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ORIGINAL PAPER

Youth Action Research for Prevention: A Multi-level Intervention Designed to Increase Efficacy and Empowerment Among Urban Youth

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Abstract Youth Action Research for Prevention (YARP), a federally funded research and demonstration intervention, utilizes youth empowerment as the cornerstone of a multi-level intervention designed to reduce and/or delay onset of drug and sex risk, while increasing individual and collective efficacy and educational expectations. The intervention, located in Hartford Connecticut, served 114 African-Caribbean and Latino high school youth in a community education setting and a matched comparison group of 202 youth from 2001 to 2004. The strategy used in YARP begins with individuals, forges group identity and cohesion, trains youth as a group to use research to understand their community better (formative community ethnography), and then engages them in using the research for social action at multiple levels in community settings (policy, school-based, parental etc.) Engagement in community activism has, in turn, an effect on individual and collective efficacy and individual behavioral change. This approach is unique insofar as it differs from multilevel interventions that create approaches to attack multiple levels simultaneously. We describe the YARP intervention and employ qualitative and quantitative data from the quasi-experimental evaluation study design to assess the way in which the YARP approach empowered individual youth and groups of youth (youth networks) to engage in social action in their schools, communities and at the policy level, which in turn affected their attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords Action research · Youth · Empowerment · Multilevel · Intervention

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Introduction

Urban low-income youth of color often find themselves caught in a range of risk-promoting structural (e.g., environmental and social) factors that affect their lives and influence their attitudes and behaviors. Continuous disinvestment in marginalized urban neighborhoods compounds the general stresses associated with poverty, including under-resourced schools and high levels of exposure to organized and informal drug sales and use, violence, and sexual risks including unwanted pregnancies, sexual harassment and violence, infection and HIV. For some youth these risks are counterbalanced by protective factors including caring, supportive parents and other adults, positive peer influences, the presence of social, health, cultural, and church groups and organizations, and committed school and youth service professionals. For others, the risks are exacerbated by difficult family circumstances, lack of connection to social support systems, and negative school experiences. The complex, and at times contradictory, factors that define the lives of low income Black and Latino urban youth require identifying and addressing specific multilevel cultural and contextual factors that promote risk, and enhance protection and can contribute to the design, implementation, and assessment of prevention interventions.

This paper describes an intervention to reduce and/or delay onset of drug and sexual risk in urban adolescents entitled Youth Action Research for Prevention (YARP). Some prevention strategies introduce intervention activities at multiple levels to bring about individual level outcomes. What makes this approach unique is its use of intervention techniques through staff training, individual and group work, and youth social networks to empower participants to envision and enact social interventions and advocacy.

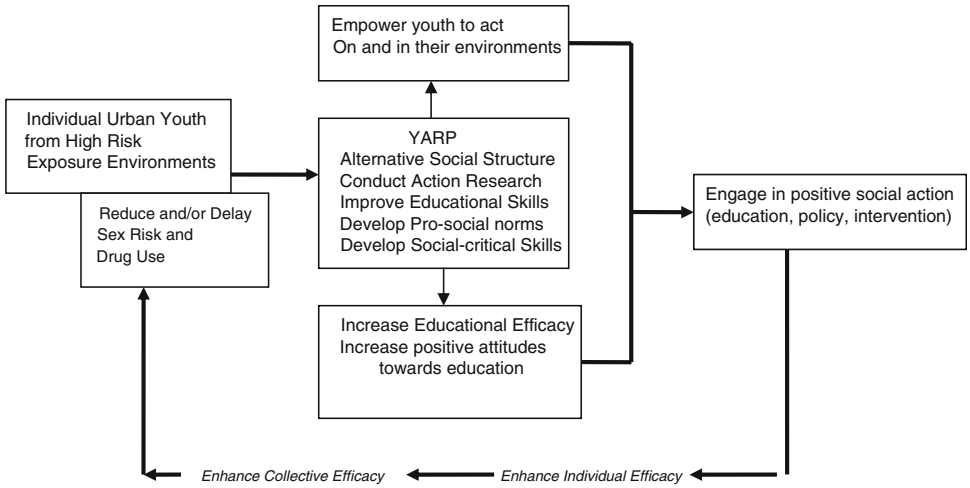

Fig. 1 YARP interactive research intervention design

The enactment of these social change efforts is targeted toward bringing about change at multiple levels, which in turn, results in individual level psychosocial and behavioral changes. Referring to the chart in the introduction to this issue, we can say that this intervention exemplifies an individual level intervention conducted in a group setting, focused on bringing about multi-level changes. These changes or outcomes then interact with other dimensions of the intervention to affect and strengthen desired changes in the intervention participants (individual level).

YARP is a 3-year summer and after school research and demonstration project. It works with youth between the ages of 14 and 16, a developmental period when adolescents seek more autonomy from parents and prioritize the importance of peer opinions and relationships (Conger 1991; Douvan and Adelson 1966; Mussen 1973). The model grew out of years of deep engagement within the Hartford, Connecticut community, using participatory ethnography to understand the needs and lives of young people, engaging youth in discussing and assessing the design of projects antecedent to YARP, linking grounded theory that emerged from these community based research-action training projects with established theories, developing a core curriculum, and testing different aspects of the approach through a series of interventions designed to bring about individual, group and community level change (Berg et al. 2002; Berg 2004; Schensul and Berg 2004). The YARP intervention[1] builds on the experience of these previous projects as it systematically test ICR's approach to Youth PAR.

The primary hypothesis underlying the Youth PAR approach is that group-conducted research for action along with involvement in multilevel social change activities (or activism) reinforces group cohesion and individual and collective efficacy. Figure 1 depicts these interactions illustrating how the intervention moves from the micro level (individual and group) to the meso, exo, and macro levels via youth action, and back to group and individual level effects.

