



## Development and testing of an assessment of youth/young adult voice in agency-level advising and decision making



Janet S. Walker<sup>a,b</sup>, Brianne M. Masselli<sup>c</sup>, Jennifer Blakeslee<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Caitlin Baird<sup>a,b</sup>, Kristin Thorp<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Social Work, Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA

<sup>b</sup> Research and Training Center on Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University, Portland, OR, USA

<sup>c</sup> Youth MOVE National, Decorah, IA, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Youth voice  
Youth participation  
Youth-serving agencies  
Self-assessment

### ABSTRACT

There is a range of stakeholder benefits when youth- and young adult-serving agencies include service recipient “voice” in advising and decision making regarding agency policies and programming. Yet many agency stakeholders lack awareness of strategic best practices to ensure the consistent and meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes, and few tools exist to evaluate agency efforts. This paper describes the development and validation of the *Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL)*, an assessment of the extent to which agencies have implemented best practices for supporting meaningful participation. The Y-VAL is intended for research purposes, as well as to provide agencies with direct guidance about strengths and challenges regarding their efforts to promote youth/young adult voice.

### 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, policy and practice stakeholders have recognized that young people should have a range of opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making influence (i.e., “voice”) within the systems and institutions that affect them (Friesen, Koroloff, Walker, & Briggs, 2011; Lansdown, 2001). This is particularly true for arenas in which organizations are responsible for successfully engaging youth and young adults up to about age 25, such as public service systems, local governance bodies, and community-based programs for young people. Whether referred to as youth voice, participation, advising, governance, leadership, advocacy, or civic engagement, a common underlying principle is that young people have expertise and insight relevant to decision-making within youth- and young adult-serving systems, agencies, and programs (Checkoway, 2011; Lansdown, 2001; Pittman, Martin, & Williams, 2007).

There are a number of mechanisms for including youth voice at the system or organizational level, including youth advisory boards, seats for young people on governance boards, partnerships between youth-led groups and other stakeholders to drive policy change, and employment of young people as youth leaders and ongoing advisors in youth-serving organizations. Recent and prevalent examples include youth councils in municipal government, which can address a range of locally-relevant topics (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016; Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon,

2007), and youth-specific engagement as part of a broader community action for policy and systems change (Cooper & Hays, 2007; Luluquisen & Pettis, 2014). A number of public service systems now include youth voice in guiding policy and practice, such as youth advisory boards to involve young people in foster care in decision-making within child welfare systems (Collins, 2004; Havlicek, Lin, & Villalpando, 2016), and youth involvement in system-of-care communities and policy change efforts impacting young people with mental health conditions (Gyamfi, Keens-Douglas, & Medin, 2007; Koroloff, Friesen, & Buekea, 2017). Young people are also involved in grant-making (e.g., Richards-Schuster, 2012) and research and evaluation efforts (e.g., Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Koroloff et al., 2010) that inform policy and practice.

However, there are few established guidelines for facilitating the consistent inclusion of youth and young adult voice in decision-making around the design, delivery, and evaluation of community-based services and programming. Importantly, when adult stakeholders invest in processes that promote youth voice in such organizations, youth engagement in organizational activities can increase and individual young people can accrue relational and developmental benefits from participation itself (Akiva, Cortina, & Smith, 2014; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011; Zeldin, 2004). Further, when adults perceive young people as valuable resources that can inform many of the decisions that impact them, they also see improvement in the quality of the decisions that are made (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin,

\* Corresponding author at: 1600 SW 4th Ave, Suite 900, Portland, OR 97201, USA.

E-mail address: [jblakes@pdx.edu](mailto:jblakes@pdx.edu) (J. Blakeslee).

McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2000). When young people, adult stakeholders, programs, and/or organizations benefit from engaging young people in these ways, we can characterize that participation as “meaningful.” Further, given the range of potential activities and benefits associated with meaningful inclusion of young people in youth-serving agencies specifically, it is important to understand the organizational and interpersonal processes and conditions that facilitate the meaningful participation of youth in policy- and practice-related decision-making. In other words, meaningful inclusion occurs when young people “have real effect on the process, influence a particular decision, or produce a favorable outcome... [and participation] is the strategy by which they are involved in goal setting, resource allocation, and program implementation” (Checkoway, 2011, p. 341).

