ELICITING THEORIES OF CHANGE FROM YOUTH CARE WORKERS AND YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

Dawn Anderson-Butcher
The Ohio State University

Hal Lawson
University at Albany
State University of New York

Lisa Fallara
The Ohio State University

Gina Furano
University of Utah

ABSTRACT: The present study examines the theories of change espoused by youth care workers and youth participants. Seven workers and nine youths participated in interviews designed to elicit program theories, intervention logics, and causal mechanisms. Several themes emerged, including the importance of relationships between youths and youth care workers; connections to organizations and programs; belonging to peers; and youth-oriented and -responsive programming. While both groups indicated that skill building was important, youth care workers emphasized sport-related skills and youths emphasized the social and life skills. Importantly, youth workers had an activities-centered rather than an outcomes-oriented perspective. These exploratory findings have import for planning, training, and funding priorities.

Eliciting Theories of Change from Youth Care Workers and Youth Participants

During the first three decades of the 20th Century, progressive leaders invented the idea of youth care, and they developed specialized youth development programs and youth leadership initiatives. Unfortunately, this important idea for specialized youth care lost momentum and resources in the succeeding six decades. Youths, especially the most vulnerable ones, paid the price for this decline. So did their family systems, along with schools and other youth-serving, custodial institutions.

Fortunately, youth care became revitalized as the 20th Century drew to a close. Positive momentum continues today as evidenced in the increasing number of summer youth development camps, 21st Century Learning Centers (and other after-school programs), revitalized and more focused boys and girls clubs, faith-based and neighborhood-based youth

development organizations, and an expansive research, training, and youth leadership literature. For example, over 17,000 state and local not-for-profit organizations classified as youth development programs operate today (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Over 4,000 national youth service organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs, and 4-H have been established (Dryfoss, 1998).

Numbers alone do not tell the entire story. These organizations offer an array of programs, and these programs are as diverse as they are plentiful. Their diversity notwithstanding, they offer some identical and comparable benefits to youths. Owing to these youth development initiatives, many of the "rotten outcomes" (Schorr, 1988) for children and youths have been prevented and nullified. For instance, participation in these programs is linked with decreased academic failure, substance use, and delinquency (Anderson-Butcher & Fink, 2002; Fashola, 1998; Holland & Andre, 1987; Larson, 1994; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Schinke, Orlandi, & Cole, 1992; St. Pierre, Kaltreider, Mark, & Aikin, 1992).

Although many program benefits for youths are documented, the specific causal mechanisms associated with these programs have not yet been specified. For example, many studies in this area examine the impact of the programs in their entirety, failing to decipher specific program components that lead to positive outcomes (Fashola, 1998). Similarly, Roth and others (1998) noted an absence of quality control mechanisms in the field; they suggest that researchers begin to explore the principles underlying various youth development programs. Whalen and Wynn (1995) concur and call for in-depth descriptive research examining the validity of certain program characteristics among highly regarded youth development programs. Further, Anderson-Butcher and Fink (2002) described the need to understand certain components of youth development activities that promote belonging and program attendance, as well as decrease risk factors and the engagement in problem behaviors.

Mirroring some evaluation designs, program dynamics and mechanisms are like "black boxes" (Anderson-Butcher, 2002; Harachi, Abbott, Catalano, Haggerty, & Fleming, 1999; Lawson, 2002). Evaluators and youth care workers know something about inputs and outputs, but they often know very little about the actual dynamics of the program intervention. A huge and important knowledge gap remains, and it limits training, research, evaluation, replication, and scale-up initiatives.

Certainly evaluators and program designers have made progress in specifying program theories (e.g., Eccles & Gootman, 2002). However, even if a program's theories are partially specified, youth care workers' theories necessarily are not. This distinction is very important, and it is apparent in instances where youth care workers are not merely faithful implementers of programs designed by others. In these instances, workers develop stylized approaches to "canned programs," and their personal theories weigh heavily in these approaches. In other instances, workers

select programs from whatever menu is available to them. In still other cases, workers design their own programs. These several examples emphasize a key relationship between the program (as an intervention) and youth care workers (as theorists and interventionists). Add differences in organizational settings, staff characteristics, youths' needs and aspirations, and community contexts, and the result is an important intervention problem requiring more robust evaluation, analysis, and theorization.

This gap is associated with another. The voices and theories of youths often are missing in program discussions and promotions. In brief, youths have not been viewed as experts in the design, implementation, evaluation, and marketing of programs designed to serve them. Nor have youths been viewed as co-trainers of youth leaders for these programs. The effectiveness and success of youth care initiatives have been constrained because of this gap between youths' expertise and "insider knowledge" and programs and other initiatives designed exclusively by adult professionals.

Both gaps need to be bridged and filled. To the extent that this work is accomplished, the youth care field will be advanced and enriched significantly. Training, evaluation, research, replication, and scale-up will be facilitated as theoretical understanding paves the way for evidence-based, and more effective policy and practice.

