

## How Teens Become Engaged in Youth Development Programs: The Process of Motivational Change in a Civic Activism Organization

Nickki J. Pearce and Reed W. Larson

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

*The question of how youth become engaged or motivated is vital to youth development programs, because engagement influences not only program retention but the likelihood of youth gaining the benefits that programs offer. This article reports on an in-depth study aimed at generating grounded theory about the change process through which youth who are initially disengaged become motivated by program activities. Youth in a civic activism program were interviewed over a 4-month period and qualitative analyses were used to derive a model of this change process. This process was found to proceed from the youth forming a personal connection to the program's mission to becoming intrinsically motivated by work on program activities. The analyses suggested that peers and the adult leader played important roles in supporting motivational change at each stage. The model developed from the investigation draws on existing theories of motivation.*

Initially, I joined Youth Action mostly for the service learning hours, but then as I got more involved and started meeting all these people, it interested me. I started to do it for what we were actually doing.

Maurice

Young people obtain many developmental benefits from involvement in organized youth programs, such as social skills (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003), initiative and teamwork (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005), and increased educational attainment (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). In order to fully reap these benefits, however, they must not only join, they must become psychologically engaged. They must become interested and motivated by program activities (Larson, 2000; Vandell et al., 2005). Theory and research suggest that people who are more psychologically engaged in an activity learn more (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998; Guay, Boggiano, & Vallerand, 2001; Lepper, Sethi, Daldin & Drake, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Substantial numbers of youth, however, show limited levels of psychological engagement in youth programs (Ngai & Cheung, 1997; Vandell et al., 2005), which not only limits the benefits they obtain (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005), but reduces their likelihood of staying in the program (An-

derson-Butcher, 2005; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005). A crucial problem for the emerging field of youth development is understanding the process of change whereby disengaged youth become engaged and motivated by program activities.

This article provides an in-depth study of this change process in one program, Youth Action, with the aim of developing preliminary theory about how it occurs. We chose to focus on a service and civic activism program because engagement in these programs is often low—especially in cases, like this one, where youth are fulfilling a mandatory service requirement (Lewis-Charp, Yu, Sengouvanh, & Laco, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2003). We chose to focus on Youth Action because it had a positive reputation among local youth development professionals and we reasoned that it might provide a natural laboratory for understanding the change process. Indeed, the members of Youth Action described a transformation in which their initial boredom and lack of interest were replaced by a high level of motivation in the program's activities.

To develop theory about this change process we drew principally on the youth's accounts of how it occurred. Although past theories viewed motivation as largely outside consciousness (e.g., Freud, Skinner), recent motivational theories emphasize conscious processes of self-regulation (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003), and the pertinent capabilities for self-regulation increase in adolescence (Keating, 2004). We therefore viewed youth's accounts as a valuable source for understanding how they became engaged and motivated in Youth Action. Our objectives were to understand,

---

We would like to thank Jason Massad and the youth of Youth Action who shared their experiences with us. We also thank the William T. Grant Foundation for its support of this research and the research staff for their valuable contributions to this work.

Correspondence should be addressed to Nickki Pearce, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 East Daniel Street, MC 716, Champaign, IL 61820. E-mail: npearce@uiuc.edu

first, the process of motivational change that youth experienced, and, second, how the program setting supported this change process.

## Background Literature

### Joining and Becoming Engaged in Youth Programs

The question of how youth become psychologically engaged is one that applies across various types of youth development programs. Research suggests that many young people join programs for reasons that are extrinsic to the program activity itself. They report that friends influenced them to join or that they joined in order to spend time with friends or meet new friends (Fredricks et al., 2002; Patrick et al., 1999; Sharp, Pocklington, & Weindling, 2002). Youth also report being influenced by parents to participate in programs (Brown, Frankel, & Fennell, 1989; Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Hultzman, 1993), and joining to improve their credentials for college admission or a career (Hansen & Larson, 2006; Lauver & Little, 2005). For these youth to become psychologically engaged in program activities, a change process needs to occur in which they become motivated by the activities.

Prior research and theory suggest some of the individual and program variables that may be related to this change process, but they provide limited information on how the actual process occurs. When asked what keeps them coming to programs, youth report enjoyment and development of their skills to be salient factors (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2002; Ommundesen & Vaglum, 1992). Various elements of the program setting are also thought to help increase and sustain youth's psychological engagement: providing activities for youth that are interesting and relevant, giving them opportunities for leadership, and adult program leaders who are responsive and supportive (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Lauver & Little, 2005; Walker & Arbreton, 2005; Weiss et al., 2005). We lack empirically based models, however, on how these variables and setting elements are related to the process of motivational change. Lock and Costello (2001) suggest that it is a dynamic process that unfolds over time as youth interact with and experience the program.

### Engagement in Service and Civic Activism Programs

The question of how youth become psychologically engaged has particular importance for service and activism programs because many youth's level of engagement in these programs is low. As with youth programs in general, young people often report par-

ticipating in these programs for reasons that are extrinsic to the program activities, including being influenced by parents and friends (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998), and joining to enhance their academic resumes (Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Serow, 1991). In addition, a large number of youth join service programs because many school districts now require students to engage in some form of service as a school requirement, and concern has been expressed that making service required does not create the level of intrinsic engagement required for youth to benefit from these experiences (Serow, 1991; Sobus, 1995). McLellan and Youniss (2003) pose the question of whether some youth may participate with a "half-hearted going through the motions" (p. 57). Whether required or not, recruitment, retention, and the underlying issue of psychological engagement are major issues for service and civic activism programs (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Rosenthal et al., 1998).

