A Conceptual Model for Empowering Youth through Volunteerism

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Abstract

This article presents a rationale for three core elements that should be considered by program administrators for a successful youth volunteer initiative: 1) the environmental context, 2) interactive processes, and 3) identified knowledge-based outcomes. A conceptual framework describing their interrelationship is described for administrators to consider when planning programs to successfully promote the empowerment of youth through volunteerism. When youth are engaged to do for others and their communities, self-efficacy, self-awareness, and eventually empowerment occur as natural by-products of this actualizing process.

Key Words:
youth, empowerment, youth development, volunteerism, engagement

All societies and cultures have processes that educate and enable young people to develop into socially responsible adults. While such methods are facilitated through formal social structures, they are often embedded in long-standing cultural beliefs and traditions. One such activity designed to increase a youth's understanding of what it means to be a contributing member of a larger community is through volunteerism.

Conceptually, volunteerism and empowerment hold a symbiotic relationship that serves as a cornerstone in the social and psychological growth of youth. As youth mature and become empowered, they embrace the ideal of community participation through volunteerism. Correspondingly, the experience of volunteerism enhances a youth's sense of empowerment. Empowerment, reinforced through volunteerism, enhances further empowerment and in turn, leads to an increase in volunteerism. This article focuses on the core elements in this relationship and offers a model for youth empowerment through volunteerism.

Youth Empowerment

Empowerment has been defined broadly as a theory, a framework, or a process (Gutierrez, 1995; McWhirter, 1991; Rose, 2000). Empowerment is also conceptualized at various micro/mezzo/macro levels including personal, organizational and societal (Gragoudas & Wehmeyer, 2004). Regardless of its characterization, empowerment essentially refers to the belief of an individual, group or community, to exercise self-determination for the mutual benefit of all.

Developmentally, however, empowerment serves a unique purpose for youth. The principle assumptions underpinning youth empowerment have been well documented in the literature (Gutierrez; Moody, Childs & Sepples, 2003; Rose). Conceptually, empowerment is deemed psychologically as the actualization of significant knowledge or skills that contribute to youth developing a sense of maturity, which leads to them becoming contributing members of a society (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Gragoudas, & Wehmeyer, 2004; Risler, Sutphen, & Shields, 2000). Moreover, empowerment serves to enhance a youth's sense of personal confidence in the development of decision-making competencies necessary in adult life (Au, Holosko, & Wing Lo, in press).

Gutierrez (1995) suggested that youth empowerment is founded upon a young person developing a socially critical consciousness, which involves three sequential psychological processes (Freire, 1973). The first process is related to the development of feelings of shared fate, where membership becomes a central component of an individual's attachment to groups that share common values. The second process is raising group consciousness, which involves a youth understanding the relationship between personal and social problems impacting a group. This includes the increasing awareness of the differential status and relationships among groups and the identification of shared feelings of the members. Self and collective efficacy is the final process that involves youth recognizing that they are participants in a dynamic group interaction capable of effecting change in their life (Gutierrez).

The congruency between power and the formulation of a youth's critical consciousness is noteworthy in understanding the elements of empowerment. McWhirter (1991) discussed four requirements which highlight the development of empowerment. The first pertains to a youth's awareness of the relational power dynamics in their life context. The second concerns a youth's ability to develop the capacity for establishing reasonable control over their life. While the first and second seem easily understood; the third and fourth conditions significantly influence the development of a youth's critical consciousness (Gutierrez). Cumulatively, the latter requirements involve a youth's ability to exercise control in their life and the ability to advocate the empowerment of others in their community. For the actualization and development of empowerment in youth, these requirements represent an expression of integrity and the integration of community values and beliefs.

To comprehend youth empowerment as a means to personal efficacy, it is important to recognize the contextual frame that enables this to happen. As such, a number of characteristics have been identified as being associated with empowering environments including: group settings, shared belief systems, knowledge development, and leadership (Garst & Johnson, 2005; Gutierrez, 1995). Two examples illustrate this actualization, one a

clinical intervention, and the other, a community-based initiative.

There are numerous outdoor experiential programs established for troubled youth in North America. Typically, youth assigned to these programs have experienced significant failures in life, and/or have limited coping skills. Therapeutically, these programs foster the development of a youth's critical consciousness and empowerment. Surviving in a wilderness setting as a member of a community, youth develop interpersonal skills to make responsible decisions for the benefit of the group (Loughmiller, 1965). Coerced by the challenges of wilderness survival they become aware and understand the power of group dynamics which promote a commitment to the community's belief system.

