Critical Examination of an Urban-Based Youth Empowerment Program: Teen Empowerment

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A Critical Examination of an Urban-Based Youth Empowerment Strategy: The Teen Empowerment Program

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ABSTRACT. Youths from marginalized and disenfranchised communities can be empowered to advocate for social justice through civic engagement and sociopolitical action. Examining youth empowerment programs, using critical social theory, builds upon our understanding of sociopolitical systems and oppression and provides a lens to examine mechanisms of change while applying theory to practice. Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, and McLoughlin (2006) have identified six dimensions of critical youth empowerment programs, which provide a framework for examining youth empowerment programs. This article presents the Teen Empowerment program, as implemented with high-risk youths in urban communities, and
examines it along these six dimensions and provides a model for how to critically examine youth empowerment programs using this framework.

**KEYWORDS.** Youth empowerment, critical social theory, social action, urban youth

Primary prevention programs will be opposed by many people—both exploiters and the exploited—if they seek to empower the powerless, if they seek to eliminate racism, sexism, and if they work toward establishing social justice for all. (Albee, 1986, p. 895)

A growing body of research demonstrates the positive, life-improving impact of empowerment on individuals from marginalized and disenfranchised communities (e.g., Bemak, 2005; Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Wallerstein, 2006). The range of benefits and outcomes for individuals and communities that become empowered include enhanced self-awareness and social achievement (Altman et al., 1998); improved mental health and academic performance (Bemak et al., 2005; Lerner & Thompson, 2002); reduced rates of delinquency, substance abuse, and school dropout (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 1998); reduced health disparities (Wallerstein); and reduced violence (Hazler & Carney, 2002). Empowerment is recognized as both an outcome, in and of itself, as well as an intermediate step to long-term outcomes (Wallerstein).

A critical and conceptual understanding of power is the foundation for generating strategies to address powerlessness on individual, family, and social systems levels. *Power* is the ability to access and influence control over resources to improve detrimental environmental conditions (Chadiha, Adams, Biegel, Auslander, & Gutierrez, 2004; Rappaport, 1985). Pinderhughes (1983) asserts “knowing how power and powerlessness operate in human systems is a key to effective intervention” (p. 331). In contrast, *empowerment* has been defined as “a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their life situations” (Gutierrez, 1994, p. 202). Rappaport (1987) also states that “empowerment suggests a belief in the power of people to be both masters of their own fate and involved in the life of their several communities” (p. 142). In other words, empowerment is action taken by an individual to facilitate his or her own ability to act in the face of oppression (Brown, 2006).

The construct of empowerment can be conceptualized along a continuum from the individual to the community (Jennings et al., 2006;
At the individual level, empowerment refers to a proactive approach to life in which individuals demonstrate self-efficacy and coping abilities to survive the injustices of social status, and racial and ethnic oppression, and where they demonstrate skills to critically examine the sociopolitical environment (Bandura, 1977; Chadiha et al., 2004; Lee; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). The community-level focus is on creating a sense of collective well-being, providing mutual support to effect change, and strengthening networks to improve the quality of community life through coalition building and advocacy groups that impact the sociopolitical process and democratic participation (Jennings et al.; Lee; Rissel, 1994; Ryan-Finn & Albee).

The construct of empowerment assumes that a society consists of separate groups that possess different levels of power and control over resources, and that social problems stem not from individual deficits, but rather from the failure of the society to meet the needs of all its members (Gutierrez, 1990). If empowerment is action taken to act in the face of oppression, at both individual and systemic levels, then critical analysis is the foundation for examining the difference in power and access to resources. Critiquing cultural and contextual factors takes on great importance when working with young people in urban settings where there are disproportionate rates of individuals who are vulnerable to oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement (Albee, 1986; Chadiha et al., 2004; Vera, Daly, Gonzales, Morgan, & Thakral, 2006). Brown (2006) proclaims, “Social justice activists espouse a theory of social critique” (p. 711). Critical social theory promotes critical thinking and focuses on emancipatory processes that give rise to community actions and the promotion of social justice with a call to activism (Brown; Campbell, 1991; Leonardo, 2004). Critical social theory is concerned with institutional and conceptual transformations “centered on the function of criticism and its ability to advance research on the nature of oppression and emancipation” (Leonardo, p. 11). It targets oppression in order to “differentiate between misfortune, which is random and quite natural, and inequality that is structurally immanent” (Leonardo, p. 14). Critical analysis is an imperative component of young people working together in efforts to create social change that addresses situations of injustice.

