



# Youth Empowerment SNAP-Ed Fiscal Year 2024 Evaluation Report

## Introduction

The overall goals of the Youth Empowerment initiative are to explore the benefits of youth empowerment as part of policy, systems, and environments (PSE) change 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.

## Objectives

To gain insights from youth that will inform a Youth Empowerment Playbook for SNAP-Ed local partners by understanding the ways youth engagement and youth empowerment are being defined, implemented, and applied to stimulate more meaningful PSE changes related to SNAP-Ed goals and objectives.

Additionally, to understand how youth characterize the assets (e.g., people and communities) that foster engagement and empowerment PSE change work as it relates to SNAP-Ed goals and objectives.

## Evaluation Design and Methods

The Youth Go method (Stacy, Acevedo-Palvolovich, & Rosewood, 2018) was used to conduct a formative evaluation of youth PSE change efforts in the context of SNAP-Ed Youth Empowerment. Youth Go is an interactive semi-structured qualitative approach to illicit feedback from participants and engage youth in the coding of their shared responses.

## Data Sources

The primary input was from SNAP-Ed youth participants from four organization (n=88). Secondary input was gathered through field note observations provided by the Michigan Fitness Foundation (MFF) evaluation team and local PSE leads and/or staff (e.g., interns). Tertiary input was gathered from documents; specifically, transcripts derived from SNAP-Ed educators and/or PSE leads who participated in the Youth Engagement Community of Practice meetings, peer-reviewed articles, or published reports.



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## Recruitment

Recruitment of youth was facilitated through existing relationships between youth, local SNAP-Ed PSE leads, classroom teachers, and MFF staff. Email, face-to-face meetings, and information sheets were used for recruitment communications.

## Data Collection

Youth program participants (middle and/or high school) from four local organizations delivering SNAP-Ed across five classrooms (n=5) were asked to share experiences and insights about PSE change and Youth Empowerment (including definitions, characteristics of readiness, needs, assets, and more) in SNAP-Ed settings where youth are typically engaged (e.g., schools, community-based organizations).

Youth Go activities took place between April and August of 2024 with youth from respective classrooms. The time spent in activities ranged from at least 30 minutes with the maximum interaction being 60 minutes. Youth represented three different regions of Michigan (West, East, and Upper Peninsula) spanning urban, suburban and rural geographies. Letters of acknowledgement and/or certificates of completion were given to PSE leads for distribution as a demonstration of appreciation.

## Youth Engagement Process for Theme Development

One group of youth out of five was engaged on two distinct occasions while four of the groups did not have the time nor bandwidth for the MFF evaluation team to return for a second time.

Youth Go calls for co-coding and co-creation of themes. In this evaluation, co-coding and co-creation of themes happened as the method outlines in one classroom, while modifications were made for three classrooms. Modifications to the method resulted in moderate (n=1), low (n=2) co-coding and co-creation of themes and in (n=1) classroom, no coding and co-creation of themes took place with MFF evaluation staff.

To further facilitate co-creation of themes member checking, an activity to verify the accuracy of the qualitative data summary took place, conducted by MFF staff. Member checking took place between April 2024 and August 2024 by youth in the classroom and/or by PSE leads who reviewed a preliminary report. All local PSE leads were invited to review a respective preliminary report and make suggestions for edits to strengthen the essence of the data interpretation. After reviewing the report, PSE leads agreed that the findings were accurate and representative.



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## Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012) was applied to the data sources to analyze the documents after the Youth Go method was applied. This was done to develop themes from all transcripts to expand upon findings from respective classrooms. Specifically, the data was broken down into initial codes using open coding which makes it possible for the evaluators to understand the discrete and similar raw data points from the individual and collective classrooms. Then, the codes were reviewed for the purpose of grouping similar concepts and defining how or in what ways those concepts contributed to the aims of the evaluation. Next, axial coding took place which the evaluators completed to find relationships (same or different) as well as how those relationship interact between the concepts. Relationships that were defined from the axial coding led to opportunities to explicate and/or reiterate causes that led to an effect based on youth narratives. The entire process is iterative and the evaluation staff constantly compared the codes leading up to the selective coding when themes were developed. During selective coding the evaluation staff remained vigilant in constantly comparing and taking notes (memos) to ensure the final themes were representative of the collective youth inputs.