This exploratory study responds to these needs, as it focuses on understanding the "black box" of programming (Harachi et al., 1999; Lawson, 2002). One way of investigating the theory behind youth development programming is to draw upon the expertise of two key "players" in every youth program—namely, youth care workers and youth (Oden, 1995). Specifically, research that examines youth care workers' and youths' perspectives allows researchers, practitioners, and funders to further understand the underlying components of effective, successful programs.

This is a new line of research and evaluation, and it is imperative for providing theoretical understanding of the mechanisms behind effective youth development programs. In fact, a new genus of evaluation called theory-based evaluation (Weiss, 1997) and theory of change evaluation (Fullbright-Anderson, Kubisch, & Connell, 1998) has developed. These theory-based evaluations stem from the idea that beliefs and assumptions underlying a program can be expressed in a cause and effect framework (Weiss, 1995, 1997). In turn, the factors that predict successful programs and the mechanisms through which they operate may be identified. Ultimately, an understanding develops about the factors responsible for program success or failure. For example, improvements are possible in the correspondence and consistency among the theory of the problem, the theory of intervention, the theory of implementation, and the theory of evaluation and improvement (Lawson, 2002).

To reiterate, this study is designed to illuminate fresh opportunities associated with theory-based evaluation. While the investigators sought basic theoretical understanding, the primary purpose was to gain knowledge that would help youths and youth care workers through improved programs. More specifically, the study uses this approach to elicit theories of change from youth care workers and youths. These theories of change are expressed as causal propositions: "When this, then that" statements. Each proposition is a micro-theory. Together, these propositions comprise theories of change for program design, implementation, and evaluation; and for leadership development. These theories of change have tremendous practical importance. This study concludes with implications for practice. Three main evaluation questions framed this study:

1. What are youth care workers' theories of change?
2. What are youth participants' theories of change?
3. What are the recruitment, retention, and long term engagement mechanisms in youth development programming?

To address these questions, the investigators selected youth care workers and youths involved in Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) programs. There are over 2,850 club locations across the country (BGCA, 1998a). Clubs adopt a comprehensive youth development framework (Kaltreider & St. Pierre, 1995; St. Pierre et al., 1992). Programs include alcohol, drug and pregnancy prevention; career exploration, citizenship; educational supports; and delinquency and gang prevention, as well as more informal activities such as sporting events, recreational games, and health and fitness classes.

METHOD

Sample
Seven youth care workers and nine youth participants involved in a Club in the Intermountain West participated in the study. On average, the youth care workers had over nine months of employment at the program, had been engaged in Boys & Girls Club training and orientations throughout their employment, and were currently actively involved in the daily operations of the program (In other words, they were frontline workers, who engaged with children and youth participants on a daily basis). Two workers were male; five were female. Three of the youth care workers were college graduates while two others were currently in college. The other two youth care workers were paraprofessionals. The mean age of respondents was 28.14 (SD = 8.11) years of age.

In addition, nine youths that were active participants in the Club were asked to participate in the interviews and parent consent was retrieved. Four of the youths were male; five were female. The mean age of the youths was 11.56 (SD = 1.42). Youths had participated in the Club on an average of 2.08 years (SD = 1.56).

Instrumentation

This study employed qualitative interviews. The researchers designed the guiding questions to elicit program theories from the youth care workers and youth participants. The interview guide aimed to get inside the black box of programming by exploring respondents' underlying "mental" constructs, or espoused theories (Argyris & Schön, 1996). These open-ended questions allowed each youth care worker and youth partcipant to discuss his or her beliefs and attitudes related to the program. Sample questions follow: How do you know a successful program when you see one? When these programs work, why do they work? When these programs don't work, why don't they? Do these programs work for everyone and why/not? What do you do as a leader when there are youth for whom the program does not work? Obviously, these questions are proxies for the theory of the problem, the theory of intervention, and the theory of implementation. Questions for youth participants included the following examples: Why do you come to the program? What do you like about the program? What do you not like about the program? Has your involvement at the program been beneficial? If so, in what ways? What do people you know say about the program?

Procedures and Analyses

Youth care workers and youth participants were identified by a Club administrator and asked to participate in the study. Once consent was provided (including consent from a parent/guardian, if needed), a trained research assistant conducted the qualitative interviews. The research assistant recorded each participant's responses to the questions in the interview guide. Each interview took approximately 25 minutes. The interview transcriptions were reviewed for overall themes. Once familiar with these interview responses, the basic unit of analyses was identified by deciphering individual quotes representing single items or themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These quotes served as the raw data. Then inductive procedures (Patton, 1990) were used to organize the raw data into themes and categories.

Next, clustering techniques were used to compare and contrast the quotes and allow themes to emerge that were inclusive and mutually exclusive (Patton, 1990). An inclusive theme consisted of all the clusters of the lower order themes. Each theme was distinct from the others. This process continued until no further categories could be created with the data.

Consensus validation of these themes was then established with a peer reviewer who was familiar with the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). We worked together to ensure that the themes made sense and accurately portrayed what people were trying to say. There was mutual agreement on the majority of themes, indicating moderate to high validity. When discrepancies were found, themes were re-clustered to establish consistency.