Jennings et al. (2006) applied critical social theory to youth empowerment programs, and upon examination of four youth empowerment programs using participatory research methods, identified six common features, which they term “dimensions of Critical Youth Empowerment
This analysis incorporated the term “critical,” as they determined that empowerment programs were not complete “without critical reflection, reflective action, and social change at individual and collective levels” (Jennings et al., p. 50). CYE programs engage youths “in actions that create change in organizational, institutional, and societal policies, structures, values, and norms” (Jennings et al., p. 40) and this is reflected in the six key dimensions, which are as follows:

1. A welcoming and safe environment;
2. Meaningful participation and engagement;
3. Equitable power sharing between youths and adults;
4. Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes;
5. Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change; and
6. Integrated individual- and community-level empowerment.

These six dimensions, which provide a framework for critically examining youth empowerment programs, can be applied to other existing programs. This author, whose work is similar to, but distinct from, that of Jennings et al. (2006), will present the Teen Empowerment program, which targets urban youths and guides them to critically examine social issues in the school and community, and to eventually take action to improve their state through social change efforts. After briefly presenting the philosophy and training components of the program, this article will critique it along the six dimensions identified in CYE and provide examples of its application to the community. The author will hereafter refer to this youth empowerment program as “TE” to distinguish it from the general concept of teen empowerment.

**THE TEEN EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM**

Unlike traditional programming that provides services to youths, TE operates with the underlying belief that youths have the capacity to make meaningful change in their community and aims to make institutions more effective by having people work productively together to achieve important goals. The TE was initially designed by Pollack in 1982 to educate youths to the operations of sociopolitical systems and social change strategies that target society’s institutions and policies. It is designed to organize youths by hiring and training them to be catalysts of institutional
and social change, supporting them as they analyze problems in school and community settings, giving them decision-making power, and providing feedback and resources as they actively address the identified problems. The focus on organizing youths varies greatly from traditional programming that provides services to youths, which tend toward the paternalistic pattern embodied in most forms of oppression (Toporek & Lui, 2001). The beliefs and conceptual framework are briefly reviewed and listed in Figure 1. Additional information about the TE program is available in Pearrow and Pollack (in press) and at www.teenempowerment.org.

Historically the program targets urban neighborhoods that demonstrate disproportionate rates of youth violence. In the process of selecting youths to be hired as Youth Organizers, area youths are recruited through flyers and personal contact with adult staff from the community center, school, or neighborhood housing the program. The youths engage in a competitive hiring process of group and individual interviews using interactive methods that allow everyone’s voice to be heard (Pollack & Fusoni, 2005). Group interviews provide the youths with an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills and articulate their thoughts about issues their schools and communities face. Individual interviews provide the opportunity to share their thoughts about the group process or the project and other activities they have organized.

FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework of the Teen Empowerment Program.

- There is a connection between feeling powerless and increased risk of engaging in dysfunctional behaviors.
- Analysis + Decision Making + Action + Success = Power.
- Youths have the ability to make real and meaningful changes in their schools and communities.
- To make real changes, youths need access to adequate resources to implement their ideas.
- The most effective forms of youth leadership are facilitative rather than command in nature.
- There is a connection between the skillful use of interactive group work methods and the ability of the group to reach consensus and to maximize the amount of productive work they are able to accomplish.