## Results

From the analysis, four main themes were produced:

- (1) Required Preparation for Youth Empowerment Work,
- (2) Youth Perspectives: Power to Transform,
- (3) Empowerment Characteristics for Adults to Acquire as Defined by Youth, and
- (4) Upholding Values of Mutual Respect and Collaboration to Promote Autonomy.

## Summary

Overall, participants generally shared the importance of honoring youth and their individual assets as vital contributors to community change. Youth participants want to see adults engage in personal and professional development before engaging youth (e.g., cultural competence, emotional intelligence, mindfulness practices). Youth participants consistently reported a demand for respect, kindness, and autonomy—putting youth development first – while addressing multi-faceted variables (e.g., food systems change, access to physical activity, climate change) using concepts of shared power to address youth-driven priorities. Additionally, participants want youth empowerment efforts to be transformative, not transactional or performative. The youth conceptual framework developed from the four main themes is included as Figure 1 following the theme descriptions.



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### **Theme 1: Getting from Engagement to Empowerment**

The theme of required preparation outlines the ways youth expect adults to prepare themselves prior to embarking on youth engagement and youth empowerment work. The theme expands upon the expectations by encapsulating youth narratives that defined the concepts of youth engagement and empowerment while exploring the effects preparation will have on youth and community outcomes. Engagement, a precedent to empowerment, was defined by youth as an active relational process rooted in trust, mutual respect, empathy, support, and understanding. Youth expect adults committed to rooting engagement in these variables to pair the active process with tailored invitations so youth can identify ways to bring their unique strengths into the engagement work.

Youth conveyed ideal visions for engagement and through that, visioning a yearning for engagement entrenched in meaningful conversations, creativity, and authentic relational experiences were portrayed. Adults who are intellectually and practically prepared to know and implement youth engagement following the concepts will in turn prepare a generation of youth who have been nurtured in their developmental needs and therefore ready to embrace empowerment work that transforms their self-identity and make a difference in their communities. Conversely, youth engagement not aligned with these rooted principles will not equip youth to feel or be empowered slowing or eliminating the possibility of shifting youth from engaged to empowered.

An adult prepared to walk alongside youth in engagement to empowerment work was often described as someone who was self-aware, committed to role modeling, and willing to unlearn/relearn normative constructs.



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### Theme 1: Getting from Engagement to Empowerment (continued)

Characteristics of prepared adults who want to or are doing youth empowerment work were outlined by youth and thus attributed as expectations. A self-aware adult would have acquired the skills to a) be empathetic, b) cognizant, and c) maintain an open mind. As such, it would follow that adults would be prepared to *decentralize personal opinions as correct* opinions to position their minds for youth perspectives to be understood and validated. Youth put a high value on self-aware adults who can translate skills to meaningful practice; namely, adults should have effective emotional intelligence skills and translate that into noticing the level of emotional security youth need to have an empowered experience. In doing so, self-aware adults can promote self-efficacy in youth and optimize the contributions youth can make in their communities. Self-aware adults see the correlation between celebrating the individuality and diverse experiences of each unique youth and commitment to nurturing the youth as a whole person.

Contributing to the development of the whole person requires a role model who invests in personal and professional development to promote practices of self-reflection and enables them to value youth as unique individuals. Prepared adults are those who have invested in their own personal mental and emotional health development and in turn can effectively support youth in mental and emotional health regulation skills. It is expected that adult role models leading empowerment work are active listeners and can translate that knowledge to youth empowerment practices. Youth illustrated adults who are active listeners have more capacity to relate to youth with a high degree of emotional intelligence, operationalize feedback loops, and translate those efforts into collaboration that feels like shared power and co-created solutions. Further, active listeners as role models demonstrate asset-based conflict resolution skills showing youth ways to resolve disagreements with honesty and integrity.

Youth place value on adults who have been exposed to diverse mentorship models that prioritize mutual respect, autonomy, and meaningful engagement. Youth appraised professionally developed adults who prioritize mutual respect, autonomy, and meaningful engagement can empower youth to develop practical life skills, such as community networking and outlining actionable steps to effect positive change in their communities. Before working with youth, adults should undergo training that equips them to create meeting spaces where youth feel empowered to speak openly and transparently. These spaces should foster an empathetic, judgment-free, and honest environment, encouraging authentic self-expression. The training should also provide youth with tools to invite adults into conversations that build trust and mutual understanding. Youth want culturally competent adults to lead youth empowerment work. Adults who have taken a cultural competency course and explored humanity through relationships of people different from them increase their aptitude for being a role model committed to honoring the individuality of youth which fosters youth autonomy.