YARP utilizes ecological modeling and critical analysis for three purposes: (a) framing youth self reflection, (b) intervention implementation, and (c) multilevel action/advocacy and outcome analysis. In the early stages of the intervention youth use an ecological framework to explore their "multiple selves" in different socio-geographic contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In framing their research question and action strategies, they use an ecological approach to explore how issues are affected by multiple-layered domains. Youth also engage in critical analysis of socio-historical antecedents, power analysis, and an examination of policies, laws, organizations, and cultural practices that affect their lives and that they wish to understand and alter. Thus the analytical framework conflates ecological modeling and critical analysis into an approach that we call "eco-critical" analysis. They use the same ecological framework and their research results to make decisions and to act upon the world. Youth learn to negotiate with one another, and to engage with other community partners in making decisions and taking action at multiple levels, that reflect the needs of their community (Roth 2000; Roth and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Pittman and Irby 1998). The process reinforces group cohesive and community connectedness and results in positive individual level developmental outcomes. These pathways are interactive and iterative. Youth develop in interaction with their

[1] Antecedents to YARP include: Teen Action Research Project (CSAP 5H86SP001441-05, 1989–1994 PI, Jean J. Schensul); Urban Women against Substance Abuse: UWASA (CSAP #HD1 SP06758, 1994–1999, PI: Jean J. Schensul, PD: Marlene J. Berg); The Minority Youth Action Research Institute (NIMH #1R25 MH58772, PI: Jean J. Schensul), 1998–2003. Additional support for model development was provided through the CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and Capital Workforce Partners summer youth employment funding allowed ICR to hire teens as youth researchers.

groups. Group identity is reinforced through constant engagement with research and action goals. Accomplishment of action goals at multiple levels reinforces group identity and the combination of skills, social relationships, and activist successes has an effect on individual development.

In this paper we will focus our description of the YARP intervention on the process through which youth come to decide upon and affect multiple level outcomes and illustrate how change that takes place in youth participants results from their engagement in collaborative, participatory research and their acting collectively upon their world. We will also discuss the challenges of conducting, documenting and evaluating a multi-level intervention model of this type.

Study Design

YARP, drawing upon interactive agentic processes, aims to affect change at multiple levels; specifically:

a. At the *individual level* YARP is designed to:
   1) Increase positive attitudes toward education;
   2) Develop critical social analytic skills;
   3) Instill self efficacy and a sense of hope and empowerment to act; and
   4) Reduce and/or delay drug and sex risks;
b. At the *group level* YARP aims to develop group cohesion, develop group prosocial norms, and collective efficacy regarding the ability to act effectively upon the world (i.e., their communities) as a group both as a component of the intervention and as a consequence; and
c. At the *community level* YARP, via youth advocacy and action, seeks to bring about community level change in policies and institutions that affect youth.

Outcomes at the individual level are measured using a quasi-experimental design (intervention group and matched comparison group) and a panel study with a preassessment and three follow-up assessments at the end of the summer, at mid year, and at 12 months (4 time points). Outcomes at the group level are measured with network analytic techniques, group level measures gathered from individuals, and qualitative documentation of group formation and development throughout the intervention. Outcomes at the community level are measured through qualitative documentation of advocacy and related actions, and their results over time.

The intervention is conducted in a youth-responsive environment, and delivered by prevention research educators who receive training in action research methods, and empowerment-oriented, social construction facilitation skills designed to achieve the desired results. These youth research educators are the mediators through which the intervention is implemented. Their research ability, critical instructional and advocacy skills and their ability to relate to as well as to challenge youth are central to the success of the intervention.

Theory and Application

Eight critical theoretically based elements are fundamental to ICR's Youth PAR model. These elements govern the planning, development and implementation of the YARP intervention, are evidenced in curricular activities, and inform interactions between staff and youth researchers as well as between the youth researchers themselves (cf. Schensul et al. 2004). They include:

- Addressing individual ***identity formation*** using an ***interdisciplinary, constructivist perspective*** and building culturally-specific social, emotional, and cognitive competencies;
- Building a strong sense of ***group identity and affiliation*** through activities and actions that strengthen historical knowledge and understanding, value ***multiple perspectives*** and bridge differences;
- Identifying and reflecting upon ***environmental and personal risk and protective factors*** for prevention and growth, using an ***eco-critical analytic process***;
- Establishing youth priorities for ***research and action by*** enabling them to generate a grounded theory of "causality" and change;
- Learning and conducting community based ***research methods*** as the basis for personal growth, social analysis, and social action;
- Integrating PAR activities with ***learning skills*** in mathematics, social studies; communications (reading, writing, speaking), ***critical thinking*** and ***problem solving***;
- ***Employing high school age youth*** as youth researchers; and
- Implementing new social roles for youth as ***Youth-PAR advocates for social change***.

YARP strategies derive from prevention, cognitive, and critical theory including: (a) ecological theory; (b) identity theory, (c) learning and instructional theories (including social learning, social construction, and multiple intelligence), and (d) critical, transformative theories including voice, empowerment, and action research (Gilligan 1982; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McTaggert 1991; Fine and Torre 2006; Freire 1972, 1982, 1985; Fals-Borda 1987).

Ecological Theories

Articulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and expanded upon by Dryfoos (1990), ecological theory situates individuals in a social system, refutes the idea that meaningful change can occur by intervening with the individual alone, and provides an analytic framework with which to identify sources of influence, power, and oppression (Prilleltensky et al. 2001; Prilleltensky 2003). The ecological model is reframed and expanded through identification of risk and protective factors at the individual level for desired outcomes (Hawkins et al. 1992). YARP takes advantage of both frameworks. Ecological theory is used critically to identify and locate power differentials at the community and policy levels and to identify and move toward change strategies on these levels that mediate power and improve conditions for youth. It is applied behaviorally, as individual and group social and health risks and stressors and supports in various domains (family, peer, school, etc.) are examined in relation to their effects on the individual. It is used to identify action strategies directed towards family, peers, schools, and policy, which are developed to address the identified issue. YARP first introduces youth to the concept of ecological modeling and then engages them in developing and using research as a tool for questioning, understanding, and addressing issues that they identify as necessary from intersecting critical and behavioral ecological perspectives. In much the same way that the intervention operates on multiple levels, youth learn that they must construct multi-leveled research designs and develop action strategies that focus on the individual, the family, and the peer group, as well as address structural constraints within institutions such as schools, that are supposed to serve them and city and state governance affecting the quality of life for youth.

