



Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation Report

Introduction

The overall goals of the Youth Empowerment initiative are to explore the benefits of youth empowerment as part of PSE efforts. Youth empowerment is a process that occurs by including youth voice in decision-making to bring about sustainable changes that benefit the community where changes are adopted and the youth who create the change.

Organizations delivering SNAP-Ed locally identified a need for additional resources, training, and evaluation to effectively use youth empowerment principles within the parameters of SNAP-Ed PSE work. Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) will create a youth empowerment guide that can be layered onto a variety of PSE strategies used in SNAP-Ed programming.

Objectives

The objectives of the Youth Empowerment evaluation include:

- To understand the ways youth engagement and youth empowerment are being defined, implemented, and applied to stimulate more meaningful PSE as it relates to SNAP-Ed goals and objectives.
- To understand characteristics and assets of people and communities that foster youth engagement and youth empowerment PSE change work as it relates to SNAP-Ed goals and objectives.

Collectively, the evaluation activities will inform recommended youth empowerment approaches to PSE initiatives based on pilot findings, including training and evaluation components and anticipated outcomes.

Evaluation Design

A qualitative grounded theory methodology was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with local SNAP-Ed staff who are youth leaders within their local organizations.



Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation Report

Methods

Interviews collected input from adult SNAP-Ed youth leaders. The semi-structured interview guide included questions to discern process and outcome narratives related to PSE efforts that co-exist with youth empowerment efforts.

Youth program leaders (i.e., SNAP-Ed educators) were asked to share experiences and insights about youth-led PSE and youth empowerment, including definitions, characteristics of readiness, needs, assets, as well as the general and specific variables to implement PSE efforts with youth in Michigan schools or other youth-centric organizations.

The 30-minute interviews were conducted by Michigan Fitness Foundation evaluation staff via Zoom Version 5.8.6. between November 2022 and January 2023.

Recruitment: Purposive recruitment strategies were used because adults were already engaging youth via SNAP-Ed; recruitment occurred by email, feasible since established relationships existed. No compensation was awarded for interview participation.

Participants: A total of seven interviews were conducted with participants (n=11) who represented seven organizations (e.g., local school districts), across three different regions of Michigan (three regions [Eastern (Upper, southeastern), Western, and Central] and both upper and lower peninsulas). The adults were recruited since they were delivering nutrition and/or physical activity education to youth as a form of YE. Adults in this group had an aim to empower youth to make PSE changes in their local community contexts.

Results

From the analysis, four main themes were produced:

1. Defining Youth Engagement and Empowerment and Characteristics
2. Describing Current States of Engagement and Empowerment as well as Sequential Steps to PSE Change
3. Calling Out and Calling In: Acknowledgement of Social and Structural Components of Practice
4. Naming Assets and Opportunities to Robust Youth Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change Work.

Themes and supporting participant quotes are further outlined in the Appendix.



Theme One: Defining Youth Engagement and Empowerment and Characteristics

Participants explored the ways they make meaning of youth engagement and youth empowerment and in doing so provided insights to how youth engagement and youth empowerment can be defined.

All participants were asked to reflect on and react to a standard definition of empowerment. Participant reflections and reactions led to points of passionate collective agreement while passionate dissonance was also embodied. Successful youth engagement and empowerment change work have similar, overlapping, and different characteristics, which are relative to youth wants and needs.

There were three subthemes to describe characteristics of an adult who is ready to do the work coupled with definitions:

- (1) Defining youth engagement,
- (2) Defining youth empowerment, and
- (3) Characteristics of an adult who is ready to do Youth Engagement and Youth Empowerment Work.

Appendix Table 1 reviews participant quotes contextualizing Theme 1.

