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Joining Hands: Constructing Childhood Agency in the Context of Ageism

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Joining Hands: Constructing Childhood Agency in the Context of Ageism

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Abstract

Childhood scholars argue that children's perspectives are systematically underestimated and silenced (James & James, 2004). Sociocultural constructions of children as fragile beings in need of protection cause youth to have few opportunities to exercise their own agency. In Change 4 Good, a youth Participatory Action Research (yPAR) program, dominant narratives regarding the capabilities of young people were challenged. The purpose of the program was to create an empowering setting where youth and adults partnered to make change, as opposed to hierarchical mentorships. The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze relationships between adults and young people within this program. These intergenerational relationships were assessed using observational field notes from the Change 4 Good program, as well as one-on-one semi-structured interviews with seven youth participants and eight adult facilitators. Deductive and inductive line-by-line coding were used to identify patterns of thoughts, interactions, and behaviors in participants. Emerging themes constructed from the data included adults' views of young people, youths' perceptions of those views, and power sharing relationships as a context for challenging traditional views of children. This study contributes to social and community psychology literature by elucidating abilities and potential for young people to act as agents of change. Findings from this project may have implications for applied child development settings, including classrooms, and youth development programs. With greater recognition of how adults' views impact youth development, teachers and parents will ideally grow more comfortable allowing young people space to grow as change-agents.

Joining Hands: Constructing Childhood Agency in the Context of Ageism

How children are constructed and conceptualized by adults impacts how they view their own abilities. These constructions of children and childhood have considerable implications for how children come to understand and embody their roles and responsibilities as members of a community. Children become more excluded as a minority group from the adult world as generational boundaries increase. Youth are often the least likely members of society to be wielders and challengers of formal power in local communities (Kirshner, 2006; Masten & Cicchetti, 2010) and young people are rarely positioned as knowledge producers in educational or political contexts (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Within educational contexts, pedagogy that silences children's perspectives has consequences for young people and their identities (Montero, 2009). Children may conceptualize their own agency in ways that reflect dominant narratives about young people as insignificant members of society.

This study contributes to the social and community psychology literature by elucidating the abilities and potential for young people to act as agents of change within the context of an after-school participatory action research program. The present study is based on work that takes place within an after school Participatory Action Research program. The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the relationships between adults and young people within this program. The focus of this analysis is children's sense of agency and how it may be connected to the youth-adult partnerships they build in the program, as opposed to traditional mentors or adults in other settings. Active participation of youth in group decision-making keeps programs focused on youth interests, experiences, and concerns (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005). In order for children to be allowed active participation, they must first be understood as beings able to actively construct and interpret their worlds, rather than

passive recipients of culture (Mead, 1934; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Assumptions of what

it means to be a child often presume uniformity, incompleteness, and underestimation.

Constructions of Children

Children are socioculturally constructed with the assumption of uniformity. Childhood, a

stage of rapid physiological and psychological development, is a unique social identity group in

that it is temporary and no human being escapes it, albeit with various experiences (Qvortrup,

1994). When children's behavior is at odds with adult expectations of children's lives, all

children suffer the consequences as they are more marginalized. This springs forth as a result of

emphases on the commonality of childhood. There are certainly commonalities, but childhood

varies culturally, economically, and politically. What it means to be a child and experiences of

childhood shifts historically, cross-culturally, and generationally, and age intersects with other

social identity categories to create multi-layered and diverse experiences of childhood (James &

James, 2004).

Not only are children constructed as uniform, they are also constructed as incomplete

relative to adults. In the US, children are socioculturally constructed within dominant institutions

in terms of their futurity, that is, what kind of adult they are on the way to becoming (Wyness,

2000). Childhood is viewed as a preparatory stage for adulthood rather than a stage in its own

right. Change and continuity must be recognized: all adults were once children, and most

children will unavoidably become adults. However, adulthood is seen as complete, meaning

children are not seen as having full personhood. They are in a state of becoming rather than

being (Lee, 2001). Children are often constructed as not yet ready for involvement in the kinds

of efforts required to effect social change (Cockburn, 2013). They are expected to transition from

their present place in society as non-citizens to achieve future citizenship status in adulthood. Young people inevitably assume roles in the adult population as workers, citizens, and voters, but until reaching that place in society they have no authoritative power.

Similarly, children are constructed as dependent, incapable of exercising full responsibility. Society does not acknowledge children as social actors, i.e., people with an informed and informing view of the world (James & James, 2004). In fact, young people tend to only be recognized as additional units, i.e., members of families. In some circumstances youth require aid, but they also benefit from autonomy and exercising their rights. Marshall (1950) identifies three types of rights: political, civil, and social. Political rights include the ability to vote or strike. Civil rights such as free speech, justice, or the ability to own property ensure personal freedom. Finally, social rights entitle individuals to welfare and education. Children appear to be limited to civil and social rights, and have no political power (Marshall, 1950). Despite being prevented from some forms of civic participation (e.g., voting), young people are highly cognizant of social and political issues and many are developing social and political competence through direct involvement in efforts to change social and political systems (Christens & Peterson, 2011). Christens and Dolan (2010) stress the importance of direct experiences. For these young people with a lack of social citizenship, status, and personhood, there is an absence of opportunities for participation. To further address these sociocultural constructions, phenomena including identity, relationships, power, and empowerment must be defined.

