

Say YES to youth empowerment – how increasing agency can reduce violence

Professor Marc Zimmerman, Kate Taelman and Alicia Harris-Goodwin

Peace garden created in Flint, Michigan through a YES Community Project.

Say YES to youth empowerment – how increasing agency can reduce violence

Many young people feel like they have little control over their lives, and this feeling, along with the emotions it can trigger, can lead to violent behaviours. In response to this issue, **Professor Marc Zimmerman** from the **University of Michigan** co-founded the YES programme, which supports and empowers young people through community engagement. Marc works with YES Project Manager, **Kate Taelman**, and teachers like **Alicia Harris-Goodwin** to empower young people in America and around the world.



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Fields of research

Community psychology; developmental psychology; public health; adolescent and child health; school health; violence prevention

Research project

Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES): centring youth in community violence prevention

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Talk like a ...

youth empowerment worker

Agency — the ability to make your own choices and take actions that have a positive impact on your life

Comparison group — a group of people in a study not receiving treatment, allowing researchers to explore whether an intervention has made a difference or not

Empowerment theory — a framework explaining the process by which individuals gain the necessary skills, experiences and knowledge to feel empowered and create change in their community

Facilitator — a person who takes a neutral role and guides a group to work well together and achieve a common goal, rather than taking a position of authority or imparting knowledge

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How much control do you feel you have over your life? Young people often feel like their voices are not heard and that adults make all the decisions. This lack of agency can be frustrating and lead to negative behaviours and poor mental health.

To help young people reclaim their agency, Professor Marc Zimmerman from the University of Michigan co-founded the Youth Empowerment Solutions (YES) programme. Driven by a desire to reduce youth violence, he realised that the most important

factor was for young people to take the lead and be at the heart of creating solutions. “One of the most consistent findings in psychological research is that agency is related to our level of mental and physical health,” says Marc. “So, we created YES to help put youth on the path to gaining that sense of control — in essence, to be empowered.”

What is the YES programme?

YES is based on empowerment theory, which focuses on two questions: how do people become empowered, and how do we know when someone is empowered? “The answer to both questions lies in the



Youth and adults working together to create a peace garden as part of their YES Community Project in Flint, Michigan.

idea of having control over the things in life that matter to you,” explains Marc. “It might be doing well in school, getting a good job, doing well at sports or influencing decisions that matter to you, like school policies.”

YES is currently designed for 10- to 13-year-olds. “The main goal of YES is to instill in students the ability to promote positivity while discouraging negativity and violence,” says Alicia Harris-Goodwin, a teacher who leads the latest iteration of YES. Participants in the programme start with team building and leadership activities, then use creative practices, such as photography, to identify problems in the community and potential resources that could help solve the problems.

Once a community issue has been identified, participants design and implement a project. “The project could be a physical change, such as creating a mural, community garden or reading space in school, or a social event, such as a community celebration or a school health fair,” says Marc. “The curriculum is designed to help youth think critically about their lives and community, develop confidence, decision-making and problem-solving skills, and recognise that they can create change.”

Each YES group is guided by trained adult facilitators who support rather than control their participants. “The role of a facilitator is to help youth realise and reach their potential,” says Marc. “They need to be a sideline coach, not a lecturing teacher, and the responsibility is given to the youth.”

How has the YES programme been evaluated?

“It is important that we pay attention to

the conversations between facilitators and participants, as both groups are likely to have personal, related experiences or curiosities around the topics being discussed,” says Kate Taelman, project manager of YES. Accordingly, the team have carried out evaluations of both the implementation and the outcomes of the programme. The implementation evaluation, where groups were observed and feedback was taken from the youth and the facilitators, has led to changes such as more formal training and support for facilitators.

In terms of outcomes, the team monitored the progress of regular attendees three months after the programme and one year later, compared to a comparison group of young people who did not participate or attend many sessions. “We found that youth in the programme felt more empowered, improved their problem-solving skills and took more actions to exert control in their lives,” says Marc. “This led to more positive behaviours, such as school engagement and participation in extracurricular activities, and fewer problem behaviours, such as alcohol use, crime and violence, compared to youth who did not participate in the programme.”