After conducting the content analysis, program theories of change were generated. In other words, youth care workers' and youths' theories, their "models of how and why programs work" (Bickman, 1987, p. 5), emerged from these analyses. Hypothesized links between program features and planned outcomes were generated. Descriptions about what program themes were associated with positive or negative outcomes for youths and children were sought. Lastly, the emergent theories were shared with youth care workers and youths, who then verified the themes and confirmed the results (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

RESULTS
Youth Care Workers' Theories of Change
Themes generated from the interviews were summarized in a theory of change format (i.e., "when this, then that"). Conditions identified by at least three youth care workers were included in Table 1. Results indicated several underlying conditions necessary for effective programming. The most commonly cited conditions were (a) when staff have connections with youth; (b) when programs were directed to meet youth needs and interests; (c) when youth have choices; (d) if youth and staff were actively involved in programming; (e) when recreational physical activity and sport were provided. Each is summarized briefly here.

All youth care workers noted that it was essential that they develop relationships with program participants in order to get and keep the youths involved in program activities. For instance, some leaders identified the need for a "partnership between youth and staff," when "the staff...connects with the kids." Others noted that they tried to establish a "community where the kids can feel comfortable," or "a sense of belonging." Trust, open communication, friendship, connection, one-on-one personal contact, and acceptance were other words workers used to identify their work. Thus, results appeared to indicate that leadership strategies, which focus on developing relationships and connections with youth, were necessary for program success.

Youth care workers also stated that a youth-oriented perspective was necessary to make programs work. These workers measured the success of a program based on whether a relationship was established with the youths and whether the programs were designed around youths' interests and needs. Thus, these workers believed that programs worked when youths felt connected to the staff, youths were actively involved in programs, youths participated in creating the programs, and youths took ownership of the activities. Also, programs were successful when youths had a choice. A quote provided by one respondent captured this change proposition:

> I try to raise kids desire to participate, to get kids to want what we have to offer, instead of bribing, threatening, or fighting with kids.... I try to help kids become invested. Kids here say "no" before they even know what they are saying no to.... When programs aren't working

for kids, I try to figure out with them why the program isn't working. I ask kids how they would change it. Kids (must be) allowed a freedom of voice.

An activity-centered frame of reference also emerged from the inter-views. A major theory adopted by the youth care workers was that a good activity is self-justifying. In other words, simply offering basketball or drama classes is a worthy aim in and of itself. This activity orientation helps explain workers' most important criterion for success. Workers believe that their program is a success when youths have fun and are actively involved in the activity.

For example, one worker stated, "You know a program is a success when kids are doing stuff, they are participating in an organized activity. Also, it is a success if the kids are having fun." Another leader reported that it is a good program when "tons of kids come to the program and participate. Also, if the staff is not cramming information down kids throats... There are happy advisors and happy kids." The change proposi-tion presupposes that good things happen by virtue of the activity. Oftentimes, the youth care workers identified recreation and sport as the important activity that recruits and retains youths.

Youth Participants' Theories of Change

Themes generated from the interviews with youth participants were summarized in a theory of change format, as well. Conditions identified by at least three youth participants were included in Table 2. Results suggested four major conditions necessary for effective programming. The first theory of change involved the relationships that youths encoun-tered while at the program. These relationships were with both staff and peers. The second theory of change involved the need for "fun" programs and activities. Third, youth participants noted that programs are not effec-tive when peers are engaged in antisocial behaviors, such as bullying and teasing. Fourth, youths described the need for programs to teach life skills and social competency. Each theory merits more discussion.

The importance of relationships with youth care workers was noted. The respondents believed it was important for workers to establish connections with youths. Youth care workers were effective "...when they help support and help the kids. When they are willing to look at my point of view. They look at the activities through the kids' eyes (and are) kind, caring, supporting." The importance of staff and youth-oriented programming also is highlighted in the following quote: "It is the rela-tionship between the staff and the kids... (it is about) how they treat them. If staff like to do activities with kids....Staff that do stuff with you, ones that join in the activity."

These youths also indicated several qualities that comprised an effective youth care worker. Five youth indicated that workers needed to be nice; four indicated a youth care worker should be "somebody who can help you with your problems;" and four youths wanted staff that would participate with them in the activities, and not just supervise them from the sidelines. Three youths also felt that workers who understood things from a "kid's point of view" are also important.

Relationships with peers also were noted. Although parents were the initial reason that these youths participated in the program, respondents indicated that they continued their involvement because their friends were at the program. More specifically, five of these youths indicated that they initially attended the Club because their parent initiated their involvement (Only one youth stated that he or she maintained his/her involvement because of a parent). Eight of the nine youths, however, indicated that they continued to participate because their friends were there or because the programs were fun. For instance, one youth stated, "Whenever I come here, I feel cool because little kids say 'hi' to me and my friend. Some of the kids are cool. I can talk to some of them about certain stuff." Youths also noted that they made friends at the program: "I met lots of new people and made lots of new friends here... It's just fun. It's really fun." Related responses included: "when people invite me to play with them" and "when I'm treated with respect by members." Relationships with peers helped them to feel accepted and connected. As one youth stated, "People treat me with respect. They let me do things even though they are playing dodge ball or kick ball. They don't say, 'You can't play' or 'you don't know anything. You can't play.' It makes me feels accepted, because they let me do what I want to do. Not everything but they let me do the fun things I want to do and don't say, 'You can't do that.'"