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Ultimately TE seeks to assemble a group of 8 to 12 youths, between the ages of 14 and 18, that is gender-balanced and reflects as closely as possible the cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity of the school or community where the group will work.

These young people must demonstrate the motivation to work for broad-based positive change in the community, reflect the community they will work in, and have a connection to the neighborhood. Typically the young people come from African American, Latino/a, and other immigrant backgrounds that reflect the composition of the neighborhood. A unique component of this urban-based program is that it includes youths who might be considered too high risk for other youth programs (e.g., on probation, dropped out of school, living in foster care).

Once the group of Youth Organizers is selected, two adult staff members facilitate a 10-day intensive training process, again using the same interactive methods. The training process ambitiously targets several goals, such as the following:

- Build group and individual relationships.
- Identify key issues in the community or school.
- Place identified issues within a larger social context.
- Develop two to three strategic action steps to begin addressing the identified issues.
- Orient group members to the weekly feedback sessions and the Behavior Contract System.

The youths and staff use guidelines as they learn to give and receive feedback, or constructive criticism, for their work with the group. The Behavior Contract System develops appropriate work, learning, and communication skills within the context of both the TE groups and the larger community. More specifically, the Behavior Contract System outlines the expectations of each group member and the consequences for failing to meet these expectations (e.g., reduced paycheck, termination) while managing the group’s daily work. Target behaviors include attendance and motivation as well as attitude within the group and the community. If a youth engages in more serious infractions such as not showing up for work or engaging in illegal behaviors in the community, they may be fired with the opportunity to be rehired. The goal of the behavioral system is to assist the young people as they develop work skills as well as understand how their behavior impacts others using the feedback system.
After the 10-day training period, the youths meet for interactive work sessions 4 or 5 days per week for approximately a 1-year period. During this time they carry out the plans organized from their two or three strategic action steps. Feedback sessions are conducted weekly and the Behavior Contract System is reviewed at each of these weekly sessions. The activities and events of the Youth Organizers are incorporated into the remaining discussion.

**EXAMINING TE THROUGH A CYE LENS**

As previously mentioned, critical social theory has been applied to youth empowerment programs, and Jennings et al. (2006) identified six dimensions of CYE as youths learn strategies to create change in organizational, institutional, and societal policies, structures, values, norms, and images. TE will be examined along these six dimensions, with examples presented of its application in urban environments.

**Safe, Supportive Environment**

To fully engage youths in the empowerment process, the environment must be safe, supportive, fun, caring, and challenging, and the youths must have a sense of ownership. Such an environment is “a social space in which young people have freedom to be themselves, express their own creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try out new skills and roles, rise to challenges, and have fun in the process” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 41). In this family-like community, youths feel respected, encouraged, and valued and interact with adults as colearners.

Creating such an environment is crucial to the work of TE and this dimension is targeted through relationship-building activities and the behavior accountability system. The first few days of training are organized around relationship building using interactive methods, which are part of each day’s activities. The interactive sessions provide the opportunity for the group members to challenge themselves and each other by thinking through issues in a unique way while also engaging in fun activities. The feedback sessions are organized around specific guidelines for giving and receiving feedback, which offer strategies for comments and criticisms from both adult staff and Youth Organizers. This allows the youths to examine the impact of their behavior on others, and the feedback is meant to be constructive and challenge the individual to meet the group’s expectations. The Behavior Contract System explicitly outlines
expectations and the consequences of engaging in behavior that can threaten the work environment and the activities of the group, and as such ensures a safe environment for all involved.

**Meaningful Participation and Engagement**

According to Jennings et al. (2006), it is essential that CYE programs create opportunities for youths to make authentic contributions to the program as they develop capacities. Their participation must be meaningful and support the development of leadership as they engage in community change efforts. Program activities need to “challenge youth to engage in new roles and develop new skills and insights while also engaging in critical reflection and action” (Jennings et al., p. 44).