As with youth programs in general, little is known about the change process through which youth service and activism programs become engaging for those who continue to participate. Youth who are engaged report being motivated by enjoyment, by the sense of competence and satisfaction they get from helping others, and by moral commitment to the goals of the service activity (Pancer & Pratt, 1999; Serow, 1991; Stukas, Synder, & Clary, 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1996). It has also been argued that participation is sustained when service activates youth's idealism (Sherman, 2002), becomes a habit, and leads to the internalization of civic responsibility (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1997). The important question is how this enjoyment, satisfaction, or idealism get activated. What leads to youth's initial extrinsic reasons for participation being replaced by intrinsic ones?

### Motivation Theories

We found theories of motivation and interest to provide useful conceptual frameworks for thinking about how this transformation might occur. Ryan and Deci's (2000, 2003) self-determination theory suggests that motivation in an activity can be understood in terms of a continuum from amotivation to extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation, with gradations along this continuum representing greater personal engagement. At the left end of the continuum a person is disengaged; and one step over, the person experiences low or alienated engagement because his or her participation is motivated solely by external rewards or demands. Increasing gradations of motivation are associated with a person's identification with the goals of the activity and with these goals becoming integrated into the self. At the right end of the continuum, the activity is intrinsically motivating when a person comes to experience

participation in the activity itself as enjoyable and satisfying. This experience of enjoyment, satisfaction, or “flow” in the immediate activity creates sustained participation because the activity is self-rewarding (as also described by Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990). Although Ryan and Deci do not formulate this continuum as a sequence in a change process, it certainly suggests the change mechanisms through which initially disengaged youth might become engaged in a program.

Theory and research on interest suggest a related process through which people develop self-sustaining psychological engagement in an activity. Hidi (2000) theorizes that interest in a topic develops in two stages. At the first stage a person’s short-term interest is “triggered” and focused on the topic; the topic “catches” the person’s interest. Research suggests that interest can be triggered by emotional reactions to the topic and discovery of its relevance to something personally meaningful, among other factors (Hidi, 2000; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). But this short-term “situational interest” does not necessarily lead to sustained engagement. At the second stage interest in the topic becomes dispositional to the person, and thus can support sustained engagement. This happens as a person develops knowledge about the topic, experiences empowerment and positive feelings around the topic, and comes to value the object of interest (Hidi, 2000; Mitchell, 1993). Both of these theories, then, provide clues on how the process of becoming engaged or motivated in a youth program might unfold.

These theories also suggest how settings might facilitate this engagement process. First, they predict that intrinsic motivation is more likely to occur in settings that support autonomy and empowerment and that provide an optimal level of challenge (Mitchell, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2003). The pertinence of autonomy to youth programs was indicated by a study in which college students who experienced choice within a required service activity indicated greater future interest in service (Stukas et al., 1999). Second, Ryan and Deci (2000) report that internalization of motivation is facilitated when youth experience interpersonal connection, belonging, and support in an activity. Consistent with this, research on service and youth activism indicates that interpersonal connections to adults and peers are important to supporting motivation in these settings (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; Pancer & Pratt, 1999).

Our goals for this investigation were to understand the process of motivational change in one program and examine how these and other setting factors might contribute to it. Although the research and theory just reviewed helped us conceptualize the issues (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1998), our principal objective was to learn from the youth and derive preliminary theoretical ideas about the change process from their accounts.

## The Research

### The Program Studied

Youth Action is a civic activism program aimed at helping youth address injustices in their lives, particularly in their schools. It is part of a larger community-based organization located in the southwestern region of Chicago. The 20–25 core members of Youth Action come from surrounding working-class communities and are Latino and African American. With support from the adult lead organizer Jason Massad<sup>1</sup>, a young Arab-American man, the youth took part in youth-led action campaigns to bring about changes in school policies. During the time we studied the program, action campaigns were conducted to lobby the Chicago School Board and state legislators to improve school funding, address problems with school overcrowding, and reexamine the city schools’ zero-tolerance policy. Program members also organized a city-wide youth summit, worked to get a new college preparation program into the city schools, and organized a rally to protest a new school exam that was being introduced by the school board.

### Participants

Our staff members interviewed 10 youths and Jason over a period of 4 months of program activities. These youth were selected by Jason, who was asked to choose a sample of active members who were representative of the larger program in age, gender, ethnicity, and length of involvement in the program. The 10 youths (5 of each gender) ranged in age from 15 to 19, with an average of 16. Six were Latino and 4 were African American. At the beginning of the study they had been in the program for a range of 3 months to 3 years.

### Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the study period, and shorter interviews were conducted by phone approximately every 2 weeks in the intervening periods. One interviewer did all the interviews with each program member. A total of 64 interviews were completed with the youth and 10 with Jason. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. In addition to the interviews, seven participant observations were conducted of program meetings and events, and field notes from the observations were used to enhance our understanding of program activities.

The interviews included open-ended questions on the youth’s experiences in the program and diverse processes of development. The initial interview with

---

<sup>1</sup>All names, including the program name, are pseudonyms.

each youth included questions about their reasons for joining Youth Action and how their motivation had changed. All the youth interviews included questions about their current motivation in program activities and explanations for changes in their motivation. Interviewers were also encouraged to ask youth about ongoing events in the program and obtain their description of the experiences they had from week to week. The interviews with the adult leader, Jason, covered a wide range of topics including his goals and philosophy as lead organizer, what he did to support youth's motivation, and week-to-week events in the program.

