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*By taking on the role of researcher or evaluator, youth experiment with new behaviors and possible identities — a key developmental task.*

## **Participatory Research and Community Youth Development: VOICES in Sarasota County, Florida**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports a case study of community-based participatory action research conducted as a community youth development activity, demonstrating a trend toward engaging youth in youth development efforts. The project actively engaged middle school youth in their communities and offered an avenue through which they could contribute to matters of importance to them. Youth are presented as stakeholders in the research process. Concrete strategies for collaborating with youth are described and evaluated.

### **Introduction**

Community-based participatory action research offers an alternative to traditional youth development efforts that “assume youth can be developed separate from their communities and in organizations devoid of community members” (London, Zimmerman, and Erbstein, 2003, p. 34). Community-based participatory action research is an approach that actively engages youth in their communities and offers them a voice in issues that affect them (for a discussion of youth development programs see Roth, 2004). This approach is based on the premises that: (1) “strong communities are built on active participation and civic engagement of members, including youth”; (2) “if youth are able to participate in civic and public affairs as

participants, not solely beneficiaries, they tend to experience optimal development”; and (3) “adults can overcome negative attitudes and misinformation about youth if they join with youth to address community concerns” (Camino, 2000, pp. 11-12).

Community-based participatory research offers numerous benefits to youth, communities, and universities (for a summary see Alfonso, 2004), including positive developmental outcomes for youth, healthier communities, increased utilization of community programs and resources, and improved research processes and outcomes (Green and Mercer, 2001; Landis, Alfonso, Ziegler, Christy, Abrenica, and Brown, 1999; Meucci and Schwab, 1997; Minkler and Wallerstein, 1997).

Involving youth in the research process may result in more reliable results because of decreased social distance, broader information scope, increased credibility with the target audience, inclusion of key stakeholders, enhanced intervention attractiveness, greater acceptance of the research design and results, and more accurate assessments of the invasiveness of methods and questions (Alfonso, 2002).

Our study took place in Sarasota County, Florida. Over the past several years, community-based participatory research has been used here to address local public health concerns like

tobacco and alcohol use among adolescents (Landis et al., 1999; McCormack Brown, McDermott, Bryant, and Forthofer, 2003; McCormack Brown, Forthofer, Bryant, et al., 2001). The level of involvement of youth in the research process in Sarasota County has varied. For the alcohol and tobacco prevention research, for example, youth were hired and trained to conduct research with the intent of decreasing the social distance between the researcher and the researched; youth development was not the primary goal (Landis et al., 1999). Youth researchers were involved at the level of research assistant and had little control over the direction of the research process and use of results (Kirshner and O'Donoghue, 2001; Landis et al., 1999). In our study, however, youth were actively involved at every level of the research process and collaborated with adults to determine the direction of the research. A case study of VOICES (Viewpoints of Interested Civically Engaged Students) is presented as a community youth development activity. Youth researchers' thoughts on community-based participatory action research are shared, methods and results are detailed, and lessons learned are discussed. Connections between research and action are demonstrated.

### **Guiding Research Objectives**

In keeping with the Community Youth Development (CYD) Model, the project was organized and led by a youth-adult partnership formed between the second and third authors. The model is used to assess gaps in services and barriers to participation and tries to identify how best to meet needs through creation of programs. Project organizers created VOICES to identify gaps in out-of-school time activities, barriers to participation in existing programs, and specific needs of youth addressed through systemic changes. However, through the course of the project, youth researchers, who were considered partners in the research process, included foci on other issues relevant to teens' lives, such as transportation, family relationships, and use of leisure time. Ultimately, five domains of middle schoolers' lives were explored: family, peers, school, neighborhood, and the future.