Defining Youth Engagement

Youth engagement was collectively defined as - a time when adults and youth come together with the intention to discover what youth need and want to ensure youth notice their voice matters through a collaborative, needs-based approach. For example, one participant stated, “... *youth engagement is helping youth find their own voice to work through the process towards changes that they want.*”
[Interview #7]

The time spent between adults and youth should:

- at least be interactive, if not reciprocally participatory,
- done with authenticity,
- uphold curiosity, prioritize inclusion, cultivate exploration,
- be carried out with a commitment to using plain language,
- be implemented with deep listening,
- done in collaborative, and
- acknowledge and value deep listening, curiosity, inclusion, and a desire for continuous learning.

The time spent engaging youth should be: supportive, purposeful, reflective of youth desires, needs-based, and facilitated - yet loosely planned to be responsive to the wants and needs of youth.

Practically, adults should go where youth typically gather (i.e., school, community center, athletic venue, etc.) making the time spent placed-based, initiating a relationship in a trusted-familiar space.



Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation Report

The culmination of youth engagement, beyond youth noticing their voice matters in any place or space, should be done with the intention to: develop a youth-driven list of PSE change effort choices prepare youth to acknowledge the depth and benefits of sharing power, facilitate an empowered state of being where youth are negotiating their readiness take a lead role in PSE change work with the adult who is guiding the engagement activities.

Defining Youth Empowerment

To define youth empowerment, participants were asked to:

- a) thinking freely and openly,
- b) report how they know they are personally empowered, and
- c) react to and reflect upon a general definition of empowerment to explore the ways they make meaning of youth empowerment.

Participant narratives were merged, and the following definition developed as a result:

Youth empowerment is the collective effort of effective youth engagement where youth are prepared to fully lead and participate in making decisions to accomplish a PSE change effort. In practice, empowered youth have the knowledge, skills, tools, ability to access resources, flexibility, and grace to make mistakes yet recover. Youth can freely express and demonstrate the desire for continuous learning and take agency over implementing what they have learned – this is fostered by time spent building a culture of encouragement, honoring youth voice, ideas, and realities.

One person's report of how they know they are personally empowered also captured the essence of other participants by explaining:

[I feel empowered] when I feel like I've given ownership of something, when I've been invited into something and my opinion is taken seriously, and I feel like I am a partner as opposed to just being told what I am going to do or what I should do. I have said in the steps moving forward.

Two people independently made the claim, “we get to empowerment through engagement” which is worth highlighting since, contextually, the quote demonstrates the importance of setting the stage and acknowledging there is a continuum, an engagement, empowerment continuum.

Youth who take on a PSE change project can do so with adults who are: willing to stand alongside go before or stand behind when prompted by youth or community, and committed to fostering an experience that looks and feels like independent exploration. Adults cultivate opportunities for youth to gain personal awareness and agency over their lives, demonstrating effective leadership to transfer knowledge from adult to youth for the PSE change project. They prepare ways for collaboration with other youth and supportive adult leaders and community members. Adults also monitor youth capacity and enhance comfortability to express their agency, empathetic and emotionally intelligent to the reality that youth may have agency over one part of their life or the given project but not all



Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation Report

parts of the project, and honoring the quest for agency, not shaming youth who cannot demonstrate comprehensive agency.

Characteristics of an Adult who is ready to do Youth Engagement and Youth Empowerment Work

As part of the transition from a youth engaged experience to PSE change work, adults will have gone before youth into the community to prepare or pave pathways to eliminate barriers for implementation of PSE change to begin. Adults should be well equipped to ‘get in the middle’ of what youth want or need and the socio-structural barriers they may encounter.

Participants named common characteristics that would be beneficial to help an adult gauge their readiness to be part of youth engagement, youth empowerment, or youth led PSE change work. Adults should be comfortable advocating with youth, comfortable disrupting norms, and prepared to walk through the consequences of disrupting the norms. For example, adults who know their own personal strengths, have patience, have an open mindset, are willing to be vulnerable within appropriate boundaries, value the power of failing forward, can keep the attention of youth in a genuine way, who can foster and call upon a high degree of resilience, and acknowledge historical and present socio-cultural factors that shape behavior will be best suited to be part of the work.