Identity Theory

Identity building is a major task of adolescence. It is multidimensional, complex and situational (Phinney 1990). For low-income, urban, African/Caribbean-American, and Latino youth it is imperative that interventions recognize and help them to understand and to negotiate the complex and multiple aspects of their identities and to explore how identity is developed, transformed and adapted in relation to different settings and situations (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Urban, minority youth are frequently marginalized by schools and other formal institutions. They often have limited access and little opportunities for gaining assistance in understanding and negotiating many of the contradictions that they see and experience between home, community, and school (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Arnett 2004). Deficit perspectives regarding minority youth tend to focus on comparisons to the dominant culture, failing to recognize intra-group diversity, and missing opportunities to build upon important mediators between difficult social and economic circumstances and youths' behaviors and achievements (McLoyd 2006). The conditions of adaptation, acculturation, adjustment, discrimination, institutional racism, and confrontation, require approaches to alternative educational experiences and informal youth development, which enhance competencies, agency, and future options and that situate identities within the social, ideological and economic environments in which youth live and make sense of the world (Garcia Coll et al. 2000). By drawing on cultural strengths and exploring identity in YARP, youth learn to understand how negative and positive perspectives regarding ethnic and racial groups are social constructions that influence their own and others' thinking and action and as such can be changed (Scales et al. 2000). They also learn how to manage and negotiate their identities in different contexts, arriving at definable selves at specific moments in time, and in specific sociocultural settings (Schachter 2004). One exercise engages youth in exploring the multiplicity of their individual identities by portraying their authentic, negotiated and projected selves, while another, entitled "gender boxes" helps them understand the constricting nature of assuming the dominant cultural perspective of gender identities. As youth engage in dialogue related to these exercises, they come to recognize how enacting their proscribed categorical identities as stable across contexts, one-dimensional, and uncomplicated is limiting and disempowering. This promotes positive individual and group development by enhancing resilience in youth, who at times find it necessary to negotiate in environments that ignore or devalue them, their background and their culture.

Learning and Instructional Theories

Social learning/development theory drives the emphasis on group formation and group work. Social learning theory argues that a reorganization of social structures, rules for interaction, socialization agents and role models, and a reorientation of the cultural and individually-learned norms, values and behaviors as a basis for developing self esteem and personal identity will redirect high school-aged experimenters away from alcohol and drug use and sales (Bandura 1977a, b; Catalano et al. 1996; Funkhouser and Amatetti 1987; Hawkins et al. 1985; Bopp et al. 1984). The intervention creates alternative social structures (peer groups) that are facilitated in a manner that assist youth develop efficacy as they work together to co-construct and reinforce prosocial rules for interaction and positive peer norms, values and behaviors.

Social construction theory guides the instructional process. Youth construct their social realities (behavioral

rules, norms, beliefs and practices; Berger and Luckmann 1967). Changing peer culture to support pro-prevention norms requires a guided process through which youth are assisted to identify both positive and negative norms, discuss them, and negotiate conflicts of options to arrive at agreement regarding prosocial norms. This process promotes the identification of ways of avoiding drug, violence and related risks and reinforcing these new norms with their peers. In this way, groups of youth socially construct new group prevention norms. The process is especially effective for enhancing higher-level thinking (information use, problem solving and decision-making), competence motivation (norms, expectancies, self efficacy), and interpersonal skills (negotiation and consensus building) that we believe to be central to improving both educational performance, and alcohol, drug and sex related risk reduction in youth (Schensul 1998).

YARP employs a cooperative learning approach. Cooperative learning (based on social learning theory) emphasizes the social context whereby learning results from mutual interaction and exchange of ideas among participants and offers a set of procedures that assist groups of youth to learn and act together (Bandura 1977a, b; Johnson and Johnson 1999). Instruction incorporates the Multiple Intelligences framework suggested by Gardner (Gardner 1983, 1993), which encourages activities that draw on all intelligences to engage youth who may not be well served by the typical linear cognitive approaches to learning utilized in most public school settings. A PAR approach utilizes all of these theoretical frameworks to actively involve groups of youth in information collection and group decisions around activism to improve social conditions for themselves and their peers (Schensul 1998; Greenwood and Levin 1998; Whyte 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2001).

Critical Transformational Theories

Empowerment and transformative change at the individual, group, community, and structural levels are central to Youth PAR. Critical theories focus analysis on structural barriers to achieving greater equity and work from the premise that formal and informal educational institutions have a responsibility to address issues of inequity through the engagement of students and instructors in a critical analysis of the structures of power, dominance, and oppression (Giroux 1981, p. 130). One purpose of such analysis is to improve life chances for students who are marginalized. Gramsci suggests that when trying to locate mechanism of domination, particular attention should be given to 'everyday' routine structures and 'common sense' values (Gitlin 1994) and this advice is particularly relevant when engaging youth in critical analysis of media and other forces of popular culture that have influence in their lives and thinking. Foucault's work on power and Bordieu's work on structures of oppression also inform the theory and practice of PAR (Foucault 1982; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) along with Paulo Freire's work, which articulates the right of people living in oppressed circumstances to conduct a transformational analysis of their own reality leading to radical change (Freire 1995). Each of these frames of reference emphasizes the oppressive nature of traditional power structures, while continuing to demonstrate the importance of maintaining "hope" (Gramsci 1971) a concept that connects structural analysis to action and empowerment. Maintaining "hope" and possibility, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers, has particular significance when working with young people. As they use social research to understand issues affecting them and their communities from a structural as well as individual level perspective, youth often initially experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Facilitating the processes of collective action and incorporating reflection helps youth move through this stage in the process, which in turn results in increased agency at both the individual and group levels.

While the YARP intervention is informed by multiple theories, measurement of social cohesion, social networks, self- and collective efficacy are described in more depth since they are most salient in explaining how groups of connected youth (networks) engage in social action in their schools, communities and at the policy level and how that engagement in turn affects their attitudes and behaviors relative to drug and sex risk and education.

The YARP Intervention

Study Setting

The YARP program is located in Hartford, Connecticut, a city of about 125,000 residents. The majority of the population (approximately 80%) is Latino or African/Caribbean-American, and many of them are poor or lower income working class. Activists often describe Hartford as a small city with big city problems. These problems, which include disinvestment, poor schools, the lack of affordable, good quality housing, and accessible, decent paying jobs, have a significant bearing on the quality of life for Hartford's youth. They affect teens' perceptions of the city, which they see as both challenged and, at the same time, as a source of important relationships, supports and social life. The negative aspects of the environment that youth perceive are reflected in the issues that they choose to study, such as sex at an early age and teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, stress, exposure to violence, teen hustling

and drug use. The importance of supportive relationships emerges as youth discuss assets and strengths in the city that they can draw upon as they seek to act on identified problems.

The intervention (2001–2004) includes two major programmatic subcomponents. The Summer Youth Research Institute (SYRI) introduces participating youth to action research for prevention. The school-year after-school program enables youth to translate their prevention research results into actions and interventions designed to promote positive peer norms and to have an effect on other youth and the broader community. Educational and career counseling and mentoring, designed to expose youth to educational and career options and opportunities, are embedded in both the summer and school-year program which follows.

ICR's ***Participatory Action Research Curriculum for Empowering Youth*** serves as the guide for the summer (Sydlo et al. 2000). Summer training activities are organized by week as shown in Table 1.