### **Youth as Stakeholders in Research**

To be involved in research as something

other than the object of study, youth first have to be considered stakeholders in the research process. Stakeholders include "the people whose lives are affected by the program under evaluation and the people whose decisions will affect the future of the program" (Bryk, 1983). [For a historical discussion of stakeholder involvement in research see Bryk (1983), Coleman (1976), and Gold (1981).] Research studies designed without the input of key stakeholders are arguably more narrowly focused than they would have been had stakeholders been involved in deciding what questions should be asked (Coleman, 1976) and result in information that is less likely to be used in the decision-making process (Gold, 1981).

Evidence supports youth capacity for functioning as stakeholders in the research process, so long as developmental issues are considered and respected (Finn and Checkoway, 1998; Hart, 1997; Hart et al., 1997; Hartman, DeCicco, and Griffin, 1994; Horsch, Little, Smith, Goodyear, and Harris, 2002; McCormack Brown et al., 2001; Ozer et al., 2008). Within the realm of public health, for example, youth have contributed to research in the areas of wellness (Schwab, 1997), community health (Torres, 1998), HIV/AIDS (Harper and Carver, 1999; Nastasi et al., 1998), sexual risk (Schensul, 1998), tobacco and alcohol use (Landis et al., 1999; McCormack Brown et al., 2001), and physical activity and nutrition (Alfonso, Jenkins, and Calkins, 2003).

Most youth have been involved at the level of research assistant, not as research partners (Kirshner and O'Donoghue, 2001), underscoring a tendency for adults to limit youths' contributions to the research process.

### **Participatory Research as Youth Development**

Youth involvement in research and evaluation is seen as a youth development opportunity when youth are provided with opportunities for making substantial contributions to the research and evaluation process (Harper and Carver, 1999). Participatory action research provides an avenue through which youth can make substantial contributions to the research process (Kirshner, Strobel, and Fernandez, 2003). Participatory action research is based on the notion that knowledge generated through action and contextual experimentation and participatory democracy will inform methods and goals of the research

process (Greenwood and Levin, 2000).

Participatory action research is multi-method and involves participants in each step, from defining objectives to application of results (Greenwood and Levin, 2000). Professional researchers serve as cogenerateds of knowledge within the participatory action research framework. Stakeholders' local knowledge combined with professional researchers' training and expertise combine to create a more valid, credible, and reliable understanding of the issue at hand (Greenwood and Levin, 2000). Professionally trained researchers serve as important sources of support for lay researchers, especially since stakeholders are, in general, "not sufficiently well organized or not sufficiently affluent" to organize, fund, and manage policy research (Coleman, 1976, p. 308). Participatory approaches to research do not claim to solve power differentials between researchers and the researched. Power is not given to participants, though circumstances that allow for empowerment are created (Carrick, Mitchell, and Lloyd, 2001; Kelly, 1993).

Supportive and caring relationships with adults and peers are key to youths' learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978). Surrounded by caring and supportive adults, youth can participate as researchers and evaluators and become invested in the health and well-being of their communities (Camino, 2000; Kirshner et al., 2003). The development of ongoing relationships with adults and pairing of youth with experts (i.e., adults or older youth) is an effective method for ensuring that youth understand projects in which they are involved and develop the requisite skills for conducting research and evaluation (Harper and Carver, 1999; Hart et al., 1997; Horsch et al., 2002; Johnson and Johnson, 1985; Vos, 2001; McCormack Brown et al., 2001). Principles associated with youth research and evaluation include respect, equality, empowerment, and collaborating with youth in all aspects of the project (Camino, 2000). Dialogue is an important component of participatory research and community youth development. Adults facilitate youth development by actively encouraging dialogue and allowing youth to answer questions asked of the adult researcher, paraphrasing and soliciting comments from quiet youth (Hart et al., 1997; Kelly, 1993).