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### **Theme 1: Getting from Engagement to Empowerment (continued)**

Youth discussed the importance of cultural competency to aide in the unlearning of normative social constructs to validate their desires to be seen as unique individuals with unique needs and strengths. Youth conveyed adults often have a desire to relate with them from the narrow perspective of experiences that shaped adults in their own youth. The problem with the narrow perspective is it minimizes the reality of the existing generation gaps between adult role models and youth which can perpetuate biases. Youth want adults leading empowerment work to be curious about the formation of normative constructs and how or in what ways adult's beliefs and opinions about age, capacity, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and societal concepts on environmental issues have been shaped. Cultural competency can foster a shift in beliefs about the capacity of youth to be a change agent. The concept of remaining curious was illuminated by youth and is a pathway to getting to know youth in their perceived reality which can facilitate relationship building and offer opportunities to identify urgent and emerging needs among youth and how youth perceived community need. Youth explained engaging them in visual and/or digital storytelling is one way to get to know topics relevant to them while practically co-developing skills that can lead to empowerment work.

### **Theme 2: Facilitating Empowerment and Developing Empowered Youth**

Youth empowerment is a dynamic and multifaceted process that hinges on the ability of adults to build trusting relationships, validate youth experiences, and act as allies in transformative change. Central to this process is fostering autonomy by respecting youth individuality, boundaries, and decision-making capacities, while ensuring support remains available regardless of the choices youth make. Empowerment thrives when adults actively listen, affirm youth voices, and prioritize their expressed needs, demonstrating commitment to action and respect. Experiential learning opportunities, rooted in youth interests and values, further cultivate agency and engagement, particularly when paired with role modeling and practical application. Additionally, adults play a vital role in supporting youth emotional regulation, demonstrating consistency and resilience while acknowledging variability in emotional capacities. Finally, empowering youth requires adults to reflect critically on their own practices, aligning their actions with principles of justice and equity. By embodying these roles, adults can help youth become catalysts for meaningful change within themselves and their communities.

Empowering youth begins with fostering autonomy by respecting their individuality, boundaries, and decision-making capacities. Adults must provide support while remaining available regardless of whether youth respond with "yes" or "no," recognizing that empowerment includes respecting their consent before engaging in potentially transformative activities. Validation is also critical, as youth want their ideas and contributions affirmed through active listening and meaningful action. By prioritizing youth's expressed needs and advocating for their perspectives, adults can foster trust and respect, key elements of empowerment. Experiential learning further enhances this process by offering hands-on engagement in



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activities like outdoor learning, community meetings, and climate change initiatives, paired with role modeling for practical application. Youth also expect adults to acknowledge the natural ebb and flow of emotional regulation, modeling consistency while supporting resilience and emotional growth. Empowerment is ultimately a collaborative, transformative practice where adults act as allies, fostering equity, justice, and collective action. By prioritizing youth needs and nurturing their roles as catalysts for meaningful change, adults can support youth in making significant contributions to their communities and beyond.

### **Theme 3: Upholding Values of Mutual Respect and Collaboration to Promote Power and Autonomy**

Youth narratives focused on the importance of autonomy and called for a heightened sense of awareness on the subject. The findings highlight the importance of mutual respect, bi-directional learning, and opportunities for youth to develop power and demonstrate autonomy. Empowerment, for youth, is deeply connected to their ability to influence their environments and pursue autonomy, which includes opportunities for responsibility, leadership, and decision-making. Mutual respect is a critical foundation, with youth desiring validation and a recognition of their individuality. Adults play an essential role in fostering this respect by actively listening, validating youth voices, and acknowledging their unique strengths and contributions. Bi-directional learning between youth and adults is crucial, with both groups learning from each other to promote growth, autonomy, and mutual respect. However, societal barriers may impede youth access to power, and adults must prioritize creating opportunities for youth to exercise leadership and decision-making capabilities. Emotional resilience and self-regulation are also integral for youth to autonomously access their power.