Since all youth had joined the program prior to the first interview, and many had been in it for a while, the information we gathered on the process of engagement was partly retrospective. Nonetheless, the opportunity to develop relationships with these youth over a period of participation provided the "prolonged engagement" that increases the credibility of interview data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Repeated interviewing provided multiple opportunities to obtain convergent information on both past and ongoing changes in their engagement in the program.

### Data Analyses

Methods of data analysis from grounded theory and other qualitative approaches were employed to identify themes and patterns in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). At the first stage of coding, all passages in the interviews that dealt with the youth's reasons for joining and their motivation in the program were identified. At the second stage, "open coding" was carried out to identify concepts within the interviewees' statements (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Third, we carried out analyses across statements to determine common themes with respect to youth experiences in the program.

These stages of analyses were guided by our two focal questions regarding the process of motivational change and the role of the program setting in facilitating this change. The data analysis was conducted by the authors who met frequently to discuss the emerging themes and refine the codes. We employed NVivo 1.3, (2001) a computer software tool for qualitative data, to facilitate the process of refining the codes and theory development.

### The Engagement Process

Our first objective was to understand the change process through which youth became psychologically engaged in the program. The analysis led to the identification of three stages in this process. The first included joining the program and an initial period during which the youth's motivation was low. This stage was

followed by the development of a personal connection to the program, and in the third stage youth described becoming intrinsically motivated by their work in the program.

#### Stage 1: The Entry Phase

All the youth reported having had the same reason for joining Youth Action: to earn service-learning credit hours. The Chicago school system required all students to complete 40 hours of service to graduate, and participation in Youth Action was a way to earn those hours. Aiesha explained:

I just wanted to make sure that I got all my community service hours, because I know someone who had to go to summer school and didn't graduate; they had 38 community service hours and you only need 40 to graduate so I wanted to make sure that I got that out of the way.

Two youths also indicated that they joined because they were offered pay (they started participation during a summer session in which they were paid at minimum wage for attendance). No one mentioned parents as a factor in their decision to join, indeed several indicated that their parents were opposed to their participation. Several youth mentioned friends as a factor. Lucia said that she and several friends had decided to come to the program together. Another said that a friend from Youth Action had encouraged her to try it. But even when pay or friends were an influence on the choice of program, the underlying reason mentioned by all was to fulfill their service requirement.

Given this extrinsic reason for coming, it is not surprising that youth reported low motivation during their initial participation. Several said they were bored. Mark recounted, "I wasn't even motivated; everyone thinks community service hours suck." Another youth, Oscar, put it even more bluntly, "I was like, 'Fuck, I gotta do my hours. I don't want to be here with these people.'" The youth came to the meetings, but according to their descriptions they were not psychologically engaged. In terms of Ryan and Deci's (2000) motivational continuum, they were amotivated or at the stage of "external regulation" in which participation is motivated by external demands.

#### Stage 2: Personal Connection

Youth were asked if their reasons for participating had changed, and all reported experiencing a transformation in their motivation. Analysis of their accounts indicated that this change began when they made a personal connection to Youth Action's mission of fighting injustices in their schools. As they attended meetings, they began to see linkages between their own experi-

ences, those of other youth, and what the program was trying to do.

The development of this personal connection involved the youth locating themselves in the issues and problems that Youth Action was addressing. Danny described how his interest in the program had grown:

I learned about the service learning hours, and then right there I got interested. But I still wasn't like, super-interested ... [Then] I found out a lot of stuff about the schools, what they were doing, and I was like 'Hey, that's wrong!' because that happened to me a lot.

Among other experiences, Danny recounted how he had been caught in a "hall sweep" at his school, made to stand against a wall for the whole period, and then marked as having cut class. Through coming to Youth Action, he learned that these types of events occurred to many students across schools. He said he was angry because "I saw teachers and administrators taking advantage." Danny became connected to program activities because they addressed issues that affected him.

Aiesha had also been subject to this type of treatment at school, and it similarly ignited her connection to the program. She said that she had been late for class on several occasions because there were too many students in the halls. After being marked tardy a number of times, she received 6 days suspension from school, a punishment she felt was unfair since these tardies were due to the overcrowded hallways. Through attending Youth Action, Aiesha also learned that her experience was shared by many other youth, particularly minority youth whose schools were most overcrowded. When the youth were preparing for the Youth Summit, Aiesha explained that she was highly motivated because she was helping to plan a session on school overcrowding, and that was "something I could relate to personally. Since I have been through it, I know exactly what is going on." The connection she had made led her to identify with the program's mission of addressing overcrowding and school disciplinary practices.

For some youth, these connections formed slowly. At first, Samantha said going to Youth Action was like going to church where "it's so hard to sit there and listen to our preacher preach and preach and preach, it's so boring." But then she began recognizing that "there are things wrong in my school and your school tries hard to hide things."