Similar to the youth care workers' responses, youths also noted that programs would be successful if they were fun. Typically, the youths thought that the programs were fun because the activities were engaging and their friends were involved (including youth care workers that were labeled as "friends"). As one youth noted, "I like coming here and knowing people. It's fun. I like being active and coming here...there are places to play basketball and do sports and stuff. I like the people...most of the staff." Youths also thought programs were fun when the activities offered were engaging. Many youths described specific games and recreational activities that they enjoyed, such as basketball, tag, bowling, and video games. For instance, one youth stated, "(I like the) activities – bowling...I like swimming every Monday and Thursday, movies, and going places with my friends like to the movies. It is fun. The activities are fun."

The third major theory that emerged from the interviews focused on the display of inappropriate behaviors by peers. Six youths noted that programs were not successful when other youths were misbehaving.

Comments were stated such as "(There are) mean people...they call people names when we do something wrong;" "Sometimes it is too loud and the little kids are rude to each other. It bugs me. They make fun of them because they are short. It bugs me sometimes;" and "I don't like how some people get treated. Awhile ago, there was some staff here that favored other kids, and some others would get picked on. I didn't like how some people got treated and other people got left out...like the guys won't let the girls play basketball because they're girls. These little things make me mad. I don't like when that happens." In other words, the youth indicated that quality youth care workers that know how to intervene are necessary. As one stated:

> It makes me feel better than if I was out with people that would get into trouble with. The whole thing makes me safe. I'm not scared of bad people coming in here, because usually someone would stop them. (names a staff member). There are certain things that people can' come in for. For example, a couple of gang members will come in here and something will happen...fighting... He makes it so they can't come here no more.

Finally, five youths in the study noted that successful youth development programs teach youths important social and life skills. For instance, youths stated "(The Club) has helped me with my temper;" "I learned how to be more respectful. How to talk. I became more comfortable and the people came and talked to me. When I first came here, I didn't really talk;" and "I learned how to Xerox, answer phones, do maintenance, and how to be a friend and support others...(the Club) has shown me how to avoid being in a gang and how to avoid peer pressure."

DISCUSSION

It is noteworthy that youth care workers and youths espoused similar beliefs and perspectives. For example, both pointed to the importance of relationships among youths and youth care workers; the value of connections to the organization and its program; the importance of belonging to peers and to youth care workers; the vital roles played by youth care workers when they actively engage with kids; and the need for prosocial opportunities for youths that would not otherwise have them. Both sets of respondents also emphasized the importance of youth-oriented programs. In social work language, both youths and youth care workers emphasized the importance of "going where the client is." And starting with youths, the "clients," entails offering recreation and sport activities, especially ones that youths view as fun. Furthermore, both sets of respondents indicated that skill building was important. However, they prioritized different kinds of skills. Workers emphasized sport-related skills, while youths wanted more life skills, social relationship skills, and problem solving skills.

These commonalties and similarities notwithstanding, youth care workers and youths also demonstrated different beliefs and perspectives. For example, youths emphasized specific results--including the new skills referenced above. Furthermore, youths emphasized the importance of their peers, expressing their concerns about problems involving bullying, teasing, and disciplinary needs and about benefits such as life skills and character development.

The youth care workers in this study were not results-oriented; they were activity (process) oriented. For instance, only one youth care worker indicated that effectiveness and success were indicated by learning life skills and promoting social competence. Not even one worker indicated that decreased problem behaviors among youths indicated program effectiveness and overall success. Arguably, these findings frame two major conclusions: (1) These youth care workers did not approach their work with outcomes-oriented perspectives; and (2) These workers did not employ the concepts of risk factors, protective factors, and social competence as they planned, implemented, and discussed their work.

In brief, youth care workers in this study were activity-oriented and youth-centered, and they believed that youths having fun provided its own justification. These youth care workers were not results- and outcomes-oriented, and they did not employ rigorous (but no less practical) causal reasoning as they planned, conducted, and discussed their programs.

No wonder. Many youth care workers have not been prepared and supported to think about, plan, implement, and evaluate their work in a more rigorous, theoretically defensible way. The huge knowledge gap stemming from the limitations of "black box designs" is implicated in how workers, as well as trainers and supervisors of workers, approach youth development programming and youth care, in general.

These findings are not an indictment. To the contrary, these findings imply that these workers' implicit theories, also called "naïve theories" because they are not scientific, have some merit (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998). In other words, workers' activity-focus may be somewhat self-justifying if it keeps youths "busy, happy, and on good behavior" (Placek, 1983)[1] Prevention effects may result from sponsored activity in safe, secure, and youth-supportive settings.