There is also a range of community-based programs designed to foster skills and enhance capacities for self-efficacy, that then enhances empowerment in youth. Consider a local community-based collaborative involved youth in community affairs. The collaborative empowered a youth subcommittee to focus on a specific problem in the local community. A service project developed by the subcommittee involved implementing strategies to address problems associated with youth dropping out of high school. This subcommittee conducted a problem assessment, designed, and coordinated activities to improve the high school completion rate in the community.

From these examples, program models for the development of empowerment may be seen as falling on a continuum. Some programs are designed as an intervention targeting a youth's particular problem, while others are community-initiated programs that promote empowerment in youth. Regardless, each program incorporates similar activities to engage youth and facilitate their development as contributing members of a community.

Youth Volunteerism

If empowerment is seen as a belief in an individual's self-determination, then volunteerism may be viewed as an altruistic expression of that value. Each year, individuals of all ages commit significant amounts of personal energy to assist others through volunteerism (Curtis, Grabb & Baer, 1992). In the United States, approximately 45% of the adults and youth volunteer in some capacity, and the value for their services exceeds $239 billion (Independent Sector, 2006).

Factors associated with youth volunteer involvement have been widely researched (Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, & Snyder, 1998; Oesterle, Johnson, Mortimer, 2004). Studies suggest that youth who are personally connected to a community are more likely to participate in volunteer activities (Johnson et al.). Other researchers have found that youth who had high educational aspirations (Johnson et al.) or parents who volunteered were more likely to engage in volunteerism (Keith, Nelson, Schlabach, & Thompson, 1990).

Likewise, research suggests common factors that nurture youth motivation youth to participate in volunteer activities. One factor suggests that participation in volunteer activities is driven by some incentive, such as improving a youth's future employment or acceptance into a college. Another view holds that volunteerism emerges out of the psychological benefits a youth gains from the altruistic nature of the activity (Holosko, Leslie & Miller, 2001). From either perspective, the literature supports the notion that participating in volunteer activities facilitates a youth's integration of

community values, which contributes to the development of empowerment (Au et al.).

The engagement of youth in volunteer activities is noted throughout the literature (Safrit & Auck, 2003). Researchers have reported on youth involved in volunteer activities both as recipients of program services and as participants in community-based initiatives (Johnson et al.). For example, youth who have been involved with the U.S. juvenile justice system and required to complete volunteer community service to instill social responsibility. Conversely, other youth participate in traditional volunteer service programs sponsored by community organizations, schools, and churches. Youth participating in these activities not only engage in community service, but also are exposed to meaningful education about civic responsibility.

The literature also cites factors underscoring the development of youth empowerment through volunteerism

(Johnson et al.; Safrit & Auck). Among others, these include youth participating in the decision-making process; engaging in activities that impact and a community need; fostering significant relationships with adults; and, the opportunity to integrate learning experiences into their identity (Amoto & Snyder, in press; Safrit & Auck).

**Empowering Youth through Volunteerism: A Conceptual Model**

The convergence of empowerment through volunteerism reflects a reciprocal and interactive relationship that enhances the overall development of youth. Moreover, the processes associated with youth empowerment and volunteerism lend credence to conceptual models (Amoto & Snyder). The relationship between empowerment and youth volunteerism, as described in Figure 1, allows one to identify elements of a framework to inform programs that promote these areas.