The key to the connection for many youth was the realization that these unjust experiences were not unique to themselves or even their school: there was a collective cause. Ana said, "I see freshman and sophomores and what they are going through, and I'm like 'I don't want them to go through what I went through.'" Danny, Aiesha, and other youth reported similar identi-

fication with the plight of other students. Youth in the program surveyed hundreds of students from across schools and, in talking with them, they found that many had been suspended for minor offenses, like being late for class, that were outside the guidelines set by the school board (which recommended that suspensions only be used for major offenses, like violence and drugs). Furthermore, Black and Latino students like themselves received these suspensions much more often. The youth began to see how many students' lives might be impacted by any success they had in bringing about changes. Batson, Ahmad, and Tsang (2002) argue that identification with a collective cause is an effective motive for service when it unites one's own welfare with that of others. These youth's discovery of the shared experience of injustice appeared to provide that kind of motive.

The formation of this personal connection corresponded to the middle stage in Ryan and Deci's (2000) motivational continuum, "identification." The youth had come to value Youth Action's mission as personally important and began to experience ownership of it. These personal connections can also be seen as providing what Hidi (2000) called a *trigger*; they mobilized the youth's interest in ways that led to youth's development of sustained engagement in the next stage.

### **Stage 3: Intrinsic Motivation in Program Work**

The third stage in the engagement process involved what the youth spoke of as "getting into" the work. As they connected to Youth Action's mission, they reported taking on tasks and responsibilities in the program's action campaigns. They shifted from passive attendance of program meetings and events to becoming active participants. Mark described this change: "At first I was bored and then later I started getting involved. I started liking everything. I started coming more and more often." He took active roles in collecting information on the schools' use of suspensions and then planning the Youth Summit. Mark reported that his desire to bring change led him to be engaged at a high level of involvement: "You gotta put effort into everything if you want to get it accomplished."

In describing their motivation at Stage 3, the youth reported that the work they were doing was energizing and rewarding in its own right. Danny had been in the program about 5 months when we first interviewed him, and he said, "Around like half-way through I really really got into it a lot. I got into the job, and then we did some actions, and it got really interesting." He reported that his motivation grew as they collected new information and he learned more about the schools. Later we interviewed Danny while he was preparing one of the workshops for the Youth Summit, and he said, "I've been doing a lot of work. I'm just really into

it, so I'm really psyched because I'm going to be talking to a bunch of people, and I'm very energetic." His words suggest that his motivation fed off the activity. Other youth also reported high levels of engagement in the challenge of trying to make the Summit successful.

As youth worked on other projects—organizing a rally, talking to students and teachers, preparing for a meeting with the school board—they reported a similar experience of being psychologically engaged in the work. Most of the youth in our study had completed their 40 hours of service but kept coming. Asked why she continued, Ana said, "It's fun." Others said that it was "exciting" or "enjoyable," and Danny said, "I'm stuck on it." Although these youth had joined the program for extrinsic reasons, they had all experienced a motivational change in which the work became enjoyable and satisfying. In terms of Ryan and Deci's continuum, their work in the program had become intrinsically motivating.

It is important to stress that Stage 3 appeared to build on Stage 2, it did not displace it. The youth's personal connection to the program's mission was the catalyst for their engagement in program work. Maurice reflected many youth's statements when he said, "I think I'm motivated because I really do believe in everything that me and Youth Action are like fighting for. And so I'm very interested. I'm enthusiastic about it so that makes me more motivated to come because I believe in things that we're doing." Their identification with the program's cause provided the impetus for the challenge, excitement, and enjoyment they obtained from the work.

### What the Setting Provided

Our second question was how the program setting supported this three-stage engagement process. The youth's reports focused almost entirely on the contributions of other people to their motivation, including, first, their peers in the program and, second, the lead organizer, Jason.

### Peer Support

Our analyses identified three themes regarding how peers supported the engagement process: (a) peers provided a friendly and welcoming atmosphere; (b) talking with peers and sharing experiences increased youth's commitment to the program's mission; and (c) camaraderie among the youth made their work more enjoyable.

First, the youth reported that the welcoming and friendly peer atmosphere they encountered when they first came was a factor in their decision to continue attending meetings. Aiesha described her early impressions of the program atmosphere and its impact in the

following way, "When I came here I noticed how friendly they were for me being a newcomer. They made it easy for me to relax and be comfortable, so I wouldn't be as nervous, you know. They made me want to pursue coming to this program." Similarly, Lucia said, "Everyone just welcomed me with open arms." She reported quickly discovering that she had much in common with the other youth, which affected her willingness to get further involved with the program.

Second, the youth reported their motivation was raised by discussing their experiences in the schools with peers. In talking with each other, they discovered that their own bad experiences were not unique. This process was illustrated in comments by Ana:

Whether I was at home or in school people want you to view things a certain way. It's like you're never really given an option to question things, and if you do it's kind of like 'Don't question them, it's just the way they are.' When I got here, a lot of things that I questioned I noticed that a lot of people questioned as well, so it just kind of made it more easy for me to be like, 'Ok this isn't right.' I mean I'm not saying that we all agreed because everyone has different point of views, but it just gave me the opportunity to do it.

These discussions with peers appeared to validate their experiences. They provided feedback from others who cared about issues they were grappling with, and helped them frame these experiences in a larger perspective.

This sharing of experiences appeared to be particularly beneficial to forming personal connections at Stage 2. It helped the youth to see the connections between their experiences and those of others. Dwayne explained, "I think programs like Youth Action help teens to realize that they're not the only person going through something; there's other people that are going through the same thing they have already been through." The data suggested that the process of forming a personal connection was often a collective one. In talking with others, the "I" became a "we." Psychological theories of motivation have been criticized for suggesting that motivation can be understood at the level of the individual (Markus & Kitayama, 2003); these youth's motivation appeared to involve collective identification with the widespread experiences of injustice.

