



The Impact of Youth Empowerment Programs: Overestimated or Under-Researched?

This user abstract presents the following Campbell systematic review:

Morton M & Montgomery P: Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Self-Efficacy and Self-Esteem of Adolescents. The Campbell Collaboration 2011.

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Do youth empowerment programs improve adolescents' self-esteem and self-efficacy? A systematic review of international research suggests that there is not enough reliable evidence to substantiate the popular expectation that these programs are effective.

Is empowering youth worth the investment?

Adolescence is an important time to build on young people's strengths for a positive future. It is also a time of heightened emotions and greater likelihood of risky behavior. Ignoring these key years for young people's participation and healthy development can have big social costs.

Understanding how best to support youths to build the attitudes and skills to do well in life is a priority of international agencies, governments and non-profit organizations. Increasingly, youth empowerment programs (YEPs) are embraced as a way to prepare young people for adulthood by improving youth strengths. Such strengths include self-esteem and self-efficacy—in other words, youths' judgments of self-worth and capability. Research suggests that these strengths promote wellbeing and resilience in many areas of a teen's life.

Morton and Montgomery's review examines the impact of YEPs on self-esteem and self-efficacy of adolescents. Other social and emotional outcomes were also reviewed.

Many programs, few studies

Youth empowerment programs involve youths in decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities. These programs may offer opportunities for positive development. The authors, however, conclude that there is not enough high quality evidence to show that YEPs improve youth attitudes or behaviors. The evidence that does exist suggests that YEPs neither positively nor negatively impact self-esteem and self-efficacy outcomes. The authors recommend further research with impact studies using credible comparison groups.

The authors point out that impact studies with comparison groups are important, though they are not the only way to assess participatory programs. Other types of studies are also needed to examine the complex processes that underlie potential impacts of youth

empowerment. Together, these different studies can provide more useful data to inform program and policy decisions.

Facts about the systematic review

This review only included YEPs that met certain criteria. They had to take place regularly and outside formal education, engage youth in decision-making processes and involve a supportive adult. The review focused on the age group, 10 to 19. It only included studies if at least 75% of participants were within this age group.

The authors' search identified 8,789 studies. Only 68 were found relevant and reviewed in-depth. Of these, only three studies met all of the review's criteria. These three programs were similar in terms of the age group they targeted (average age 15-16). They differed in terms of urban versus rural settings, cultural contexts, ethnicity, gender make-up and life circumstances. There was not enough data to look at the role of socio-economic status or ethnicity of participants in program outcomes.

There was no conclusive evidence regarding the impact of YEPs on primary outcomes: self-efficacy and self-esteem. There were mixed results on other outcomes. Each study showed at least one positive impact among YEP participants. Impacts included improvements in team skills and coping skills and reductions in marijuana use and number of sexual partners. These outcomes should be treated with caution, as they are based on a small number of studies with mixed quality.

Excluded studies that examine YEPs in formal education show more positive program effects than do the YEPs included in this review. This evidence has shortcomings and cannot be generalized. Yet it highlights the need for more research on the potential of school settings for youth empowerment.

Other research in the area

A multisite randomized trial in the USA with 3,400 participants was underway at the time this review was published. This may add to the evidence base on YEPs. The authors also believe that a qualitative systematic review, exploring processes, mechanisms and perceptions underlying youth empowerment, would be a useful effort. Future studies should explore differences in the implementation of YEPs across cultures. High quality evaluations of the impacts of YEPs outside of the USA are especially lacking. Finally, YEPs run in school settings should be further examined. The features of school settings might enable greater program impacts.

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