One way for organizations to focus on the process of participation is to identify the interpersonal mechanisms that facilitate youth contributions to decision-making in a range of contexts. One of the clearest frameworks describing such a relational mechanism is Zeldin and colleagues' conceptualization of *youth-adult partnership* (Y-AP), defined as “the practice of (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective fashion, (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue” (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013, p. 388). In the community program setting, such partnership is marked by expectations that young people and adults will work together throughout decision-making processes, “from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement” (Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014, p. 338).

However, without clear examples of operationalization in real-world settings, as well as implementation guidance for introducing meaningful youth and young adult participation as standard operating practice, it can be difficult to fully install and sustain (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Accordingly, there can be a large gap between rhetorical commitment and the actual practice of meaningful youth participation in policy and program arenas. For example, organizations may attempt to solicit youth voice, but with a low level of influence, such as periodically gathering information from advisory groups of young people, rather than at higher levels, such as consistently empowering youth to meaningfully influence decision-making processes or outcomes within the organization (Head, 2011). On the other hand, high-level administrative commitment, resource allocation, and ongoing stakeholder reflection are likely required to install and sustain meaningful youth participation within a larger context.

Zeldin et al. (2005) identify six guidelines for initial adoption and implementation of youth-adult partnership for organizational and community change: (1) gain clarity and consensus on the purpose of partnership (2) mobilize and coordinate a diverse range of stakeholders; (3) create favorable narratives about youth-adult partnership; (4) construct theories and stories of organizational change; (5) affirmatively address issues of power; and (6) institutionalize new roles for youth (Zeldin et al., 2005). Similarly, Head (2011) points to the broad framing of participation promotion as providing “openings, opportunities, and obligations” (Shier, 2001) facilitating various levels of youth involvement, where the “process of commitment” (Head, 2011) has three stages. The first is awareness of participation as a desired outcome, then the securing of resources and skills to achieve the participation, followed by the development of operating procedures to maintain the participation; thus, investing in meaningful participation is an ongoing, iterative process that allows for multiple entry points for youth to be involved to various degrees, based on regular consideration of the feasibility of involving young people in a particular decision-making area (Shier, 2001).

Zeldin and colleagues similarly describe the dissemination of youth-adult partnership as an innovative practice in established organizations by identifying the implementation goals and leverage points at various

stages (Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). The first (“Planting Seeds”) focuses on maintaining stakeholder attention on the purpose and outcomes, leveraging champions, networks, and stakeholder self-interest; the second (“Walking the Talk”) is about ensuring that stakeholders can translate the vision into quality practice, leveraging knowledge, personal experience, and group reflection and planning; the last (“How We Do Business”) aims to build a sense of shared ownership among stakeholders, leveraging infrastructure, role identification, and collective narrative (p. 267). Importantly, this implementation framework reflects a multi-level effort to build awareness, secure resources, and maintain commitment for a range of approaches to involve youth in decision-making in organizational or community change efforts (not limited to creating youth advisory boards, for example).

### 1.1. Assessment of youth participation

Despite current prioritization of the inclusion of youth and young adult voice in the design and delivery of services for young people, such as those provided through the child welfare (e.g., *Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative*, 2017) and mental health (e.g., *SAMHSA*, 2016) service systems, few tools have emerged to assist service-providing programs, agencies, or systems in implementing or evaluating their efforts. For example, the inclusion of stakeholder input or “youth voice” may be required in funding contracts for service delivery, but agencies may not be familiar with the relevant rationale or guidelines for doing so. Additionally, though stakeholders may endorse the general purpose and principles for including youth and young adult voice, they may lack awareness of emerging policies and practices that ensure the consistent and meaningful engagement youth as participants in decision-making processes. Given the multi-level, multi-stage nature of the implementation of youth participation policies and practices, it may take time for organizations to fully embrace meaningful youth participation as “the way we do business.” To assist with this process, they can assess the development and extent of their own understanding, commitment, capacity, and supportive practices to ensure young people consistently have a voice in decision-making. However, there are few assessments available to evaluate dimensions of meaningful youth participation—whether at the individual, program, agency, or system level—and fewer still that have been validated as reliable and relevant measurement instruments.