This experience of collective motivation was also present in the third theme in youth's reports on their peers' contribution to their motivation. They reported a strong sense of camaraderie within the group that buoyed their work. In describing what factors were important for completing projects, Lucia reported: "We all fight for the same rights and we're all mostly from the same part of the city, I think that's why we relate to each other so well. Everyone believed in the same thing

and wanted to get things done.” This camaraderie related to Stage 3. They were engaged together in working toward shared goals. Dwayne reported a sense of collective efficacy about achieving the group’s goal, observing that “If you could get enough people that believe the same thing you do, and work with them on solving problems, then you know you can actually change it.”

Youth reported that this camaraderie was reinforced by a collaborative ethos in which they supported each other’s efforts. Cynthia said, “People don’t give each other attitude. If someone is slipping up, they just try to help them out.” As Samantha worked on the Youth Summit, she described this collaborative ethos and how it added to their motivation:

We’ve been really, really supportive, helping out wherever we can, even though we are very busy with school and stuff. I think we have just been having a lot of fun with that. We don’t really see anything as work anymore, we’re just too busy having fun.

Samantha’s report that their work was “fun” suggests a collective experience of intrinsic motivation.

In sum, peers appeared to provide forms of support that facilitated each of the three stages of engagement. They helped youth feel welcomed at Stage 1, they shared experiences in ways that facilitated personal connection at Stage 2, and they provided camaraderie that facilitated youth’s intrinsic motivation in the work at Stage 3.

### Leader Support

Our analyses indicated that the leader, Jason, supported the engagement process in four salient ways. He helped to: (a) foster the welcoming group climate, (b) direct the youth’s attention to the issues of injustice, (c) challenge them, and (d) provide instrumental support for getting the work done. As with peer support, these different forms of leader support appeared to be pertinent to the distinct stages in the processes of engagement.

First, the youth’s reports included many examples of Jason’s role in fostering the program’s welcoming climate. They had positive recollections of the “ice-breakers” that he had used when they first joined to help them get to know other youth. Danny said, “He would introduce us, and we would just like do ice-breakers, and just start getting along; it was really fun.” Youth also reported that Jason often went the extra mile to help them overcome their nervousness as newcomers. Lucia reported: “He was just nice from day one. He told me that if I ever had any questions, feel free to ask. He gave me his card, his extension and even his cell number.” Jason helped youth feel comfortable

with him and with other youth, and that helped youth want to continue coming.

The second way that Jason facilitated the engagement process was by providing learning opportunities that helped youth form personal connections to the program’s mission. The youth described how the sessions he organized heightened their awareness of injustice at their schools, as well as other forms of injustice in the community, nation, and world. He organized training sessions with guest speakers who were working on social justice issues in the community. He also facilitated role playing and small group discussions among the youth that allowed them to share their experiences in school. Jason was quite deliberate about this, stating that the program’s goal was to “connect a young person’s lived experiences with issues affecting the lives of countless other people.” He stressed critical thinking and did not impose his views on the youth. But he was intentional in providing opportunities for them to understand and connect with injustices experienced by others.

The third way that Jason facilitated the engagement process was by challenging youth. Youth reported that he encouraged them to take on novel and demanding tasks, tasks that created opportunities for their engagement in work in Stage 3. For example, while planning the Youth Summit, he encouraged several youth to step into leadership roles for the Summit workshops. These roles required the youth to take personal ownership in planning the workshop’s activities. Lucia said that Jason had challenged her by telling her she was capable of planning one of these sessions. Lucia described responding to Jason’s encouragement: “When I hear people talk about me like that, because I don’t hear [that] a lot, that makes me like ‘Wow! He sees something in me. He like believes, he sees I have potential and stuff.’” This encouragement motivated her to take on new responsibilities. Others reported similar challenge and encouragement that helped them get into the work of the program.

Fourth, at the same time that Jason challenged youth, he also provided instrumental support for their work in ways that facilitated their motivation. The data suggested that he provided assistance when needed with the assignments and responsibilities they had taken on. This was reported by Mark as he prepared the workshop he was leading for the Youth Summit:

Like, he helps me out when I get stuck, you know. [He asks] like, ‘What’s going to happen?’ Or, he tells me like when are the meetings and everything. He’s trying to keep me on track. But he also wants me to keep on track with school.

Maurice reported similar scaffolding from Jason: “I probably wouldn’t have applied myself or been as dedicated, you know, unless I had someone with me, help-

ing me along the way.” Similar quotes from other youth indicated that the encouragement and instrumental support Jason provided helped them build and sustain their motivation. Jason, like other effective leaders we have studied (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), achieved a balance between supporting youth’s ownership of their work with helping them keep the work on track. He viewed himself as a collaborator with the youth, and provided direction, encouragement, or intervention, as needed, to help keep them moving in the direction they wanted to go.

### Discussion

How do youth become engaged in the activities of youth development programs? This question is central both to program retention and to ensuring that youth benefit from the developmental opportunities that programs provide. This in-depth study of youth’s experiences yields preliminary grounded theory of how this engagement process occurred in one civic activism program, that may provide a model for how it works in other programs. Our analyses suggest a process of engagement that involves three stages, related to motivational theory, and they suggest specific forms of support provided by peers and adult leaders that facilitate each stage.