Youth expressed that power is enacted across multiple levels and has multiple meanings. Individual youth used a range of concepts such as power is ‘lightening’ or power is ‘the president’ or power is ‘myself’. Collectively, youth most often conceptualized power as personal strength, courage, justice, positionality, and autonomy. Youth who defined power as personal strength (i.e., physical, emotional, intellectual) typically paired the concept with the perceived capability to act on that strength. Courage to speak up, speak out, act, and create impact was frequently synonymous with power. Prominent categories that explained power in the youth narratives were linked with justice and equity. Youth made it clear that power to advance justice and equity needs to be rooted in fairness, kindness, and humility. People in respective positions of society or community were figures used to exemplify what power means and that can create tension when power is not rooted in fairness, kindness, and humility. Power was metaphorically and literally defined as internal and external energy.



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### **Theme 3: Upholding Values of Mutual Respect and Collaboration to Promote Power and Autonomy (continued)**

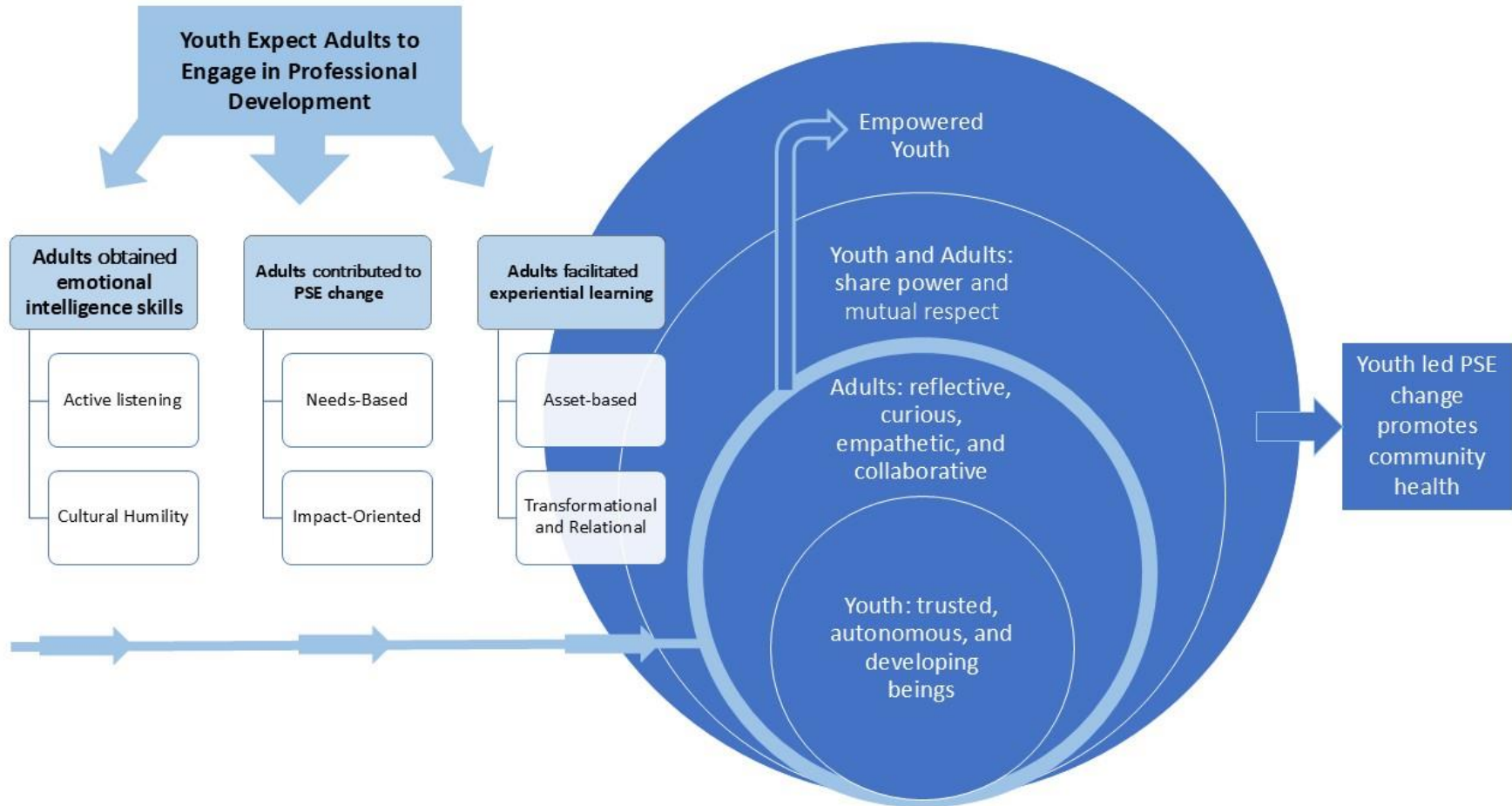
Youth who explicated power is influence and noted such influence is curated, fostered, and catalyzed by internal and external forces, often positioning a person in a role that society considers a leader who create opportunities. As such, people in these positions can use that internal energy paired with external synergist energy to increase awareness, catalyze a defined or established action, and/or achieve liberation. It came through the narratives that power can be and should be shared; and, shared power is transformative. Youth want to share power and called out ways they would use power to transform their communities to be reflective of an environment that meets their needs and the needs of others. This concept was expanded upon by categories that described youth and power as synonymous, especially as it concerns influence to change the environment. The essence of less prominent categories and constructs that youth shared is that power is hope paired with potential, where there is potential there is opportunity for growth, and growth is the result of power.