Identity

Children's acknowledgment of their own agency is one portion of their identity construction. Selves and identities are social products of an ongoing process of discovering who

we are through social interactions with others (Jenkins, 1996). These are never fixed but

constructed and reconstructed every day (Atkinson & Housley, 2003; Blumer, 1969; Charon,

2007). Identity is composed through three different orders: individual, interactional, and

institutional. Individual identity is constructed through interactions, which are typically

controlled through institutionalized norms. Therefore identity construction, which includes

realization of agency, relies heavily on relationships that are normalized in societal order.

Through the law, interactions between adults and children are encapsulated, routinized, and

systematized (Qvortrup, 1994). Law is the key mechanism through which social structures and

practices surrounding education, health, family, and criminal activity take place. The nature of

any society is a product of the interaction between the structures, thoughts, and ideas that bind

people together, personally, socially, and culturally. The way people organize themselves and are

organized reflect the way society wishes to structure relationships between adults and children.

Intentional and unintentional actions and interactions between children and adults are responsible

for establishing generational relations, which in turn constitute how children grow up to

comprise the adult population.

Relationships

Relationships are not just external components that humans inhabit, but the platform for

the construction of identity (Kegan, 1982). Relationships are a complex multifaceted

phenomenon incorporating dimensions of voice, emotion, instrumentality, and partnership.

Adults have traditionally formed relationships with youth in order to protect, counsel, and

instruct young people as they move through the tasks of adolescence (Hine, 1999; Hollingshead,

1949). However, unless youth feel their ideas are considered, it is unlikely they will believe their

voices are valued by adults. Therefore, it is the challenge of the adult to be attuned to the

emotional state of youth and their capacities for trusting and relating to adults (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Relationships are typically power-imbalanced, stifling youth's influence.

Power

Agency is one's ability to have power and make change. Power is not fundamentally situated within individuals but emerges within relational spaces (VanderPlaat, 1999). It is not something one possesses but something exercised through interaction (Speer & Peterson, 2000; Wilke & Speer, 2011). Conceptually separating children as a group different from others fuels perpetual divisions that label young people as unlike adults. Among other imbalances of power, the law divides adults from children as youth are given the status of minors. Unequal power distribution also includes the power of definition, for adults determine how childhood is defined (Gordon, 1989; Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 1989). Adults attempt to control and dictate what is right and proper for children to be.

One of the many hierarchical platforms children experience occurs in schools. Above knowledge, children learn their social place through educational norms, or hidden curriculum (Bernstein, 1971). Hidden curriculum is defined as all things learned in school in addition to official academic curricula (Meighan & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). Vallance (1983) identified five sets of rules: relational, structuring, protecting, personal, and etiquette. Etiquette, personal, and structuring rules are cultural and do not relate to the current study. Protecting and relational rules, however, reinforce constructions of children that creates a hierarchical divide between adults and young people. According to Thorne (1987), the goal of socialization is to teach obedience. Those who obey the system are assigned labels: well-behaved/benevolent/desirable/good. Social regulation functions to organize behavior and social

life in school. In Thornberg's study (2009), pupils even expressed the belief that they were

lacking the ability to live harmoniously without adults' explicit rules. They viewed themselves as

dependent on adults and these rules in order to function. Most school and classroom policies are

developed by adults, and youth are expected to conform to them. It is important to note, youth

rarely have a voice in the development or revision of such rules (Schimmel, 2003). Youth are

seen as non-questioning and non-participating, as no critical discussion takes place.

       Adults must question and reflect on their own assumptions about youth and their roles

before being able to join with them as partners (Camino, 2005). There is growing recognition

that adults cannot be counted on to represent the needs and concerns of youth (Landsown, 2001).

Adults generally expect too little of youth and fail to recognize the full potential of young people

in community organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2010). Although few studies address it, when

adults are engaged as partners in collective action with youth, the adults also benefit

developmentally, psychologically, and behaviorally (Camino 2005; Ginwright 2005; Gutierrez,

1995). There are various ways children influence adults including access to play, memory, and

enlarged range of emotions (Thorne, 1987). The abilities children possess to influence adults are

underestimated due to previously addressed constructions, which are further reiterated by power

hierarchies and divisions.