#### Entry and Welcoming

At the first stage, all youth in the study reported joining Youth Action to fulfill a service requirement and many described themselves as initially bored. In motivational theory, this low engagement is to be expected when people are doing an activity for extrinsic reasons (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lepper et al., 1997). Research showing low levels of engagement in service programs suggests that this low motivation continues for many youth in service programs (Hansen & Larson, 2006). At Youth Action, however, the youth experienced a welcoming climate from peers and the leader that made them want to become further involved with the program.

#### Personal Connection

The second stage involved the youth discovering a personal connection to the program’s mission and activities. As they came to sessions, they saw the relationship between their experiences of injustice in their schools and the aims of the program. In Hidi’s (2000) terms, their interest was triggered. In Ryan and Deci’s (2000) terms, they came to *identify* with Youth Action’s cause: The program’s goals became personally meaningful and internalized. The connection these

youth made to a moral cause may be distinct to service and civic activism programs, but in other types of programs youth may make personal connections to a career choice or become invested in completing a project or artistic production (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Larson et al., 2004).

This connection appeared to be particularly strong because it was collective. They identified with the injustices recounted by their peers in the program and by hundreds of other youth whom they had interviewed. They became connected to a shared cause, a greater good. They discovered that problems of overcrowding and capricious use of suspensions were more prevalent among Latino and African American students like themselves, and this appeared to increase their personal connection to this shared cause (Watkins, Larson, & Sullivan, in press). Other research on civic activism suggests that this connection between one’s own cause and that of others can be powerful in motivating social action (Batson et al., 2002; Kieffer, 1984; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

The lead organizer, Jason, facilitated this process of personal connection by providing opportunities for youth to learn. He organized small group discussions where they learned about each others’ experiences of injustice, and he organized other sessions that helped youth develop their knowledge, for example, about the links between underfunded schools and school disciplinary practices. Youniss and Yates (1997) provide a similar description of how a teacher of a service learning class facilitated students’ connection to their work in a soup kitchen by providing opportunities for the students to discuss and reflect on the connections between the experiences they had as volunteers and larger institutional and societal structures. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) describe how the leader of a gymnastics team engaged urban youth who might otherwise have been attracted to gangs by structuring the program to provide many of the same connections the youth might form to a gang, namely a sense of belonging and group loyalty.

#### Intrinsic Motivation in the Work

This personal connection was the foundation for the third stage in which youth developed self-sustaining engagement in the work of the program. Members of Youth Action described their investment in the cause of improving their schools as the impetus for their social action campaigns, but also that the work itself became fun, exciting, and enjoyable. In other words it became intrinsically motivating. But what made it enjoyable? Ryan and Deci’s (2000) theory suggests that the experiences of autonomy, challenge, and relatedness to others are important. Hidi suggests that interest builds as people gain knowledge, positive experiences, and a

sense of competence in a domain (Hidi, 2000; Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). These theories, however, do not fully address what creates this enjoyment.

In Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1990) theory, intrinsic motivation and enjoyment are created when a person experiences challenges that are matched to her or his skills. The state of enjoyment or flow is generated by people's ongoing engagement in challenges that they are able to master. A vital point in his theory is that the challenges must be *personally* challenging; adolescents experience high levels of challenge in school but they are generally not identified with or motivated by those challenges (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). At Youth Action, members' personal and collective connection to the cause of fighting injustice made the challenges of their work personally meaningful. And they were developing skills that allowed them to meet these challenges, that is, skills to organize a successful Youth Summit, plan rallies, and gain the attention of the school board. In Csikszentmihalyi's theory, pitting these skills against these meaningful challenges not only created intrinsic motivation, it provided conditions impelling them to develop new knowledge and skills by taking on progressively higher levels of challenges (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Indeed, other analyses of data from Youth Action suggested that members developed sophisticated skills in strategic thinking (Larson & Hansen, 2005).

As with Stage 2, peers and leaders appeared to be important in supporting the youth's enjoyment of their work. Intrinsic motivation appeared often to be a collective experience: Youth worked together and shared their skills to take on challenges. They also experienced their success as a group achievement, leading to what Bandura (1986) has identified as a sense of collective efficacy.

Jason's role in supporting the youth's experience of intrinsic motivation can be described as helping youth experience a match between their skills and challenges. First, the youth reported that Jason challenged them. He encouraged them to take on assignments and work toward social change goals. But second he also provided guidance and support as needed that helped them address these challenges, which kept them from getting overwhelmed, off track, or stuck. He helped shore up a "channel of engagement" that allowed for more sustained experience of enjoyment than they would have experienced working alone without his input (Larson et al., 2004).

Evidence suggests that similar processes of matching skills to challenges occurs in other types of youth programs from arts to adventure programs, and that peers and leaders may play similar roles (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Priest & Gass, 1997; Larson & Walker, 2006).

## Future Research

An important implication of this article is that youth do not have to enter programs already motivated in order to become engaged. Although the teens we studied joined Youth Action to fulfill a school service requirement, they became intrinsically motivated and continued to participate beyond the mandatory requirement. Much further research is needed to understand how this process of motivational change can be supported across diverse types of youth programs. How can youth who join programs because of friends, to please a parent, or to build their college resumes become authentically engaged in program activities?

