
The Promise of Autonomy Supportive Contexts to Promote Youth Participatory Competence

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Abstract: A municipal youth citizenship initiative was implemented with the aim of providing adolescents with autonomy supportive contexts to plan and implement activities that were meaningful to youth and contributed to the collective good. The study purpose was to assess whether autonomy support, operationalized as instrumental practitioner support, influenced youth perceptions of participatory group competence beyond individual level factors. Youth participated in groups of 8 to 20 peers with practitioners facilitating youth participation in collective decision-making, planning and activity implementation. Cross-sectional surveys were completed by 79 of 113 eligible youth participants actively involved in the citizenship initiative implemented during the 2003-04 school year. Practitioner support was significantly related to participatory group competence, beyond perceived self-efficacy and age. Study findings suggest that there may be some merit to the implementation of youth citizenship initiatives that create autonomy supportive contexts and allow youth the opportunity to develop their participatory competence. Experiences such as this may allow young people to flourish as individuals and citizens and thus realize their full potential.

Introduction

Positive youth development stresses the importance of transactions between adolescents and their proximal social environments to produce constructive developmental change (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner & Castellino, 2002). In contexts characterized as autonomy supportive, practitioners encourage youth to make choices and participate in decision-making to satisfy basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, & Ryan 2000; 1995). In contexts that undermine autonomy, practitioners make decisions on behalf of youth and unintentionally thwart satisfaction of these basic psychological needs (Deci, & Ryan 2000; 1995). As a concept within Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, autonomy support is associated with positive changes in academic achievement and self-esteem (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994), sense of sharing and respect for others (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; McLaughlin, 2000; Merry, 2000), emotional well-being (Ryan, La Guardia, Solky,-Butzel, Chirkov, & Kim, 2005), as well as social competence and job seeking (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005).

The concept of autonomy support is also congruent with empowerment-based adolescent citizenship (Hart & Atkins, 2002) and health promotion initiatives (World Health Organization, 1986). Related research suggests that there may be some merit to practitioners providing autonomy support to youth groups in school and community settings to promote competent group-based decision-making (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994). Rather than teaching or implementing pre-designed activities for youth, practitioners can facilitate or enable collective decision-making and promote positive developmental outcomes while teens contribute to the collective good (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

This study hypothesized that an autonomy supportive context, operationalized as instrumental practitioner support, would be positively related to youth perceptions of participatory group competence, when individual level measures were taken into account.

Methods

Intervention Context

A youth citizenship initiative was launched by an urban municipality with a population of 350,000 to enable youth empowerment through their participation in planning and implementing activities of interest to them. This initiative was adopted by five schools and two youth-based community organizations that served an estimated 6,000 youth. Youth participated in groups ranging from 8 to 20 participants to plan and implement activities. They met outside of school time to plan a variety of activities ranging from school culture week and a skateboard park to preparation and delivery of food baskets to community members. Group leaders were practitioners with backgrounds in counseling, guidance, social work, and youth work. Their mandate was to work with youth groups to provide ongoing autonomy support and thus facilitate collective planning, decision-making, and activity implementation.

Procedure

Cross-sectional surveys were completed by 79 of 113 youth participants actively involved in the youth citizenship initiative implemented during the school year. Surveys were administered at a regularly scheduled youth project meeting in May 2004. Self-report surveys were completed in the researcher's presence. The response rate was 70% of those involved in activity planning and decision-making. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivieres.

Measures

Measures were derived from the literature when available, or developed for this study from published qualitative research based on a Healthy Communities initiative (Cargo et al., 2003). New measures were reviewed by a panel of three experts in youth empowerment and pre-tested on a convenience sample of 15 youth and six practitioners for comprehension and readability. Changes in wording and question format were made based on their feedback.

Dependent Measure:

We developed a 7-item measure of perceived participatory group competence (scored on a four-point Likert scale) to assess youth perceptions of their group's capacity to collaborate on making decisions, planning, and implementing activities (See Table 1). One scale item (#6) was reverse coded. Higher scores indicated greater perceived participatory competence ($\alpha = 0.73$).