One validated self-assessment tool, the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA), measures program quality in terms of best practices for promoting positive youth development in general, with a subscale that specifically assesses youth-centered policies and practices (The *Forum for Youth Investment*, 2012; Smith & Hohmann, 2005). There also are two practice-friendly tools that specifically measure youth-adult partnership. First, the validated Youth-Adult Partnership (Y-AP) scale measures dimensions of Y-AP in community programs, with subscales for supportive adult relationships and youth voice in decision-making. The 9-item measure is completed by youth to evaluate a particular program setting and demonstrated strong validity on the subscales (Zeldin et al., 2014). Additionally, adults working in youth programs can complete the Y-AP Rubric to self-assess how well program activities reflect dimensions of youth-adult partnership (e.g., authentic decision-making and reciprocity) for the purpose of program evaluation and continuous improvement (Wu, Weiss, Kornbluh, & Roddy, 2014). However, although the rubric is based on Y-AP research and was developed in partnership with young people, it has not yet been formally validated as reliably measuring the concepts of interest.

Thus, while existing measures have some formal validation for assessing some aspects of youth participation in program decision-making, there is still a need for a comprehensive self-assessment of the meaningful inclusion of youth/young adult voice in policy and practice at the broader organizational level. Further, such assessment tools need to be validated both for research purposes, such as evaluation of large-scale initiatives to increase youth voice across multiple organizations or

systems, as well as for practice improvement purposes, in terms of providing direct guidance about specific practices that could be implemented or improved upon in individual agencies or systems. This paper introduces a new tool, the *Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level* (Y-VAL) self-assessment, that is intended to fill these gaps.

### 1.2. Development of the Y-VAL

Development of the Y-VAL assessment was undertaken by a research team representing a collaboration between staff at Portland State University and staff from Youth MOVE National (YMN), a youth-run organization with more than 60 affiliated chapters in 35 states. YMN aims to inform and improve youth- and young adult-serving systems—e.g., mental health, child welfare, justice/juvenile justice—by increasing the extent to which the systems are responsive to the perspectives of young people who have received services. YMN works to ensure that these “systems-experienced” youth and young adults develop advocacy and leadership skills, and that agencies and systems provide opportunities for systems-experienced young people to participate meaningfully in developing policies and programs. The members of the research team met every other week by web conference to develop and revise the items for the Y-VAL assessment, to determine the overall research and recruitment strategies, and to review and interpret feedback and/or data gathered from stakeholders. Researchers from the university took the lead in data collection and analysis.

Development of the assessment was a four-step process, with the research team collaborating to develop the initial items in the first step, and to review feedback and make revisions after each of the three later steps. The first step in the process was a review of existing literature—both peer reviewed literature and less formal “grey” literature, including evaluation reports, training materials, conference proceedings, and informal surveys and other tools designed to elicit information on youth and young adult “voice” at the agency/organizational level (i.e., their participation with adults in advising, decision making and policy development). Based on this review, and on the collective experience of the research team, an initial pool of items was generated and sorted into conceptually related groups or “themes.” Each item was intended to express a conceptually distinct best practice related to agency support for youth and young adult voice. Further, the items were intended to be written such that they could be completed by any stakeholder knowledgeable about an agency's efforts to support youth/young adult voice in advising and decision making. In other words, current and former service participants, as well as agency staff, could potentially be respondents for the assessment.

In the second step of the process, the research team contacted five agencies that had been identified in either the research or grey literature as having successfully developed and sustained meaningful participation of young people in agency-level advising. The research team worked with managers at each agency to identify a stakeholder who was active in and knowledgeable about the agency's efforts to promote youth and young adult voice. Each key stakeholder was asked to review the assessment, and then to participate by phone in a semi-structured debrief with a member of the research team. During the debrief, stakeholders were asked to reflect on the wording of each item, the extent to which each item was important and relevant for the assessment, the extent to which the items within each theme coherently and completely represented an aspect of youth and young adult voice, and the extent to which themes appropriately covered the broader topic of best practices for the inclusion of youth and young adult voice at the agency level. Based on the combined feedback from the key stakeholder interviews, a second draft of the assessment was created.