Over the 3-year intervention study, YARP trained three cohorts of urban youth to become Youth Action Researchers, through participation in a 4 hour daily, 7 week SYRI followed by an 8 month action implementation/reflection period (October–May). Each YARP cohort discussed, and agreed upon a study topic related to adolescent risk behavior and conducted mixed methods research on that topic following the protocol outlined above during the summer. They then developed their collective action plans and programs, which were designed to change public norms and promote social advocacy around issues of concern to youth at the school, community and policy levels and to develop and promote positive youth action programs in schools and youth serving agencies, throughout the school year. Each project involved a set of actions, a team of organizational collaborators, and one or more target audiences. Steps involved reviewing the data, transforming the research model into a social action model by identifying social actions related to each predictor domain in their research model, and planning, conducting and reflecting on actions.

Cohort 1 youth researched ***risky teen sex***, using observations, interviews, pilesorts, and survey research. They developed a research model based on their own understanding of youth "culture" that included substance use (micro level) media influence (macro level) and peer pressure (meso level) as predictors of risky teen sex. In their view, personal emotions acted as mediators between these predictors and risky teen sex. The youth researchers then used their research findings to: (1) create a scripted PSA (in English and Spanish) on the dangers of substance use and how it may lead to risky teen sex, which was aired on the radio as well as at schools (media level); (2) construct a game entitled "Do You Know Your Music" (with game board and a montage of videos, commercials and TV shows along with focus group questions) on media influence and risky teen sex, which they used in conjunction with educational focus groups that they conducted with groups of teens (group level); and (3) scripted, enacted and taped a 15 min video entitled: "*I Remember That Night…*" focused on substance use and risky teen sex, which was accompanied with questions for a focus group held with parents and well as with other teens (family and peer levels). One aspect of the focus-group activity involved youth stepping out of the roles they portrayed in the video and engaging in conversation with the "audience" regarding how they felt

Table 1 Summer Youth Research Institute (SYRI) curriculum topics

Week 1	Building relationships, exploring identity, assessing learning styles, and introduction to group and cooperative learning processes.
Week 2	Introduction to participatory action research through a "mock court" analogy, learning ecological thinking (risk and protective factors; power analysis and potential change strategies at multiple levels); introduction to research methods and action strategies by rotating through a series of learning stations; and selection of a research issue. In addition, this week youth visit one or two colleges in the New England area.
Week 3	Generating a "horizontal" research model, a group formative theory of prediction and change in relation to their issue; vertical modeling or deconstructing each of the variable domains in the research model. Training in research methods such as in-depth interviewing, survey, elicitation (cognitive mapping), visual research and geographic/social mapping. Youth use operationalized domains to construct their own data collection instruments. Other activities include: introduction to literature search, research ethics, reflection on the connections between research and personal experiences, risk exposures and aspirations
Weeks 4 & 5	Pilot testing data collection instruments and consent forms, revising, seeking expedited IRB approval, collecting data from other youth and adults through interviewing, setting up databases for data entry, and entering data. Visiting a second set of colleges.
Week 6	Completing data collection, and data entry; conducting data analyses within method groups; triangulating data gathered through different methods; analyzing data in relation to research model.
Week 7	Completing data analysis, preparing research results for final presentation, practicing presentation, considering potential action strategies; presenting the research project, results and potential action strategies to the public, obtaining feedback.

during the performance, which stimulated further self-critical reflection. As youth engaged in an action strategy designed to bring about change in thinking at peer and family levels, critical reflection helped them to reconsider their own individual level attitudes and behaviors.

Cohort 2 youth studied ***teen dropouts***, using interviewing, mapping, visual research, pile sorting, and surveys. They developed a model that included teen pregnancy, substance use, and family issues as independent variable domains and stress as the mediator, in predicting whether or not teens would drop out of school. At the community level a grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts enabled the visual research group to receive training in photography and show their work at a photography exhibit at Capitol Community College in an interactive exhibit entitled *Explorations of the Visual: Researching Material Culture through a collection of photographs by Hartford Youth*. The photographs youth took reflected their examination of how the environment might contribute to influencing a teenager to drop out of school. Documentation of audience reaction to the exhibit revealed that viewers came to see environmental aspects that they had not been consciously aware of and helped youth understand how elements, which are commonplace in one's everyday life, can inadvertently impact one's thinking and performance. As one 16-year-old viewer expressed it: "I see it all around (used condoms, empty alcohol bottles, drug paraphernalia) but (the project) opened my eyes to the reality. So much is around the neighborhood, it's scary". Another youth added: "I did not know how much drugs would be found around the schools and parks"; while a third suggested "you do not concentrate on school because you want to get high".

In addition to the exhibit, Cohort 2's action strategies included holding communication workshops for teens and parents (family and peer levels), creating a brochure on resources for dissemination (community), and producing a video on how substance use/abuse, family problems, and teen pregnancy leads to stress, which in turn can result in teens dropping out of school. They showed this video to parents and other teens in community settings (family and peer level) and presented it to health educators as part of an in-service training session designed to consider more relevant ways of presenting health education topics to students (institutional level). In conjunction with some of these teachers, the youth used the video as the basis for discussing the relationship between teen pregnancy and dropping out in several Hartford high school health classes. This action strategy enabled youth to contribute to improving the relevancy of health education materials and approaches to education by offering a research-based alternative that resonated with Hartford youths' lives and experiences.

Youth researcher-activists from Cohort 3 studied ***teen hustling***, a term referring to selling items that were pirated, stolen, traded, or illegal. They reasoned that "hustling" was quite prevalent in Hartford and in other urban, low income areas because of personal financial situations, family issues and peer influence. To test their model they collected data using a survey of youth, interviews with youth and adults including police and community agency representatives and visual research to construct a case study of a teen hustler in words and pictures. Additionally, they gathered information from youth about where different goods and services were exchanged (i.e., "hustled"), which they mapped in order to analyze the relationship between hustling and income. The data suggested that if youth had other alternatives for generating income for themselves or their families they more readily could resist peer influence and avoid the legal consequences of being caught in illegal activities. Thus they concluded that it would be important to advocate for and create more youth employment opportunities.

At the community level the youth used their data in visits with their state representatives, where they educated them about the importance of youth employment programs. They contacted and collaborated with other youth in organizing a rally for youth employment at the State Capitol. They made a presentation to members of the Education and Employment Committees of the Hartford City Council, appeared on local public access television, and wrote an op-ed on the importance of youth employment for the local newspaper, the Hartford Courant. These action strategies were linked with advocacy efforts of other youth and adults and resulted in a state investment of 6 million dollars in summer and year round employment and learning programs as well as an allocation of City of Hartford funds to supplement state funding.