Empowerment

       To combat such power imbalance, adults may foster relational empowerment (Christens,

2011). Empowerment can be defined as increased access to resources that affect one's life

(Rappaport, 1987). More importantly it is a move towards collaboration of individuals,

organizations, and communities to achieve greater social justice and community wellness

(Rappaport, 1981). Empowerment as action is defined as an "intentional, ongoing process

centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group

participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater

access to and control over those resources" (Cornell Empowerment Group, 1989, p. 2). Lerner

and colleagues' (2003) study of empowerment, resilience, and positive youth development

identified five areas of benefits for children: confidence, competence, caring/compassion,

connection, and character. Langhout, Collins, and Ellison (2013) identified five relational

empowerment factors: collaborative competence, bridging social divisions, facilitating others'

empowerment, mobilizing networks, and passing on a legacy. Collaborative competence is

classified as the ability to act as a part of a group (Ginwright, 2007; Kieffer, 1984: Russell et al.,

2009), and bridging social divisions enhances trust across difference (Watkins, Larson, &

Sullivan, 2007).

Consistent support for youth voices is a foundation for strong relationships. Child-adult

relations help determine what children can speak about (Mannion, 2007). Student voice, the

degree to which students help plan projects and take on real responsibilities, establishes a sense

of ownership and increases student self-concept and political engagement (Serriere, Mitra, &

Reed, 2011). Genuinely demonstrating respect for youth voices involves making time to solicit

views of youth, listen to their opinions, and respond in non-judgmental ways. Attention to

student voice is an important component for adults to act upon youth suggestions (Fiscus, 2003).

Giving children opportunities to use their voices raises their self-esteem and self-image as

learners, which in turn enhances their attainment. As valuable members of society, young people

have the right to freely express an opinion and have that opinion taken into account. When

teachers treat young people as individuals whose opinions matter, children and adults can freely

and openly communicate. This is exemplified in schools with pupil councils that are taken

seriously.

Active support of youth involvement requires establishing norms of respect and equality (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). A form of this empowerment includes depowerment, where elders do not give up power entirely, but rather learn how to balance youth need for autonomy and voice while providing instrumental and emotional support. As advocates for youth, adults are expected to consistently invite and encourage young people to be active and empowered participants. Adults balance three factors in their roles: affective nurturer and compassionate guide, instrumental teacher or coach, and partners as facilitators and co-managers (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Both parties must learn to balance, negotiate, and creatively adapt. Adults and youth share a common vision for responsibility and accountability for group decisions (Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Perceptions of children due to unbalanced hierarchical relationships demonstrate a need for empowering intergenerational relationships.

Current Study

Youth-adult partnerships are a form of intergenerational relationship in which both parties have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, learn from one another, and promote change (Camino, 2000; Jones & Perkins, 2005). Purposes for youth-adult relationships include ensuring youth rights of participation in decision-making, promoting positive development of youth, and building community and civil society (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Youth can be active agents in their own development, the development of others, and the development of community. Zeldin and colleagues (2005) stress the importance of empowering intergenerational collaborations in youth development. In their study, decision-making was the most common way students discussed empowerment.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one way that adults can empower children. PAR is undertaken by multi-generational cooperatives to examine conditions of social injustice through social theory with a devoted commitment to social action (Torre & Fine, 2006). It is not a method, but a radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science. The goal of PAR is to challenge hierarchical assumptions about who is the expert, and acknowledge that those who experience oppression hold a certain wisdom. Collaboration with youth, the elderly, or other oppressed groups is too often labeled nice. An emphasis to counter that assumption is supported by the mission to struggle alongside oppressed populations rather than be charitable towards such people in a potentially patronizing way.

From what is known of social perceptions of children as uniform, incomplete, and incompetent, identity construction through relationships, and power imbalance, there is a need for empowering intergenerational relationships in order for youth to develop and practice their agency. Children are constructed as similar, despite their contextually diverse lives, as not fully human, and as incapable. Adults are largely responsible for these constructions due to societal power imbalance. These perceptions influence youth-adult relationships and therefore the identity and agency development of young people. Such youth-adult partnerships must shift to empowering support of youth involvement and acknowledgement of student voice in order to create a platform where youth are able to realize their agency. The present study aims to make connections between the constructions of childhood and these phenomena. Rather than only know adult perspectives of youth capabilities, young people should be directly involved in such Participatory Action Research. In this study, both youth and adults reflected on the abilities of young people.

