YOUTH EMPOWERMENT
THE THEORY AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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INTRODUCTION

The field of youth empowerment has a solid foundation of theory, at both process and outcomes levels. The process – or empowering level – provides opportunities for youth to develop skills and become problem solvers and decision makers. The outcomes – or the empowered level – refers to the result of the empowerment process, including the consequences of attempts to gain control in the community and the effects of interventions designed to empower participants.\(^1\)

The theory of youth empowerment can be broken down even further into three components: individual empowerment, organizational empowerment, and community empowerment.

**Individual Empowerment**: youth or adults developing skills to exert control and improve competence, as well as developing critical awareness to effectively collaborate for the betterment of organizations and communities\(^2\)

**Organizational Empowerment**: entities that provide, and benefit from, the opportunity for youth or adults to acquire the skills needed to gain control over their lives, provide alternatives to service provision, as well as entities that develop and influence policy decisions\(^3\)

**Community Empowerment**: efforts to improve the community, respond to threats to quality of life, and provide for citizen participation at the local, state, and national level\(^4\)

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Youth development is centered on developing the capacity of the individual youth. Youth empowerment is focused on creating greater community change that, in its methods, relies on the development of individual capacity. Therefore organizations operating with a youth development framework are not addressing social inequities, but rather developing the individual within an unjust society and not changing the source of the problem.

Zimmerman summarizes the theory simply: "Empowerment theory connects individual well-being with the larger social and political environment, and suggests that people need opportunities to become active in community decision making in order to improve their lives, organizations, and communities." 5

While various researchers have demonstrated that the theory is sound, there is little record of the implementation, effectiveness, and accountability of youth empowerment. 6 Some researchers say the reason for this lack of evidence is simple: It is difficult to implement a theory, one with an intrinsic challenge to include the voice, ideas, and experiences of young people at the tables where important decisions are made. 7 A further difficulty: youth empowerment implementation requires young people to be involved not only in the day-to-day programming decisions but also in organizational governance. It is only through this immersion that communities will be able to promote the development of all youth and adults. 8

Others point to the inherent biases of traditional research methods, in which evaluating the effectiveness of youth empowerment is stymied due to cultural differences, diversity of communities where implemented, and a lack of trust between evaluators and communities. 9 As the reach of community-based participatory research methods expands, so too will the literature of the effectiveness of implementing the theory of youth empowerment. 10

Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!), however, has found a means to successfully implement all aspects of the theory of youth empowerment. The empowerment theory approach was developed and piloted in a teen tobacco prevention program in North Carolina, which later became the basis for creating YES! as a nonprofit organization in 2008. Its focus is to empower youth between the ages of 13 to 21, in partnership with adults, to create community change. The organization has four initiatives: Access to Health Care, Substance Abuse Prevention, Obesity Prevention, Tobacco Use Prevention – plus a Custom Services initiative that includes contracted trainings, consulting and technical assistance.

YES! implements the theory of youth empowerment within the structure of the YES! Youth Empowerment Model (© 2011 Youth Empowered Solutions), a three-pronged approach that effectively engages young people in work that challenges them to develop skills, gain critical awareness, and participate in opportunities that are necessary for creating community change. Youth become competent community advocates.