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YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AS DEMONSTRATED BY THE JÓVENES EN ACCIÓN PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a review of relevant literature on empowerment and youth empowerment theories and models to develop a comprehensive understanding of key elements that are found in youth empowerment programs. Through the literature review, there are five themes identified which can be used to analyze youth programs for the presence of empowerment. The five themes considered are: a power sharing adult-youth relationship, an individual and community level orientation, a safe and supportive environment, peer collaboration, and reflection. A World Learning youth program, Jóvenes en Acción (Youth in Action, or JenA) is used as a case study to understand the practical application of these youth empowerment themes. Each theme is analyzed within the program implementation and within the youth-centered pedagogy which informs JenA program design. Program reports, blog posts, and student newsletter articles are used to evaluate the JenA program through the lens of the five youth empowerment themes. The purpose of this Capstone project is to use youth empowerment theory as a method of illuminating the practice of youth empowerment program design and implementation.

Keywords: experiential learning cycle, empowerment theory, youth empowerment, youth programs, Jóvenes en Acción

Introduction

The terms ‘youth empowerment’ and ‘youth development’ are used almost interchangeably in the conversation surrounding youth programs. I have always felt a little uncomfortable with the use of the term youth *development*, as it seems to imply that adult programmers are molding youth into their own image of successful, civically engaged young people, rather than – as youth *empowerment* would suggest – giving youth the environment, skills and tools to determine for themselves both what their future selves should be and how they might positively impact their social context.

When I was 14 years old, I participated in a week long service learning youth program in the mountains of Central Appalachia. Our group of 60 youth, from New Brighton, MN and Ann Arbor, MI, worked to provide warmer, safer and drier homes for low-income families in Knox County, KY. During the day we dug foundations, installed new floors, fixed roofs, and painted new walls, taking breaks to get to know the families who lived in the homes we were repairing. In the evenings we participated in programing designed to help us process the experience we were having, to understand the vast cultural differences between the suburban Midwest, and rural Central Appalachia, and the social justice issues that plagued the Appalachian region. This week-long experience proved to be entirely transformational for me, instilling in me the value of service, the power of cross-cultural communication, and largely influencing the path my career would take. In the 15 years since my first experience in Appalachia, I have often reflected on the importance of that week in the grand scheme of my life. Reflecting on how transformative that one week was for me, I am inspired to provide similar experiences for the students with whom I work.

Since my first experience as a participant in a youth program, I have learned a lot about education, youth program design, experiential learning, and youth empowerment. As a youth program professional, I believe in the power and potential of young people, and work hard to provide transformative and empowering experiences for the youth with whom I have the opportunity to work. That first week that I volunteered in Appalachia has since led me to work with thousands of young people from around the world, and in my home community. If one student from each program I have implemented has that same transformative experience, the ripple effect across their communities will be enormous. This is why I believe in the importance of empowering young people.

In this paper, I will examine relevant literature on youth empowerment theory and models, and compile these models into five themes of youth empowerment that can be used to evaluate existing youth programs and inform design for future programs. The five themes that I identify and use for analysis are: (1) a power sharing adult-youth relationship, (2) an individual and community level orientation, (3) a safe and supportive environment, (4) peer collaboration, and (5) reflection. The determination of a strong presence of all five of these themes can be used to identify a youth empowerment program.

In order to relate theory to practice, I will link my work as a member of the World Learning Youth Team (officially termed the Youth Development Unit), specifically as program manager for the Jóvenes en Acción (Youth in Action or JenA) program, to the theory of youth programs taught in the Youth Program Leadership course at SIT in a Course Linked Capstone (CLC) project. Specifically, I will use the five themes of youth empowerment as focus areas to analyze within the Jóvenes en Acción program to determine whether the program can fairly be

termed a youth empowerment program, and to what degree this assertion can be made. I will close with empowerment focused program design and implementation recommendations.

World Learning Youth Development Unit

The World Learning Youth Development Unit, more commonly known as the "Youth Team" implements both short and long term exchange program opportunities for youth from across the globe. The Youth Team works with high school aged youth 15-18 years old. Under the umbrella of short term programs, there are both *in-bound* (international students traveling to the United States) and *out-bound* (U.S. students traveling to other countries) programs. Each program has its own unique curriculum and thematic focus that informs the overall program design, however, there are several key design components that run through all of World Learning's youth programs.

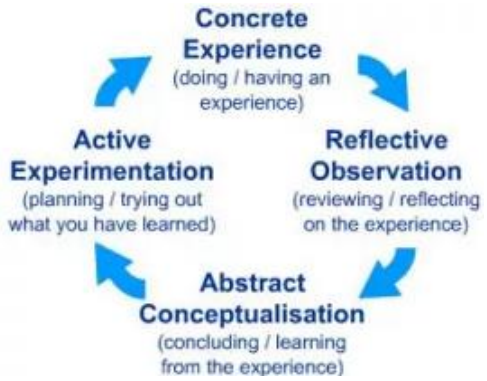
According to the Youth Programs' website, "World Learning Youth Programs empower young people to understand their world, develop leadership and civic responsibility, build lasting friendships across cultures, and cultivate the skills and motivation to make a difference in their communities." The model below shows key ingredients that can be found in every World Learning youth program:

(World Learning Youth Programs, 2012)

The shared element found in all of the above listed key ingredients, is action. Dynamic participant engagement is an essential element to curriculum design on any World Learning youth program; this is because, all programs are designed with a youth-centered pedagogy that includes, at its very core, a focus on experiential learning. Program designs are based on David Kolb's *Experiential Learning Cycle* (ELC) (Kolb, 1984). The ELC is, quite simply, the combination of action and reflection; participants commit an act (doing), then reflect on the act (reviewing), determine what to do differently in future actions (concluding), then try this new action (planning). It is not important where in the cycle a learner begins, rather that they continue through all four stages.

This focus on reflecting on actions taken and using that reflection to inform future decisions and acts is elemental to the program design of World Learning youth programs. There is significant time built into program activities, as well as the overall calendar, for reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation; students are active participants in their learning experience, not passive observers. World Learning's focus on dynamic participant engagement in the learning process provides ample opportunity for the "doing" stage of the ELC.

The figure below illustrates Kolb's model.