Participants coupled their narrative responses with typical pathways to youth work such as coaching, volunteering, and lived experiences from childhood. One profound participant statement worth highlighting that contributes to the essence of the big picture of readiness – explains the gravity of making a lasting impression upon youth and bearing the responsibility of being a role model:

...I know how I was when I was a young person, but just didn't feel like I had the support because I had moved around and the main people that were supportive, I just always remembered it.
[Interview #3]



Theme Two: Describing Current States of Engagement and Empowerment as well as Sequential Steps to PSE

Most participants reported that they were at or around the same theoretical state of engagement and empowerment work when presented a continuum of possible stages. Similarly, participants reported the desire to move up the continuum as the year progressed. Participants were not directly asked to provide a sequence of events or steps that transpire to get from youth engagement to youth empowerment; however, participants organically alluded to key sequential variables that can make the pathway from engagement to empowerment easier to navigate.

Reflecting on Current Status of Engagement and Empowerment using the Ladder of Youth Voice

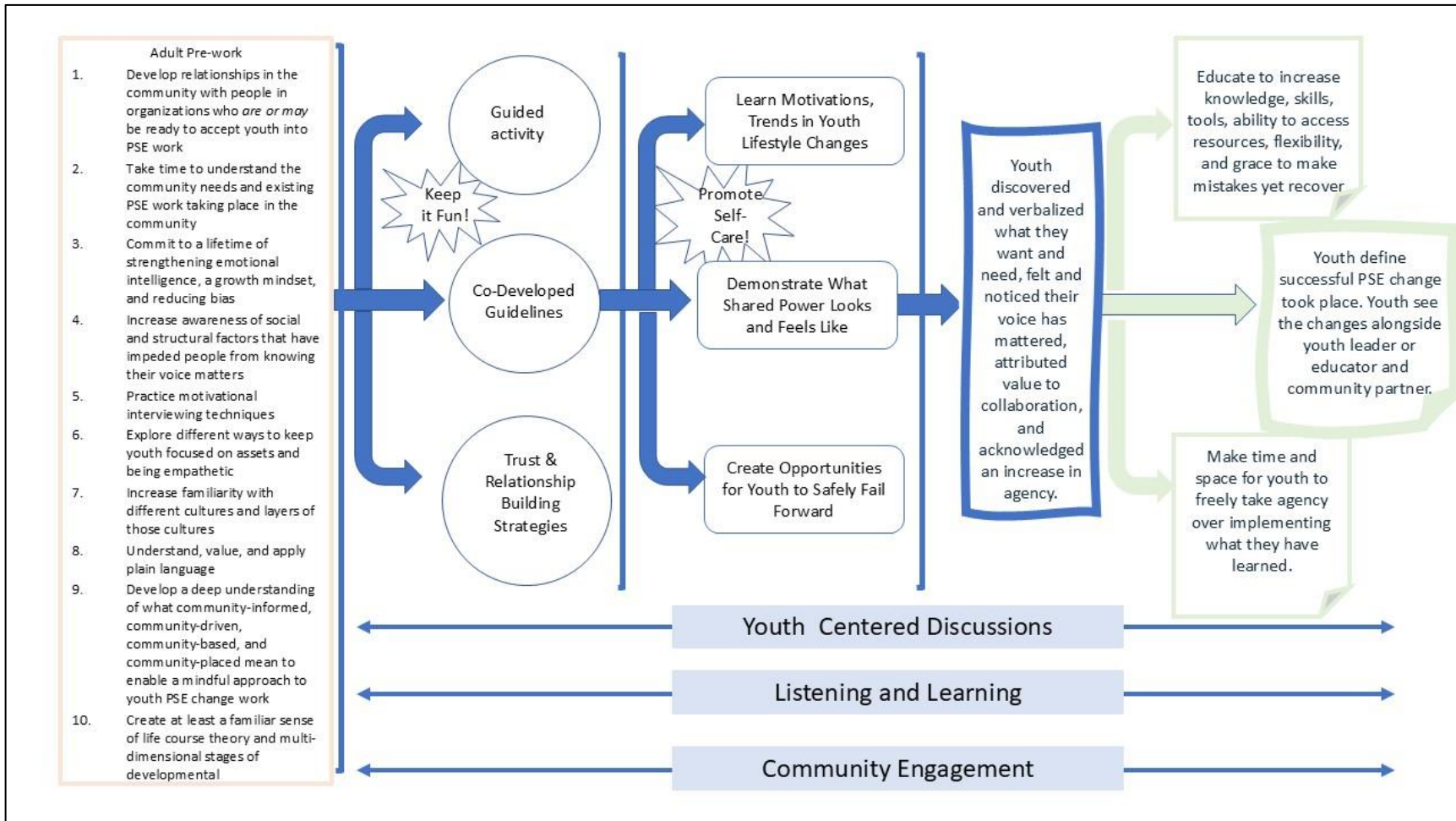
Participants were asked to reflect on an image of the ladder to describe where they are in the process of employing constructs and tenants of empowerment with the youth they are engaging. Most respondents were at least on rung 5 = “Young people consulted and informed” while a fewer amount was above, at 6 = “Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people”, or below at 4 = “Young people assigned and informed”. Additionally, participants were asked to report on their aspirations to describe where they would want to be by the end of the academic school year. For most, they aspired to be at rung 7 = “Young people lead and initiate action”.