Figure 1
The Inter-relationship of Empowerment and Youth Volunteerism.
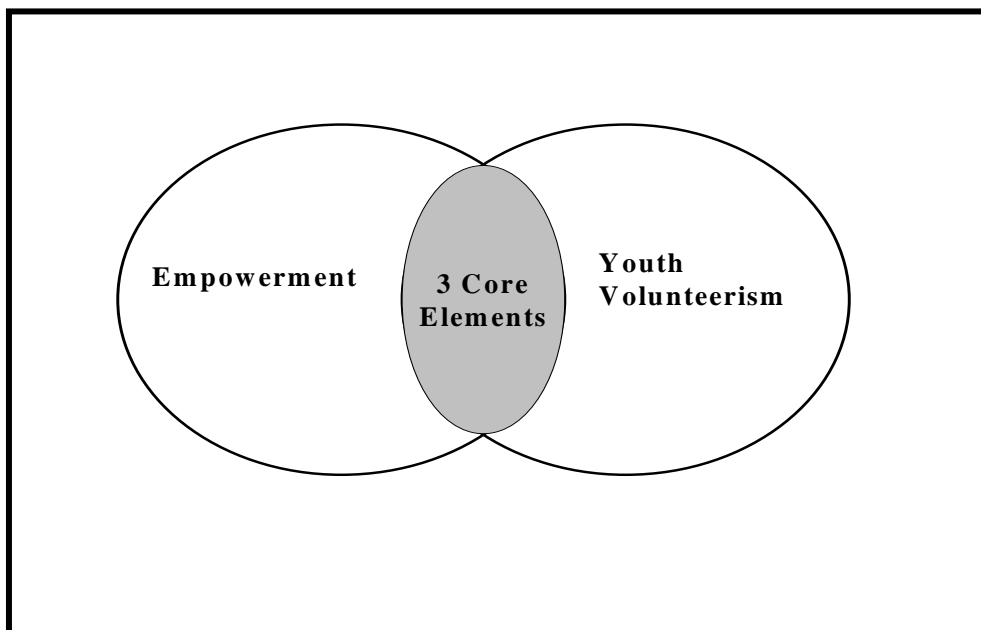
Figure 2
A Conceptual Framework of the Three Core Elements.
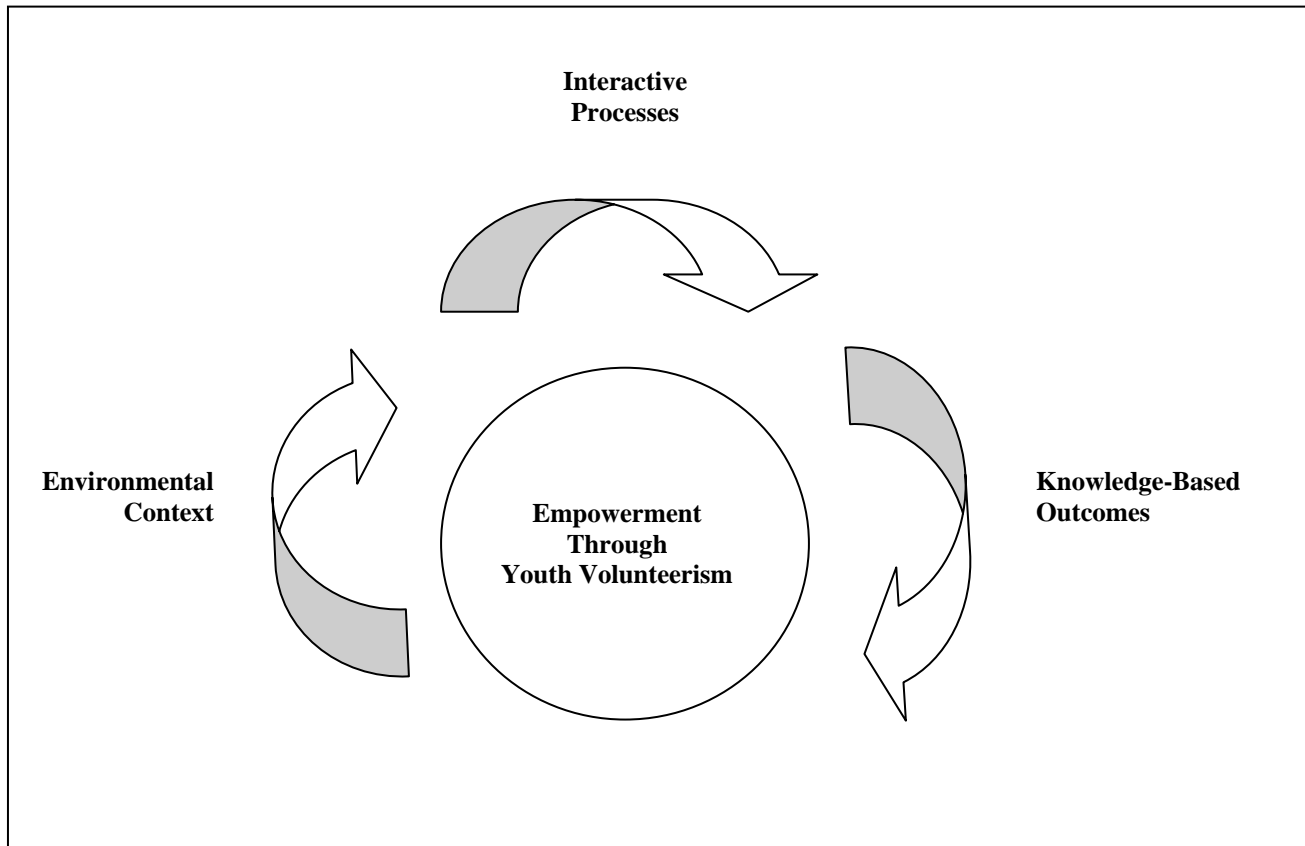
A conceptual framework for a youth empowerment model that can serve to promote the desired program goals and engage youth in volunteer activities should consider: a) the environmental context, b) identified interactive processes, and c) knowledge-based outcomes for stakeholders. Figure 2 provides an illustration of the three core elements of a framework for youth empowerment.