This group of youth also created and implemented workshops for parents and youth on the prevalence and causes of teen hustling (peer and family level). They included special workshops for middle school youth since they learned that engagement in hustling activities often starts at an early age. In their workshops for parents and other adults they drew on research findings related to how hustling increased among youth who said that it was accepted and prevalent in their families to demonstrate how family actions and norms impact youth behavior. They developed a jobs bulletin board and website for teens that served as the base for funding to create a teen-led job service at one city high school in Hartford. The following year youth action researchers developed a youth-led job service within one school's career counseling center (institutional level). They reasoned that a school based, youth-led employment service would encourage more teens to use the school's guidance and career services,

which to date had served a relatively small number of students. Building the job program within the counseling center required that students solicit job listings in the community surrounding the school. Youth Action Researchers hypothesized that this positive contact with adults in the neighborhood would alleviate troubled youth–adult relationships. Unfortunately jobs were not forthcoming from the community and ICR was unable to enlist another community agency to continue to sustain the effort and support the youth in the following year. Hence the youths' hypotheses regarding the potential positive effect of a school-based, youth-led employment service on students' use of regular school guidance services could not be tested.

Evaluating Outcomes

At the individual level a quasi-experimental design was used to evaluate the effect of the combined action research training program and subsequent collective activism on individuals and cohorts. We assessed the youth-conducted social interventions by observing and documenting youth activities and the responses of various target audiences and collaborators, and by encouraging youth to engage in ongoing reflection on their activities, which was also documented. We employed a mixed methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative data, to describe the way in which the YARP approach empowered individual youth and groups of youth (youth networks) to engage in social action in their schools, communities and at the policy level, how social action transpired to bring about structural or other changes, and how this process cycled back to affect youth attitudes and behaviors regarding drug and sex risk and education.

Methods

The evaluation study design for the *Youth Action Research for Prevention* project compared changes in three cohorts of urban youth participating in the project intervention with changes in a matched sample of three cohorts of non-participating urban youth. The summer component, SYRI, engaged approximately 35 youth per cohort (total $N = 114$). The youth action researchers were evenly divided between females (51%) and males (49%). They ranged in age from 14 to 17 with a mean age of 15.2 years. Participants were predominately African- and Caribbean-American/Black (47%) and Latino (41%), with 12% identifying as mixed, white and/or a member of newly arrived groups, including Bosnians and Iraqis. Most youth were either first or second year high school students; the mean grade for the entire group was 9.4. About 75% of the youth ($N = 87$) successfully completed the follow-on, school year program.

A Comparison group of 202 youth was recruited from other summer youth employment programs in the City of Hartford and matched by neighborhood, age, race/ethnicity, and sex. Evaluation staff recruited the comparison group through a series of presentations to youth groups at their employment sites, where initial assessments were conducted. Comparison youth received an incentive of $10 for each completed assessment. Detailed personal tracking information enabled follow-up testing during the school year.

Intervention and comparison group members, obtained parental consent and provided informed assent to participate in the research study, which included completing self-administered outcome evaluation instruments, using pencil and paper, at 4 time points: pre and post the intensive summer intervention and at the mid point and end of the school year extension intervention. In addition, the intervention group completed a network analysis, designed to measure group level effects and the effects of the group on individual level outcomes, at these same 4 time points. All instruments were administered on a group basis; youth completed them independently, with evaluators available to assist with wording clarifications as necessary.

Attrition for the intervention and comparison groups was (17.4%). The impact of attrition was examined by comparing those who completed all four assessments to those who did not. Chi square and independent samples *t*-tests were performed to compare demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, age and education level) between the two groups; these tests indicated no difference between those who left and those who remained in the sample on these measures. A MANOVA was performed to ascertain whether or not there were differences on the baseline values of intermediate and long-term outcomes. The overall MANOVA was not statistically significant (Wilks' Lambda $= .81$, $p > .05$). Therefore, it appears that there are not any substantial differences between those who completed and those who did not complete all assessments.

Baseline equivalence was assessed to ensure that the treatment and comparison groups were not statistically different on any demographic and/or intermediate and long-range outcomes at baseline. There were no statistically significant differences on demographic variables (gender, ethnicity, age, and grade level). A MANOVA was performed to assess differences on all outcomes. The overall MANOVA was not statistically significant (Wilks' Lambda $= .390$, $p = .585$). Results of univariate tests, however, suggest that there were baseline differences between the groups in Cohorts two and three in terms of: (1) age (control group was older, mean age of 15.56 compared to 15.17 for treatment, $p = .003$); (2) social

