
Social Justice and Civic Engagement through Participation in a Youth Health Leadership Program

Marie J. Bryant

Wooster, OH

mariejbryant1@gmail.com

Corliss Outley

Texas A&M University

College Station, TX

coutley@tamu.edu

Michael B. Edwards

Texas A&M University

College Station, TX

mike.edwards@tamu.edu



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Marie J. Bryant

Corliss Outley and Michael B. Edwards
Texas A&M University

Abstract: This program brief examines the impact of a community-based health leadership program on youth participants' perceptions of citizenship in the context of social justice for community-level policy changes to promote physical activity. Youth participants completed journal entries and interviews. Results suggest citizenship developed as participants considered issues of social justice through exposure to new environments and experiences. However, youth struggled with issues of adultism and relating social injustices to their role as citizens.

Introduction

Traditional policy processes portray youth as a vulnerable group instead of competent citizens (Jentsch, 2006). Rather than remain passive recipients of adult-developed health policies, youth should participate in social change (Ribisl, Steckler, & Linnan, et al., 2004). The participation of youth as citizens is important to create equitable political outcomes and prepares youth to be active adult citizens (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2004). A justice-oriented vision of citizenship teaches youth how to critically analyze social issues and injustices to bring about social change. This perspective allows youth to move beyond being a participatory citizen to one that focuses on confronting social inequality through critical consciousness (Westheimer, & Kahne, 2004). The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a community-based health leadership program on youth participants' perceptions of citizenship in the context of social justice for community-level policy changes to promote physical activity.

Methods

The setting of this study was a community-based youth program in Bryan/College Station, Texas called the UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership Program (UP-BEAT). UP-BEAT was designed to address physical inactivity in two socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods while engaging youth participants in the community citizenship process (Table 1). Youth participated in weekly training sessions on *Public Speaking, Leadership, Technology and Youth Mapping, and*

Government to assist them in developing skills to conduct neighborhood walkability assessments, and interviews with community residents and city government leaders. After the assessments were completed youth utilized Community Walk online database to organize the data, formulate recommendations for community improvements and make presentations to community leaders, city councils, and government decision-making groups (e.g., City Zoning Board).

Twenty-six diverse youth (11-16 years old) participated in the program during the 2010-2011 school year. The program had a majority of girls and included 50% White, 35% African American, 7% Hispanic, 4% Asian and the remaining categorized themselves as 'other.' Fifteen percent of youth indicated that a language other than English was spoken in the home. Nineteen youth indicated that they lived in households with two adults. Data collection methods included individual journal assignment writings, structured youth interviews and adult leader observations.

- **Journal assignment writings.** During the weekly training sessions youth responded to pre-determined journal questions. The questions were designed to prompt youth to consider their roles as citizens. The questions included items such as: *What kind of activities do responsible/good citizens do?, How should decisions be made in the community? How should youth be included in those decisions,? and What is the most important experience youth can have to prepare them to be good citizens?*
- **Structured Youth Interviews.** Youth interviews were conducted by adult leaders to ascertain the youth's experiences in the UP-BEAT program. Questions included but were not limited to: *What have you learned from participating in this program? Is it important for youth to get involved in their communities? Why? and Do you feel youth can make a difference in their communities?*
- **Adult Observations.** Each week leaders engaged in an informal conversation regarding observations of youth and informal conversations with youth. These informal meetings were used to gauge the level of engagement, program issues, and youth personal issues. At the end of the program, the Program Director and the Program Coordinator invited youth to participate in the conversation and offer their opinions (positive and negative) about the program.

Data was analyzed using principals of systematic qualitative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Researchers working independently used an iterative coding process to conduct content analyses and thematic coding.