Adults can support this by providing growth experiences and helping youth develop the tools and vocabulary necessary for expressing their power in meaningful ways. Additionally, adults must trust youth in their journey toward autonomy, ensuring opportunities for them to experience freedom, responsibility, and emotional growth. These factors—respect, trust, autonomy, skill-building, and mutual learning—work together to create the conditions for youth to act as catalysts for meaningful change in their communities.



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**Figure 1. Youth conceptual framework**



## Considerations

Empowering youth requires a holistic approach that integrates their perspectives, values, and aspirations into actionable opportunities. It begins with respect for autonomy, trust in youth capabilities, and a commitment to co-creating spaces where youth can lead and learn. Adults must embrace a collaborative mindset, guided by empathy, self-reflection, and a genuine willingness to support youth in realizing their potential.

Adults should know youth have an awareness of who they are they are seeking new ways of knowing themselves:

- Youth are confident in their ideas as well as their decision-making skills. They crave a space to share their thoughts without judgement. They crave autonomy over their own personal decisions.
- Youth acknowledge that power is a privilege, regardless of age, that comes with responsibilities. They are aware power is not only physical strength but mental aptitude as well.
- Youth want to have a sense of responsibility and autonomy. This being said, adults should be there for support and able to assist when asked.
- Youth want to be continuously engaged in their communities and environments. They understand and advocate for opportunities to share their concerns and suggestions. Youth need space as well as support from adults in order to be active contributors to change in their communities and environments.
- Overall, it is imperative that adults maintain a level of mutual respect and a high level of communication with youth in order to help them feel supported and valued. Youth are intent on being active members of their communities and with the support and guidance of the adults in their life they are able to achieve their goals of change and autonomy.



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Youth expect adults:

- will treat them with the same respect that they give adults. They want to feel like the relationship between themselves and the adults in their life is mutual.
- to be open minded and willing to listen when communicating and nurturing a relationship with youth.
- adults maintain a level of mutual respect and a high level of communication with in order to help them feel supported and valued.
- to acknowledge youth are intent on being active members of their communities
- to provide support and guidance to help youth achieve their community goals change and autonomy.

Adults should take part in professional development that explores promising practices to:

- Engage youth
- Build trust with youth
- Develop mutual respect between youth and adults
- Employ empathetic, supportive, and understanding behaviors
- Practice active listening
- Create safe meeting spaces
- Curate opportunities for youth to feel safe to express who they are
- Implement practices and behaviors related to cultural competence
- Facilitate unlearning of biases as well as informed by structural and systemic practices



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### Conclusion

In summary, the findings suggest a comprehensive toolkit aimed at equipping adults with the skills and practices necessary for successful youth empowerment work, particularly in the context of policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes. The toolkit should emphasize the importance of self-awareness and emotional intelligence for adults, enabling them to engage meaningfully with youth. This includes fostering empathy, active listening, and cultural competency, which will help adults understand and validate the diverse experiences and identities of youth. Active listening, along with conflict resolution skills grounded in asset-based practices, should be central components, guiding adults to create empathetic, judgment-free spaces where youth feel seen and heard. The toolkit should also encourage adults to model emotional resilience, support youth in their emotional growth, and respect their autonomy, allowing youth to make decisions and take ownership of the empowerment process.