By taking on the role of researcher or evaluator, youth experiment with new behaviors and

possible identities – a key developmental task (Dworkin and Bremer, 2004). Effective youth development participatory research programs encourage youth to perform beyond their current capacity and take on new roles (Horsch et al., 2002; Roth, 2004; Sabo, 2003). For example, within the research and evaluation context, supportive adults teach youth evaluation or research terms, thus providing youth with access to a script they can use when performing in their new role as researchers (Sabo, 2003). Adults perform in facilitative, as opposed to instructional, roles by guiding and assisting youth and documenting but not directing the process (Sabo, 2003; Schwab, 1997; Vos, 2001). Adults nourish youth's sense of authority by creating moments when youth are in challenging roles (e.g., teaching, research) and using these experiences to reflect on what the youth have learned (Kelly, 1993).

### **Community Youth Development in Sarasota County**

The CYD of Sarasota County has been the leader in youth civic engagement in Sarasota County since 1995. It is a voluntary collaboration of not-for-profit youth-serving agencies and teens working to address the needs of middle and high school youth. CYD's core philosophy is to engage young people as vital resources and experts in the process of addressing the needs of their peers. CYD strives to provide youth with an environment that is conducive to positive youth development. (See Larson, Eccles, and Gootman, 2004, and Dworkin and Bremer, 2004, for descriptions of key features.) Youth serve as equal decision makers in all aspects of the program including hiring staff, setting budgets, writing grants, establishing policy and procedures, creating positive drug-free events, and evaluating the program.

CYD has an annual budget of \$500,000 and operates with three full-time and three part-time staff, including two teens. CYD serves as a role model for Sarasota County in the practice of youth-adult partnerships and engaging youth as resources. This is accomplished through training youth and adults, developing youth-adult partnerships that focus on specific activities (e.g., National Youth Service Day events) that provide first-hand opportunities for community leaders to work with teens, and advocating for opportunities for youth to be engaged in addressing

issues that affect their lives (e.g., law enforcement, education).

Because of CYD's success, youth civic engagement initiatives have been able to gain credibility and acceptance very quickly within the community. Community leaders who collaborate with CYD are familiar with the CYD requirement that youth must be involved as partners in everything they do.

### **The VOICES Project**

The VOICES project represents an important component of CYD's Youth Civic Engagement Initiative. The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth and the Community Foundation of Sarasota County funded the project. VOICES was created as a means of engaging middle school youth in civic life through meaningful participation. Whereas CYD had an extensive civic engagement program in place for high school youth designed to increase participation in civic activities such as voting, civic discourse, and community leadership, leadership and civic engagement programming for middle school youth was limited. VOICES was an effort to empower and engage middle school youth in community decision making by sharing their viewpoints through the research project. VOICES varied from our regular approach by utilizing a research model to gather and assess information collected and engaging middle school youth.

The third author, while in her junior year at a local high school, developed VOICES. A graduate of the Students Taking Active Roles (STAR) leadership training offered by CYD, she developed VOICES after attending a presentation on a similar initiative offered in California through the John Gardner Leadership Center at Stanford University (<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu>). The purpose of VOICES was to learn about Sarasota County teens by going to the "experts" – teens. This is central to the philosophy of CYD. By engaging youth in the process of identifying teens' needs, community organizations learn the most effective ways of addressing teen needs through programming and can expect better participation because teens are promoting the activities and behaviors to their peers.

### **Methods**

*Recruitment of youth researchers.* Students were

recruited with the cooperation and assistance of the Sarasota County School District, especially middle school coordinators and faculty and staff from four local middle schools. Middle school coordinators were hired to coordinate prevention activities in the school. One of their roles was to engage youth in prevention activities. Youth were targeted based on their interest in learning new things and making a difference in their community. In addition, adults were asked to identify youth who had leadership potential not being cultivated in another way (e.g., student government). Twenty students applied for the program, 12 attended an orientation meeting, and eight completed the training program and worked on the research project. All eight youth researchers were eighth-graders. Approximately half were actively involved in school or community activities (e.g., Boy Scouts, student government), while the others participated because they were looking to get more involved in their community.