Method

Participants

Maplewood Elementary School, a low-income public school located in an unincorporated area on the central California coast, has a student body that is about 80% Latina/o, and most students come from poor and working class families. The PAR program, called Change 4 Good, engages about 20 fourth and fifth graders per year in learning about and conducting action research to address an issue they identify in their school. Students learn research skills, engage in systems-level thinking, and strengthen communication skills. This culminates in the completion of a mural (see Appendix A). The current study focuses on the interactions and relationship building through the process, rather than the social justice artwork itself. The students involved in this study were 10 to 11 years old. Of the 16 participants, 14 were Latina/o and 2 were biracial (Latina/o and White, and African American and White). The adults involved included a White female graduate student with a background in school social work, a White female university faculty member with a background in community social psychology, a Latina graduate student, and four undergraduate research assistants (RAs), all of whom were from a local public university. The four undergraduate RAs self-identified as a Latino man, a Chinese American woman, a Chicana, and a White woman, respectively. All were members of the Change 4 Good program and consented to partake in the study.

Data Collection

This study drew upon multiple forms of data, including ethnographic field notes and semi-structured interviews with the program participants and facilitators. One-on-one semi-structured interviews with the adults and children involved in the Change 4 Good program were conducted and transcribed (See Appendix B). Interviews were conducted by a female facilitator

of the program following its completion. In addition to interviews, the field notes of those who

worked in the program were analyzed. These ethnographic field notes were completed within 72

hours of each weekly one-hour program session. It was in these weekly sessions that the students

learned research skills in order to identify issues in their school that would contribute to themes

for the mural. Graduate and undergraduate facilitators organized activities and recorded in field

notes summaries of the exchanges between children and adults.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this research utilized a combination of deductive and inductive line-by-

line qualitative coding. A qualitative codebook was constructed to identify patterns of thoughts,

interactions, and behaviors among children and adults involved (see Appendix C). Such

deductive codes included ideology of immaturity (Thornberg, 2009; Wyness, 2000), hidden

curriculum (Thornberg, 2009), self-reflexivity (Freire, 1970), bridging social divisions

(Christens, 2011), collaborative learning (Christens, 2011), and children's influence on adults

(Thorne, 1987). Although data was collected and analyzed from field notes and interviews, only

data from the latter are included in the results. I, as a researcher who was not involved directly as

a facilitator of the program, used a social psychological lens to organize my theorizing, and my

work in this area is grounded in the childhood studies literature.

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Results and Discussion

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Using the six deductive codes, three overall themes were used to organize the data: adult

views of children, youth views of adult perceptions, and the balance of those two impressions

through power-sharing collaborative relationships. Adult views were either negative (i.e.

underestimating youth abilities) or positive (i.e. recognizing those abilities). Youth views of

adult perceptions were typically negative, addressing the constructions of outsider adults in their

lives. The balance found in these relationships springs from working collaboratively in an empowering setting.

Adult Views of Children

Adults demonstrated either a negative or positive view of children's abilities. Negative views, or underestimations, were based on constructions of uniformity, incompleteness, and incompetence, whereas positive views pushed back against these constructions. The common factor that determined positive or negative views depended on whether the adult was school-based or program-based. There is an important distinction between adults that work directly with children and those who are more distant. School-based adults included those who were outsiders within the program, meaning they did not interact directly with the children. Such adults included the teacher, principal, and superintendent. Program-based adults, or insiders, were those who did work directly with these young people. This group consists of the undergraduate and graduate students who facilitated the program.

Underestimation. This theme emerged from adult perceptions of children's abilities based on the assumption that young people are not capable of understanding advanced concepts. Terry is the Superintendent of the school district in which Maplewood Elementary resides. She says she works very indirectly with the Change 4 Good program. When asked if there was anything that surprised her about the children's work in the program, this was her response.

> I was surprised, really, at the depth of what they came up with so, this isn't a "cutesy"
> mural … in fact, it was a little TOO bold for me at one point… I don't know if I want that
> it's a- it's a playground!

Here is an example of an outsider adult reflecting on the finished product of the mural. She mentions being surprised at the depth, which implies expectations that children are not

capable of understanding deep topics. This assumption follows the sociocultural construction of children as incompetent. She also believes that it is not cutesy, which also supports that expectation of immaturity with the construction of children as incomplete. Finally, she displays discomfort at the thoughts of the mural being located at a playground because it is "too bold." That final assumption encompasses all three constructions. Her statement implies that children are alike and should therefore be surrounded by similar surroundings. This idea is present with other adult interviewees as well, as adults assume children should only be surrounded by happy or uplifting messages. She is implying simultaneously that young people are incomplete and incompetent, unable to make "bold" (critical) statements or understand abstract concepts.

　　　　Rules and structure. Hidden curriculum refers to teachings unrelated to academic criteria, for social regulation and moral socialization (e.g., the golden rule: treat others as you want to be treated, raise your hand, or wait your turn). Here, Gary, the Principal of Maplewood, answers a question about what a child's primary role is in school. According to his description about his involvement in the program, he did not participate with the students much.

　　　　Well their primary role is to WORK. Their primary role is to work, learn how to read,

　　　　learn how to write, learn how to THINK, learn how to behave well.