1. ***Concrete Experience*** *(a new experience of situation is encountered, or a reinterpretation of existing experience).*
2. ***Reflective Observation*** *(of the new experience. Of particular importance are any inconsistencies between experience and understanding).*
3. ***Abstract Conceptualization*** *(Reflection gives rise to a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept).*
4. ***Active Experimentation*** *(the learner applies them to the world around them to see what results).*

(McLeod, S. A., 2010)

Short term, in-bound programs that the Youth Team implements are between three to five weeks in length, and bring students to between two and three different cities around the United States. In this paper I will focus on one specific short term, in-bound program of the Youth Team, Jóvenes en Acción.

Case Study: Jóvenes en Acción (JenA)

The Jóvenes en Acción (Youth in Action) program is a four-week, three-part program for Mexican youth, designed to hone participants' leadership skills and increase their understanding of democratic institutions and civic engagement. The program includes subthemes that focus on how local communities can develop a *culture of lawfulness* by addressing problems related to gangs, violence, substance abuse, bullying, human rights, and social disintegration. The program is funded through a partnership between the U.S. Department of State (including the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City), the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico, and private sector donors, and has been implemented by World Learning for the last four years. The JenA program has been in existence for five years and has worked directly with approximately 400 Mexican youth in that time. The program has been positively evaluated by both World Learning and the

program's funders, and has seen a growth in participant numbers and funding each year with 68 youth in 2011, 77 youth in 2012, 99 youth in 2013, and 102 youth in 2014.

Currently, approximately 100 high school students are selected from across Mexico to participate in the Jóvenes en Acción program. To apply for the program, students must form project teams (four to five students each) and design a project proposal which addresses an identified need in their community; projects must fit within the established program theme of creating a culture of lawfulness. Successful applicants must also take an English language exam to prove sufficient proficiency in the language, submit school transcripts to prove high academic achievement, and answer essay questions addressing their motivation for applying to the program. The final participants are selected, in their project teams, through a competitive process. The entire recruitment and selection process is managed by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, and the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education.

The U.S. Embassy and Department of State list the following goals for the JenA program:

- Promote mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and Mexico through exchange
- Significant interaction with American peers and/or families to provide cultural context
- Students gain language skills through intensive English language workshops, helping them to gain confidence and ensure they receive maximum benefit from program content
- Incorporate service-learning activities to promote a culture of lawfulness through simulations and workshops
- Prepare youth leaders to become responsible citizens and contributing members of their communities
- Students demonstrate enhanced leadership skills (Graves & French, 2015)

The backbone of the program design for JenA is consistent with the Youth Team's youth-centered pedagogy driven by the Experiential Learning Cycle. Participants in the program are given the opportunity to dynamically engage in their learning process through interactive

workshops, hands-on activities, and creative expression. The program can be divided into three key phases: *Pre-Departure,* the *U.S. Program,* and *Follow-On.*

During the *Pre-Departure* phase of the program students are notified of their status as finalists, receive a Pre-Departure Orientation Manual, complete pre-departure forms, and attend a four to five-day Pre-Departure Orientation in Mexico City. The focus of the *Pre-Departure* phase is preparing the students and their families for the realities of the exchange experience on which they are embarking. Before the Pre-Departure Orientation, students and their families are provided with as much information as possible to make the transition to the program comfortable and as non-overwhelming as possible.

Students are also introduced to the Digital Youth Leadership Challenge (DYLC) which is an online social media (Tumblr) based activity that will run throughout the entire ten months of their program. During the *Pre-Departure* phase, students are given DYLC prompts to introduce themselves to one another by posting pictures and short descriptions of their families, posting pictures of their favorite places in their home town, sharing fun facts about their region in Mexico, writing a short post about the work they hope to accomplish with their community action projects, sharing their hopes and fears for the JenA program, and asking any questions that they may be wondering about the program. Program staff monitor the site to respond to posts and answer any questions the students may pose. The purpose of the DYLC during *Pre-Departure* is to begin building the peer community among the 100 Jóvenes participants, to start building a trusting relationship between the youth and program staff, and to foster the students' pre-program processing and anticipation.

The final step in the *Pre-Departure* phase is the Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO) in Mexico City. The PDO is a four to five-day workshop that focuses on: the logistics of

international group travel through visa interviews, filling out customs and immigration forms, sharing flight details, and a workshop on Airport Navigation 101. Time is also spent on program community and relationship building through team-builders, ice breakers, other dynamic activities, and free-time conversations. An introduction to culture shock and cross-cultural communication is provided to prepare students for the culture shock they may experience and to brief participants on cultural differences they may experience with their U.S. host families, as well as with peers and students from other countries they may meet while on program. The main goal of the PDO is to ensure that all students feel comfortable and prepared – if with a healthy sense of apprehension – to travel to the United States and begin their JenA program experience.

There are three components to the *U.S. Program*: Leadership and Orientation Camp (Brattleboro, VT), Global Leader Education and Engagement Institutes, including host family stays (various cities across the U.S.), and the Synthesis Workshop (Washington, D.C.). The *U.S. Program* is four weeks in length during July/August. The first nine days of the *U.S. Program* comprise the Leadership and Orientation Camp on the SIT campus in Brattleboro, VT. The primary focus of these first nine days is continuing the relationship and trust building among participants and with program staff that began during the PDO, and building leadership skills and participants' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The program design during most days in Vermont is: mornings are spent on the SIT campus in English and Language Culture groups followed by workshops focusing on program themes, action project planning, or teamwork. Afternoons are spent exploring Vermont and developing leadership skills and teambuilding. Evenings are filled with fun activities like drumming, improv theater, attending the circus or going to a drive-in movie. The SIT campus provides an excellent setting for building a program community that allows for students to experience independence and build a sense of routine in a

safe environment. As the Orientation and Leadership Camp comes to a close, program staff start directing the students' attention towards preparing for travel to their host communities and living with a host family.

The second component of the *U.S. Program* are the Global Leader Education and Engagement (GLEE) Institutes in host communities[1]. GLEE institutes are 12 days long, and take place in seven cities concurrently. The 100 Jóvenes participants are divided into smaller cohorts of approximately 15 students each for travel to the host communities. Each host community designs their curriculum around one of the program subthemes (gangs, violence, substance abuse, bullying, human rights, and social disintegration). The division of students is dictated by the theme of their team's community action project– for example, all project teams that traveled to Raleigh, NC in 2014 were focusing on preventing substance use and abuse. During the GLEE institute, the student group is together Monday through Friday from about nine o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening, participating in program activities; they spend their nights and weekends with volunteer host families. Program activities are focused on providing a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding their project themes and designing the work they plan to do on their community action projects. Time with host families is spent exploring the cities that they are in through cultural activities and tourism, and experiencing what it is like to be part of a U.S. American family.