*Training and support.* Youth researchers received training in leadership, community assessment, and communication skills from staff and volunteers of CYD. Staff and the first author provided training and technical assistance on research skills. Training modules included ethics, question development, focus group guide development, focus group moderation, qualitative data analysis, and survey development, delivered in that order. Youth researchers attended an orientation, one-day of mapping and consensus building training, one day of focus group training, one day of focus group re-training, and two days of survey development. From January through March, youth researchers received six days of formal training. Surveys were administered in April, survey data entered over the summer, and the final report presented and delivered in September.

The general training approach involved: (1) presenting information through discussion, brief lectures, modeling of skills, and participation; (2) helping youth make the research their own; and (3) providing opportunities for practice and feedback (Alfonso, 2004). Sole reliance on lecture-based training strategies was avoided (see Takata and Leiting, 1987). Opportunities for reinforcement were provided throughout the project. Specific training strategies included youth-graduate student partnerships, provision of feedback on activities and products, group discussion, team

building exercises, experiential learning, and role-playing (Alfonso, 2002).

In addition, research methods were incorporated into the training process. Trainers used environmental mapping and brainstorming to encourage youth to identify and think about issues to address (Schwab, 1997). Focus group facilitation methods were used to encourage dialogue among youth researchers, process training activities, and model skills necessary for facilitating group conversations.

The authors' prior experience working with youth allowed the training process to work smoothly. It is interesting to note that once the research process was completed, youth researchers and adults realized there were additional questions that they wanted to answer. The biggest barrier to the process was the inability to distribute surveys in the schools. Finding alternative locations was a substantial challenge.

Our team trained graduate students who volunteered to assist with the training of youth researchers to minimize the challenges (e.g., power sharing), risks (e.g., adultism [adult bias against children]), and frustration associated with youth-adult collaboration (Alfonso, 2004; Harper and Carver, 1999; Horsch et al., 2002; Schwab, 1997). As a part of the training, graduate students participated in a focus group discussion designed to orient them to the developmental characteristics of eighth graders (e.g., "What was it like to be an eighth grader?"). This discussion segued into what to expect when working with youth and sensitized them to behaviors to avoid, such as rigid, directive approaches (Lau, Netherland, and Haywood, 2003).

*Design and methodology.* A sequential mixed-methods design was used to gather information from middle school youth in Sarasota County (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Qualitative methods, including mapping and focus groups, were used first, to gather thick descriptions (facts in context) of life as a middle school-aged youth in Sarasota County. Mapping was used to identify the domains of interest to be investigated – family, peers, school, neighborhood, and future. Youth researchers used focus groups to explore these domains with other middle school students. Youth researchers developed a survey based on the focus group findings and administered it to other middle school-aged youth in Sarasota County. Qualitative and quantitative findings

were synthesized around each key domain of interest, and recommendations for action were made specific to each.

We used community mapping to identify resources in Sarasota County and to help youth discover domains of interest (e.g., family). Eight youth researchers completed a community map of the resources available to support youth in Sarasota County. This was done as part of youth development training to help them understand how communities work and recognize the interrelation of various facets of a community. Youth were asked to use words, pictures, or symbols to describe the positive people, places, or things available in Sarasota County to assist youth.

Results included organizations (CYD, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA), institutions (schools, government, hospitals), businesses (movie theaters, mall), and people (teachers, police). Community mapping provided the framework for developing the focus group guide. Youth researchers brainstormed questions specific to each domain of interest and, with the assistance of adults, developed a focus group guide for use with their peers. Sample questions included the following:

- What is it like to be a teen in Sarasota County?
- What kind of volunteer work do you do?
- Think back to your last family dinner. Tell me about it.