Table 1

UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership Program Description

Program Mission	The mission of the UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership Program is to prioritize necessary changes to the targeted communities surrounding the Neal and Lincoln Recreation Centers in order to increase access to physical activity and reduce rates of obesity. The UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership program was designed for the youth participants to reflect the greater population of Bryan/College Station.
Recruitment	Efforts were made to advertise and make the Youth Health Leadership program available to a wide range of demographics throughout Bryan/College Station. The opportunity to participate in UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership program was advertised on the local radio and television stations. Flyers were handed out to all 6 th , 7 th , 8 th and 9 th graders in the area schools. Program facilitators also set up an information booth at the local First Friday events located in downtown Bryan, TX and handed out brochures advertising the program.
Program Logistics	Trainings were held at a central location to residents in both cities and offered the necessary classroom and computer lab space. In addition, the building was selected due to its security given that the trainings were being held in the evenings. Transportation to and from training and assessment events was available. Training sessions were held Thursday evenings from 6-8pm from October 2010 to May 2011. A training and special event calendar was provided to each participant and parent/guardian at the orientation session. Youth participating in UP-BEAT Youth Health Leadership program were compensated for their time and effort with t-shirts, food and gift cards. The grant from the Texas Department of Health Services included funds to provide compensation for youth. Youth did not receive additional compensation for participation in this research study.
Curriculum	Curricula were developed by the Sequor Youth Development Initiative, a program of Texas AgriLife Extension Service and faculty and graduate students in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Science Youth Development program at Texas A&M University. UP-BEAT youth participants were trained in four curriculum areas: <i>public speaking, leadership, technology and youth mapping and government.</i>

Results**Exposure to New Environments**

Exposure to new neighborhoods (beyond the participants' residence) and government entities' prompted youth to engage in activities and conversations about the differences between communities and reasons behind those differences. Differences were also emphasized during specific program activities that discussed the ideal community and the elements needed within the targeted neighborhoods. Lauren was surprised to learn that some areas did not have access to the same amenities she had in her neighborhood – "*I've learned that a lot of places aren't like your neighborhoods, sometimes they may be worse, sometimes they may be better. You never know.*" Dan suggested that exposure to the differences in neighborhoods prompted youth to begin examining inequalities - "*I'm really looking at the communities that I see more. Seeing if they have any problems.*" Exposure to new environments made some youth (and their parents) uncomfortable, yet was necessary to encourage youth to scrutinize levels of disparity. Youth reflection of their individual lives and new learning experiences led to expanded cultural knowledge. Finally, exposure to new environments increased youths' awareness of social institutions and how they are affected by the quality of decision-making processes.

Exposure to New Experiences

The program required the youth to illustrate creativity, deal with new or unexpected situations, and provided opportunities for goal creation, thus, assisting in the development of leadership skills. Interaction with neighborhood residents led to meaningful conversations about the reasons behind the disparities. Youth began to recognize that people from disadvantaged neighborhoods were people like anyone else, but their neighborhoods and concerns sometimes did not get as much attention as other neighborhoods. Youth also cooperated with city representatives. Through these interfaces, youth were surprised by how perceptions of a disadvantaged neighborhood changed based upon the governing body (i.e., City Planning Board versus City Council). Participants began to recognize social injustices and to discuss how new experiences, such as interactions with different people, were important to foster intercultural learning, specifically between social and economic classes. Mary recognized that there are inequalities in the "world" and suggested that in order for youth to make change, they must first understand what changes need to be made.

Youth Limited Power and Voice

Youth voice and ability was an ongoing struggle throughout the UP-BEAT YHL program. Alazzi (2009) discussed that as youth, young people are expected to conform and behave according to adult rules, while they are expected to question and challenge authority. Youth style of expression was often different from adult staff expectations. As a result, the program director and program coordinator were forced to mediate between the two groups. This mediation often resulted in changing youth plans and opinions. Many of the youth felt frustrated with the continual criticisms. During a practice presentation, Marielle described a problem in the community using the word "sucks." Committee members immediately denounced the word as inappropriate. Mariella replied, "but it does suck." This is an example of the continual struggle between youth authentic voice, leadership and power and the adult social structure that the youth were attempting to transform. Some youth questioned why their participation was even necessary for the program if projects they completed were going to be manipulated by adults.

Youth frustration with adult relationships was not limited to program management. During the culmination of the UP-BEAT YHL project, youth made presentations to several city groups in Bryan and College Station. Youth felt that adult members of the various decision-making groups did not take their concerns and recommendations seriously. They recognized patronizing overtones in their interactions. Youth in UP-BEAT were irritated in their inability to participate in civic life in their community. Dan said, "I do everything I can, which is almost nothing." Jordan suggested that youth have a stake in what is occurring in the community, "Youth are the ones that will eventually become president, governor or in other offices so they would also need to know what goes on in their community." Dan best described the primary obstacle to youth participation, "I'm not sure about that [youth can be involved in community]. It is possible... but adults don't listen to kids." Dan's comment suggests that perhaps the solution to engaging youth in citizenship is not in formal school education or programming but in the education of adults.