The third and last component of the *U.S. Program* is the Synthesis Workshop in Washington, DC, the objective of the final five days of the *U.S. Program* is to provide opportunities for participants to reflect on and evaluate the impact of the program, share their

[1] 2014 host communities were: Baltimore, MD; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Kansas City, MO; Milwaukee, WI; Raleigh, NC and Seattle, WA.

experiences, impressions and lessons from their time in host communities, and prepare for the community action projects they will implement back home. The atmosphere during the Synthesis Workshop is very celebratory, from reflecting on the success and accomplishments from the *U.S. Program* experience, and from looking forward to the adventure that is still to come. There are many hopeful outcomes for the *U.S. Program*, one of the most critical is that students leave the United States feeling prepared and empowered to successfully implement their community action projects in their hometowns in Mexico.

The *Follow-On* phase of the program spans approximately nine months, from August to April. During the *Follow-On* segment of the program, students return to their homes to work in their project teams and implement their community action projects. Each project team has two adult mentors to support them during *Follow-on*, one mentor is an employee of the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate, and is assigned by the Embassy, the second mentor is self-selected by the Jóvenes team, and is associated with their high school. With the support of their mentors, the Jóvenes work to apply their lessons learned from workshops, activities and meetings in the U.S. to the betterment of their communities through their action projects.

The participants are brought together in smaller cohorts to attend two day regional Mid-Term Conferences (in select Mexican cities[2]), half-way through the *Follow-On* phase. These Mid-Term Conferences are strategically scheduled for the half-way point to offer the students a chance to take time to reflect on the work they've been doing, and re-focus and re-energize for the second half of their program. Curriculum for these conferences is designed to allow for knowledge and best practice sharing, and problem solving amongst the Jóvenes. The conferences

[2] Mid-Term Conferences for 2014 program were held in January, 2015 in Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Mexico City.

are also an opportunity for the project teams to reflect on their teamwork and team dynamic and take any necessary time to address issues they may be experiencing within themselves; program staff are available to assist with peer mediation if requested.

Finally, the entire group meets for a three day Reunion Conference, in Mexico City, in April. This Reunion Conference represents the official closing of the JenA program. Participants share with each other, program staff, and program funders the successes and challenges they have experienced during the ten month JenA program. There is significant time dedicated to reflecting on individual and group development, looking forward to where students will go now that the program has concluded, and how the JenA program will influence their next steps. Later we will examine the key components of each segment of the JenA program.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this capstone is to clearly define and understand the theory of youth empowerment and to identify its practical applications through an analysis of the JenA youth leadership program.

Literature Review

Empowerment has become one of the most widely used development terms in our global context. If you were to google "definition of empowerment" or, even more specifically, "definition of youth empowerment," you would be directed to more than 30 pages of resources, organizations, and political platforms which all have their own intentionally crafted definitions of empowerment programs. In an effort to develop a clear understanding of youth empowerment theory and its practical implementation, I will review key pieces of literature which both addresses the theory and assess the implementation of different models in practice.

Empowerment Theory

Before examining the literature on youth empowerment models, it is important to first take a step back and look at the greater umbrella of empowerment theory from which youth empowerment models have been developed.

Julian Rappaport first began the formation of Empowerment Theory in his paper *Terms of Empowerment/Exemplars of Prevention: Toward a Theory for Community Psychology.* In his paper, Rappaport argues that empowerment theory is rooted in the notion that people gain power from having a sense of their personal influence within the structure of social and political power.

Empowerment is a multi-level theory that addresses people both as individuals and as members of a larger community, e.g. schools, neighborhoods, social service organizations, etc. Individuals who civically engage in their communities experience a consistent level of empowerment which is positively influenced by participating in a leadership role rather than being isolated. Rappaport explains that collaboration leads to an environment of empowerment: "The people of concern [participants] are to be treated as collaborators; and at the same time, the researcher may be thought of as a participant, legitimately involved with the people she is studying" (Rappaport, 1987, p. 140). Being involved in decision making and activity design encourages a sense of empowerment for participants. In summary, Rappaport (1987) states, "Empowerment suggests a belief in the power of people to be both the masters of their own fate and involved in the life of their several communities" (p. 142).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO) shares Rappaport's definition of empowerment as a multi-level concept which affects both individuals and organizations/communities, and is self-dictated:

> Empowerment: How individuals/communities engage in learning processes in which they create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies. Through empowerment, individuals not only manage and adapt to change but also contribute to/generate changes in their lives and environments. (UNESCO)

In the report, *Women Education and Empowerment: Pathways towards Autonomy*, the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) acknowledges that empowerment has become a buzz word in the field of international development; its popularity has led to many different understandings and definitions of the concept. This UIE report examines the relationship between empowerment and women, and the authors determine that the importance of empowerment for women (or any empowered individual) is that "empowerment allows women to have choices, which in turn means relative strength and bargaining power for them" (Medel-Anonuevo, 1995, p.9).

According to the UIE report (1995), a true definition of empowerment must include "cognitive, psychological, political, and economic components" (p.14). The cognitive component dictates that participants (in this case women) must develop an understanding of themselves, their rights, and the conditions that affect their existence. Understanding these existing conditions, and their ability to make decisions and act in contradiction to them for the betterment of themselves and their peers, leads to empowerment. The psychological component of empowerment entails providing conditions in which participants can develop self-esteem and self-confidence. This may be accomplished by involving participants directly in the decision making, planning, and implementing of projects in order to demonstrate their capabilities and trustworthiness. The economic component requires that participants engage in activities that will

lead to autonomy acquired by financial independence. Finally, the political component leads participants to be able to mobilize group activity for long-term social change.