Youth researchers conducted 24 focus groups (n = 144) with sixth to eighth grade students at local middle schools. School officials selected individual students from each classroom based on their grade and gender (e.g., sixth grade females). Focus groups were audio-recorded, and youth researchers took notes during the discussion. Youth were provided with an introduction to qualitative analysis and were guided through the analysis process (see Appendix A for worksheets used). Youth researchers worked in teams made up of two youth and one graduate student. Focus group notes and tapes were distributed to the teams. The notes were used as the primary source of information, with tapes used to fill in notes and identify illustrative quotes for inclusion in the final report. Each team was provided with three worksheets to assist in the analysis process (Appendix A). The first worksheet listed questions to be considered when reading the notes and dis-

cussing responses. The second asked the team to summarize key themes and suggest quotes specific to each domain for each focus group. Once the teams analyzed each focus group, the larger group used the third worksheet to guide a discussion of similarities and differences across focus groups, key findings, and future research needs.

Youth researchers' responses to "What else do we need to know?" generated survey items (Appendix A). A large group format was used to create the initial draft of the survey. Youth researchers brainstormed the questions and adults helped youth researchers format the survey. A laptop computer and ability to print questionnaires were key components of this process. Youth researchers pre-tested the survey to ensure it would be easy for other youth to complete and would provide desired information (Appendix B). They pre-tested the survey with middle school-aged youth including family, friends, and alternative school students. Youth researchers discussed the pretest findings in a large group, resulting in a modified survey. The final survey was four pages in length and had approximately 22 items (closed and opened). Item types included demographics, activities done for fun, work experiences, perceptions of treatment by adults, and volunteer experiences.

The final version was distributed at various venues including a local shopping mall, movie theaters, CYD events, the beach, and at local camps and summer programs. Youth researchers collected 578 surveys from sixth to eighth grade students (11 to 14 years of age) from both public and private schools in Sarasota County. Most survey respondents were Caucasian (86%), attended public school (84%), had access to a computer every day (87%), and had access to the Internet every day (82%). African-Americans and students from one area in the southern part of the county may have been underrepresented because of lack of community organizations through which to distribute the surveys.

The first author created a spreadsheet that calculated information for each survey item. Youth researchers entered the data into the spreadsheet and reviewed the results as a group. Project organizers guided the group discussion, asking youth to consider:

- What strikes you as you look at the results?

- What ideas do you have for addressing the issues raised (e.g., transportation)?

Youth researchers discussed the data and compared findings to what was discovered using mapping and focus groups.

Organizers questioned the youth researchers' assumptions, challenging them to think through their interpretations. After analyzing and interpreting the data, youth researchers and project organizers developed data-driven recommendations for action. Qualitative (focus group) and quantitative (survey) findings and recommendations for action were summarized for each domain (see Table 1 for sample findings and recommendations). In Table 1, the second column displays mixed-method results, and the third column provides a summary of evidence-based recommendations.

With the support of the project organizers, youth researchers presented their results and recommendations at a community meeting at the School Board of Sarasota County. A variety of community stakeholders attended, including local middle school guidance counselors, university faculty, middle school coordinators, parents, community agency representatives, school staff, media, and public transportation representatives.

The presentation focused on the five domains, with students presenting their results and recommendations through oral presentation with slides and videotaped skits. For example, after showing a PowerPoint entitled "The Stat Family," youth researchers showed a videotaped scenario of youth researchers sitting around a dinner table discussing their findings about families and middle school youth. Each youth researcher played the role of a family member.

Basic facts discovered during the project were mentioned in the scenario and reinforced on subsequent slides (e.g., 20% [of students] never talk with their parents about important issues). A final report, "Into the Minds of Middle School Students," collaboratively developed with guidance from the first author, was made available to community members in attendance.