Testimonials from participants highlight the programme’s positive impacts. “One youth interviewed several years later noted that the YES experience was transformational and helped him appreciate his community and that there was more to the world than his own perspective and experience,” says Marc.

Facilitators note that participants form friendships, connect with trusted adults, gain confidence to speak in front of a group and learn to communicate respectfully,

even when they disagree. “This is important because we want them to be able to know how to engage with people from different backgrounds or points of view while valuing each other and demonstrating respect,” explains Kate.

What are the wider impacts of the YES programme?

The team found a reduction in violent crime around murals and gardens created by participants. “We found that the effect was stronger closer to the project, and then slowly decreased further away from the site,” says Marc. “This led to a whole new programme of research on greening and reclaiming vacant properties, which we have consistently found to result in less community violence.”

“Youth-led projects have also addressed other needs within their school communities,” says Kate. “Some have created food pantries or emergency clothing banks, while others have installed buddy benches, promoted school pride, and hosted events to destigmatise and raise awareness of mental health.”

What is next for the YES programme?

The team are improving YES by providing free online access to all programme materials and low-cost, self-paced facilitator training. They hope to expand YES to high school students, including a focus on employment skills for older students and graduates. “We are currently evaluating YES to see whether it can improve tolerance for differences and build solidarity between youth, regardless of race, sexual identity, gender and (dis)ability,” says Marc.

About *youth empowerment*

Childhood, adolescence and early adulthood are full of excitements, frustrations and mistakes, and are key to the development of our personality and sense of self. Working in youth empowerment provides unique opportunities to sit alongside young people as they work through these experiences, and to enable them to grow in confidence, develop leadership skills and become agents of change. “Youth empowerment is exciting because you see thought processes change over time,” says Alicia. “We often see quiet students who join YES and find a voice they didn’t know they had.”

There are challenges, such as convincing young people (and adults) to engage with the work. “Some youth find it hard not to think critically about their community and to recognise that they have power to make change,” says Kate. “Apathy is rampant and there are lots of distractions, such as social media, that make it easy to tune out.”

“Another challenge is helping students understand that there are people who live their lives differently from them yet have some of the same experiences,” says Alicia. “It is important to help students understand that the stereotypes and

stigmas they have seen and heard about through the media don’t represent a single group of people.”

These challenges can be overcome by listening deeply to the needs and concerns of young people. “Centring youth voice and experience is key,” says Kate. “They need opportunities to practice using their voice, making decisions and planning for shared goals.” Patience and acceptance are also important. “Keep an open mind,” says Alicia. “Be willing to accept people as they are and know that there’s always room for growth.”

Explore careers in *youth empowerment*

Careers in youth empowerment can include working as a researcher in universities or other organisations such as charities and policy research units, or working directly with young people in settings such as schools, hospitals, prisons and community centres.

The American Psychological Association (apa.org) and the British Psychological Society (bps.org.uk) both have useful websites full of information, resources and volunteering opportunities. You could even consider becoming a student member, which gives you access to additional resources as well as meetings, conferences and other opportunities to meet professionals working in the field.

You can learn more about the research being carried out by Marc, Kate and their colleagues in the School of Public Health at the University of Michigan on their website: sph.umich.edu/research-education/index.html

Pathway from school to *youth empowerment*

At school, build a foundation in psychology, sociology and statistics. At university or college, focus on topics such as community psychology, developmental psychology and public health. Exploring courses which cover service learning, organisational studies, group processes and active learning will also be helpful.

“If you are interested in youth related research or youth empowerment, be sure to gain experience working directly with youth or with professionals who work with them in any capacity,” says Kate. “You can learn a lot about the needs and experiences of youth through roles like coaching, camp counselling or assisting teachers.”

Meet the team



Meet
Marc

I grew up during the civil and women's rights movements of the 1960's, so I was influenced by how those movements made change by organising and making their voices heard in mostly non-violent ways. When our college administrators started to cancel all bi-lingual, women's and African-American studies programmes, I worked with my fellow students to save them. We

succeeded, but I learnt that those in power had all the information. This led me to a career in research because I wanted to develop the skills to gather data and inform policy, and to have the power of the data and information that I generated.