Youth Empowerment

In the paper, *Toward a Model of Adolescent Empowerment: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence*, Matthew J. Chinman and Jean Ann Linney develop what they call the Adolescent Empowerment Model. Chinman and Linney see a need to focus empowerment theory on its specific application towards adolescents during their unique period of development. The authors are concerned with what they term "problem behavior" which surfaces during adolescent development. They propose that an empowerment process is necessary to encourage positive and appropriate growth in young people. Chinman and Linney identify five key elements of an empowering experience for youth:

1. Role of Adults - Adolescents value guidance from adults; positive reinforcement is a necessary key to adolescent development and adults can provide much of it
2. Peer Approval - Having adolescents work in groups/teams is empowering as it allows them to learn from and teach one another
3. Nature of the Experience – meaningful activities, opportunities for acquisition of new skills, and an environment conducive to full participation are key
4. Positive Recognition - receiving positive recognition leads to higher self-esteem and self-efficacy as well as encouraging further participation in such activities
5. Reflection - Ensuring adolescents are given enough time to reflect critically on the experiences they are having is integral to their empowerment (Chinman & Linney, 1998).

The authors stress the importance of youth fully engaging in the process in order to develop positive identity and role stability; their experiences may include role experimentation, feedback from peers and positive adult role models, and self-definition. Chinman and Linney's Adolescent Empowerment Model echoes Rappaport's Empowerment Theory in its focus on both the individual and the community at large; youth must develop their own sense of self-efficacy, as well as understand their relationship to their environment.

Matthew Morton and Paul Montgomery, in *Youth Empowerment Programs for Improving Self-Efficacy and Self-Esteem of Adolescents*, also focus their work on adolescents with the goal of better understanding the impact of youth empowerment programs on their participants. The authors define youth empowerment programs (YEPs) as,

> Interventions that regularly involve young people as partners and participants in the decision-making processes that determine program goals, planning and/or implementation. With the support of caring adults, YEPs engage young people in program leadership as a characteristic of their involvement in safe, positive, and structured activities outside of formal education. (Morton & Montgomery, 2013, p. 3)

The two keys to Morton and Montgomery's definition of YEPs are young people's role in program decision making, and collective, democratic group collaboration. An individual mentoring relationship does not qualify as a YEP in this case because it does not provide the youth with opportunities for collaboration with a peer group. The authors also insist that occasional requests for ideas and input are not enough to create an empowering environment, youth must be put in positions where they can assert real influence over program design.

Empowerment as Fostering Positive Youth Development and Citizenship, written by Margaret Cargo, Garry Grams, Judith Ottoson, Patricia Ward, and Lawrence Green, is an article which aims to develop a theoretical framework for youth empowerment within the context of participatory community health programs. Cargo et al join the previously cited works in their assertion that adults play a key role in creating empowering environments for young people. The authors assert that adults can create a "welcome social climate" by helping youth to feel comfortable, respected and trusted (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003).

Adults can create relationships with youth where decision making, power and responsibility are slowly transitioned to youth as they feel comfortable to take ownership. Knowing that they are truly respected and cared for enables youth to feel confident taking this larger role. Adults can accomplish this through *facilitating, teaching, mentoring, and providing feedback*. As youth gain greater skill sets, they will be able to take on larger roles in their projects and the adults can step into more supporting roles. Generally, they found that "youth empowerment requires a shift in programming, from a top-down to a partnering approach where professionals welcome youth and assume an active enabling role" (Cargo et al., 2003, p. S78).

Nicole Mohajer and Jaya Earnest, in their article *Youth Empowerment for the Most Vulnerable,* review adolescent empowerment programs around the world and develop their own model to be used specifically with vulnerable adolescents. Through literature review and summaries of Paulo Freire's works, the authors found five themes which are woven into their model of an empowerment program.

First, they find it is important that a clear vision of the goals of a program be agreed upon by all involved; without such agreement, adolescents may determine an intended outcome which does not coincide with the vision of the funder or sponsoring organization. The second theme is

the importance of circle groups for dialogue around critical issues; dialogue groups can offer a space for working through issues of local importance to the community and, therefore, the adolescents who reside there. This process of talking through issues can lead to a sense of ownership and role understanding for young people. Third, it is key that the content of the program should involve skills development; it is particularly effective if the youth have a voice in identifying the skills they will acquire. The fourth theme requires that program content involve an examination of culture, beliefs and values for youth and adult facilitators together. Embracing and celebrating local culture, beliefs and values helps youth to develop an understanding of their identity and role within the greater community; including adult facilitators in the process allows youth to understand the continuing nature of the process, and serves to build a trusting relationship between youth and adults. Finally, Mohajer and Earnest determine that it is essential for there to be an element of community involvement to ensure sustainability of the program. There should be a community service element that engages the youth with their community and offers the opportunity to implement lasting positive change in the community (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009).

John Ungerleider in his article, *Structured Youth Dialogue to Empower Peacebuilding and Leadership,* discusses the importance of youth dialogue in creating empowering programs for young people. Ungerleider describes the dialogue groups as a setting where adult staff facilitate open conversation between young participants in youth leadership programs (Ungerleider, 2012). Youth are encouraged to discuss key issues facing young people globally, as well as specific issues from their home communities. Through the dialogue process, youth are given a safe space to be heard, to voice their opinions, concerns and ideas, and envision a world where they can affect change. Ungerleider (2012) explains:

> For young people to feel empowered to address social problems in their communities and conflicts facing their world, they need to engage not only with the issues, but with each other. Through structured, adult-facilitated peer dialogue, high school and college students reflect on their generation's role in responding to seemingly overwhelming challenges from war to child labor to global warming. For future leaders, dialogue groups create a place and time to envision one's own potential leadership for social change. (p. 382)

Dialogue is an essential part of a holistic program design in building a sense of empowerment for youth participants. Having the experience of facilitated peer-to-peer dialogue in a safe environment, and being encouraged to engage in self-disclosure and reflection, can lead youth to become change-makers in their communities. Ungerleider's use of dialogue as a component of empowering youth programs demonstrates the importance of the youth-adult relationship, peer-to-peer conversation and collaboration, and youth developing an understanding of their role within their greater communities.

Development of a critical social theory of youth empowerment through the identification of integral dimensions is the goal of Louise B. Jennings, Deborah M. Parra-Medina, DeAnne K. Hilfinger Messias, and Kerry McLoughlin in their article *Toward a Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment* (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Jennings et al analyze existing models of youth empowerment in order to design a conceptual framework which integrates prevailing models into one critical social theory. Through their research, Jennings et al (2006) find that youth empowerment processes "occur within welcoming, youth-centered environments, through meaningful engagement and knowledge, skill and leadership development, critical reflection on societal forces and power relations, and active

community participation, leading to change in sociopolitical processes, structures, norms or images" (p.33).