The Environmental Context

The environmental context considers mechanisms that facilitate various processes of youth empowerment. These include cultural norms and attitudes toward youth; the youth's status in the community social structure; and resources and desired needs of the community which promote volunteer service. For instance, youth should have a voice and be seen as a valued resource for their community, and there should be established institutions that provide opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful activities.

More importantly, the environmental context serves to define the structure and relationships that create the interactive circumstances for youth to become engaged in the empowerment process. The components within this conceptualization primarily include a group's climate for embracing youth and the relational involvement of committed adults. For example, programs that create effective models for volunteerism are defined by a

climate that provides opportunities and incentives for youth to become empowered and engage in decision-making processes. Youth are motivated when they believe they can influence a process, which impacts a genuine concern for their community. In turn, the climate in which this process occurs promotes member affiliation and contributes to group cohesion. This is particularly true for the integration of a youth's mutual shared belief in the collective efficacy of the group. Ultimately, youth value the group's purpose when they see themselves as important members through this reciprocal process (Au et al.).

Involved adults are the focal point for the group setting and climate in this process, and effective programs attract those adults who are committed and invested in the empowerment of youth. These adults set the tone for the empowerment of youth by coordinating programmatic support with local community institutions. Furthermore, these adult mentors and leaders facilitate the integration of learning experiences in the developmental processes of youth empowerment (Holosko, Leslie & Miller, 2001).

The environmental context designed to engage youth in volunteerism may be articulated in several ways. The climate may be observed in groups that project a particular image or identity. Examples include physical structures, articles of clothing that identify group affiliation (e.g., caps, T-shirts, etc.), established group norms of member inclusion, and newsletters or web pages that communicate volunteer events. The volunteer activities achieve legitimacy when adults are significantly involved, openly committed, and provide supportive leadership for participating youth. Endorsements from institutional and agency organizations may provide similar legitimacy to the group.

Interactive Processes

In the framework suggested in Figure 2, consideration is given to interactive processes that occur at various levels between the youth, the group members, and participating adults while engaging in volunteer activities. Interactive processes refer to ongoing transactions and collaborations between individuals and groups toward a collective goal. Intrinsically, these factors facilitate change and promote the development of a youth empowerment process.

Primarily, this refers to the sophistication of the group's level of investment in volunteer activities. Some programs have a specific purpose and long history of engaging youth in volunteer activities. For example, the previously mentioned youth committee and the volunteer project targeting school dropouts took more than a year to plan and implement. Other volunteer initiatives may be brief and focused on an activity to address a specific issue, such as a school organizing youth to provide refreshments to donors during a blood drive. Effective interactive processes that facilitate the development of youth empowerment emerge in a variety of contexts; however, the synergy between empowerment and volunteerism is inherent in this model.

Interactive processes focus on actualizing the potential of individual youth. This includes a mechanism for engaging youth in a purposeful manner and for the integration of their learning and development. Programs with effective interactive processes provide a welcoming climate that inspires youth participation. Such programs promote community values and provide opportunities for youth to participate in activities that they consider meaningful.

However, youth who are involved in empowerment programs are rarely socially,

emotionally, and/or psychologically equal. For example, there are experienced youth that have fostered higher levels of personal empowerment, and are viewed as leaders among their peers who have a history of participating in organized volunteer activities. They exude confidence and have social skills that make them able to effectively contribute to the group process and successfully involve themselves in community activities.

In contrast, some less empowered youth are involved in programs designed to address their therapeutic needs. Typically, these youth have had difficulty developing healthy social relationships with peers and adults. Characteristically, they have low self-esteem, lack competence, and seldom feel a part of a community. While these youth are not unwilling to contribute, they simply may not have acquired the opportunity, social skills, or more specifically interpersonal empowerment. As such, many have failed socially, and/or academically, or have been involved in anti-social activities.