I enjoy working with my colleagues and community partners to use the research process to improve lives, especially among those who are less advantaged than me. It was not easy, but I now get to use research to make a difference in the lives of individuals, families and communities – helping to create safe and healthy futures.

I'm motivated by helping youth find a path to positive development instead of the

slippery slope of problem behaviours which can lead to all sorts of bad outcomes like alcohol and drug addiction, crime, injury, and even death. I am also driven by helping the next generation of learners take what I have learnt to new heights and make positive change in the world.

Marc's top tips

1. Believe in yourself, and be a positive force in the world.
2. Be open-minded, listen to others' ideas and include them in your plans to make positive change happen.
3. Think outside the box, be creative and do not let the ordinary get in the way of the extraordinary.



Meet
Kate

My own teenage years were very challenging. I became a social studies teacher to help students who were facing similar challenges, and to instil the belief that people have power to make change within themselves and their community. As a teacher, I saw the effects of structural racism and policy failures that contribute to violence, poverty and

poor health outcomes at a population level. After more than a decade in various education roles, I began my career in public health research. I wanted to better understand what 'we' can do about these large issues facing communities, and to do something about it.

What I love most about my job is the people! I enjoy working with my colleagues and connecting with the YES teachers and youth involved in the programme. I also love that my role helps others work towards creating a better world. I love being a project manager because no two days are the same and I'm able to use my planning, organisational and problem-solving skills in meaningful ways.

I am motivated by the beliefs that people have power and youth are our future. This means preparing them and making sure they understand that their power is vital. We do not need to normalise or accept violence as an inevitable outcome. Adults and youth can't become complacent in that. We can do better.

Kate's top tips

1. Make connections with all kinds of people. Let them teach or inform you about their lives, experiences and expertise.
2. Go through open doors – they may lead you to something you hadn't thought of or planned to do, but more often than not, it'll be better than you expected.



Meet
Alicia

As a teenager, I was interested in the typical activities – going out with friends, reading and listening to music. In high school, I was a member of the marching band and symphony band.

During my undergraduate years, I was involved in many teaching and mentoring roles with a variety of groups.

This helped me determine which ages I wanted to teach, and promoting youth empowerment was an added bonus. As a teacher, I give my students the necessary tools to be their best selves, especially how to give and receive respect.

I love hearing student-led discussions. I'll pose a question based on the given topic, and they'll keep the conversation going. In those moments, I am more of a moderator than a facilitator. It's an amazing thing to see, hear and feel. It gives me an understanding of what their points of view are and answers the 'why' of what they think and feel.

I am motivated by students who are excited to participate. They show up eager to hear about and discuss the given topic. Their commitment to the YES programme inspires me to keep working with the programme as well.

Alicia's top tip

Start small and take part in volunteer work with youth to determine your level of commitment.

Youth empowerment

with Professor Marc Zimmerman, Kate Taelman and Alicia Harris-Goodwin

Talking points

Knowledge & Comprehension

1. What is empowerment theory?
2. How does the YES programme aim to empower youth?
3. What is the difference between a teacher and a facilitator? Why is this distinction important in the YES programme?

Application

4. What questions could you ask Marc, Kate and Alicia to learn more about how they evaluated the implementation and outcomes of the YES programme?
5. What might stop a young person from taking part in or completing the YES programme? What could facilitators do to help them overcome these barriers?

Analysis

6. Marc describes how he uses comparison groups within his research. For example, he compares outcomes for participants in the course with those who have not completed the course. Why is it important to use comparison groups, and why might the research be unreliable without them?
7. The team monitored outcomes for regular participants both three months after completion of the programme and one year later. Why do you think they looked at two different time periods?
8. Why do you think the team found a reduction in violent crime near to YES projects such as murals and community gardens?

Evaluation

9. What aspects of a career in youth empowerment would you find most interesting? What skills do you already have that could help you on this career path? What skills do you need to develop?
10. To what extent do you feel empowered to make change within your community? What issues in your community would you like to address, and how would you address them?

Activities

1. In a small group, list different problems that frustrate you or that you feel helpless about. Work through your list and think about the problems from a different point of view. These discussion points might help:
 - How might others see this problem differently?
 - What information might I need to understand this problem better?
 - What small positive steps could I take to create change?
 - How would this benefit me, my fellow students and the wider community?