Adults play a key role in creating a youth-centered environment which enables youth to feel safe and actively engage in decision making with progressively more authority. As youth gain skills and cultivate leadership ability, they take a more active role in community service and acquire a greater sense of their own potential for positive social change. Critical youth empowerment views youth as individuals within a larger framework of families, communities, and a sociopolitical context.

Common Themes

A review of both empowerment theory and youth empowerment literature revealed many commonalities to be explored. While the literature included multiple variations of youth empowerment models, each identified key themes, components, or pieces which must be present to facilitate the empowerment of youth. I have identified five common themes which surfaced over and over again in the reviewed literature:

- Power sharing adult-youth relationship
- Individual and community level orientation
- Safe and supportive environment
- Peer collaboration
- Reflection

A shared theme in youth empowerment literature is the importance of a **power sharing adult-youth relationship** (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Jennings et al., 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Ungerleider, 2012). Youth will not feel truly empowered if they are simply given a superficial sense of responsibility; a truly

empowering experience is one in which youth are integrally involved in decision making, are given ownership over outcomes, and are offered the opportunity for guided self-reflection and positive feedback from the adults around them. Adults must be properly trained to regulate their involvement and ownership in order to provide appropriate space for ever more control to be taken by youth.

A balance between **individual and community level orientation** was another common theme (Cargo et al., 2003; Jennings et al., 2006; Medel-Anonuevo, 1995; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Rappaport, 1987; UNESCO; Ungerleider, 2012). Many of the works reviewed talked of the importance of the individual's role in their own empowering experience – that it is a self-defined and self-instigated process. Though this theme was addressed differently in the various models reviewed, there was consistent reference to the importance of youth first developing personal skills, understanding and defining their individual role, and then implementing the skills acquired through empowerment programs by engaging with their communities, actively working to resolve community issues, and understanding the challenges faced by their peers and society in general.

It was consistently noted that a **safe and supportive environment** plays a key role in successful youth empowerment programs (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Jennings et al., 2006; Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Ungerleider, 2012). The creation of a safe and supportive environment allows the freedom for youth to try new skills and make important decisions within a context that makes it OK whether they succeed or fail. This environment allows for failure to be an opportunity for further growth and skill development rather than a deterrent to progress. Adults who embrace this environment are able to facilitate learning from

both failure and success, while encouraging youth to experience consequences in a way that leads to constructive learning.

Peer collaboration through dialogue, project design and implementation, community service, and feedback sharing was a common theme through many of the works reviewed (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Medel-Anonuevo, 1995; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Morton & Montgomery, 2013; Ungerleider, 2012). While it is important for youth to experience individual awareness and growth, it was suggested that this can be magnified through collaboration with peer groups. An understanding of their influence over not only their own lives, but over the lives of their peers as well, can lead to much higher levels of self-efficacy; existing in an environment that encourages youth to teach and learn from their peers leads to empowerment.

Critical and intentional integration of **reflection** was repeatedly identified as a key component to providing empowering experiences for youth (Chinman & Linney, 1998; Jennings et al., 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Ungerleider, 2012). Giving youth the space to critically reflect on their actions, the intended or unintended outcomes, and how this might influence future plans, empowers them toward further growth. Fostering critical reflection takes time and intentionality that must be planned; reflection activities should be youth-centered and engaging – often artistic and creative outlets are effective tools. Reflection is an opportunity for adult facilitators to foster empowerment by guiding youth through their own reflective process from the background.

Assessment of Empowerment Themes Found in Jóvenes en Acción

While there may be many different definitions of youth empowerment, each specifically written for the demographic or organization it represents, these five common themes can be used to evaluate youth programs. A program that includes each of the five empowerment themes identified above, can be labeled a youth empowerment program. I will use each of these five empowerment themes to examine and identify the ways in which the JenA program is an empowering experience for youth.

Power Sharing Adult-Youth Relationship

Throughout the course of the JenA program, there are two main groups of adults with whom the students regularly engage. During the *Pre-Departure* and the *U.S. Program* components of the exchange, students engage primarily with World Learning program staff. World Learning staff continue to maintain their relationship with the Jóvenes during the *Follow-on* program, however, their role is much more removed; during this phase of the program, the students primarily engage with their mentors.

World Learning program staff are trained to be facilitators of a student-centered program. Throughout the U.S. program, staff offer support and guidance to the Jóvenes; as the students gain a greater sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, the staff move further into the background, playing a supporting role. The best example of this is the students' community action projects. During the program, students work to gain skills that will help them to implement their projects when they return to Mexico. Program staff lead workshops and activities which facilitate this skill building. As this development occurs, program staff step farther into the background, while

continuing to offer support as needed, as students assert themselves through public presentations of their project goals.

Once the students are home in Mexico and are working on the implementation of their projects, they have the support of the Embassy/Consulate and self-selected mentors. These mentors play a supporting role, offering feedback and guidance when asked, but not serving as decision makers or project implementers themselves. The Jóvenes know that there is an entire network of caring adults who are available to consult, offer guidance, and provide a safety net if needed; however, those adults (both program staff and mentors), during the follow-on program, only step in to actively participate in the students' work when they are expressly invited by the Jóvenes themselves.

In her paper on World Learning youth programs, Melanie Brubaker (2009) commented,

> During evaluations, students often reference the respect they feel from the staff, that the staff treat, teach, and talk with them like they are adults or leaders. This is a result of student centered learning. As their thoughts, questions and opinions are valued, the students develop greater confidence in themselves and their ability to gather more knowledge once our programs are over. (p. 9)

The JenA program has had a 100% success rate[3] in community action project implementation every year that World Learning has run the program (Graves, 2012; Graves & French, 2013; Graves & French 2015). The incredible success achieved by JenA project teams can largely be attributed to the empowerment that the youth participants feel through their power-sharing relationship with the adults associated with the JenA program.

[3] 100% Success Rate is defined as all project teams implementing a community action project in their communities.

Individual and Community Level Orientation

The curriculum design for the JenA program provides a balance between teaching individual skills for developing an increased sense of self-efficacy and building a critical awareness of the positive impact youth can have on their greater communities.