In fact, national policy, expressed in massive and increasing funding support for after-school programs (21st Century Learning Centers), is based on findings about the prevention effects deriving from programs offered between 3PM and 7PM. If youth are busy doing something else, and when youth care workers provide appropriate supervision, they will not be involved in problem behaviors such as committing crimes, using

---

[1] Although we have used her language, our use of Placek's "busy, happy, and good" descriptor contrasts with hers. For Placek, this phrase was pejorative. She used this description to describe school physical education programs that lacked clear, instructional purposes and identifiable outcome measures.

substances, or becoming pregnant (Galambos & Maggs, 1991; Henderson, 1990). This finding is significant when one realizes that three out of five young people report that they are home alone two or more hours each day (Benson, 1997). Here, youths "vote with their feet" and participation is self-justifying.

Workers and youths also suggested that the programs work best for youths who do not have other resources or support systems (i.e., youths who are not protected from social problems). For example, workers believed that many youths who attend the program are looking for positive ways to spend their time. As one youth care worker stated, "These kids have no other place to go. They benefit from role models or simply having someone who cares about them." In short, youths are not passive, compliant, and obedient consumers, as this study's findings indicate. In Martinek and Hellison's (1997) framework, these youths are active agents; they do their own "cultural shopping." They are looking for something that works for them, something that is better than what they currently have. Youths also are shopping for an "identity" in relation to youth care workers, programs, and agencies.

Here, Lawson's (2002) concepts of program magnets, hooks, and glue are relevant (see also Lawson, Anderson-Butcher, Barkdull, & Byrnes, 2001). *Magnets* are the recruitment resources and dynamics, including incentives and perceived rewards, which attract children and youth. *Hooks* are the program resources (e.g., a caring youth leader and advocate) and dynamics (e.g., having fun), which serve as incentives and rewards and are responsible for retention. *Glue* refers to the social bonding mechanisms provided by the program and the organizational setting, and it is manifested in a sense of connection to the school, a sense of belonging to the program, and new interpersonal relationships.

The point is, workers' views and theories related to magnets, hooks, and glue may not correspond to youths' views and theories. This study explored magnets, hooks, and glue as children and youths perceived and experienced them. Indeed, youths in this study have their own views and theories, and the understanding derived from their voices and stories provides empirical grounded for evidence-based practices related to magnets, hooks, and glue. To reiterate, kids vote with their feet. Their theories suggest that if the program and its youth care workers do not attract them, announcing that fun and enjoyment (magnets); if they fail to deliver to youths the fun and enjoyment they announce (hooks); and, if they do not provide a sense of connection and belonging to the youth care workers, other youths, and the organization (glue), programs will not be effective or successful. In this sense, youths are active agents and expert program designers and consultants; their views indicate magnets, hooks, and glue. To reiterate: These youths in this study wanted and needed life skills development, problem solving skills, solid peer relations, and a safe, secure setting to engage in fun activities. Any program seeking to recruit, retain, and support youths will build on youths' views on magnets, hooks, and glue.

LIMITATIONS

This qualitative research used interviewing techniques and inductive analyses to explore the theories of change among youth care workers and youth participants. This choice helped enhance our understanding of youth care work in general, but also brought with it several limitations and concerns. A small sample of participants (seven workers; nine youths) was used. This significantly reduced our ability to generalize the results of the study to the larger population. Similarly, the researchers subjectively decided on useful ways of expressing the data. As Patton (1990) suggests, there is a constant struggle to find the "right" language to communicate the themes, patterns, outcomes, and processes that emerge from the data. This struggle is related to another one: Success in data collection depends on the skillfulness of the researcher in conducting the interviews. A third struggle is to analyze the data accurately and consistently (Agar, 1980).

The researchers used several controls to avoid limitations in reliability and validity. Double coding ensured that there was accurate classification of the raw data into schemes (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1990). Furthermore, the peer reviewer confirmed that the criterion of "fittingness" was met in order to enhance external validity (see Guba & Linclon, 1981). Finally, the credibility of the findings was enhanced as youth care workers and youths verified the emergent theories of change (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). In brief, the researchers used several strategies to safeguard study results. Even so, limitations remain. The results of this exploratory study should be evaluated with caution.

Implications for Training of Youth Care Workers and Administrators

Notwithstanding the study's limitations, its most important implications merit mention. To begin with, youth care workers' theories may be naïve, but they are not necessarily wrong. Training and supports for leaders can be grounded in workers' existing theories, especially their logic about program magnets, hooks, and glue. Moreover, the youth-centered orientation of many workers, an orientation that is holistic and caring, has solid grounding in the research literature (Chung, 2000; Gootman, 2000; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). Build-from strengths training and capacity-building approaches are recommended. These approaches will elicit actively the theories of youth care workers, the theories of youths, and their relations.

This set of implications includes some important disclaimers. The import of youth workers' (naïve) theories is not an endorsement of "anything goes" approaches, nor does it represent an abandonment of rigorous, theoretical and evidence-based logic. To the contrary, to do nothing more or less than youth workers do now restricts the potential appeal and impact of programs. Today, many programs fall short of their

potential, and some may lack demonstrable impacts because they lack sufficient rigor; and because they lack access to the knowledge contained in black box designs.