Defining a Sequence: from Youth Engagement to Youth Empowerment

Participants offered some promising practices that might be worth adopting to support a sequential approach to working on youth engagement and youth empowerment. Implementors of youth engagement and empowerment may consider the steps as a help to guide new implementation or start a new youth PSE change work.

Figure 1 below outlines the pre-work adults need to undertake to enter the engagement, empowerment continuum and how to navigate through the continuum.

Figure 1. A Youth Engagement, Empowerment Continuum for PSE Change Work



Theme 3: Calling Out and Calling In: Acknowledgement of Social and Structural Components of Practice

While there was a consensus that centering youth by showing up where they are physically, emotionally, intellectually, or otherwise socially constructed norms may be a barrier to full engagement or empowerment. Subsequently, social constructs may be a barrier to PSE change work being started, carried out, or fulfilled as intended. In part, participants translated social constructs to be bias among adults who may not know youth capacity for applying their own skill sets, community cultures that put productivity and time before slow, intentional exploration and shared power, and the fact that adults inherently use their power to shape or act on the decisioning process with or without youth voice.

There were two subthemes:

- 1) Grounding the Realities of Empowerment Work and
- 2) Social and structural constructs that impede robust youth engagement and youth empowerment.

Grounding the Realities of Empowerment Work

Youth and adults participating in empowerment work have had different experiences leading up to when youth empowerment work begins – those lived experiences shape the realities in which these youth and adults go through empowerment efforts. For example, youth around the globe have been leaders in many important societal changes and led advocacy efforts – not all adults in communities where participants work acknowledge the power of youth.

To interpret what one participant stated, *“Empowerment is not always going to be felt by adults – to have the expectation that youth will feel empowered could be a reality not often acknowledged.”*

Framing the way youth empower is defined is important since specific words can be associated with and put on goals and objectives - such as the word mastery – which can create unrealistic expectations and put burdens on youth who may believe being a master or becoming perfect at the effort is the right or only way to do PSE change work.