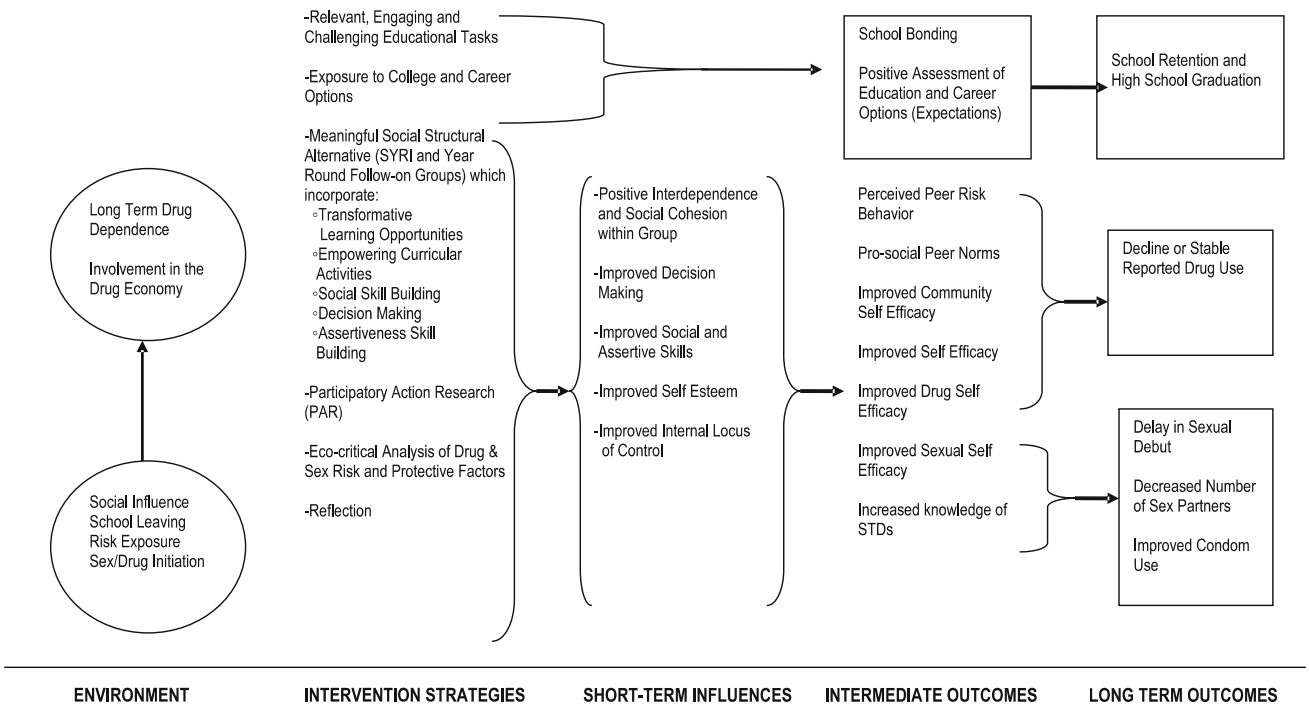

Fig. 2 YARP logic model

skills (treatment group had better skills, $p = .044$); (3) self-esteem (treatment group had higher self-esteem, $p = .013$); and (3) school bonding (treatment group reported higher levels, $p = .020$). Therefore, these variables have been incorporated as co-variates in analyses.

The research design outlined a series of testable hypotheses, which are graphically depicted in the logic model in Fig. 2.

Relative to the discussion in this paper, we hypothesized that an increase in group cohesion (group level—short term outcome), which emerges from engaging in group research, is necessary before group members can feel efficacious in their ability to work together to bring about change in their community (community level—collective efficacy, an intermediate outcome). We also reasoned that collective efficacy would result in delaying onset of drug use and reducing use among existing users and delaying or reducing risky sexual activity.

Measures

The outcome data collection instrument incorporated the following measures: (1) Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) measures of client outcomes, such as 30-day use of alcohol, marijuana and other drugs; (2) Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP 1999) core measures including scales for school bonding and retention, disapproval of drug use, self esteem, social skills, assertiveness skills, perceived drug risk, attitudes toward drug use, and beliefs about peer norms; (3) selected items and scales which measure educational expectations, sexual self efficacy, and drug self efficacy [Social and Health Assessment Instrument (SAHA; Barone et al. 1995; Schwab-Stone et al. 1995) developed for use in the New Haven Public Schools]; and (4) collective efficacy was measured by a modified 11-item scale on community efficacy (Israel et al. 1994; Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988).[2] ICR also constructed scenarios to enable the contextual assessment of sexual and drug self-efficacy.

The outcome instrument was complemented by a process evaluation of the intervention, which included interviews with staff, ethnographic observation, youth focus groups, and youth self-reflection. A network data collection instrument measures group structure, social cohesion, social bonding, and interdependence within program networks through a series of questions that ask how well members of the group were known, trusted, turned to for advice regarding education and work, and turned to for advice regarding drugs and sex (Lee and Robbins 1995).

Systematic observation was used to gather data on implementation, the emergence of prevention group norms, and other factors that might influence outcomes, as well as

[2] While a few of the items on this scale were reworded to reflect youth rather than adult collective engagement; reliability was maintained (original alpha score was .71 and YARP reliability was .72).

to assess intervention fidelity. The observation coding schema was developed and refined over the initial 3 weeks of the intervention and reviewed with each new cohort. The approach involved two evaluation assistants systematically comparing observations from the same activity with the PI and senior evaluation staff members. In addition, the PI and senior evaluator observed and coded a sample of activities. Once a high level of inter-rater reliability was obtained, an observation sampling plan was created to assign the two evaluation assistants to specific activities each day. Evaluators observed and coded: (a) facilitators' use of the modeling, scaffolding, explication and reflection to enable social construction within a group; (b) multiple perspective taking, consensus building, and cognitive conflict group processes; (c) the manner in which cognitive conflicts were resolved using a 7 point scale which ranged from no resolution to social negation to idea synthesis; and (d) youth experiences and attitudes regarding environmental risk exposure, sex, and drug risk. A sample of sessions were also video recorded and the results, along with coded observation notes, were reviewed with youth facilitators as a component of staff development designed to improve intervention integrity.

Findings

For the purpose of this paper we focus on: (1). descriptions of facilitator performance, (2). social cohesion as measured by the network instrument, (3). intermediate outcome measures related to peer norms and collective efficacy—those variables which relate to the ability to engage in social action, (4). descriptions of social action, and (5). the interrelationship among multiple levels within the intervention and their interactions with individual-level behavioral outcomes.

Facilitators are an integral component of this group level intervention, which is designed to engage youth in co-constructing pro-social group norms in a contrived environment that they will in turn generalize to their natural environments. Facilitators must be well trained in social construction facilitation techniques, able to suspend the desire to direct youth decision-making, and skilled in posing questions that challenge youth to negotiate and consider alternative perspectives. Observation data indicates that the more often facilitators engaged youth in multiple perspective taking and scaffolded them, both as individuals and as a group, to engage in cognitive conflict, the more often the group came to prosocial resolutions during discussions of risk. Moreover, we found that reflection activities that provided youth with the opportunity to personalize more abstract elements from their research and action to their everyday life and decisions had a positive effect on the attitudes and opinions that youth expressed in the group as well as on behaviors that they exhibited.

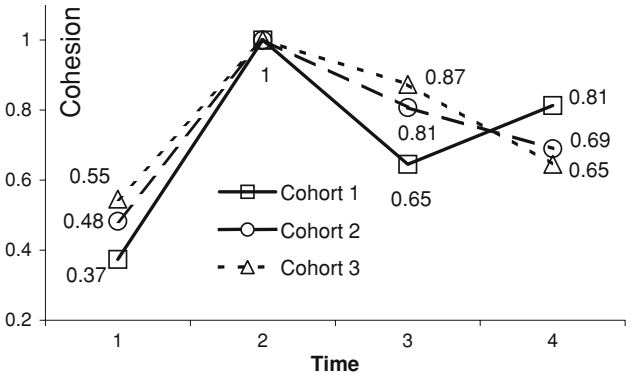

Fig. 3 Network cohesion

Social Cohesion was measured through the network instrument. One of the questions on the network instrument: "I talk to this person about problems that have to do with drugs or sex (0 = never, 1 = every once in a while, 2 = regularly every week or more)" is used to assess network formation among youth. Using Cohort 1 as an example, in the pretest condition, network cohesion was .37, with a corresponding 63% fragmentation (See Fig. 3). This indicates that nearly two-thirds of the possible ties between network members were disconnected. In the posttest condition, presented in Fig. 3, network cohesion was 1 and fragmentation 0, indicating that all possible ties between network members were connected and that they were indeed talking with each other about problems related to drugs and sex. Cohesion then dropped to .64 at time 3, reflecting the realignment of connections among youth who stayed through the school year portion of the program, and increased again at time 4 to .81. A similar pattern of cohesion over time was observed across all three cohorts.