Table 1

Items for the participatory competence measure

1. Group members shared their ideas and opinions freely with each other.
2. The group considered my ideas when it came to deciding on the tasks that needed to be done.
3. Our group weighed the pros and cons of different ideas before making decisions.
4. The group worked together to implement its activities.
5. When it came to planning activities, we made decisions as a group.
6. Group members did not listen to the opinions of others when it came to making decisions.
7. The group considered my ideas when it came to making decisions to advance the project.

Independent Measures:

Demographic and contextual measures. Information on youth age (years), gender, and academic achievement (4-point ordinal measure) was collected. Whether youth participated in the school or community setting was coded as a binary variable. To assess practitioner level differences in support, the group in which youth participated was coded as a nominal variable.

Individual measures included perceived self-efficacy ($\alpha = 0.79-0.83$), perceived co-operation and communication and perceived problem-solving scales ($\alpha = 0.70-0.77$) from the California Healthy Kids Survey (Constantine & Benard, 2001). Each 3-item scale was assessed using a 4-point Likert scale. Self-reported participation measures included duration of activity participation (months), and the number of activities in which youth were involved over the last school year.

Perceived autonomy support was measured using a newly developed 7-item scale; each item was rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale was informed by the concept of autonomy support in Deci & Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory and qualitative research featuring the role of practitioners in enabling collective youth decision-making (Cargo et al., 2003). Youth responded to the following items on whether practitioners:

- gave advice, suggestions and information,
- helped the group with brainstorming and discussion,
- showed youth how to work in a group,
- provided group feedback, and

- showed youth new skills in support of collaborative planning, decision-making and activity implementation ($\alpha=0.86$).

Given the skewed distribution, this measure was dichotomized based on the median split to reflect "high" and "low" autonomy support.

Results

Participants' age ($n=79$) ranged from 12 to 17 years, with a mean age of 14.1 years ($SD=1.55$). More girls (58 percent) completed surveys than boys. Level of academic achievement was high with 24 percent of participants reporting a grade of 91 or higher on an ordinal-level measure. Descriptive information for psychosocial, participation and autonomy support measures is in Table 2.

Table 2
Means and standard deviations for psychosocial, participation and perceived autonomy support measures.

| Measures | | N | No. items | Alpha |
|--|------------|----|-----------|-------|
| Psychosocial/ developmental (mean + SD) | | | | |
| Perceived self-efficacy | 3.43 (.41) | 79 | 3 | .66 |
| Perceived cooperation and communication | 3.49 (.53) | 79 | 3 | .64 |
| Perceived problem-solving | 3.01 (.64) | 79 | 3 | .67 |
| Perceived participatory group competence | 3.43 (.42) | 78 | 7 | .73 |
| Participation (mean + SD) | | | | |
| Duration of participation (% more than 6 months) | 35% | 79 | 1 | - |
| Number of activities (% more than 2 activities) | 43% | 79 | 1 | - |
| Context (% involved in school setting) | 70 % | 79 | 1 | - |
| Perceived Autonomy Support (mean + SD) | 1.48 (.50) | 75 | 8 | .86 |

Most youth participated through the school setting (70 percent). In the last school year, 43 percent of youth participated in more than two activities; one-third of the sample participated in activities for over 6 months. Perceptions of participatory group competence did not differ by gender ($t=0.98_{df=74} p>.05$), academic achievement ($F=.82_{df=3,68} p>.05$), context of participation ($t=.42_{df=74} p>.05$) nor by duration of involvement ($F=1.1_{df=2,72} p>.05$) or number of activities ($F=.02_{df=1,74} p>.05$), but increased with age ($F=5.6_{df=1,76} p=.02$). The GLM univariate procedure was used to test for an independent effect of practitioner on participatory group competence. Group, entered as a fixed effect, was not statistically significant ($F=.73_{df=6,69} p>.05$).

Adjusted for age and gender, independent main effects of perceived self-efficacy ($t=4.3_{df=1,76} p<.0001$) and autonomy support ($t=4.4_{df=1,76} p<.0001$) on participatory group competence were statistically significant, while measures of perceived co-operation and communication ($t=1.1_{df=1,76} p>.05$) and perceived problem-solving ($t=1.9_{df=1,76} p>.05$) were not significant. Given the small sample size, only statistically significant main effects were retained for further analysis. Although not statistically significant, models were adjusted for gender.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to assess the contributions of individual level measures and autonomy support on participatory group competence; variables were entered in three blocks (See Table 3).