Social and Structural Constructs that Impede Robust Youth Engagement and Youth Empowerment

Participants named the social and structural constructs that impede robust youth engagement and youth empowerment. Participant insights described community readiness in various forms a social and structural barrier. If communities prioritize other variables, personal biases, or social norms over youth doing PSE change work will be harder to enter or complete. Some examples that were named as social or structural barriers included needed community infrastructure changes, lack of willingness to define cultural contexts, adults prescribing activities for youth, and lack of respect for or inability to



Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2023 Evaluation Report

acknowledge youth wisdom. Other expectations or biases named that infiltrate opportunities for youth and adults to robustly participate in PSE change work were 1) expectations for adults to reach a productivity standard and 2) biases that influence the way curriculum gets designed.

Theme 4: Naming Assets and Opportunities to Robust Youth Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change Work

To do PSE change work with youth is to be continuously reflecting on the linear and non-linear processes of engagement and empowerment which, with training and support, can be more easily facilitated. Participants also named promising practices that have influenced successful facilitation of PSE work. Collectively, participants named limitations, barriers, facilitators, and solutions or supports needed towards more fully engaged youth PSE change work.

Training and Supports Needed

Trainings and/or supports participants thought would be helpful to facilitate work with youth were subject matter experts, clearer expectations within SNAP-Ed guidance, making resources from Choices training conference or other trainings available directly after the training, updated or new curriculum that is better aligned with PSE change work, and increased frequency of youth specific trainings throughout the year.

Facilitating Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change Work

Participants noticed that it is important to make space for conversations with youth, community members, and colleagues to make a pathway towards effective, sustainable youth-led PSE change work. Moving a youth-led PSE change effort across the engagement, empowerment continuum where PSE change takes place calls for common elements of the scope of the work to be implemented. Additionally, for adults doing youth-led PSE change work call for continuous personal reflection and sharpening of emotional intelligence.



Conclusions

Overall, participants generally shared a positive affinity towards doing youth-led PSE change work, but there were concerns about social and structural barriers limiting the scope of service that leaders and educators want to provide to youth. Youth program leaders and educators want to see changes in social norms and structural barriers so youth can have a more comprehensive (e.g., emotional, physical, intellectual, academic, etc.) experience with PSE change efforts. Youth program leaders and educators consistently reported centering youth – putting them first – while addressing multi-level factors of preparation and planning to facilitate a continuum of successes when doing youth-led PSE change work. Additionally, participants raised opportunities for trainings that could better support and/or mediate increased success on the continuum of PSE change work efforts.

Youth program leaders and educators provided insights on youth engagement, youth empowerment, and youth led PSE change work. Engaging youth program leaders and educators who provided narrative reports culminated in definitions of youth engagement, youth empowerment, and common characteristics of who a person might be if they were leading youth PSE change work. The practical experience of youth program leaders and educators offered a community-informed definition of what it means to work with youth.

Additionally, youth program leaders and educators described the current depth to which they are engaging and empowering youth across a continuum. Narrative reports led to sequential steps that are commonly followed when doing work with youth.

Youth program leaders and educators acknowledged that, in practice, there are social and structural components that exist within the social ecology where youth-led PSE change takes place that hinders a comprehensive scope of work. By naming and acknowledging the social and structural barriers youth program leaders and educators encounter, they are making meaning of what not to do and what needs to change. Specifically, this naming was particularly relevant to the pre-work phase, engagement phase, empowerment phase, the PSE change phase, within communities, or SNAP-Ed guidance.



Conclusions (continued)

Youth program leaders and educators made meaning of what assets facilitate youth-led PSE change work and how success happens on a continuum. Furthermore, youth program leaders and educators provided practical insights that can act as a roadmap towards robust youth-led PSE change work. Align Indicators of the SNAP-Ed Framework with the engagement, empowerment continuum of to honor the components of the continuum which could make implementation and PSE change more realistic. Raise awareness of youth informed, youth driven, and youth led change work to increase clarity about the youth effort on PSE related projects.

Next steps include engaging youth through qualitative inquiry to learn how their narrative reports expand upon, affirm, draw attention to gaps, and influence a conceptual framework that can lead to the development of a Youth Empowerment Guide for SNAP-Ed staff in and out of Michigan.