Individual level empowerment is facilitated through workshops which enable learning valuable skills such as: leadership, public speaking, networking, strategic questioning, working in teams, and peer mediation. These skills prepare students for their own success in navigating the world as they are exposed to it, and create increased levels of self-efficacy. According to a World Learning program report from April, 2013, during their reunion conference – at the end of their ten month program experience – the participants were asked to make a list of personal skills that they gained or developed during their JenA program. The most commonly listed skills were:

Communication	*Active Listening*
Self-Confidence	*Optimism*
Organizing	*Time Management*
Self-Initiative	*Self-Responsibility*
Public Speaking	*Utilizing Community Resources*
Fundraising	*Forming Partnerships*
Volunteer Management	*Peer Mediation*

(Graves & French 2013)

As I stated earlier, the subtheme of the JenA program, dictated by the funders, is creating *A Culture of Lawfulness*; this theme is the focus of curriculum woven into the students' learning experience throughout the program, from the *Pre-Departure Orientation,* through the *U.S. Program,* and during the *Follow-on* as well. This subtheme leads the students to take the individual skills they are acquiring and begin to see how they can positively assert themselves in their greater communities.

During the Leadership and Orientation Camp in Brattleboro, VT, students participate in workshops titled: Critical Youth Issues in Mexico, The Effects of Substance Use and Abuse, and Social Issues Improv Theater. These workshops begin to lay the groundwork for a more in-depth exploration which takes place in the host communities during the Global Leader Education and Engagement Institutes. In their host cities, under the rubric of a culture of lawfulness, students spend significant time learning about their project team's chosen theme – bullying, school desertion, family disintegration, substance abuse or domestic/relationship violence – and acquire tools to use when implementing their projects upon their return home. In their host communities, the Jóvenes are given opportunities to meet with local youth who are civically active and working to combat the same issues in the United States. There are also opportunities for service learning through volunteering. For the Jóvenes, the selection of social issues, youth activism, and service learning experiences are empowering processes which lead to a greater level of commitment to community and an understanding of their capacity for initiating positive change.

One team from the 2013 generation of Jóvenes noted this understanding in their reflection on the JenA Blog: "The principal purpose of this trip and of our stay in Baltimore [host community] is to prepare us to change our community, our state, to change Mexico, and nothing can stop us from changing the world" (Team: Las Dos Caras de la Moneda 2013).

The final portion of the U.S. program is the Synthesis Workshop in Washington, DC. This segment of the exchange continues community level empowerment by opening the focus to a higher level of involvement. While in Washington, DC, the Jóvenes meet with the Mexican Ambassador to the United States, representatives of the Wilson Center Mexico Institute (DC's foremost think-tank on issues surrounding diplomatic relations between Mexico and the U.S.), and with representatives of the U.S. Department of State. The focus of these meetings is the bi-

lateral relationship between Mexico and the United States; the Jóvenes are given the chance to ask questions, propose ideas, and generally gain an understanding of their own roles within this relationship. The Jóvenes' time in Washington, DC is also spent working within their project teams to fine-tune their plans for community projects upon their return home.

Many of the workshops during this part of the program focus on action planning skills such as: articulating purpose, goals and objectives; defining SMART goals; identifying key stakeholders; and creating a timeline for project activities. These action planning workshops help the students to reflect on their newly honed skills both individually and as a project team, and help them to look forward towards the work they will do to better their communities in Mexico. The Synthesis Workshop brings a balance of individual and community level empowerment processes to the entire program.

Upon return home to Mexico, the Jóvenes are given nine months to implement their community projects. During this time, the project teams often continue their growth and development through on-the-ground reflection, conceptualization and experimentation which leads to dynamic changes and adaptations to their original project proposals. As the Jóvenes implement their community action projects, their work often has a ripple effect which influences hundreds of community members across Mexico. The opportunity to implement the individual and team skills gained in the program for the betterment of their community truly highlights the empowering nature of the full JenA cycle.

Safe and Supportive Environment

Believing in the power of youth and inspiring them to believe in themselves is a principle at the very core of the World Learning Youth Team's reality. This principle influences decisions

that are made at all levels and stages of program design and implementation and, in my observation, it is this principle that leads directly to the existence of a safe and supportive environment in the JenA program. During training, program staff are taught that the very core of being a youth program facilitator is the intention to create a space in which youth feel safe taking challenges, living new experiences and learning from the whole process.

Throughout the program experience, Jóvenes are reminded that they are in an environment which encourages "challenge by choice". This means that if a student does not feel comfortable participating in an activity – one which to them feels high-risk – or if they are not yet ready to open up to a new level of engagement, it is their choice either to participate or just to observe. Program staff are trained to encourage students to challenge themselves and try new experiences when appropriate; they are also trained to support students when they decide to take a step back and re-evaluate. The program community is intentionally created as a safe space in which students are given opportunities to succeed; when failure happens, staff help students to process the experience and plan for future attempts. Program staff use the Experiential Learning Cycle as a model for processing both successes and failures in order to create an empowering environment for the participants.

In an article written for the Youth Voices Newsletter – a publication of the World Learning Youth Team – one participant spoke about the fear of failure falling away in the environment of the JenA program. The student's words explain how this safe and supportive environment led to skill development, self-efficacy and new discoveries daily:

> These have been just a few days, but they have already made a big difference for us. The fear to fail or express what we think and feel has been cast aside. Our ideas flow effortlessly because every day there is something new to see

> and learn, which is of great help for us to develop our project ideas. Every day, we not only discover something new around us, but also realize what we are capable of. Our skills were a bit underestimated before coming here, but these workshops really managed to get the best out of all of us. (Sanchez Cid, 2013)

Peer Collaboration

The students apply to the JenA program in project teams of four to five youth, and they continue to work closely with that same team for the entire ten months of the program. This built-in team dynamic leads to incredible success for the community action projects that are implemented during the nine month follow-on phase, however, it requires a great deal of intentional teambuilding and group work skills training during the U.S. program. For this reason, teamwork and peer collaboration are themes woven into the entire JenA program.

The students participate in workshops such as Peer Mediation and How to Work Effectively in Teams, as well as in teambuilding activities such as learning to canoe, a day on a low and high ropes challenge course, Egg Drop Challenge, and a team scavenger hunt around Brattleboro, VT. During the Leadership and Orientation week at the beginning of the U.S. Program, the Jóvenes are a part of a "Global Camp" experience which includes students from many countries around the world. During the daytime, each program runs independently; evening activities and free time are shared with the entire camp. Students from different programs also room with one another in the dormitory, giving them a chance for cross-cultural learning and collaboration during the evening free-time hours. One Jóvenes student reflected on this global relationship building experience in a post on the program blog:

> The week I spent in Vermont means something really amazing for me. Back in the camp I met guys from Iraq, and their friendship taught me something about leadership. They taught me no matter our religions, cultures, or cities, all people on Earth are part of a big family. They also taught me that differences make friendships stronger, instead of divide people. If we really want to make a change for our communities, we should try to understand each other and act in benefit of all people. (Ruiz Visfocri, 2014)

The balance of significant time spent together with Mexicans from around the country and peers from around the world contributes to the empowering nature of the JenA program.