Achieving program potential may depend on specifying outcomes and developing a precise, solid intervention logic (see Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The research on the development of social competence research is clear: For social competence to be developed, its constituent knowledge, skills, norms, and values must be translated into specific, explicit program objectives; and youth care workers must choose and conduct activities known to help achieve these objectives. For example, youths want, need, and seek life skills related to social competence development. These skills are magnets and hooks, and they may cement bonding to the program, to youth leaders, and to peers. Social competence must become an explicit focus, and its progress markers and success indicators must be translated into a results-oriented framework. Moreover, workers and agency heads must evaluate social competence development. They must be willing to be held accountable for social competence development and the reduction/prevention of risk factors and problem behaviors.

It may be that youth workers in this study lacked preparation for this type of planning, implementation, and evaluation work, albeit through no fault of their own. In other words, youth care workers and other human service providers are often not taught to start with outcomes and match interventions to these goals (see Elliott & Tolan, 1998; Hatry, van Houten, Plantz, & Taylor, 1996). The youth care workers interviewed in this study simply did not think about outcomes. They measured their success based on the activities they offered, the number of kids participating in them, and whether the youths and workers were actively involved.

Unfortunately, these activity-focused programs may be limited because of the gap between current knowledge and best practices and what these workers know and are able to do. In this perspective, this study raises issues about how youth care workers are trained.

It also raises concerns about how non-profit youth service agencies are structured, including their funding and accountability criteria. In the past, agencies and programs have been solely held accountable for the number of "clients" served (Hatry et al., 1996). This practice may change, however, with the growing requirement for outcomes accountability among funders (Davis, 1999; Hatry et al., 1996). This change in the "way of doing business" may have a ripple effect. As funders become more interested in results, national youth development organizations such as BGCA will become more focused on accountability, and then local agencies will begin targeting outcomes.

The following question is an especially important one. If youth care workers' orientations reflected outcomes-accountability, would there be a greater impact on developing social competence?

Other important questions remain. Chief among these questions is this one: As programs move to outcomes-oriented perspectives, will

youth participate? Voluntary participation within these programs resents a barrier (Kaltreider & St. Pierre, 1995). To say it another way, kids vote with their feet and no results will accrue if youths are not there.

The fact that kids vote with their feet raises another set of implications. This study uses the concept of involvement to refer to youths' participation. The theories of change presented in Table 2 use this involvement concept. Involvement is an important success indicator, but it is not enough. In future studies, measures of engagement also are needed. Engagement refers to the frequency, intensity, and duration of participation. Engagement no doubt explains differences in outcomes. Therefore, engagement-focused theories of change elicited from workers and youths will be especially valuable, and they will strengthen outcomes-oriented programs and training.

Magnets, hooks, and glue, derived from youths' actions and perspectives, are of paramount importance in relation to both involvement and engagement. More youth care workers need to know how to collect and use data from the youth experts to constantly revise and improve their programs.

The findings from this study suggest that a balance must be struck, and the exact dimensions of this balance may vary over time and in different contexts. The challenge is to balance fun, youth-oriented, activity-focused programming with interventions that focus specifically on positive outcomes. The theories of change generated through this study point to important program components that are essential to creating this balance. Future research and practice must explore these issues further.

TOWARD RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS

This exploratory study indicates the practical value of a theory of change approach. However, this approach is complex and labor-intensive. It recommends teams of people cemented by firm partnerships. For example, it is a tall order to expect youth care workers to do the relevant theorizing and to embed intervention logic in their everyday work. Training is important, but it is not likely to produce widespread, uniform changes in workers' actions. The job is simply too demanding to expect workers to do more research-related work. Furthermore, every worker, from every walk of life, is vulnerable to self-sealing beliefs and behaviors.

As this study indicates, researchers and evaluators can play pivotal roles in eliciting change theories and feeding them back to youth care workers and agency supervisors. In a related study, two investigators piloted a developmental, empowerment-oriented evaluation approach that is relevant to partnership initiatives (Anderson-Butcher, 2002; Lawson, 2002). In this related study, the investigators derived intervention pathways and success formulas, feeding them back and forward. In other words, the formative theory of change work informs youth care workers, and workers simultaneously validate the action frameworks. Such an iterative, recursive (back-and-forth) approach works best when

partnerships are developed. Furthermore, this partnership approach helps to embed evaluation logic in everyday language and operations. Thus, this study responds to major gaps that limit programs and leadership development initiatives. It recommends other studies that escape its limitations and draws on its contributions.

This study also indicates the practicality of a theory of change approach. As pressures mount for program and agency accountability, this theory of change approach to evaluation, program development, and leadership preparation gains importance. And, as this study illustrates, youths also must be viewed as experts who consult and provide leadership for evaluation, training, implementation, recruitment, and retention.

References

Agar, M. (1980). *The professional stranger: An informal introduction to ethnography.* New York: Academic Press.