### **Application of Results**

The success of the participatory action research process is judged by stakeholders' acceptance and action based on research results

**Table 1.** VOICES Project: Selected Middle School Focus Group and Survey Results and Recommendations

Domain	Focus Group Themes and Survey Results	Recommendations for Actions
Family	Focus group participants reported “hardly ever” eating with family, citing conflicting schedules (e.g., sports activities). Survey results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 67% of students have dinner with their family every night.</li> <li>• 48% talk with their parents once or twice a week.</li> </ul>	Any conversation is an important one. Teens and adults don’t always agree on what is important, but we encourage adults to take every opportunity to talk with their child.
Peers	Focus group participants, particularly girls, reported cliques, self-image, and popularity were major issues affecting them. Survey results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44 % report they feel no pressure to fit in at school.</li> <li>• 65% say their friends help them make good decisions.</li> </ul>	Create more instances where teens cannot make bad decisions, like the programs offered by CYD.  Continue the WEB program started in the middle schools in 2003-2004 to assist with peer pressure.
School	Focus group participants reported having too much homework. Survey results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 58% dread school because they’re tired from homework.</li> <li>• 69% feel study hall would help.</li> </ul>	Offer a study hall as an elective class during the school day or create after-school programs to assist with large amounts of homework.
Neighborhood	When asked about their neighborhoods, focus group participants agreed they were safe but boring. Survey results <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 68% feel there is little or nothing to do in their neighborhood.</li> <li>• 53% have never used the SCAT bus (local transportation).</li> </ul>	Continue the “ten cents” policy for youth under the age of 18 throughout the year.  Middle schools could also institute SCAT bus field trips to familiarize youth with how to use the bus.
Future	Focus group participants reported feeling pressure about making the right academic decisions for college and getting a good job. Survey results: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 89% say they want to go to college.</li> <li>• 58% believe Sarasota County has things to help them reach their goals.</li> </ul>	Offer more education for middle school-aged students and parents on getting into college. For example, offer seminars focused on scholarships and internships available, how the “Bright Futures” scholarship program works, the SATs, and what courses to take in high school. These should be offered at the middle school age so that when those students reach high school, they know where they’re going and how to get there.

(Greenwood and Levin, 2000). For the most part, VOICES researchers were not in positions of power necessary for implementing their recommendations. However, anecdotal evidence suggested some individuals who attended the community presentation accepted the results as a valid and reliable evidence-base on which to

make decisions and pursue changes in the local community and schools. To date, the research team has collected the following evidence that project recommendations are being applied:

1. A local middle school guidance counselor used VOICES data to support the

**Table 2.** A Youth Participatory Research Leader's Reflections



Leading VOICES was fun because I got to enjoy the company of energetic youth, as well as have the opportunity to teach and learn new things. Through VOICES I learned about research methods and how to conduct research. I learned the importance of each youth's opinion being heard by the community. I learned that even one voice can affect the community. For example, one youth researcher used the data to argue for making public transportation more affordable for youth year-round.

We invited the director of the local public bus system to be at the VOICES presentation. After he heard the results of our research, a relationship was developed between VOICES youth researchers and an important part of the public transportation system in the county. Leading VOICES was rewarding because I got to see the benefits of our hard work, like when a local middle school guidance counselor, who attended the VOICES presentation to the School Board of Sarasota County, used our research findings to convince his middle school to add a study hall.

creation of a study hall at the middle school where he worked. The counselor said his job was to “do data-driven guidance,” and the VOICES report provided him with a “list of concrete, data-based” recommendations for action, which he kept on his desk.

2. A local community college and major university agreed to include eighth-graders in college-bound awareness information previously directed only to high school students.
3. Local public transportation (SCAT bus) added stops in rural areas, as well as additional routes that youth researchers recommended, for example, the beach and the mall.

### Lessons Learned

Table 2 provides insight into what the youth project leader gained from her experiences with VOICES. But VOICES was a learning experience for all involved, not just those in leadership roles. For example, we learned that:

*Middle school youth are able to meet high expectations.* CYD staff set high expectations for youth participating in its programs. However, University of South Florida project organizers and staff had not worked with middle school-aged youth in such an intense project in the past and were uncertain about their ability to stay focused and engaged to completion. Through their perseverance and commitment to completing the project (eight months from start to finish), VOICES students met these high expectations. Feeling they were treated as equals and respected for their abilities and ideas, youth investment in the project grew.