Development of Higher Moral Purpose

As youth realized disparities in neighborhood characteristics, they broadened their spheres of thought, made important observations and asked difficult questions. Haley

admitted that she didn't think about how others lived before - *"I really didn't think about other communities before. Like I really didn't think about how other people might feel in their communities."* She said she hoped this new understanding would help her to consider different opinions and become more informed about problems in her community. Furthermore, youth began to identify those whose voice and power were limited and to advocate for social justice. Youth seemed to easily identify with those who lacked power and voice. This may reflect youth frustration with their marginalized ability to voice opinions and affect change in their environments. Some youth expressed the importance of all citizens to have an equal voice in the decision making process. Many felt that although we live in a democracy, everyone's opinion is not heard, and some opinions have more influence than others. Youth recognized that those with limited power and voice were often those with limited education and money. Youth also criticized the tendency for those without education to have little voice or power within the community. Laura suggested that neighborhoods receive more attention from people in power based on how wealthy they are, *"... I've learned that some people show more attention to the neighborhoods that ... have more people that are more rich..."* Youth acknowledgment of disparities in the community created a foundation for a higher moral purpose.

Discussion

The intent of UP-BEAT was to develop a sense of responsibility and empowerment among youth to inspire community change and combat community health disparities. In addition, the study hoped to determine youth perceptions of justice and citizenship. New experiences and environments experienced by youth during their participation in the program greatly helped youth to recognize disparities in power and voice. The structure of the UP-BEAT program directly affected youth's recognition of justice. For example, UP-BEAT youth felt adultism undermined their civic engagement ability. The youth advised that it would be difficult for youth to become involved in communities where adults will not listen to them. Yet, the youth understood the importance of involvement, arguing that youth engagement should be encouraged because they are the future community leaders. Youth suggested the solution is to challenge adultism assumptions in order to bring about transformative practices. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) established that youth are capable of initiating social change but needed help to successfully navigate the community-level processes to promote social justice. Similar to other programs (Glaser, 1985) UPBEAT youth did not possess the critical assessment skills necessary to be *fully engaged citizens* without the direction of adults. Youth advocacy programs focused on reducing health disparities often expect that youth understand key concepts of citizenship. However, youth must first be able to recognize the existence of injustices and have supportive platforms for youth voice before intentional efforts to engage youth in citizenship can be successful.

Recommendations/Conclusion

The UP-BEAT program has led to the emergence of several recommendations that can assist practitioners in youth voice, empowerment and engagement. Given that this was a small number of participants, care should be taken in the application of these recommendations. With this in mind, the following recommendations are offered:

- **Combine civic engagement activities with community service.** Community service projects that had a visible end result assist youth in acquiring feelings regarding sense of accomplishments. This level of service learning aids in the development of civic

engagement but also allows for greater understanding of social justice through advocacy activities.

- **Facilitate new experiences and exposure to new people and new environments.** The ability for youth to have new experiences and be exposed to things beyond their local neighborhood and everyday experiences provides them an opportunity to develop new skills and new knowledge.
- **Incorporate youth voice in a meaningful way.** Youth frequently notes that their ideas or words were edited or changed to fit the goals of the adult leaders. This produced feelings of frustration and incapability. If youth are going to participate, they must be allowed to contribute in a way they can understand and is meaningful to them.
- **Address issues of adultism.** Many adults are often unintentionally patronizing. While it may be impossible to prevent adultism from occurring, youth should be engaged in discussions about how these issues may affect them. Discussion between the adult leaders and youth may facilitate management of these issues.
- **Consider the impact of reading levels on data collection methods.** Future programs should think through the reading/writing ability of participants before choosing a data collection method. While journal entries provided an excellent chance for reflection for some participants, others were frustrated due to their academic limitations. The interview method presented a similar dilemma. Some youth were clearly engaged by the interview process, while the less outgoing youth became stressed and withdrawn.

Youth are capable of participating in citizenship in meaningful ways. Youth action and advocacy can be a powerful tool to motivate social change. However, we cannot expect youth to participate in a civic system that is designed to largely ignore them. Youth practitioners and educators have the responsibility to promote the expansion of youth civic identities to include the characteristics of the justice-oriented citizen by exposing youth to social injustices. If we truly seek youth citizens of high moral character who recognize and seek to solve injustices through critical assessment, then adults need to examine how youth are engaged in the programs and systems in which they participate.

NOTE: Pseudonyms were used to hide the identity of youth participants. All grammar and spelling errors were maintained to ensure youth voice authentication. For more details about the UP-BEAT program including detailed curriculum and outcome reports please contact Sequor Youth Development Initiative with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension.

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