　　　　He says it is their job to learn how to work, to read, and to write. Certainly, these are typical goals in the world of education. However, he also adds it is a child's job to learn how to think and to learn how to behave well. There is probably a hope that young people are thinking critically in school, but that also means their thoughts are being shaped. Consistent with Freire's (1970) concept of the banking model of education, this statement indicates the power in educational systems where children are viewed as empty vessels to be filled with information, rather than a dynamic part of the process. As for learning to behave well, with time constraints

and class sizes, social regulation is used to help a school day run as smoothly as possible, but this also means young people are learning about what good behavior means. Gary's statements presume all children will have the same experience in school; that they are not yet complete people as they are being filled with information, and that they are not capable of understanding their actions as they must be controlled.

Recognition of abilities. Many undergraduate and graduate student assistants that worked with the young people reflected on how they were impacted by the youth involved in the program. Joyce, one of the graduate students, worked directly with the students and was involved in the creation of the mural. When asked if there was anything she learned about kids through the program that she had not previously known, she replied with the following.

> You learn a lot about yourself through them… through how they challenge YOU, as an adult and:: through their diff- the different lens through which they view their world so I-I learned a lot from them.

We often label children as learners and adults as teachers. What Joyce, an insider adult, has done here is identify these young people as teachers of something and herself as a learner. This shifts the power hierarchy in which society is usually structured. Here, Joyce is shattering the construction of children as uniform, incomplete, and incompetent. She describes how children view the world through a different lens, based on their social positionality. This gives their various experiences value. As knowledge producers, she conceptualizes youth as valuable resources, challenging the typical construction of young people as merely consumers of resources. That change of perspective is vital in seeing young people as significant beings. Correspondingly, by picturing youth as people capable of challenging their elders, she is constructing them as competent as well.

In addition to reflecting on how they acknowledge children's abilities, adults mention how they think children view their abilities. Abby is one of the undergraduate students that works directly with the young people facilitating activities. When asked about what skills the children learn in the program she describes the following.

> Just learning to think about themselves, as like, representatives of something bigger …
> the right to think of yourself as a valuable person and like to think of your own opinion as
> valuable … that you are, like, a worthwhile person … to be raised to think that you can
> make a difference and kind of be guided through how you can do that, and to be a critical
> person.

Abby conveys what she hopes the young people will see in themselves. This contrasts with what children face in other settings. As seen in the previous views from outsider adults, adults often assume children are not capable of representing anything more than childhood. Abby challenges that narrative as she says in Change 4 Good children learn to see themselves as "representatives of something bigger." Many do not encourage individual thought or empowerment. Adults in power may even claim they believe children can make a difference but rob young people of any opportunity to take on that role or use those skills. Abby mentions that the children gain a right to think of themselves as a valuable or worthwhile person. Social constructions of children as incomplete and incompetent rob them of this right. She also says that children learn to think of their own opinions as valuable. This is supported by the attention to student voice in the program. Finally, she states young people acknowledge they can make a difference and are guided through that process. Here she is alluding to the power-sharing nature of Change 4 Good. Unlike other programs where children may simply be instructed to be part of a project that sparks change, in this environment they are guided with empowerment. Consistent

with Rappaport's definition of empowerment, children in Change 4 Good gain access and control over resources that impact their lives through participation in decision-making processes.

Children's Views of Adult Perceptions

Youth views of their typical experiences with adults also reflect the socio-cultural constructions of young people as uniform, incomplete, and incompetent. The young people also address the dominant narratives that create a context where their voices are seldom taken seriously by adults.

Fay is one of the young people involved in the Change 4 Good program. She and the interviewer are discussing communities and power. After describing who makes decisions in groups and who has political power, the interviewer ("I") asks if those people listen to kids.

Um, I think.. I'm not sure 'cause like, I don't really watch the news that much so I'm not POSITIVE if they do or not But, the last time I saw the news, I saw that there… they talked to the PROGRAMS where the students are, but I've never heard that someone LISTENS to what children, or a child, about what they should do in the community (I:mmm) 'cause, to ME, I think that, some adults think that kids are not equal to.. um, adults (I:right) that adults are more advanced (I:mm) and that kids are barely learning (I:mm) but I think we're basically equal (I:mhm) but, the adults is just OLDER and knows a little::: tiny more (I:mhm) but you know, I think the kids, know the same, 'cause they're learning more things, and the adult has already learned them (I:mhm) I think, the kids SHOULD listen to like, the adult (I:mhm) but, it depends on what course the adult is steering them (I:mm) like if they're doing bad things, I would NOT listen to what those adults.. if they're doing good things and I see that they're RISING more to their.. I don't know uh, statur- or POWER (I:mhm mhm) or something, I WOULD (I:mmm), I think

that, the, the adults s-um.. probably would not listen to a chi- children but, I think, it

depends on HOW the adult thinks.