Focusing on peer collaboration during the U.S. program sets the groundwork for the Jóvenes project teams on their return home to Mexico. While in the United States, the importance of working with peers, offering suggestions and taking feedback from other program participants builds within the Jóvenes an understanding of benefits that come from working with peers. When the students return to Mexico and begin work on their community action projects, they naturally turn towards their schoolmates and other team-members for support in their project implementation. The 2014 World Learning final program report noted that after their program experience, "98% of Jóvenes stated that they more actively encourage teamwork and cooperation since the JenA Program" (Graves & French, 2015).

Reflection

As reflection is an integral part of the ELC, which informs the JenA program design, reflection is intentionally practiced throughout the entire program. Processing and reflecting are tools that program staff use within individual activities. For example, after a teambuilding

activity, staff might ask: What surprised you about that activity? Were you successful? What would you try differently next time? How does this activity relate to your real life? Processing and reflecting also take place within the bigger picture of the program design. For example, after a day of multiple meetings and workshops in a host community, staff might ask: What was today's theme? What connections do you see between panel discussion A and workshop B? How can you apply what you learned today to your action project? What was the most important thing you learned today? What do you think could have been done better at meeting C?

During the busy hustle and bustle of a day on program, or even after four weeks on program, program staff are expected to slow down the clock and give students space for critical reflection on the learning that is taking place. Often much of this reflection comes in the form of informal conversation and short question and answer sessions; however, there are times when staff are able to allot more time and energy into designing reflective activities that are more engaging and creative. Staff may ask students to create a work of art that represents their reflection on a day's experience, or take photos throughout a week and create a collage, or film a video, or write about their learnings. These activities allow students to take significant time to reflect on the program and what they are learning, and enable them to look forward to how they may apply these lessons to their futures.

Reflection on program experiences is also encouraged through the use of the Digital Youth Leadership Challenge (DYLC). Throughout all segments of the program, participants are given a variety of prompts, involving a variety of media tasks, relating to program experiences and themes such as leadership, civic engagement, and creating a culture of lawfulness. These media tasks include taking photos, writing blog posts, and taking videos that they submit and staff post on the blog. The DYLC is a creative outlet for students to reflect on their day-to-day

program lives and then share their reflections with each other and their families at home. One JenA student posted the following reflection on his experience of the Leadership and Orientation week in Vermont:

> Vermont was all about overcoming fears, the fear of being without your parents, the fear of not knowing anyone, new people, new places, new experiences and a total new culture. I guess it was hard at the beginning; the first 2 days were crazy I felt like those days could have last forever but they didn't, everything was slow to me just because I wasn't expecting all the activities and I was overwhelmed by everything.
>
> I wished Vermont would have last longer but nothing last forever and that's how I describe my experience in Vermont something crazy that I enjoyed a lot but at the same time I was thinking that a week was not enough to meet all the people in the campus, I feel like I didn't enjoy it in the way that others did and I'm ok with that because I made the friends that I wanted to make, I learned what I wanted to learn and I enjoyed what I wanted to enjoy. After Vermont I was proud of myself; I sang in front of a big audience, I went thru the whole ropes course, I overcame my fear of heights, and I made a lot of new friends. I got along with everyone, with the staff, the Iraqi students and the Mexican students…yes; Vermont will be an experience that I'll never forget. (Virgen Torres, 2014)

Staff facilitated dialogue groups are also very effective tools for critical reflection and processing. In the first several years of JenA, dialogue was a regular part of the curriculum

during the Leadership and Orientation week in Vermont, as well as during the Synthesis Workshop in Washington, DC. Two years ago, to lower the overall budget for the program, the funders asked that the U.S. Program be shortened from five to four weeks in length. To accommodate this request, the Leadership and Orientation week in Vermont was condensed from twelve to nine days in length, and several content pieces had to be cut. One of the changes made to accommodate the new schedule was reducing staff-facilitated dialogue to a two session curriculum that is now called Conversation Groups.

In the previous full curriculum, dialogue groups provided a safe, focused space to reflect on and process program components as well as student selected global youth issues. The Conversation Groups that JenA currently uses take place during the Synthesis Workshop at the close of the U.S. program. While they no longer provide time for reflection and conversation on global youth issues, these Conversation Groups are still very effective tools for students to process their JenA experience, share new knowledge and questions that the program has raised, and learn from their peers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

An in-depth review of the JenA program design, implementation, students' experiences and program outcomes demonstrates the strong presence of each of the five themes of youth empowerment discussed above. I recognize, however, that due to my close ties to the JenA program, there is a good deal of potential for bias in my assessment of the program. As an employee of the World Learning Youth Team, I have been – either collaboratively or on my own – managing the JenA program for the last 3 years, making program design decisions, writing curriculum, hiring and training staff, etc. This personal experience, along with my belief in the

positive benefits of youth empowerment programming, could be seen as influencing my assessment of the empowering nature of the JenA program.

To protect against subjectivity in my assessment of the program, I have limited my judgements of empowerment themes and practices present in the JenA program to components which are evident in and can be supported through published student blog posts, newsletter articles, and official program reports.

The first theme – **a power sharing adult-youth relationship** – was found to be present in the Jóvenes' relationships with both the World Learning program staff and their project team mentors. In my experience managing this program, I have heard from students, on many occasions, how important their relationship with the program staff is to their experience. During a recent Mid-Term Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, I had the opportunity to talk with a program alumni from the 2012 generation (I will call him Mateo for the purpose of telling this story). Mateo told me that as his team has reflected on their JenA experience and their lives in the years since, the most impactful part of the program for them was their relationship with the staff team. He said that he was so impressed by how much the staff believed in him, that he began to believe in himself in the same way. Mateo attributes much of the success of his team's project and his personal growth to the empowering relationships he experienced on the JenA program.