In addition we explored the effect of network cohesion on relevant outcomes such as community self-efficacy and drug disapproval. To do this, we evaluated the similarity of self-reported community self-efficacy and drug disapproval at post tests 3 and 4, of those who remained in the network or program group after post test 1 (end of summer program) as compared to those who dropped out. Based on Levene's tests for equality of variances, which assesses homogeneity of variances, we found that participants who remained in the network at time 3 were more similar in their self-reported community self-efficacy and disapproval of drug use than those who dropped from the network, $F(94) = 7.27$ and $F(90) = 4.00$, with $p = .008$ and $p = .049$, respectively. This pattern continued through Time 4 but the difference between variances was not significant. Moreover, remaining participants had higher levels of both community self-efficacy and disapproval of

drug use than those who dropped (mean score of 23.4 vs. 22.7 and 21.7 vs. 19, respectively). These findings suggest that for multi-level interventions, network instrument measures should be included in modeling the effect of the intervention through group level processes.

Peer Norms and Collective Efficacy

The YARP intervention had an effect in the intended direction on intermediate range social-cognitive variables including peer norms and collective efficacy. Controlling for baseline differences, intervention youth shifted to believing that fewer peers were using drugs ($p = 049$) at Time 3. In addition, youth approval of peers' drug use and educational expectations, while originally showing undesired or negative increases at Time 2, began to change in the desired direction at Time 3. In both cases the results approach statistical significance (.084 and .091) and demonstrate an important theoretical PAR construct articulated by Freire as praxis. Praxis refers to the integration of theory and practice rather than focusing on one or the other (Freire 1972). In the case of YARP, theory stems from the intersection of research based on indigenous models, with reflection on both the research and the action that flows from it. The conduct of participatory research during the summer was sufficient for creating group cohesion and a high level of interaction within groups, in discussing issues like drugs and sex as demonstrated by the network analysis, but was not sufficient to demonstrate a measurable effect on peer norms related to education and drug use. However, when the youth research component of the intervention was combined with on the ground action and reflection during the school year, positive change became noticeable, including increased educational expectations and stronger disapproval of peer drug use both of which approached significance of .09 and .08, respectively.

The same pattern was seen in relation to development of community level self-efficacy. The collective action strategies described earlier in the YARP Intervention section provide examples of social action undertaken by youth. Immediately following the summer research experience, we observed a reduction in community efficacy, a proxy measure for group agency and empowerment. However, once youth were able to move their research to action and reflect on the impact, those in the intervention group experienced a significant increase in community-level efficacy as compared to youth in the comparison group at Time 3 ($p < .05$) and this increase was sustained through Time 4.

The interaction among the multiple levels with the intervention and their resulting influence on individual level outcomes (increasing educational attachment and reducing drug use is revealed through an additional follow-up survey of intervention youth and structural equation modeling. We conducted a follow up study with youth who had participated in the program and had reached the age of high school completion and found that the majority of YARP youth in this group, 85% of whom entered the program with C grades or less, did indeed graduate from high school, a factor of high importance in a city with a high school completion rate of fewer than 50%. Research on vulnerable urban youth shows a high correlation between negative school experiences, dropping out of school, and future risk behavior. YARP's approach, which integrates group based experiential learning and youth knowledge and experiences with interactive community action opportunities, appears to be central to creating positive peer attitudes towards education. Follow-up in-depth interviews with youth demonstrate the complex interaction between learning, adult support, research action and creating and affirming positive attitudes towards education. The majority of YARP participants identified the importance of youth-staff relationships and adult supports as important. One youth summarizes the interaction:

> They're (the facilitation staff) cool to interact with they're you know they're up to it they're not you know like teachers at school… like as we learn from them they're learning from us and it's cool… you know like we have the coolest conversations on like music videos or fashion and all and I mean she's up here and she's on our well I won't say she's on our level cause you know we're younger but I mean there's times when we're you know we're there. She helps me get the things I work for like a big sister figure because you know she graduated from college and she wants the best for us and she shows that she really does care for us because if she gives us tips on life and what we should and what we should not do to get into college and make the right decisions and I really do appreciate her for that because you know we're not gonna just well I know me personally I'm not gonna let her go through one ear and out the other I mean it really makes sense—what she says.

Another youth articulates the importance of engaging in community level research and action in increasing his understanding, sense of engagement, and empowerment; an interaction, which our research demonstrates, has a positive effect on improving individual outcomes:

> Seeing that we're doing research on our community we got a lot of like seeing our peers and community more clearly … is like wow you really didn't need to you know take an action and promote this change and seeing that you have something to say on our issue of teen dropouts. We really wanted to do teen dropouts

> as our issue because its an issue that happens a lot and its not you know nothing is being done about it so you want something to be done about teen drop-outs…I really don't think there's a lot of support out there for the teens. I realize that, you know, teens are engaging in risky things and what not and some of the responses are like wow adults don't you know don't anything or they do things a little bit but not to the point where its effective. That's just about it how I see it as. If it's going to change, we need to be involved.

Relationship Between Multilevel Intervention Action and Individual Level Outcomes

We employed structural equation modeling to understand the process by which the YARP multi-leveled intervention approach affected behavioral outcomes. We found that alcohol use decreased in the intervention group as compared to comparison group members at the final measurement point (Time 4), as did number of sex partners at time 3, but these changes were not statistically significant. However, as demonstrated in the output presented in Fig. 4, the intervention produced a significant reduction in frequency of 30-day marijuana use at Time 4. [Longitudinal Structural Equation Model (SEM) with acceptable fit, $\chi^2 = 11.30$, $p = < .001$, RMSEA = .073, $\chi^2/df = 2.35$, standardized path $-.12$, $p = .053$].