Fay, a child, recognizes some adults do not view children as equal. This is a clear

connection to the social construction of children as incomplete and incompetent. She ties this

into her experience watching the news and hearing from the people in power from student

programs, but notes that she does not hear from the actual children involved. Fay addresses age,

saying she believes children and adults are equal and adults are just older. She mentions the

power imbalance youth face as learners when adults have years of experience, that does not

equate to young people being incomplete or incompetent. Furthermore, just as not all children

are uniform, neither are adults. Fay argues kids should generally listen to elders, but adults are

not inevitably wise or good. Finally, she says, overall, adults probably do not listen to children,

but it depends on how the adult thinks. This is the epitome of attention to youth voice. It is

entirely in the hands of adults to question their assumptions and challenge their thinking before

being able to partner with young people.

Lucy is another child who was involved in the program for half of fourth grade and

continued on through fifth grade. In her interview, she is asked about her understanding of the

purpose of the Change 4 Good program.

I think it's to like have the community- a way to communicate with your community (I:

mhmm) uhm, a good way to like spend your time and have fun and like, bring up ideas:

and, you know, make your dreams possible cuz a lot of the time, you want to do

something but you feel like it's impossible because you're just a kid (I: mmm) and the

change for good program they made you feel like, you know even though you're a kid

you can still do things (I: mhmmh) that adults would be able to do (I: mmm) uhm you

could reach oou-reach out a hand and get help, uhm, you could be HEARD, yeah-I-I

think that's one of the main purposes of the change for good program.

Lucy's statement about the adults in the Change 4 Good program indicate her impression

that they helped to create an empowering setting with young people in a way that contrasts other

dominant narratives children face. Using the expression "just a kid" assumes childhood is

synonymous with incompetence. The first portion of her statement aligns with the social

constructions of children as uniform, incomplete, and incompetent. She emphasizes that, in the

real world, young people face the message that they are all the same - not powerful, and not

capable. Lucy contrasts this reality with the way she feels treated in the program. The second

part of her statement, in which she describes that program-based adults encouraged young people

to believe they could do things adults are able to, works as her definition of empowerment. She

also stressed that in this program young people feel heard, which ties into attention to student

voice.

The interviewer followed up this statement asking if this was something Lucy was told or

if she came to understand it on her own. She replies the latter. Acknowledging her comment

about feeling some things are impossible to do as a young person, the interviewer inquires as to

what makes it so difficult. Lucy responds with the following:

uhm: because a lot of the things that are-going on in this world like, uhm, for example,

what Barrack Obama is trying to do to this other country I don't remember which one it

is (I: mhmm Syria?) yeah that on-what-what he's trying to go to war it doesn't get the

fact, that people that are going to war, it facts the kids and the families that are related to

them, (sigh) and you know like a lot of people die in wars and the thing is, like a lot of

the times it's really hard for grownups to understand that you're mature enough to think

about those things (I: yeah) and you know like, it's really hard when you're like trying to

get through something and you're trying to tell your parents something but they won't

listen (I: mhmm) or you're trying to tell adults something and they just tell you oh you're

just a kid you don't know yet you don't understand the reasons, we do understand that's

the thing that's what makes it so difficult.

Lucy is simultaneously breaking the conceptions of children as uniform, incomplete, and

incompetent while addressing that these constructions exist from adults who do not recognize the

fallibility of such stereotypes. She describes a political discussion of which she has awareness

and an opinion, and then introduces the idea that adults do not involve young people in such

conversations because of their preconceptions of children. She says it is difficult to get adults to

understand and listen. It is hard to make them realize the maturity of young people, that they can

think about certain topics. Lucy also mentions the battle of discussions with parents. She

describes the response from other adults, the way they inform young people of their minority

status and dismiss their comprehension abilities. Lucy describes this dismissal referring to when

young people try to tell adults something, "they just tell you oh you're just a kid you don't know

yet you don't understand." She disagrees, stating young people do understand, and that it is the

adult's dismissal that makes being heard so rare. Again, that phrase "just a kid" presents itself in

her dialogue, although it differs from her original use. In her first comment, Lucy states her own

feelings of embodying that terminology. However, in this statement she identifies exactly where

this narrative springs from. This very point exemplifies where relationships impact identity.

Children come to identify with the roles and abilities they are told they possess.

Balance

Building further upon the separate views of adults and children of each other, within the

program balanced views of each group emerged through power-sharing relationships. Insider

adults and youth reflect on their relationships and empowerment throughout the program.

Relationships. There are many examples of the depth of relationships that were formed

through this program. Almost every child and graduate student in the program references the

familial nature of their bonding. Here, Lucy, a child previously referenced, describes her

definition of family. She was originally asked what she liked about the program and recalls a

field trip to a university with the program facilitators. After being prompted to define what about

the field trip she liked and remembered doing, she is then asked why she thinks that memory

stands out to her. When she uses the word family, she is finally asked to say more about what

that means.