Volunteer programs that facilitate an interactive process of empowerment for youth are driven by the actualization of individual potential achieved through two dynamic dimensions. First, there are specific processes that establish a level of acceptance for youth engagement and commitment to the group (i.e., a welcoming environment). For example, rituals and symbols can encourage a sense of belonging that reinforces the organizations' mission, values and purpose with which youth can identify. These include a mission statement, code of ethics, or pledge, all of which serve to empower and enhance the awareness of youth. Notable community programs with recognizable symbols and rituals are the Boy Scouts of America, 4-H, and the Red Cross.

Second, effective volunteer programs that empower youth contain interactive

processes that enhance interpersonal growth. These processes focus on enhancing one's self-esteem, confidence and competence. Within this dynamic interaction, youth experience respect, encouragement, and a sense of personal values, which they internalize.

Programmatically, there are structured processes for youth to have ownership in voicing opinions, as well as taking responsibility for decisions and confronting issues challenging the group. For example, effective groups establish norms of behavior where youth assume roles facilitating the program's system of shared beliefs, which creates group cohesion and promotes a sense of collective efficacy that empowers individuals.

Adults play a critical role in supporting youth in this process by modeling and integrating learning experiences for youth. Effective programs are lead by committed adults who recognize the global context of the growth of youth who participate in volunteer activities. These adults create transactional partnerships with youth and, more importantly, cultivate a cycle of constructive development in youth through each successful volunteer experience (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

With each experience, adults facilitate learning that enhances youth empowerment, which further motivates the youth. One example of this would be an adult leader conducting group discussions wherein youth had an opportunity to reflect on how the volunteer experience impacted them individually. This could be achieved through the use of written journals, posters, murals, or other forms of art expression.

Consider a youth group concerned about graffiti in their neighborhood. The adult mentor facilitates a discussion about how these youth and community was affected by the problem, and helps the youth

to develop a plan to address the issue. Afterwards, the youth decide to voluntarily paint over the offensive graffiti with drawings and poetry expressing their feelings. Once completed, the adults and the youth participate together in a discussion on what the experience has meant to each person individually.

Knowledge-Based Outcomes

The final element of the empowerment volunteerism model is knowledge-based outcomes. These are deemed to be lessons learned by individuals that hold personal meaning for them. These outcomes highlight the seminal results associated with the interactive processes of empowerment and represent contextual changes in the group, its members, and the community.

For individual youth, this may be readily apparent. Over time, and often in a dramatic fashion, these youth appear to be more self-actualized and socially empowered. Their individual actions reflect an integrated perception and value of community membership. They often demonstrate an intention to remain committed to the group and assume leadership roles within the process. As youth become empowered and their personal maturity increases, they are more likely to continue being agents of social change in the community.

Evidence of collective group empowerment can be seen more pragmatically. Such empowered groups have a high degree of satisfaction among their members and are effective at mobilizing resources and achieving the desired outcomes of their activities. Cumulatively, success at having achieved group project goals results in a greater degree of satisfaction overall and often expands the membership of the group (Holosko et al., 2001). Functionally, groups that are highly empowered create their own identity and history, and are able to sustain themselves with minimal adult supervision.

Community empowerment can be seen in a broader context that is influenced by both individual and group outcomes. For example, the specific number of youth activities achieved provides concrete evidence of the evolution of youth empowerment in the community. Conceptual indictors would pertain to changes in the perception of youth empowerment by the larger community (e.g., youth being formally recognized by civic leaders as viable and important members of the community) (Holosko et al., 2001).

Concluding Remarks

Youth volunteer involvement in communities has been shown to impact them in various positive ways. These include enhancing responsibility and community commitment (Brendtro & Bacon, 1995); strengthening ties to the community (Swinehart, 1992); strengthening opportunities for meaningful civic engagement (Safrit, Scheer, & King, 2001); and strengthening empathy, engagement, empowerment, and personal enrichment (Safrit, 2002). Conspicuously absent in the literature are models or frameworks which involve youth as true partners in community-based volunteer programs.

As indicated by Safrit (2002), "many not-for-profit administrators and program leaders often experience frustration as they seek to design, implement, and manage community-based programs involving teens" (p.21). This article seeks to contribute literature to offset this concern. A guiding principle for volunteer program administrators is that activities are grounded on the process of engaging individuals, which serve as a catalyst for community change. The efficacy of any model of

empowerment within an applied context is dependent on maximizing the process of engagement (Safrit). Summarily, effective models for youth empowerment through volunteerism should consider three core elements: 1) the environmental context, 2) the level of interactive, and 3) identified knowledge-based outcomes for individual youth as well as the program group and the community. If such elements are meaningfully incorporated into volunteer programs, the likelihood of the youth's empowerment and future community service will be greatly enhanced.

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