We reason that the intervention, which is designed to influence internalized decision-making by youth rather than imposing didactic prevention messages, requires time to take hold. Moreover simply learning about the negative consequences of drug use or risky sexual behaviors through research, even when the process involves self-reflection, does not appear to be sufficient to produce a change in efficacy and behaviors. However, when the results of research and self reflection are combined with social action, youth see that their pro-social messages and actions have some effect. This process appears to have an important effect on collective efficacy, which in turn results in individual behavioral change.

We also hypothesized that the combination of research and action in relation to a specific topic would positively affect individual and group outcomes. In order to explore this hypothesis, it was necessary to identify an item or scale from the outcome instrument that related to the research topic for each cohort. Measures are available for the Cohort 1 topic (sex at an early age) as well as Cohort 2 (dropping out of school). This was not the case for Cohort 3, for which the topic was teen hustling, so the analysis is conducted only for Cohorts 1 and 2. Using longitudinal structural equation modeling, we found clear differences in the patterns of change (positive) on the control dimension of the sexual efficacy scale for Cohort 1 participants as well as on the education expectations scale for Cohort 2. This is a promising area for future exploration in interventions with youth that involve topic oriented action research, using more precise topic oriented measures and a larger sample.

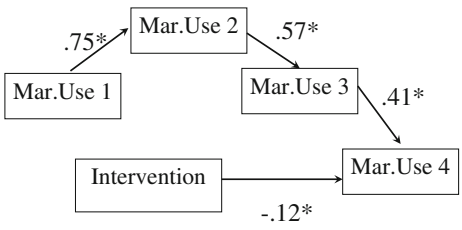

Fig. 4 Effect of intervention on 30-day marijuana use

Discussion

The strategy used in YARP, which begins with ***individuals***, forges ***group*** identity and cohesion, trains youth as a group to use research to understand their community better (***formative community ethnography***), and then engages them in using the research for social action at the ***community level*** is different from those approaches that attack multiple levels simultaneously. This approach, involves working directly with community residents, in this case youth, to engage them in bringing about changes at other levels. The program staff builds and sustains partnerships with other agencies, primarily for the purpose of facilitating youth-led research and action and enhancing the individual and collective self efficacy of the youth themselves. Community level intervention is circumscribed by the capacity of youth groups to address structural problems but duration in time and persistent effort shows that youth can have significant impact on policies and on school based programs as demonstrated in the success that youth experienced in working in coalition with others to advocate for and achieve state funding for youth employment and in their ability to develop and implement a web-based job site for youth and a school-based youth-led employment service situated within an existing, but under utilized high school career counseling center.

As the YARP intervention unfolded over the 3 years, systematic observation, interviews, focus groups, and materials the youth researchers produced themselves showed that they had built communications, analytic and inquiry skills, developed personal agency and direction, generally embraced positive peer norms which they reinforced with one another in group meetings, and developed a sense of collective empowerment and self-efficacy in relation to social action.

The Youth Action Research Approach developed at ICR has always made the assumption that activist involvement

in community level action (a form of group practice) based on research (a form of reflection and analysis) is an important strategy for intervention with marginalized urban youth of color. The research design we utilized in the YARP intervention study has allowed us to describe actions taken at multiple levels by youth working with the support of committed adult facilitators. And, for the first time, it has provided the basis for examining the direct effects of engagement in such actions on group and individual measures of change. While there is a substantial literature on participatory action research in general (cf. Reason and Bradbury 2001; Schensul et al. 2008 for reviews), and a growing literature on youth participatory research, Youth-PAR is not an approach typically utilized in prevention science, and there is no research on the interaction of community level engagement on individual outcomes.

Our initial analyses of ICR's YARP as a multileveled intervention indicates that using a culturally grounded, multi-leveled approach both for the intervention and for the evaluation of results at each level offers promise for increasing our understanding of what approaches to intervention are successful with urban youth of color, and how engagement in multilevel intervention/action affects individual level cognitive and behavioral outcomes and why.

Our data have shown that YARP offers an important addition to the out-of-school, science-based, theory-driven prevention programs, and a unique approach to multilevel prevention. Nevertheless it requires further analysis of our own outcome data at the community and at the group level. For example, network analysis combined with qualitative data based on observations of youth in interaction with one another in group settings, has the potential to inform us as to how social network characteristics (density, cohesion, centrality, directionality of information flow) and the characteristics of pivotal individuals within the networks influence peer attitudes perceived norms and behaviors and whether the influence is positive or iatrogenic (cf. Dishion et al. 1999). In addition, we need more sensitive, developmentally appropriate measures for determining how engagement in small scale community change affects community connectedness, self and collective efficacy and how these contribute to individual and group level outcomes. In the construction of the research and intervention, we need to pay more attention to developing direct measures for each level of the intervention rather than relying on incomplete or only qualitative observations. Finally, we need to replicate the intervention in other sites, improving upon multiple level processes and measurement of outcomes, and specifying those points in the intervention process that lead to negative outcomes that could be minimized and positive pathways and outcome that could be strengthened to produce better pro-social outcomes.

The process of developing critical consciousness, skills, and civic engagement for prevention among youth who are most directly affected by the issues that they research and try to change requires time and an iterative approach that includes research, action, reflection, evaluation, and further research. This process is generally in conflict with resources available for implementation which privilege short-term, individual level scripted or didactic approaches that are perceived to be cost effective because they can reach many youth at once. The intervention process is also challenged by finding, training and retaining staff with the ability to interact effectively with youth, the research and instructional (pedagogical) skills required to conduct action research with young people, and, at the same time, the commitment to social justice and collaboration necessary to build infrastructure that enables youth to achieve success in attempting to bring about social change at multiple levels in often-unresponsive government, education and social service systems.

Additionally, it is unlikely that a single intervention approach which might have effect at the individual and group levels can sufficiently address community level changes in complex, urban settings. Generating significant community level change will require linking Youth PAR interventions and research with complementary intervention strategies and movements, and designing community-level evaluations using a CBPR model.

Conclusion

Youth PAR uses transformative learning processes that help youth question previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives (Mezirow 2000) about themselves, and the structural and social obstacles to the achievement of alternative futures for themselves and their peers. In YARP, action research and an eco-critical perspective provide the overall, multilevel theoretical framework and is the implementation methodology through which newly developed skills are put into action to bring about small-scale transformational changes in school and community settings as youth act upon their world as emerging activists with individual developing critical consciousness, agency and collective efficacy (Bandura 1989, 2000). More work is required to test this multilevel approach in other settings and with other partners to understand the degree to which it can bring about changes in social systems and individuals simultaneously.

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