Toward a critical social theory of youth empowerment. *Journal of Community Practice, 14*, 31-55.
- Jones, K. R., & Perkins, D. F. (2005). Youth adult partnerships. In C. B. Fisher & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Applied developmental science: An encyclopedia of research, policies, and programs* (pp. 1159-1163). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Krueger, M. (2005). Four themes in youth practice. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*, 21-29.
- Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55*, 170-183.
- Larson, R. W. (2006). Positive youth development, willful adolescents, and mentoring. *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*, 677-689.
- Larsen, R. W., Hansen, D. W., & Moneta, G. (2006). Differing profiles of developmental experiences across types of organized youth activities. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 849-863.
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth adults. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*, 57-74.
- Lerner, R. M. (2002). *Adolescence: Development, diversity, context, and application*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Liang, B., & Rhodes, J. (2007). Guest editorial: Cultivating the vital element of youth mentoring. *Applied Developmental Science, 11*, 104-107.

- Mitra, D. L. (2003). Student voice in school reform: Reframing student-teacher relationships. *McGill Journal of Education, 38*, 289-304.
- Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record, 106*, 651-688.
- Mueller, R. B., Wunrow, J. J., & Einspruch, E. L. (2000). Providing youth services through youth-adult partnerships: A review of the literature. *Reaching Today's Youth, 4*, 37-48.
- National Youth Employment Coalition. (2001). Promising and effective practices network criteria workbook. Washington, DC: A. R. Smith. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from <http://www.nyec.org/PEPNetCriteria.htm>
- O'Donoghue, J. L., & Strobels, K. R. (2006). *Directivity and freedom: The role of adults in empowering youth activists*. Paper presented at the Society for Research on Adolescence Conference, San Francisco, CA. March 23-26, 2006.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Perkins, D. F. (2002). *Youth adult partnerships/Governance assessment instrument*. University Park, PA: Department of Agricultural and Extension Education.
- Perkins, D. F., & Borden, L. M. (2002). *Youth in governance assessment survey*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Perkins, D. F., & Borden, L. M. (2003). Key elements of community youth development programs. In F. A. Villarruel, D. F. Perkins, L. M. Borden, & J. G. Keith (Eds.), *Positive youth development and its implications for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices* (pp. 327-340). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Perkins, D. F., & Borden, L. M. (2006). Youth development and sports. In F. A. Villarruel & T. Luster (Eds.), *Crisis in mental health: Critical issues and effective programs: Vol. 2: Issues during adolescence*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Perkins, D. F., Borden, L. M., Villarruel, F. A., Carlton Hug, A., Stone, M., & Keith, J. G. (2007). Participation in structured youth programs: Why ethnic minority urban youth choose to participate or not to participate. *Youth & Society, 38*, 420-442.
- Pittman, K. J., Irby, M., & Ferber, T. (2000). Unfinished business: Further reflections on a decade of promoting youth development. *Youth Development: Issues, challenges, and directions* (pp. 18-64). Philadelphia: Public Private Ventures.
- Rhodes, J. E., Spencer, R., Keller, T. E., Liang, B., & Noam, G. (2006). A model for the influence of mentoring relationships on youth development. *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*, 691-707.
- Rutter, M. (1987). Psychological resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 57*, 316-331.
- Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., & Mannes, M. (2006). The contribution to adolescent well-being made by non-family adults: An examination of developmental assets as contexts and processes. *Journal of Community Psychology, 34*, 410-413.

- Scheve, J. A., Perkins, D. F., & Mincemoyer, C. C. (2006). Community team's characteristics that foster youth engagement. *Journal of Youth Development: Bridging Research and Practice*. Available from [http://www.nae4ha.org/directory/jyd/jyd\\_article.aspx?id=d4d218b6-2440-4b13-b4da-967da882f90a](http://www.nae4ha.org/directory/jyd/jyd_article.aspx?id=d4d218b6-2440-4b13-b4da-967da882f90a)
- Schneirla, T. C. (1957). The concept of development in comparative psychology. In D. B. Harris (Ed.), *The concept of development*, (pp. 78-108). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sherrod, L. (2004). Ensuring liberty by promoting youth development. *Human Development*, 48, 376-381.
- Villarruel, F. A., Perkins, D. F., Borden, L. M., & Keith, J. G. (2003). *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices* (pp. 394-403). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Walker, J. (2003). The essential youth worker: Supports and opportunities for professional success. In F. A. Villarruel, D. F. Perkins, L. M. Borden, & J. G. Keith (Eds.), *Community youth development: Practice, policy, and research* (pp. 373-393). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Werner, E., & Smith, R. (1982). *Vulnerable but invincible: A study of resilient children*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wimer, C. T., & Simpkins, S. (2006, March 23-26). *Adolescent out-of-school time participation: Contextual predictors and development differences*. Paper presented at the Society for Research on Adolescence Conference, San Francisco, CA.
- Yohalem, N. (2003). Adults who make a difference: Identifying the skills and characteristics of successful youth workers. In F. A. Villarruel, D. F. Perkins, L. M. Borden, & J. G. Keith (Eds.), *Community youth development: Practice, policy, and research* (pp. 358-372). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32, 623-641.
- Zeldin, R. S., Day, P., & Matysik, G. (2001). *Program and activity assessment tool (PAAT): For those in the business of promoting positive youth development with young people*. Madison: University of Wisconsin. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from <http://4h.uwex.edu/cyd/resources.cfm>
- Zeldin, S., Larson, R., Camino, L., & O'Conner, C. (2005). Intergenerational relationships and partnerships in community programs: Purpose, practice, and directions for research. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33, 1-10.

## Bios

**Joyce Serido**, PhD, is a research scientist at the University of Arizona with a joint appointment through Cooperative Extension and the Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences. Her research interests focus on studying the processes through which psychological and physical experiences during late adolescence and early

adulthood contribute to health and well-being across the lifespan. Specifically, she examines how social stressors foster or inhibit positive development.

**Lynne M. Borden**, PhD, is a professor and extension specialist in the Division of Family Studies and Human Development of the Norton School of Family Consumer Sciences at the University of Arizona. Her research interests focus on youth development specifically on community youth development, community programs that promote the positive development of young people, civic engagement, and public policy.

**Daniel F. Perkins**, PhD, is a professor and extension specialist of family and youth resiliency and policy in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at the Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on type ii translational research and the factors and assets related to strength-based programming, out-of-school time, family/youth resiliency, and the evaluation of community-based programs.