Additionally, the toolkit should focus on fostering authentic relationships between adults and youth, built on mutual respect and shared power. This can be achieved by creating co-creative spaces where youth have agency in shaping initiatives and community health efforts. Adults should prioritize experiential learning opportunities that align with youth interests, enabling them to gain hands-on experience in community engagement, leadership, and systems change. Through mentorship and skill-building activities, youth can develop practical life skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving, which are essential for their growth as change agents. The toolkit should also highlight the importance of bi-directional learning, where both adults and youth learn from each other, ensuring that youth voices are prioritized and integrated into decision-making processes.

Finally, the toolkit should be rooted in the values of justice, equity, and shared power, encouraging adults to help youth navigate societal barriers and recognize their capacity for meaningful community transformation. By supporting youth in their leadership development and ensuring that their voices are heard in discussions about community health, adults can foster a culture of mutual respect and collaboration that empowers youth to lead efforts for systemic change. In doing so, the toolkit will equip adults to guide youth in becoming catalysts for community health improvements and advocates for PSE changes that reflect their needs and aspirations.

### Point of Contact

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## **Appendix**

### **Themes and Supporting Quotes from Youth Participants**

#### **Central Description**

Participants stressed the importance of adults valuing youth voices and perspectives as meaningful contributors to community change. Youth called out specific traits and competencies that adults should cultivate through personal and professional development before being employed in a youth engagement role, including cultural competence, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness practices. Youth participants consistently reported a demand for respect, kindness, and empathy, with many participants wanting adults to limit assumptions and bias when approaching youth. Youth described that successful engagement and empowerment work would focus on active listening, mutual respect, validation of the youth voice, and cultivation of youth agency. Most youth conveyed that in order to demonstrate that adults are listening and prioritizing the youth voice, adults should take action in response to youth input. Youth expressed a need for autonomy where youth are able to make their voice heard and exercise agency to enact change, while still acknowledging that adults should be there to support when called in by youth. Lastly, youth collectively described “power” as personal strength, courage, justice, and autonomy, emphasizing that having power means having the ability to use that power for the greater good.



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**Table 1. Youth Themes and Supporting Quotes**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
<p><b>Theme 1: Getting from Engagement to Empowerment</b></p>	<p><i>“Adults [should] ask more questions to better understand our ideas.”</i> [Rural Youth Participant, Upper Western]</p> <p><i>“[Adults] should understand that things aren't the same as when they were our age.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Western]</p> <p><i>“An adult should have good listening skills, be patient, and be understanding. Empathy is important as well to understand why and how children act a certain way.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Eastern]</p> <p><i>“The main point is stop assuming what kids think and ask instead to help them.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Southeastern]</p>
<p><b>Theme 2: Facilitating Empowerment and Developing Empowered Youth</b></p>	<p><i>“If grown-ups really want to help kids they should be by their side, listen to their thoughts, and listen to their feelings.”</i> [Rural Youth Participant, Upper Western]</p> <p><i>“[Adults] should help you and show you their support to help you and listen to you more.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Western]</p> <p><i>“Grownups should acknowledge kids’ opinions and thoughts while trying to truly understand and listen as well as being patient instead of demanding.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Eastern]</p> <p><i>“[I will know adults are listening] if they start helping you out and not judging you and being kind about it.”</i> [Urban Youth Participant, Western]</p>



**Table 1 (continued). Youth Themes and Supporting Quotes**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Quotes</b>
<b>Theme 3: Upholding Values of Mutual Respect and Collaboration to Promote Power and Autonomy</b>	<p><i>“[Adults should know] to let us do what we want to be and do as a person.”</i> <i>[Rural Youth Participant, Upper Western]</i></p> <p><i>“Adults need to learn respect to children if they want respect.”</i> <i>[Urban Youth Participant, Western]</i></p> <p><i>“Kids should get some more autonomy for themselves. I don’t think we need adults for EVERYTHING.”</i> <i>[Urban Youth Participant, Eastern]</i></p> <p><i>“When the word power comes to mind, I think it means like you’re in control of stuff like you can make the streets cleaner.”</i> <i>[Urban Youth Participant, Southeastern]</i></p>