> it was like being in a like-being in with my family, cuz it was like, I was comfortable I fe-
>
> I like-I fit in and I didn't have to worry about like people judging me and it was FUN (I:
>
> yeah) cuz it was like, you know, I had to remember my favorite people (laughing) (I:
>
> yeah, ok) yeah...family: I think is someone-it's not necessarily who's blood related to you
>
> it's more like someone who you could trust be with (I: mmhm) and they'll be there FOR
>
> you [B1] (I: mhmm) it's not, someone who like, is literally your family I mean family is
>
> always gonna be family but you know like family is also the people that are closest to
>
> you (I: mhmm) not, the people, that, cuz you could have family members, but they're
>
> never there for you and you know (I: yeah) so there's differences between like (I: mhmm)
>
> different types (I: mhmm) that's what I mean by family.

Lucy has much to say about what makes the Change 4 Good youth-adult partners like

family. She was comfortable and felt like she fit in, which is because of the rapport that was built

through power-sharing. She felt like she did not have to worry about being judged. Again,

feeling valued springs from empowerment and attention to student voice. This young person does not fear judgment because of the atmosphere of non-judgmental support for youth participation. Finally, she explains family is not necessarily someone related, but those who provide trust and support.

Joyce, one of the graduate students previously referenced, was a program-based adult that worked directly with the young people. Therefore, she was one of the adults responsible for establishing rapport with the children. In her interview, Joyce reflects on the way children blossomed within the program, becoming more actively involved, outspoken, and engaged. When asked about her attributions for that change, she responds with comments about authentic caring and participation, alluding to attention to student voice.

…is this idea of authentic caring and I think that that's very central to you know the positive development of, of young people not just in terms of their interpersonal skills but in terms of how much they can say and participate.

Authentic caring is important in the relationship-building process between the involved adults and children. As described in the connection between identity and relationships, this understanding is constantly being constructed and reconstructed through interaction. The program-based adults were responsible for challenging assumptions about children to strengthen that bond. Youth-adult partners are faced with the battle of balancing their role as a facilitator while encouraging the young people. This non-patronizing sense of providing emotional support, while enabling youth to be joint decision-makers, is key to building strong relationships. In addition to what Joyce describes as authentic caring, one of the primary themes revolved around what she also mentions: participation. She says this is central to how much they can say and participate. This concentration on the need for student voice is vital in empowerment.

As a returning member, Fay was a child involved in the program in fourth and fifth grade, as well as the production of the mural the following summer. In her interview, she was asked what kept her coming back and what made her want to stay involved for so long.

I felt like I was actually, being listened to, and getting involved in the community because of, the PEOPLE, that were in the program, they were just so nice, and they would tell you and ask you a, questions that made you feel like you HAD to answer them in a GOOD way and, you just had more ideas popping in your head.

This child starts off by clearly stating she felt like she was actually being listened to. That statement is a direct confirmation of the efforts the adults describe. She also mentions getting involved in the community because of the people in the program. Fay also explains that the young adults make you answer in a good way. Here a space was created where children were challenged in a positive way. The adults would not let them off the hook, but in a caring and helpful way aided understanding, which led to idea generation, or as Fay says, "you just had more ideas popping in your head." If given the time and space to think critically, children will participate.

Yvette is a child that was involved in the program as a fourth grader. When asked what her role was in the program she replied that it was to share her ideas. When the interviewer followed up, inquiring what the adults in the program did to make her feel encouraged to speak out, Yvette replies with thoughts similar to Fay's.

Sometimes they'd ask us questions and … you'd be like I don't know but then they'd … rephrase the question for you and they'd make us … answer it.

Yvette echoes Fay's sentiment and even adds that the adults would rephrase the question if necessary. In other settings children are expected to answer correctly and quickly. This creates

an uncomfortable atmosphere where young people feel afraid of giving a wrong answer so they

would rather not participate at all. In the empowering Change 4 Good atmosphere, student voices

were valued which provided a comfortable space for youth to share ideas.

Empowerment. This theme is in reference to the nature of Youth Adult Partners as co-

learners and co-researchers. The adults engaged in depowerment to accommodate for youth

gaining voice. This theme and the previous regarding relationships were significantly intertwined

because much of what contributed to the depth of the relationships was this sense of

collaboration.

Abby, one of the undergraduate students previously referenced, answers a question about

any constraints that were experienced throughout the process of the program. She responds with

the following in reference to structuring authority and balancing power.

It's supposed to be a space were power is very much distributed between all people

present in the space between researchers and kids. And yet, um, so far, it's been

inevitable that like the researchers still need to structure the program especially in the

beginning need to facilitate, and the researchers developed the lesson plans, um, and so…

the researchers are very much responsible for kind of structuring the space beforehand

and then the kids kind of enter the space and participate in it. Um… definitely in an

enhanced way to what they were used to… researchers individually and collectively

negotiate being like both authority in that space and like peers.