This study provides a very provisional model of how this process unfolds, however the limits of this study need to be recognized. We examined only one program, thus can only speculate on how the findings apply to others. The sample included only 10 youths, which limits generalizability to other young people, particularly to youth who differ in age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or life situation from those studied here. The methods used are those of theory generation, not theory testing (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

There are several ways in which the model of engagement proposed in this study can be further evaluated. First, research is needed across programs to evaluate the impact of type of program, organizational features, the role of peers, and the strategies of leaders on how and whether this process of motivational change occurs. Stukas and Dunlap (2002) point out that even within community service programs, there are major differences in how organizations function (in organizational systems, types of collaborations, types of service activities). Only by comparing programs can researchers identify how diverse organizational, programmatic, and human factors influence motivational change across service, arts, and other types of programs.

Second, it is important to examine individual differences in whether motivational change occurs, how it occurs, and what influences it. Although the change process appeared to be quite similar across the group of youth studied here, Stukas and Dunlap (2002) suggest that individuals may differ in what motivates their participation in service. We have focused on the role of program activities in motivating youth, but it is possible, for example, that qualities of relationships are more salient motivators for some youth and the sequence through which they become engaged is much different. The role of culture, personality, age, and gender should also be investigated.

Third, it is important to study the fit between youth and the program. We might expect that younger, less developmentally advanced youth might need to form personal connections through identification with a

concrete mission or cause, while older youth are able to form connections to abstract principles and moral causes. Likewise we might expect differences in age and experience in the level of challenges that fuel intrinsic motivation. In addition, we can anticipate that youth from different cultures or ecological settings will differ in the issues with which they identify. To mobilize the type of intense engagement we observed, we suspect that a program needs to focus on issues that are as personally relevant as school injustices were for members of Youth Action.

## References

- Anderson-Butcher, D. (2005). Recruitment and retention in youth development programming. *The Prevention Researcher, 12*, 3–6.
- Auerbach, C. F., & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). *Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *The social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N., & Tsang, J. (2002). Four motives for community involvement. *Journal for Social Issues, 58*, 429–445.
- Brown, B. A., Frankel, B. G., & Fennell, M. P. (1989). Hugs or shrugs: Parental and peer influence on continuity of involvement in sport by female adolescents. *Sex Roles, 20*, 397–412.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). *Beyond boredom and anxiety: The experience of play in work and games*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Larson, R. (1984). *Being adolescent*. New York: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K., & Whalen, S. (1993). *Talented teenagers: The roots of success and failure*. Cambridge, England: University Press.
- Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular involvement matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research, 14*, 10–43.
- Fletcher, A. C., Elder, G. H., & Mekos, D. (2000). Parental influences on adolescent involvement in community activities. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 10*, 29–48.
- Fredricks, J. A., Alfeld-Liro, C. J., Hruda, L. Z., Eccles, J. S., Patrick, H., & Ryan, A. M. (2002). A qualitative exploration of adolescents' commitment to athletics and the arts. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 17*, 68–97.
- Gottfried, A. E., Fleming, J. S., & Gottfried, A. W. (1998). Role of cognitively stimulating home environment in children's academic intrinsic motivation: A longitudinal study. *Child Development, 69*, 1148–1460.
- Guay, F., Boggiano, A. K., & Vallerand, R. J. (2001). Autonomy support, intrinsic motivation, and perceived competence: Conceptual and empirical linkages. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 6*, 643–650.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hansen, D., & Larson, R. (2006). Amplifiers of development and negative experiences in organized activities: Dosage, motivation, lead roles, and adult-youth ratios. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Hidi, S. (2000). An interest researcher's perspective: The effects of extrinsic and intrinsic factors on motivation. In C. Sansone & J. M. Harackiewicz (Eds.), *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: The search for optimal motivation and performance* (pp. 311–339). San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Hidi, S., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2000). Motivating the academically unmotivated: A critical issue for the 21st century. *Review of Educational Research, 70*, 151–179.
- Huebner, A. J., & Mancini, J. A. (2003). Shaping structured out-of-school time use among youth: The effects of self, family, and friend systems. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*, 453–463.
- Hultzman, W. (1993). The influence of others as a barrier to recreation participation among early adolescents. *Journal of Leisure Research, 25*, 150–164.
- Keating, D. (2004). Cognitive and brain development. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 45–84). New York: Wiley.
- Kieffer, C. H. (1984). Citizen empowerment: A developmental perspective. *Prevention in Human Services, 3*, 9–36.
- Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55*, 170–183.
- Larsen, R., & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact human systems in a youth activism program. *Human Development, 48*, 327–349.
- Larson, R. W., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Development of initiative and teamwork within a youth program. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 159–183). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Larson, R., Jarrett, R., Hansen, D., Pearce, N., Sullivan, P., Walker, K., Watkins, N., & Wood, D., (2004). Organized youth activities as contexts of positive development. In P. A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 540–560). New York: Wiley.
- Larson, R., & Walker, K. (2006). Learning about the “real world” in an urban arts program. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 21*, 244–268.
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). Youth-driven and adult-driven youth development programs: Contrasting models of youth-adult relationships. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*, 57–74.
- Lauver, S. C., & Little, P. M. D. (2005). Recruitment and retention strategies for out-of-school-time programs. *New Directions for Youth Development, 105*, 71–89.
- Lepper, M. R., Sethi, S., Dialdin, D., & Drake, M. (1997). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: A developmental perspective. In S. S. Luthar, J. A. Burack, D. Cicchetti, & J. R. Weisz (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Perspectives on adjustment, risk, and disorder* (pp. 23–50). Cambridge, England: University Press.
- Lewis-Charp, H., Yu, H. C., Sengouanh, S., & Lacoe, J. (2003). *Extending the reach of youth development through civic activism*. Takoma Park, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.
- Lock, E., & Costello, J. (2001). Determinants of youth participation in primary supports: What can be learned from research? Retrieved March 30, 2005, from [http://www.chapinhall.org/article\\_abstract.aspx?ar=1303](http://www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1303)
- Mahoney, J. L., Cairns, B. D., & Farmer, T. W. (2003). Promoting interpersonal competence and educational success through extracurricular activity participation. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*, 409–418.
- Mahoney, J. L., Larson, R. W., Eccles, J. S., & Lord, H. (2005). Organized activities as Developmental Contexts. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 3–22). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.