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1996). *Organizational learning II: Theory, method, and practice.* Reading, MA: Addeson-Wesley.

Anderson, C., & Lindsay, J. (1998). The development, perseverance, and change of naïve theories. *Social Cognition, 16*(1), 8-30.

Anderson-Butcher, D. (2002, January). *Eliciting program theories, intervention logic, and implementation fidelity: An evaluation of a 21st Century Learning Center.* Paper presented at the Society for Social Work Research, San Diego, CA.

Anderson-Butcher, D. (2000). *Exploring the relationships among participation in youth development programs, risk and protective factors, and problem behaviors.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.

Anderson-Butcher, D., & Fink, J. (2002). *The importance of a sense of belonging to youth service agencies: A risk and protective factor analysis.* Manuscript submitted for publication.

Benson, P. L. (1997). *All kids are our kids.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bickman, L. (1987). *Using program theory in evaluation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bissell, J. (2002). *Evaluation of California's after school and safe neighborhoods partnership program.* Irvine, CA: Department of Education, University of California-Irvine.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America. (1998). *Youth development: The foundation for the future.* Atlanta, GA: Author.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America. (1998b). *Building the foundation.* Atlanta, GA: Author.

Chung, A. (2000). *After-School programs: Keeping children safe and smart.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Davis, N. J. (1999). *Resilience: Status of the research and research-based programs.* Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services.

Dryfoss, J. G. (1998). *Safe passage: Making it through adolescence in a risky society.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development.* Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Elliott, D. S., & Tolan, P. (1998). Youth violence prevention, intervention, and social policy: An overview. In D. J. Flannery, and C. R. Huff (Eds.), *Youth Violence* (pp. 101-122). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.

Fashola, O. S. (1998). *Review of extended-day and after-school programs and their effectiveness.* Washington, DC: Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk.

Fullbright-Anderson, K, Kubisch, A., & Connell, J. (1998). (Eds). *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Volume 2, theory, measurement, and analysis.* New York: The Aspen Institute.

Galambos, N. L., & Maggs, J. L. (1991). Out-of-school care of young adolescents and self-reported behavior. *Developmental Psychology, 27*(4), 644-655.

Gootman, J. (2000). *After-school programs to promote child and adolescent development.* Washington, DC: National Academy of Science.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation.* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

Halpern, R. (1999). After-school programs for low-income children: Promise and challenges. *The Future of Children, 9*(2), 81-95.

Harachi, R., Abbott, R., Catalano, R., Haggerty, K., & Fleming, C. (1999). Opening the black box: Using process evaluation measures to assess implementation and theory building. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(1), 711-731.

Hatry, H., Van Houten, T., Plantz, M. C., & Taylor, M. (1996). *Measuring program outcomes: A practical approach.* Alexandria, VA: United Way of America.

Heath, S. (2001). Three's not a crowd: Plans, roles, and focus in the arts. *Educational Researcher, 30*(7), 10-17.

Henderson, D. (1990). Expanding the curriculum with after-school classes, Oak Park Valley Union Elementary School District, Tulare, CA. *Thrust, 1*, 32-33.

Hirsch, B. J., Roffman, J. G., Deutsch, N. L., Flynn, C. A., Loder, T. L., & Pagano, M. E. (2000). Inner-city youth development organizations: Strengthening programs for adolescent girls. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 20*(2), 210-230.

Holland, A., & Andre, T. (1987). Participation in extracurricular activities in secondary school: What is known, what needs to be known? *Review of Educational Research, 57*, 437-460.

Kaltreider, D. L., & St. Pierre, T. L. (1995). Beyond the schools: Strategies for implementing successful drug prevention programs in community youth serving organizations. *Journal of Drug Education, 25*(3), 223-237.

Larson, R. (1994). Youth organizations, hobbies, and sports as developmental contexts. In R. K. Silbereisen & E. Todt (Eds.), *Adolescence in context: The interplay of family, school, peers, and work in adjustment* (pp. 46-65). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 170-183.

Lawson, H. (2002). Improving conceptual clarity, accuracy, and precision and facilitating more coherent institutional designs. In M. Brabeck and M. Walsh (Eds.). *The contribution of interprofessional collaboration and comprehensive services to teaching and learning. The National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook 2002.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lawson, H. (2002, January). *A hybrid, multi-level, multi-method evaluation design for an after-school program initiative: Implications for social work.* Paper presented at the Society for Social Work and Research, San Diego, CA.

Lawson, H. A., & Anderson-Butcher, D. (2001). In the best interests of the child: Youth development as a child welfare support and resources. In A. L. Sallee, H. A. Lawson, & K. Briar-Lawson (Eds.). *Innovative practices with vulnerable children and families.* Dubuque, IA: Eddie Bowers.

Lawson, H. A., Anderson-Butcher, D., Barkdull, C., & Byrnes, E. C. (2001). *The Learning Plus evaluation, Phase 1: Assessing implementation dynamics, documenting progress indicators and achievements, clarifying key program features and interventions, identifying needs and lessons learned, and paving the way for an outcomes evaluation.* Salt Lake City, UT: Salt Lake City School District.