Abby, as an insider adult, is clearly stating the goal of the program here to create an

equitable space. In other programs there would be no power-sharing—adults would lead and

youth would follow. However, in Change 4 Good children are not only encouraged to lead, they

are expected to do so. Both adults and youth are identified as student-researchers. Furthermore,

the adults balance roles as both authority and peers. They are challenged to depower themselves

in that space. It is also a team effort as facilitators manage these roles individually and

collectively. Nonetheless, she is also addressing that this is not a simple endeavor. It is a struggle

for facilitators to be responsible for structure while also attempting to provide a power-sharing,

equitable space. Yet, she does emphasize that once structure is in place, young people enter that

space and participate. She specifically mentions this is in a more enhanced way than they are

accustomed.

      Yvette brings respect into the conversation of relationship-building. She is asked by the

interviewer about the skills she learned in the program. After answering that she learned about

respect, she is asked what that means.

> Like if you want, somebody to respect you have to respect them … just by, us respecting
>
> them and them respecting us … showed us… we each do something together.

      Yvette, a child, builds on what Abby describes saying the adults and young people were

working together with mutual respect. It is important to note the two-way direction Yvette

describes. Children are typically expected to respect their elders, as supported by power

hierarchies. Yet, here adults are respecting young people. This respect ties into challenging social

constructions, attention to student voice, and power-sharing.

Significance and Conclusion

      Limitations of this study revolve around the small sample size from a particular

demographic. Ethnicity and socioeconomic status expectedly played a role in the relationships

developed in the Change 4 Good program. Although these are not intended to be generalized to

all populations, findings from this project may have implications for applied child development

settings, including classrooms and youth development programs.

Classrooms

Schools are systems where values and patterns of thought are culturally constructed and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1971). Through education, children are introduced to society and learn how they will embody their roles as adults in the future. Education systems work on the basis that children are ontologically absent, socially incompetent, and therefore unfit to reflect on school choice and policy (James & James, 2004). Children have enormous expertise about what works in school, yet too often, pupils are treated as empty vessels to be filled with information. Real acknowledgement of and engagement with children as social agents allows children to be seen as beings who receive and participate in educational process.

Youth Development Programs

Empowering community settings can be created in mutual help groups, educational settings, religious settings, civic engagement organizations, and social movement organizations (Maton, 2008). Community programs for youth are an important context where intergenerational isolation can be bridged. Out-of-school and afterschool programs provide structured opportunities where adults and youth develop common goals and create intergenerational ties. Learning each other's points of view through shared projects aids in the transition from hierarchical and paternalistic relationships to power-sharing dynamics (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Youth development organizations, such as 4H or Boy/Girl Scouts embody empowerment through participation as young people are allotted responsibility. Apprenticeship programs aid youth in their acquisition of concepts and skills relevant to careers (Halpern, 2005). Professionals teaching a craft alongside youth creates an atmosphere of jointness, providing high quality learning experiences. There are some things that can only be learned through participation, and that includes democracy. It is important for young people to be engaged not

only in classrooms, but in programs that prepare for their involvement in broader opportunities in society.

Contrasting views of childhood agency from insider and outsider adults emerged in this study. Specifically, adults who are more distant from children underestimate their abilities, whereas those who are more close to young people acknowledge and value their capabilities. This implies that those who work directly with young people in an empowering context may develop a more positive impression of children's abilities that aligns with children's own conceptualizations of their capacity to participate. In a dynamic process, this then impacts youth's own understanding of their agency.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

How did you become involved in the Change for Good Program?

What is your understanding of the purpose of the program?

Can you describe what your role is?

Have you ever been a part of any after school programs/organizations that are for kids?

Can you compare and contrast those programs and the Change for Good?

 What skills do you think children were learning in the program?

What opportunities exist for children to participate in their communities?

Are the opportunities for children to participate in the lives of their communities different for those that exist for adults?

Do you think that children should have more or different kinds of rights?

Well what would you need to change in order for that to be a reality?

What do you think is the biggest challenge or obstacle now to greater child participation?

Appendix C

#	Color	Code	Definition
1	Pink	Ideology of Immaturity; (Thornberg, 2009)	Underestimate, ignore young people
2	Orange	Hidden curriculum; (Thornberg, 2009)	Social regulation & moral socialization
3	Yellow	Self-reflexivity; (Freire, 1970)	Children realizing assumptions of their abilities
4	Green	Bridging Social Divisions; (Christens, 2011)	Building intergenerational relationships
5	Blue	Collaborative Competence; (Christens, 2011)	Learning skills working together
6	Purple	Youth Impact on Adults; (Thorne, 1986)	Children's influence on elders