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Appendices

Themes and Supporting Quotes from Adult Participants

Central Description

Participants explained engagement between youth and adults should be, at the least, interactive and should strive to be reciprocal, collaborative, authentic, curious, steadfast in listening, and participatory. Engagement should be approached with authenticity. Adults should approach youth with plain language. Practically, adult participants identified youth engagement should take place in spaces where youth typically gather to initiate trust (i.e., school, community center, athletic venue, etc.). Adult participants expressed a sentiment of agreement that youth engagement should culminate in youth noticing their voice matters in society. Participants specified once youth have been validated through engagement, youth will also be active in PSE change, speak truth to power, and demonstrate an improved readiness to lead. Engagement should result in a youth driven list of needs-based PSE changes that can be addressed.

In practice, empowered youth have the knowledge, skills, tools, ability to access resources, flexibility, and grace to make mistakes yet recover. Youth can freely express and demonstrate the desire for continuous learning and take agency over implementing what they have learned – this is fostered by time spent building a culture of encouragement, honoring youth voice, ideas, and realities which acknowledged the engagement, empowerment continuum. Participants reported adults need to be mentally and emotionally flexible. Namely, accept the role of co-leading, normalize youth being leaders, speak up against norms youth identify do not serve them or their community, model ways to transfer knowledge, be empathetic and emotionally intelligent, and have a growth mindset so as not to shame youth in their quest for more agency.



Appendix Table 1. Adult Findings: Theme 1 Supporting Quotes

Theme 1: Defining And Characterizing Youth Engagement and Empowerment	
<p><i>“I feel like it’s so much of it (engagement and empowerment work) is us learning how to facilitate and not bringing any judgments into a conversation with youth and then really pairing the facilitation with some education, too, along the way.”</i> [Rural Adult Participant, Upper Western].</p>	
Theme 1: Sub-Themes	Quotes
1.1 Defining and Contextualizing Youth Engagement	<p><i>“... youth engagement is helping youth find their own voice to work through the process towards changes that they want.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Southeastern]</p>
1.2 Defining and Contextualizing Youth Empowerment	<p><i>“[I feel empowered] when I feel like I’ve given ownership of something, when I’ve been invited into something and my opinion is taken seriously, and I feel like I am a partner as opposed to just being told what I am going to do or what I should do. I have a say in the steps moving forward.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Western]</p>
1.3 Characterizing Readiness: Adults who can do the work	<p><i>“So, if you’re not open to listen and not be super just focused on the task at hand, you may not be ready [to engage youth]. And if you’re not willing to be vulnerable and have boundaries and consistently attempt to build rapport, it may be very difficult for you to engage in this work.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Eastern]</p>



Appendix Table 2. Adult Findings: Theme 2 Supporting Quotes

Theme 2: Moving Along the is to Youth Empowerment Continuum	
<p><i>“...we start with engagement and by helping youth engage in the process, they gain their empowerment.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Southeastern]</p> <p><i>“...we get to empowerment through engagement...”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Southeastern]</p>	
Theme 2: Sub-Themes	Quotes
<p>2.1 Reflecting on Current Status of Engagement and Empowerment using the Ladder of Youth Voice</p>	<p><i>“I think we’re between kind of 5 and 6 [on ladder of youth voice] right now. Our youth have been informed and consulted, kind of given the background of what we’re hoping to do. It’s been adult initiated thus far. Then I would like to see us at 7 by the end of this year where we’ve consulted with them [youth] and their decisions have led us to an action.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Central]</p>
<p>2.2 Defining a Sequence: from Youth Engagement to Youth Empowerment</p>	<p><i>“...engagement can be a discussion; it can be participating in an activity... But that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are motivated or feel prepared to take action... whereas I think empowerment is like saying, ‘Okay, now we’ve got all of this knowledge. We’ve engaged on this topic, this issue. We have this knowledge... You have agency here. What do we want to do about this or is there something to be done here?’”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Western]</p>