*Middle school youth develop at different rates.* Youth researchers were expected to develop self-confidence and responsibility skills in addition to knowledge of research methods from participation in VOICES. The timing in which the impact of involvement on youth researchers became evident varied across individuals. Some adapted to the expectations and skills quickly, making significant impacts throughout the project. Others took longer to gain the confidence

or trust in their skills, resulting in what appeared to be a large jump in ability in a short period of time. In general, youth development occurred in direct proportion to development of the right atmosphere in the experience. Once youth developed trust with each other and the adults with whom they were collaborating, developmental changes were easily detected.

*Consider in advance who can and will determine what should be known.* Epistemological and ethical issues arise when conducting community-based participatory action research (Clark and Moss, 1996). Ideally, youth help determine research objectives and retain the power to modify and exclude research questions (Kelly, 1993). Failing to include youth in the determination of research objectives can result in time delays and decreased youth investment and ability to perform research tasks (Landis et al., 1999).

However, funding requirements often place constraints on the level of youth control over the research process that is possible (see Green and Mercer, 2001). When VOICES youth researchers changed the research focus from identifying gaps in services, barriers to participation in existing programs, and specific needs of youth to topics they viewed as more relevant (transportation, family relationships, use of leisure time), project organizers were forced to consider the following questions:

- Who decides what should be asked or what is worth knowing?
- How do adults and university professionals, who bring with them funding-related agendas, collaborate with youth and accommodate recommended changes?
- What happens when youth researcher interests or priorities do not match funder or agency requirements?

*Ensure good, clear communication with community and school partners.* When community-based agencies work in collaboration with school districts, extra care should be taken to ensure good, clear communication. A lack of clear understanding about the project led to discomfort among school district officials regarding the questions used for focus groups and the survey. School district officials were uncomfortable with the segment of the focus group script that focused on family, as follows:

- Now we are going to talk about your family. Tell me about your family. Think back to your last family dinner. Tell me about it.
- How many times a week do you talk to your parents about things that are important to you?
- How many times a week do you talk to other family members about things that are important to you?
- How many times a week do you eat dinner with your household family?
- Where are you when you feel like your parents listen to you the most?

Ultimately, this discomfort precluded the ability to administer the survey in the schools during noninstructional time, forcing the VOICES team to identify other methods for obtaining a diverse sample.

*Middle school youth are capable of critical analysis.* During the survey analysis and interpretation phase, VOICES participants learned first-hand the need to critically analyze data or information. Youth researchers critically questioned the results of their own survey, especially those findings that contradicted their experience. For example, results indicated 44% of survey participants agreed “not at all” with the statement, “I feel pressured to fit in at school.” After much discussion, youth researchers decided to present this finding along with a caveat that it did not match their experiences. Youth researchers addressed this disconnect in the final report.

We believe that youth may have been influenced to answer questions in a manner that was more socially desirable. While the surveys were anonymous, we believe respondents knew that youth were actually the ones reading these surveys, and they wanted to avoid appearing weak or inadequate in the eyes of the researchers, their peers, or even themselves.

## Conclusions

This article presented a case study of community-based participatory action research as a community youth development activity. VOICES demonstrates a trend toward including youths in key roles in prevention programming and youth development.

The project: (1) triangulated qualitative and quantitative evidence to support out-of-school

time programs throughout Sarasota County and shed light on key contexts in which middle school youth develop (e.g., school); (2) engaged youth in identifying and addressing the needs of teens in Sarasota County; (3) empowered youth as vital resources in the development of a healthy community; and (4) provided a middle school option for the civic engagement initiative currently operating at the high school level. Youth were presented as stakeholders in the research process, and participatory action research was discussed as an approach that allows for youth to be actively involved in each phase of the research process and to have a voice in decision making. Youths' thoughts on community-based participatory action research were shared and lessons learned were discussed.