Mahoney, J. L., & Cairns, R. B. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early schooldropout? *Developmental Psychology, 33*(2), 241-253.

Martinek, T. J., & Hellison, D. R. (1997). Fostering resiliency in underserved youth through physical activity. *Quest, 49,* 34-49.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Oden, S. (1995). Studying youth programs to assess influences on youth development: New roles for researchers. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 10*(1), 173-186.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Posner, J. K., & Vandell, D. (1994). Low-income children's after-school care: Are there beneficial effects of after-school programs? *Child Development, 65*(2), 440-456.

Roth, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Murray, L., & Foster, W. (1998). Promoting healthy adolescents: Synthesis of youth development program evaluations. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*(4), 423-459.

Schinke, S. P., Orlandi, M. A., & Cole, K. C. (1992). Boys & Girls Clubs in public housing developments: Prevention services for youth at risk. *Journal of Community Psychology, 20*, 118-128.

Schorr, L. (1988). *Within our reach: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage.* New York: Doubleday.

St. Pierre, T. L., Kaltreider, D. L., Mark, M. M., & Aikin, K. J. (1992). Drug prevention in a community setting: A longitudinal study of the relative effectiveness of a three-year primary prevention program in Boys & Girls Clubs across the nation. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 20*(6), 673-707.

Weiss, C. H. (1997). How can theory-based evaluation make greater headway? *Evaluation Review, 21*(4), 501-524.

Weiss, C. H. (1995). Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families. In J. P. Connell, A.C., Kubisch, L.B. Schorr, & C.H. Weiss (Eds). *New approaches to evaluating community initiatives: Concepts, methods, and contexts* (pp. 65-92). Aspen: The Aspen Institute.

Whalen, S. P., & Wynn, J. R. (1995). Enhancing primary services for youth through an infrastructure of social services. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 10*(1). 88-110.

Table 1. Youth Care Workers' Micro-theories of Theories of Change

Theory of Change	Youth Care Workers
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SENSE OF CONNECTION	
1. When youth care workers establish connections with youth, programs are effective and successful.	6
2. When a strong, interpersonal relationships between youths and youth care workers are not developed, programs are not effective.	4
3. Even when youths do not receive close mentoring and social support at home, when they develop strong, interpersonal relationships with youth care workers, programs are effective andsuccessful.	4
ORGANIZATION	
4. When programs are structured, they are effective and successful.	5
5. Where program (curriculum) content is appropriate, programs are effective and successful.	4
6. When programs are flexible, youth participate in the program.	4
7. When youth care workers informally teach skills (mostly sport-related skills), programs are effective andsuccessful.	4
YOUTH-ORIENTED AND FOCUSED ON THEIR NEEDS	
8. When programs are designed to meet each youth's needs and interests, they are effective and successful.	7
9. When youths do not have access to or opportunities for other prosocial activities during the non-school hours and when they come regularly, programs are effective and successful.	3
10. When youths are actively involved in the activities, programs are effective and successful.	7
11. When youths take ownership in programming, programs are effective and successful.	4
12. When youths do not have good attitudes, programs are not effective.	6
13. When youths do not have choices in programs, programs are not effective.	6
14. When youths are having fun, programs are effective and successful.	5
15. When recreational physical activity and sport programs are provided, youths come to the program and have fun.	6
YOUTH CARE WORKER QUALITIES	
16. When youth care workers actively participate with youths in programs, programs are effective andsuccessful.	7
17. When youth care workers feel strong, competent, and/or confident in special program areas and these programs are implemented, then programs are effective and successful.	4
18. When youth care workers have positive attitudes about their leadership, the programs they implement are effective and successful.	5

Note. A total of seven youth care workers participated in the interviews.

Table 2. Youth Participants' Micro-theories of Theories of Change

Theory of Change	Youths
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SENSE OF CONNECTION	
1. When youths have relationships with peers at the program, they will maintain their involvement in programming.	5
2. When youths feel accepted by their peers they maintain their involvement in the program.	4
3. When youths are victimized by anti-social behaviors such as bullying, name calling, and fights, they decrease involvement and may withdraw altogether.	4
4. When youths feel accepted by youth care workers, they maintain their involvement.	5
YOUTH CARE WORKERS RELATIONSHIPS AND QUALITIES	
5. When youth care workers help youths feel safe, youths maintain their involvement and programs are effective and successful.	5
6. When youth care workers actively participate with youths, programs are effective andsuccessful.	4
7. When youth care workers are supportive of youths and try to see from the youths' perspective, youths continue to participate and programs are effective and successful.	5
ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS OFFERED	
8. When recreational physical activity and sport programs are provided, youths come to the program and have fun.	8
9. When youths are taught relationship and character development skills, they maintain their involvement and the programs are effective and successful.	5
10. When youths do not have access to or opportunities for other prosocial activities during the non-school hours and when they come regularly, programs are effective and successful.	4
PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT	
11. When youths participate in programming, youths will continue their involvement.	5

Note. A total of nine youths participated in the interviews.