Teen Empowerment supports meaningful participation of Youth Organizers through training and ongoing activities. In the first few days of training, Youth Organizers not only identify issues in their community, they also prioritize the most significant issues and use the planning process with a problem-solving approach to create a structure for tasks, responsibilities, and deadlines as they complete a project to address the identified issues. Through the planning process, they not only accept and delegate responsibilities and duties, but also become accountable to their peers and the group. The adult staff and the empowerment program’s strategies support youths as they learn new skills and strategies for working collaboratively with peers as they engage in social change.

**Equitable Power Sharing Between Youths and Adults**

Shared power is critical to the empowerment process, wherein there is an incremental transfer of power to the youths as they gain capacity. Jennings et al. (2006) clarify the need for this aspect of the program, explaining that, “In a society where adults hold legitimate power and are ultimately responsible for decisions and actions, creating equitable power sharing within the context of youth empowerment programs is a challenge” (p. 44). Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, and Parra-Medina (2005) indentified best practices for adult roles in youth empowerment and suggested the following strategies: putting youth first, raising the bar for youth performance; creating the space and making things happen; being in relationship; exerting influence, control, and authority; and communicating and connecting with the broader community.

In TE, the adult staff structures the work of the Youth Organizers as they lead the first 2 weeks of training; thereafter, facilitation of the group
transitions to the Youth Organizers. As the youths create a plan for their project, they begin to work independently to prepare for it. The adult staff plays a supportive role by helping the youths access facilities and necessary resources (e.g., stages, audio systems) to conduct a community event. However, the events are entirely organized by youths, and they complete all aspects of required tasks such as creating flyers, conducting outreach, organizing the schedule, and performing. For example, each spring the Youth Organizers from various community sites collaborate and facilitate a Peace Conference with only youths present on the stage.

Power is also shared between youths and adults through feedback sessions. In these sessions, comments and criticisms are intended for both the Youth Organizers and the adult staff, with guidelines providing a structure for this experience. Ultimately the balance continues to weigh in favor of the adults through the implementation of the Behavior Contract System, which sustains the safe environment, but the feedback sessions provide a forum for concerns to be aired equally.

**Engagement in Critical Reflection on Interpersonal and Sociopolitical Processes**

Critical reflection is integral to CYE and it is the dimension that has historically received less emphasis in youth empowerment programs. Critical reflection can include societal analysis through structured questions to become emancipated from constraints and engage in actions to build community life (Jennings et al., 2006; Ray, 1992). Understanding power is the foundation for generating strategies to address powerlessness on individual, family, and social systems levels. According to Freire (1970), awareness of visible and invisible structures of social institutions is critical for the empowerment of people living with oppression. Thus “critical reflection is required to help youth come to see and understand the very structures, processes, and social values and practices that they seek to alter” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 47).

The focus on sociopolitical analysis and social action is a unique component of TE. An awareness of community issues and the motivation to work for positive social change are criteria for being hired by the TE program—for both the youths and adult staff. The group interview process, which allows participants to discuss serious issues in the community, highlights youths who have an awareness of social structures and resource allocation. Once hired, the youths brainstorm on the topic of “justice” to examine how communities and schools can be organized to create a more equitable society.
The training in TE facilitates critical reflection as the youths prioritize community concerns and then examine societal values, institutional policies, and resources using the Social Change Wheel. The wheel represents four interrelated factors of societal dynamics, and the youths examine these factors and generate strategies to change these dynamics. These four factors include

1. Societal values: The values of a society determine how that society treats people. When exploring this factor, the youths clarify the underlying assumptions that motive the actions of society, especially as they relate to issues such as race, class, and gender.

2. Policies and resources: Every society is regulated by policies that control many aspects of people’s lives, and resources are distributed to deal with people’s needs. The youths explore the policies and distribution of resources, which reflect societal values, as they might be fair or unfair, helpful or harmful, to different parts of a population.

3. Institutions: Policies and resources flow out to people mostly through the institutions that society creates (e.g., schools, police, government, courts, corporations, and media). The youths examine institutional policies to ascertain what the actions of major institutions tell us about the values in our society.