Table 3
Hierarchical regression predicting participatory group competence

| Step | Variables Added | Beta _{step1} | Beta _{step2} | Beta _{step3} |
|------|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Age Gender <i>Model Summary:</i> <i>F</i> =5.6 _{1,76} <i>p</i> <.05, <i>R</i> -square (adjusted) = .06 | .27* -.13 | .25* -.05 | .18* -.04 |
| 2 | Perceived self-efficacy <i>Model Summary:</i> <i>F</i> =13.2 _{2,75} <i>p</i> <.0001 <i>R</i> -square (adjusted) = .23 | | .43** | .39** |
| 3 | Autonomy support <i>Overall model:</i> <i>F</i> =15.4 _{4,73} <i>p</i> <.0001, <i>R</i> -square (adjusted) = .36 | | | .37** |

* *p* < .05 ** *p* < .0001

The effects of age and perceived self-efficacy, entered in the first and second blocks, respectively, were statistically significant. Perceived autonomy support, added to the model in the third step, was statistically significant and accounted for 13 percent of the variance.

Results should be interpreted in light of study limitations, notably small sample size, the newly developed measure of perceived participatory competence and the cross-sectional research design which precludes inferences of causality.

Discussion

To date, research has shown an association between youth participation in organized activities and the acquisition of initiative, identity exploration and reflection, and developing teamwork skills (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). The role of the practitioner in promoting these developmental competencies has not been examined. Their role, however, is of growing importance given health and social policy directives aimed at engaging adolescents as active participants in group-based initiatives to improve the quality of school and community life (Australian Youth Foundation, 1997; Blyth & Roehlkepartain, 1995; Hartmann, Watson, & Kantorek, 2001; Watson, 2002; World Health Organization, 1993).

This study found perceived autonomy support provided by practitioners to have a direct effect on youth perceptions of participatory group competence, beyond age and perceived self-efficacy. Our findings suggest that opportunities made available to youth through newly implemented empowerment-based youth citizenship initiatives require concomitant autonomy

support from practitioners in the form of offering advice, assisting youth with brainstorming and offering feedback to let youth know they are on the right track. As the recipients of practitioner-designed programs, many participating youth were not aware of some key logistical issues that needed to be addressed as part of activity planning and implementation. Funding issues, for example, required youth to write letters or attend meetings to secure event sponsors and material support. Youth also had to approach the appropriate authority figures (e.g., school principal) to gain permission to host an activity in a particular venue (e.g., school gym). Participating youth, especially those who were younger, had not been in a position to make these types of decisions before. We found that youth required the ongoing assistance of an experienced and interested practitioner to serve as a guide and point them in the right direction. Through the provision of autonomy support youth were enabled to make informed group-based decisions at a point of their development in which they likely lacked the necessary experience and skill.

Without practitioner support, empowerment interventions that provide youth with meaningful opportunities for participation in collective decision-making run the risk of reinforcing the disempowerment it aims to alleviate (Wallerstein, 1992). However important practitioner support may be, it should not eclipse the influence of perceived self-efficacy and age, both of which were positively related to participatory group competence. Thus, complementary interventions are required to develop youth's confidence in their ability to confront general challenges.

By facilitating the group process, practitioners can help youth define the object of, or the parameters around, their pro-social participation, which in this study ranged from organizing a school culture week to establishing a skateboard park or preparing food baskets for the underserved. Once young people identify the general target of their pro-social efforts, they may feel more confident to participate in group-based activities consistent with self-endorsed values, needs, and intentions (Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997) and contribute to the collective good (Lerner et al., 2003). Discussions with practitioners over the course of this study point to at least two motivations for youth participation: 1) to have fun; and 2) to gain volunteer experience. Consistent with the theoretical ideas put forward by Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde (1993), for youth to have fun, the activities should be meaningful and relevant, and the context for participating should be enjoyable. The goals of some youth participants, however, were oriented more toward a future professional occupation. These youth were involved to gain experience and develop skills for a future job. It would appear that an openness and responsiveness of practitioners to the pro-social interests of youth is key to engaging and maximizing the participation of youth in citizenship initiatives.

In providing autonomy support to develop participatory competence, practitioners play a significant role in shaping the lives of young people by fostering person-environment interactions that allow them to flourish as individuals and citizens.

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