Appendix Table 3. Adult Findings: Theme 3 Supporting Quotes

Theme 3: Calling Out, Calling In: Acknowledgement of Social and Structural Norms in Practice	
<p><i>“...a lot of other things have to be taken care of ahead of time when we look at a progression of priorities within a community. Where does this lie in that progression of priorities. So, if infrastructure needs are taken care of, for example, and other very basic types of priorities within the community, they’re more apt to be able to start looking at issues such as youth empowerment.”</i> [Rural Adult Participant, Upper Eastern]</p>	
Theme 3: Sub-Themes	Quotes
3.1 Grounding the Realities of Empowerment Work	<p><i>“Empowerment is not always going to be felt by adults – to have the expectation that youth will feel empowered could be a reality not often acknowledged.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Eastern]</p>
3.2 Social and structural constructs that impede robust youth engagement and youth empowerment	<p><i>“...culture is part of this as well. And I think some communities are more open to engaging young people than others might be. So that could be part of the equation as well.”</i> [Rural Adult Participant, Upper Eastern]</p> <p><i>“So, we’re oftentimes going into schools and asking youth to do stuff in like one school year or two school years when in reality in our real world, things have taken a long time. So, we’re talking about usually disenfranchised groups. So, it’s going to take a lot more infrastructure, it’s going to take a lot more money, it’s going to take a lot more time. It’s going to take more.”</i> [Urban Adult Participant, Eastern]</p>



Appendix Table 4. Adult Findings: Theme 4 Supporting Quotes

Theme 4: Naming Assets and Opportunities to Robust Youth Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change	
<p><i>“We’re trying to get them [youth] to get out of the mode of looking at something as a deficit first. We try to go in like, ‘What is the community like? What is the food like?’ So just a general description.” [Urban Adult Participant, Eastern]</i></p> <p><i>“...taking resources that are available and then like adding a little bit more of our community context to them.”</i></p> <p><i>[Rural Adult Participant, Upper Western]</i></p> <p><i>“I think our biggest success has been around the youth identifying physical activity opportunities that their peers were most interested in.”</i></p> <p><i>[Urban Adult Participant, Southeastern]</i></p>	
Theme 4: Sub-Themes	Quotes
<p>4.1 Training and Supports Needed</p>	<p><i>“...when it gets to the PSE space and the middle and high schoolers and engaging them in these efforts, I think if we had kind of a youth leadership training that gave more facilitation tips, tricks, resources, I think that would be helpful...”</i></p> <p><i>[Urban Adult Participant, Central]</i></p> <p><i>“I think the [youth engagement] guidance has been vague. And I know that part of that is because it’s a process. And so... I really like a good framework. I like a framework that gives me like, ‘Okay, if I can help you understand youth, that this is where we’re going to start’...”</i></p> <p><i>[Urban Adult Participant, Southeastern]</i></p>



Appendix Table 4 (continued). Adult Findings: Theme 4 Supporting Quotes

Theme 4: Naming Assets and Opportunities to Robust Youth Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change (continued)	
Theme 4: Sub-themes	Quotes
4.2 Facilitating Engagement, Empowerment, and PSE Change Work	<p><i>“I think as far as like other systems in place being ready, like for the example of a school menu change, like is the food service director on board to make that change happen? Is the food readily available for wherever they source it from? So, as the person facilitating it, you’re having these behind-the-scenes conversations and also looping the youth in, when possible. Just to make sure that you don’t want to get the youth excited about a change and then it really can’t happen. So just making sure that all the players are on the same page and just keeping your communication going. And just almost being like an advocate for the youth to make sure if you’re having a conversation with another adult, that you’re keeping in mind what the youth have to say.”</i></p> <p><i>[Rural Adult Participant, Upper Western]</i></p>