4. Individual behavior: Each individual has to deal with the institutions of the society, the policies and distribution of resources that affect their lives, and the societal values that underlie all aspects of one’s lived experience. The youths explore how individual’s decisions and behaviors react to these realities.

In analyzing the Social Change Wheel (Figure 2), the youths are presented with the example of race, as a social construct in a historical context, and how the policies and resources (e.g., African Americans being “owned,” unable to own land) impacted institutions (e.g., segregation of education) and individual’s behavior (e.g., racism, lynching)—all of which reflected society’s values. The youths are presented with these concepts as they learn strategies to intervene to change values, change destructive policies, and increase the resources necessary to deal with people’s needs, improve the way institutions function, or influence individuals toward positive behavior.

Critical reflection of interpersonal processes is also engaged in through the feedback sessions and the Behavior Contract System. These weekly activities allow the youths and adult staff to reflect on how their behaviors can impact themselves, each other, and the work of the group, thus targeting individual as well as societal empowerment.
Participation in Sociopolitical Processes to Effect Change

Critical Youth Empowerment goes beyond civic engagement to critical social engagement, where youths have the “capacity to address the structures, processes, social values and practices of the issues at hand” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 48). An essential component of CYE is that youths engage in sociopolitical processes within the community, thus gaining “mastery through participation in transformative social action” (p. 48).

While the initial dialogues provide the opportunity for young people in the community to address the issues they face, the 10-step planning process of the training is based on the Social Change Wheel and moves the youths from dialogue to action. The 10-step planning process involves a problem-solving model that encourages the group of Youth Organizers to actively work for social change and justice. In the past, some Youth Organizers have hosted community events at which youths used the spoken word, poetry, rap, or role playing to share their concerns and their strategies to address them. Other groups of Youth Organizers have collectively advocated at the state level for more funding for youth programs and at
the local level by engaging the mayor and the police commissioner in a dialogue with youths. Outcomes in school settings have included meetings with school administrators, sharing concerns and strategies for addressing issues that effect the school environment (e.g., fire alarm being pulled so much that students were missing a significant amount of class time), and implementing strategies to educate their peers about the negative impact of such events. The training of TE, in addition to support from the adult staff, allows the youths to practice skills of social action as they address issues of inequity and injustice.

**Integrated Individual- and Community-Level Empowerment**

While many empowerment programs provide youths with the opportunity for growth at the individual level, thus increasing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), CYE programs move to the level of communal and societal empowerment with collective and political efficacy (Ryan-Finn & Albee, 1994). Empowerment processes at the community level include working toward improving “access to resources, tolerance for diversity, and open governance structures” (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 49). Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) state, “despite the conception of empowerment as a multi-level construct, most of the research has not achieved social justice goals because of a microlevel or individualistic focus” (p. 829). By focusing on the societal level of empowerment, there is an enhanced capacity of the youths “to contribute to and work in collaboration with others to effect social change” (Jennings et al., p. 50).

Uniting youths to work together as they engage in social action is an essential component of TE, thus addressing skill development at both the individual and group levels. Engaging in community organizing and critically examining community issues provides young people with the experience, self-efficacy, and social connections to continue to work for community-based change. The feedback sessions provide the forum for youths to be accountable to each other as they create social change. Furthermore, the work for social change is demonstrated when youths share their community’s needs when meeting with public officials and advocating for youth programs and resources at city hall and the state house.

The six dimensions of CYE outlined by Jennings et al. (2006) provide a framework to examine and evaluate programs that may already exist in communities. The work of CYE programs moves the individual youth beyond him- or herself to address the issues of the larger systems and structures of which they are a part (Riger, 1993). When young people are
empowered and they advocate for policy changes (e.g., fiscal funding for youth programs), their work empowers others and increases their access to resources, subsequently correcting sociopolitical inequities. The strategies of TE to meet the dimensions of CYE are listed in Table 1.

**SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

In summary, TE is grounded in critical social theory and exhibits characteristics of the six dimensions identified for CYE programs. Jennings et al. (2006) have provided a framework to critically examine youth empowerment programs, and this article can serve as one example of applying these dimensions to youth empowerment programs. The examination of TE, which has been implemented throughout communities for more than 25 years, highlights the unique contribution of its efforts to organize youths as they actively participate in the sociopolitical process. TE unites youths as they engage in the work of social change. As Fine (1992) poignantly stated, “As long as individual victims (or survivors) act alone to improve their circumstances, oppressive economic and social arrangements will persist” (p. 72).

While TE evaluates its impact after each session, there needs to be a more systematic examination of how this program impacts the individual and collective sense of empowerment. Future directions need to include an examination of the short- and long-term impacts of the program on youth participants, their caregivers, and their community. Currently the evidence is anecdotal, and there are several Youth Organizers who now work in the offices of city councilors or district attorneys. Yet this examination needs to systematically evaluate how organizing youths to increase their empowerment impacts their community actions, perceived control, and engagement in risky behaviors. This examination can follow the six dimensions outlined in this article or can examine issues of civic engagement and sociopolitical involvement using Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, as traditional evaluation strategies may minimize the findings to the individual outcomes. As stated in Kidd and Kral (2005), there is a need for researchers “to examine the larger sociocultural contexts that underlie individual problems and use interventions that facilitate social action and empowerment with participatory strategies” (p. 192). Conde-Frazier (2006) supports the ideal of scholars pursing knowledge while being “educated by struggling peoples” (p. 322), and as
TABLE 1. Teen Empowerment strategies that support critical youth empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Critical youth empowerment</th>
<th>Teen Empowerment Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safe, supportive environment</td>
<td>Environment must be safe, supportive, fun, caring, challenging.</td>
<td>• Relationship-building activities.</td>
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<td>• Feedback sessions to address individual and group behaviors.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Behavior Contract System to regulate behavior.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Interactive methods to create a fun, supportive environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaningful participation</td>
<td>Opportunities for youths to develop capacities in a meaningful forum with youth responsibility and decision making.</td>
<td>• Youths identify and prioritize issues in the community or school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Youths plan realistic action steps to implement change around these issues.</td>
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<td>Shared power</td>
<td>Shared power critical, with an incremental transfer of power to youths as they gain capacity.</td>
<td>• Youths facilitate the group with adults playing a supportive role.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adults provide access to resources necessary for activities and events.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feedback sessions address behavior of both youths and adults.</td>
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<td>Critical reflection</td>
<td>Critical reflection integral to CYE through varied youth-based approaches.</td>
<td>• Group interviews focus on sociopolitical environment.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Youths prioritize issues to address.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Training places identified issues within a larger social context.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feedback sessions support reflection of each individual’s choices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical change goals</td>
<td>Programs emphasize societal analysis and encourage social change goals.</td>
<td>• Youths develop two to three strategic action steps to address identified issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual- and community-level oriented</td>
<td>Individual and community empowerment viewed as interwoven.</td>
<td>• Youths plan and implement local and state-level events or activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Individual-level empowerment supported with feedback sessions and the Behavior Contract System.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Community-level empowerment through social action events and activities.</td>
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such, using PAR methods to examine issues of social justice and to utilize skills and training to work in support of positive social change (Brydon-Miller, 1997; Ditrano & Silverstein, 2006). The dialogical approach to knowledge and discovery espoused by Freire (1970) is obvious in this approach.

Using these methods, future studies can also examine the impact this program has on the systems and institutions that house the youths and programs (e.g., schools and community centers; Nastasi, 2006). As discussed in Yowell and Gordon (1996), there are challenges inherent in implementing, supporting, and sustaining empowerment programs in many school settings given the hierarchical structure and contextual norms of these environments. Given these constraints, examining systemic changes within youths serving institutions can generate strategies for future generations as they advocate for equitable resources.

REFERENCES