How does it feel to discuss problems in a proactive way?

2. Imagine that you are facilitating an iteration of the YES programme in your local area. How would you help participants create, plan and implement a project that addresses an issue in your community? Think about the following:
 - How would you encourage young people to take part in your programme?
 - What issues might young people in your community want to tackle?
 - How would you help your participants think about solutions to these issues?
 - What support do young people require to develop the skills they need to work together on such a project?
 - How will you ensure that you are facilitating rather than leading?
 - How would you deal with sensitive topics and the emotions that they bring up?
 - What training would you need in order to safely and successfully run the programme?
 - How would you evaluate the implementation and outcomes of your programme?

Use information from Marc, Kate and Alyssa's article and the YES programme website (yes.sph.umich.edu) to help you answer these questions. Create a presentation summarising your iteration of the YES programme and present it to your classmates. Try to answer any questions that they have and reflect on the feedback that they give you.

More resources

- Read more about the goals and history of the YES programme and about empowerment theory here: yes.sph.umich.edu/about-us
- Tune in to *The Ultimate Youth Worker* podcast where they discuss topics covering tips for those working in youth work: ultimateyouthworker.com.au/ultimate-youth-worker-podcast
- Explore the Youth Participatory Action Research Hub website which contains lots of information, advice and resources for working on projects like the YES programme: yparhub.berkeley.edu/home

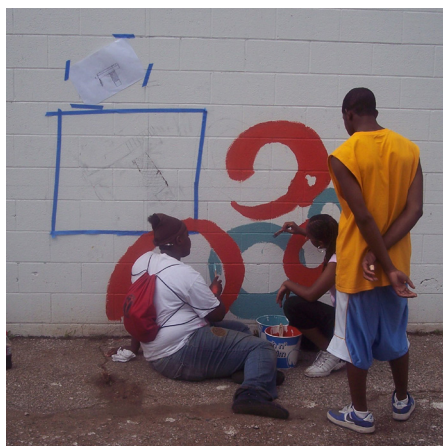
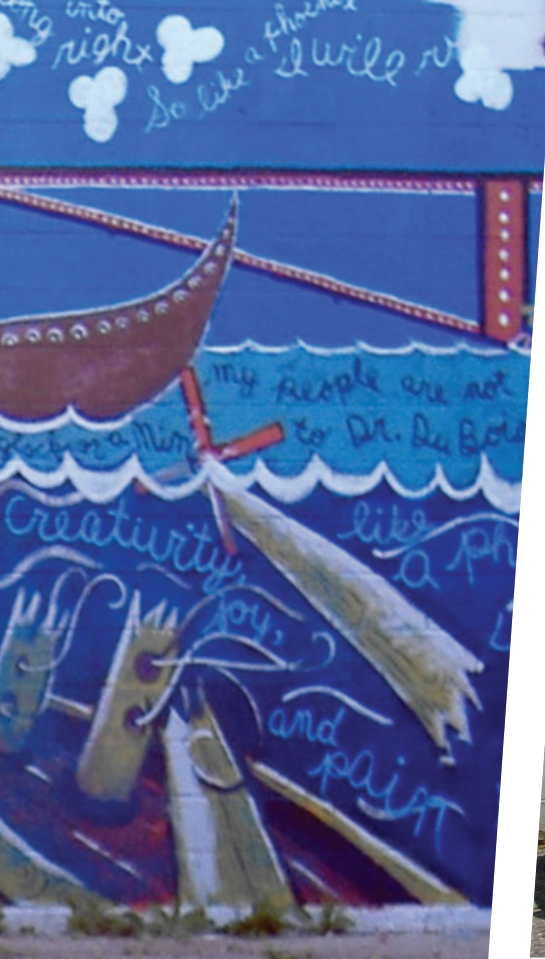


Photo montage

Top: Hands for Peace mural created by youth in Flint, Michigan.

Middle row: Left: Youth working on the anti-violence mural in Flint, Michigan.

Centre: Youth creating a peace garden in Flint, Michigan.

Right: Youth in Westland, Michigan organising and creating an emergency clothes and hygiene closet for students in need.

Bottom: The youth team who designed and created the anti-violence mural in Flint, Michigan.



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