In summary, VOICES was a successful youth development project in which committed adults and youth worked closely with youth researchers. In addition, high expectations were held for youth, they were made to feel that their work was meaningful and significant, and they were set up for success through opportunities to take on challenging roles (Gambone and Connell, 2004; Larson et al., 2004; Lee, Murdock, and Paterson, 1996; Roth, 2004; Sabo, 2003).

Here are two representative comments from VOICES researchers:

"[It is] nice that people listen. [We are] not always taken seriously, and we have a lot of good ideas. It's good to have people listen."

"[I am a] better person and feel good for having helped the community."

VOICES in Sarasota County represents one community-based participatory action research project that involved a small number of youth researchers and adults and only one round of research. One reviewer cautioned against broad conclusions on the experience of so few students and one research round. We agree, and the reader should keep these limitations in mind. What worked in Sarasota County may not be the best approach for others considering participatory action research in their youth development programming. However, this article, along with the broader literature, contributes to what is known about youth participation and community change by emphasizing concrete strategies and

tools for collaborating with youth researchers as valued stakeholders.

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## Appendix A. Focus Group Analysis and Survey Item Generation Worksheets (reformatted for publication to fit on one page)

### Worksheet 1: VOICES Focus Group

Data Analysis — Team Activity

Break into teams and do the following for each focus group:

1. Read your notes.
2. Listen to parts of the tape where notes are incomplete.
3. Identify themes within each group. Look for patterns in what the youth said or didn't say and ask yourself the following questions:
  - What did each youth in the group say to answer the question?
  - Were there answers that were the same? Did youth agree?
  - Were there answers that were different? Did youth disagree?
  - How many gave the same answer?
  - Was the answer in response to a "leading" question or was it a spontaneous response? [Example of leading: "So you think tobacco is bad?" "Yes."]
  - What do the words mean (What does "fit in" mean? What does "belong" mean?)?
  - What's the big deal? What were youth really trying to say?
  - What quotes really do a good job of demonstrating what youth were trying to say? Write these out and note who said them (e.g., 6th grade boy).

### Worksheet 2: VOICES Themes and Quotes

Directions: Use this form to record themes and transcribe quotes that do a good job of demonstrating major themes. Focus Group Description:

Family	Peers	School	Neighborhood	Future
Themes:	Themes:	Themes:	Themes:	Themes:
Quotes:	Quotes:	Quotes:	Quotes:	Quotes:

### Worksheet 3: VOICES Focus Group Analysis — Large Group Activity

Look for similarities and differences across each focus group

- What were youth trying to say?
- What didn't youth talk about? Did they fail to mention something you thought for sure they would talk about?
- What were they saying in common?
- Did they disagree with each other?
- How do the groups compare? Consider what you accomplished overall.
- Did you get an answer to each question?
- Are the answers useful? What else do we need to know (i.e., possible survey questions)?

## Appendix B. Pretesting Assignment

Purpose: To try out our survey before it's too late to make it better!

Directions:

Find three to four friends or family members who are 12 to 17 years of age and WON'T be taking the survey for real. Ask them (and their parents) if they will help you try-out a survey. Tell them the focus isn't on their answers so much as on if the survey makes sense or is confusing. Schedule a time to meet with them. Pretesting takes about 20 minutes.

Steps:

1. Hand them the survey. Before they start, ask them, "While you're taking the survey, please circle any words you think other youth would think were confusing or didn't make sense."
2. Look at your watch — write down what time they start and what time they finish.
3. Take notes on questions they ask while taking the survey. Have them put a star by questions they couldn't answer easily.
4. Once they're finished, ask them to tell you in their own words what the instructions asked them to do. Take notes.
  - a. Does their description match what the instructions say?
  - b. If not, how could we change the instructions?
5. Ask them to show you which words they circled. For each word they circled, ask them how they would make it less confusing. Which word should we use?
6. Ask them, "Is there anything else we could do to make the survey better?"
7. Thank them for their help!

Bring this completed form to our next meeting. You should have one for each time you pretested the survey.