JenA program curriculum design was shown to be well balanced with a focus on both **individual and community level orientation**. The program design concentrates on teaching individual skills to the Jóvenes who are then given the greater community context in which they can practice their newly acquired and strengthened skills. As Jennings et al (2006) noted, "Critical social empowerment involves both individual and group level change: enhancing the

capacity of individuals to contribute to and work in collaboration with others to effect social change" (p. 50). The JenA program allows for students to daily enhance both their individual capacity and their collaboration with larger groups toward social change.

The third empowerment theme – **a safe and supportive environment** – was shown to be fostered within the JenA program community by program staff. As a youth program professional, I have worked with many staff teams throughout my career and can confidently say that the youth-centered programing that the World Learning Youth Team practices is truly outstanding. This youth-centered program design facilitates a family-like atmosphere where youth feel treasured, respected, stimulated, and supported as is necessary for creating a safe and supportive environment.

The case study showed that **peer collaboration** is built into the very fiber of the JenA program with the presence of the project teams. As demonstrated, there are also many opportunities for the Jóvenes to work collaboratively with other youth outside of their chosen teams. As Chinman and Linney (1998) noted, peer approval is incredibly important to adolescents, therefor having opportunities to work within peer groups can be very empowering. The project teams, teambuilding exercises, workshops on effective teamwork, global camp experience, and finally project implementation in Mexico, all contribute to the empowerment of the JenA program participants.

Reviewing the JenA curriculum design showed that the core program pedagogy, based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, incorporated a daily presence of the fifth empowerment theme, **reflection.** To foster experiential learning, reflection is built into most program activities. Jennings et al (2006) also highlighted the importance of youth being given opportunities for

critical reflection on social issues; this critical reflection was observed in the social and global issue curriculum of the JenA program.

It is, of course, possible for a program to produce differing levels of empowerment, and there must always be space for self-criticism and consequent improvement. With that in mind, I have several suggestions for changes and improvements that can be made to program design and implementation to ensure greater levels of empowerment for program participants.

First, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, Rappaport's Empowerment Theory and the five themes of empowering youth programs should be taught during World Learning's program staff training. As it currently runs, youth empowerment is a backbone of program design, and individual pieces of empowerment theory are taught during training; however, there is no comprehensive model of youth empowerment being taught to program staff. Reflecting on the program staff training week, this is likely due to two reasons. First, the focus of the training week is very logistical. There are so many hard skills required to implement the programs that staff are being trained for that it is hard to include time for theory as well. I think we fall back on the knowledge that program managers are designing youth empowerment programs, and so if we do not have the time to train program staff in the theory as well; it is considered more important that they have the hard skills needed for the day-to-day running of the programs.

Second, historically program staff have been primarily recruited from the SIT graduate school where they enrolled in the Youth Program Leadership and Design (YPLD) course prior to being hired to staff World Learning youth programs. Youth empowerment theory is taught in the YPLD course so, as long as staff come through SIT's graduate program, it was safe to assume they had a background in youth empowerment theory. In the last few years, the Youth Team's program portfolio has exponentially grown. With this growth, the need for program staff has also

increased leading to a more diverse applicant pool and overall program staff. The curriculum of staff training week should be adjusted to no longer assume a basic knowledge of the YPLD course instructed theories. Having program design informed by youth empowerment theory is the first key; however, once that has been established, teaching an internally consistent and comprehensive model of youth empowerment as a holistic practice to the staff on the ground will further ensure that both program design and implementation are truly empowering.

Another change that I would suggest, is reinstating the full dialogue curriculum into the JenA program. When the full curriculum is used, dialogue is an activity that supports all five themes of youth empowerment in a re-occurring way throughout the program. The truly empowering nature of a dialogue group is likely one of the reasons that year after year participants consistently list it as their favorite component of their program experience. JenA is one of the only World Learning youth programs that currently does not include a full dialogue curriculum and, I believe, this is an oversight that should be corrected. It seems that one of the challenges always facing youth program implementers is how to fit more and more content into the same allotted time. I would suggest looking at the program creatively and adding in at the least three dialogue sessions during the PDO and Leadership and Orientation week to compliment the final two sessions held during the Synthesis Workshop. Dialogue has not traditionally been a part of the PDO curriculum, however I think it could be a wonderful addition to this pre-program time. Introducing the practice of dialogue at such an early stage of the program could strengthen its overall impact.

Additionally, an area that I believe could use further attention is the role of the adult mentors in the *Follow-on* phase of the program. Throughout the years, mentors have been either incredible or lackluster, and their choice has mostly left up to chance. Admittedly mentors

receive very little training or guidance in fulfilling their role. In the last year, I have worked with our partners in Mexico to strengthen the mentor curriculum, including workshops specifically for the mentors at the closing of the U.S. program in August, and at the Mid-Term Conferences, however, even these new additions could be strengthened to better prepare and support mentors. Mentor training and support has suffered on the JenA program mostly because there has always been a level of confusion around whose responsibility it is to facilitate this relationship. Embassy and Consulate mentors are kept entirely removed from program implementers – World Learning staff are not even given their contact information. Improving this relationship would require heightened transparency from the U.S. Embassy and is largely out of World Learning control, therefore, I will focus my comments on the student selected school mentors.

Currently, the project teams select their mentors as a part of their application to the JenA program. This means that neither the mentors nor the students know if they will be selected to participate – the commitment is theoretical. I would suggest that the model be changed to require mentor selection upon a team's admission to the program. This would give the nominated mentor an understanding that their commitment is a real, not theoretical, support of the project team. Secondarily, I suggest that a mentor handbook and contract be created. This handbook would fully define the mentor role and expectations – including time commitment, it would also include an overview of the entire ten month program and an explanation of the youth-centered pedagogy, ELC, and youth empowerment models used to design the JenA program. After reviewing this handbook, mentors should be asked to sign a contract committing to fulfilling the mentor role. Finally, the workshops held for mentors throughout the ten month program should be re-designed to reflect the youth empowerment model, and the role of mentors in empowering their Jóvenes teams through a power sharing youth-adult relationship. Making

these changes and adding a stronger level of intentionality to the programming provided to mentors will significantly improve their ability to empower the Jóvenes in their community action project implementation.

Further research may benefit from including data collected from participant questionnaires or interviews. For the purposes of this capstone paper, however, due to both time constraints and the delicate nature of conducting research with minors, I chose to exclude directly engaging JenA participants.

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