- Mahoney, J. L., Lord, H., & Carryl, E. (2005). An ecological analysis of after-school program participation and the development of academic performance and motivational attributes for disadvantaged children. *Child Development, 76*, 811–825.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (2003). Models of agency: Sociocultural diversity in the construction of action. In V. Murphy-Berman & J. J. Berman (Eds.), *Cross-cultural differences in perspectives on the self: Volume 49 of the Nebraska symposium on motivation* (pp. 18–74). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Marsh, H. W., & Kleitman, S. (2002). Extracurricular school activities: The good, the bad, and the nonlinear. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*, 464–511.
- McLaughlin, M. W., Irby, M. A., & Langman, J. (1994). *Urban sanctuaries: Neighborhood organizations in the lives and futures of inner-city youth*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McLellan, J. A., & Youniss, J. (2003). Two systems of youth service: Determinants of voluntary and required youth community service. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 32*, 47–58.
- Mitchell, M. (1993). Situational interest: Its multifaceted structure in the secondary school mathematics classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 85*, 424–436.
- Ngai, N. P., & Cheung, C. K. (1997). Participation in youth center activities: A sequential specificity approach. *Youth and Society, 29*, 238–243.
- Ommundesen, Y., & Vaglum, P. (1992). Sport-specific influences: Impact on persistence in soccer among adolescent antisocial soccer players. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 7*, 507–521.
- Pancer, S. M., & Pratt, M. W. (1999). Social and family determinants of community service involvement in Canadian youth. In M. Yates & J. Youniss (Eds.), *Roots of civic identity: International perspectives on community service and activism in youth* (pp. 32–55). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Patrick, H., Ryan, A. M., Alfred-Litro, C., Fredricks, J. A., Hrunda, L., & Eccles, J. S. (1999). Adolescents' commitment to developing talent: The role of peers in continuing motivation for sports and the arts. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 28*, 741–763.
- Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (1997). *Effective leadership in adventure programming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- QSR International. (2001). NVivo for Microsoft Windows [Computer software]. Melbourne, Australia.
- Rosenthal, S., Feiring, C., & Lewis, M. (1998). Political volunteering from late adolescence to young adulthood: Patterns and predictors. *Journal of Social Issues, 54*, 477–493.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*, 68–78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2003). On assimilating identities to the self: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization and integrity within cultures. In M. R. Leary & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (pp. 253–272). New York: Guilford.
- Serow, R. C. (1991). Students and voluntarism: Looking into the motives of community service participants. *American Educational Research Journal, 28*, 543–556.
- Sharp, C., Pocklington, K., & Weindling, D. (2002). Study support and the development of the self-regulated learner. *Educational Research, 44*, 29–41.
- Sherman, R. (2002). Building young people's public lives: One foundation's strategy. *New Directions for Youth Development, 96*, 65–82.
- Sobus, M. (1995). Mandating community service: Psychological implications of requiring prosocial behavior. *Law and Psychology Review, 19*, 153–183.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stukas, A. A., & Dunlap, M. R. (2002). Community involvement: Theoretical approaches and educational initiatives. *Journal of Social Issues, 58*, 411–427.
- Stukas, A. A., Synder, M., & Clary, E. G. (1999). The effects of "mandatory volunteerism" on intentions to volunteer. *Psychological Science, 10*, 59–64.
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Vandell, D. L., Shernoff, D. J., Pierce, K. M., Bolt, D. M., Dadisman, K., & Brown, B. B. (2005). Activities, engagement, and emotion in after-school programs (and elsewhere). *New Directions for Youth Development, 105*, 121–129.
- Walker, K. E., & Arbreton, A. J. A. (2005). Improving participation in after-school programs. *The Prevention Researcher, 12*, 11–13.
- Watkins, N. D., Larson, R. W., & Sullivan, P. J. (in press). Bridging intergroup differences in a community youth program. *American Behavioral Scientist*.
- Weiss, H. B., Little, P. M. D., & Bouffard, S. M. (2005). More than just being there: Balancing the participation equation. *New Directions for Youth Development, 105*, 15–31.
- Yates, M., & Youniss, J. (1996). A developmental perspective on community service in adolescence. *Social Development, 5*, 85–111.
- Youniss, J., & Yates, M. (1997). *Community service and social responsibility in youth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zimmerman, B. J., & Campillo, M. (2003). Motivating self-regulated problem solvers. In J. E. Davidson & R. J. Sternberg (Eds.), *The psychology of problem solving* (pp. 233–262). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Received July 22, 2005

Revision received September 19, 2005

Accepted September 20, 2005

Copyright of Applied Developmental Science is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.