In the third step of the process, the revised assessment draft was reviewed individually and then as a group by the members of YMN's Youth Best Practices Committee (YBPC). The YBPC comprises systems-experienced youth and young adults who have been identified by local YMN chapters as having the skill and desire to provide consultation for

program and policy change efforts around the nation. The research team reviewed feedback from the YBPC and incorporated changes into a third draft of the assessment.

For the fourth step of the process, 21 additional key stakeholders provide structured feedback on the revised assessment draft. These key stakeholders were recruited in the same manner as the earlier group, i.e., on the basis of their having documented in either the research or grey literature a sustained effort to promote youth voice at the agency level. Each stakeholder reported having had significant direct experience participating in efforts to include youth/young adult voice at the agency level. Just over half of these key stakeholders (n = 11) were professional staff of agencies that provided traditional services (primarily mental health or child welfare-related services) to young people. The remaining stakeholders were staff from advocacy organizations, with five from organizations not specifically focused on youth and young adults (e.g., NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness) and five from organizations that did specifically focus on youth/young adult advocacy (e.g., Youth MOVE chapters). The stakeholders provided input on the draft assessment (i.e., they were *not* asked to rate their agency's practices) via structured online survey. The survey requested both quantitative and qualitative feedback regarding the items, the themes and the assessment as a whole. For each item, stakeholders were first asked to select whether they thought it was *essential*, *optional* or *inadvisable* for inclusion in the assessment. Respondents were given an opportunity to explain each rating and were particularly encouraged to enter a comment if they selected the *optional* or *inadvisable* rating. Stakeholders were then asked to focus on the wording of the item, and rate it as *fine as is*, *needs minor revision*, or *needs major revision*. They were again given an opportunity explain their ratings, particularly if they had rated the item as needing revision, and to suggest wording changes. For each theme, stakeholders were asked to provide general comments on the theme as well as to comment specifically on the extent to which the items coherently expressed a theme, and whether there was any aspect of the theme not covered by the existing items. Finally, stakeholders were given an open-ended opportunity at the conclusion of the survey to provide comments, ideas or suggestions.

Across all of the items, stakeholders averaged 95.1% agreement that the item was *essential* for inclusion on the assessment, and 4.5% agreement that the item was *optional*. Across all raters and items, there were three ratings of *inadvisable*, each on a different item. The corresponding averages for wording were 83.4% for *fine as is*, 14.7% for *needs minor revision* and 1.9% for *needs major revision*. Based on this feedback, the research team made final revisions, most of which were intended to clarify or simplify the language or concepts, and included replacing the term *organization* with *agency* throughout. For example, this sentence *The organization has created mechanisms to regularly engage young people to generate ideas around policies and decisions that affect young people served or impacted by the organization* was changed to *The agency has created way(s) to regularly engage young people in advising and decision making about issues that affect youth/young adults served or impacted by the agency*. The version of the Y-VAL assessment that resulted after these revisions was the version that was tested in the current study.

### 1.3. The current study

Qualitative and quantitative data gathered from stakeholders during the development of the test version of the Y-VAL provide strong evidence of face validity for the assessment. The current study was designed to evaluate other aspects of validity and reliability and then, assuming that the psychometric properties warranted it, to report on findings based on responses to the Y-VAL from stakeholder participants representing a variety of youth- and young adult-serving agencies and organizations across the United States.

Specifically, the current study uses confirmatory factor analysis to test whether the proposed structure of the Y-VAL (i.e., as an overall

scale composed of eight sub-scales) provides a good fit for the data. The study also assesses concurrent validity by testing the hypothesis that organizations that include a strong focus on youth/young adult development and advocacy will, as a group, tend to have significantly higher Y-VAL scores than organizations focused primarily on service delivery. Additionally, the study assesses concurrent validity by comparing scores on the Y-VAL with scores on two other, previously validated assessments that have a degree of conceptual overlap with the Y-VAL.

**2. Method**

The research team created an online survey to gather data for the study. The survey included the test version of the Y-VAL—37 items grouped into 8 themes—as well as a series of questions asking about respondents' organizations and their experience with efforts to promote Y/YA voice at the agency level. Additionally, the survey included parts of two previously-validated assessments that measured aspects of youth voice and participation at the agency level.

**2.1. Participants**

Participants aged 16 and over were recruited from across the United States through announcements placed in listservs belonging to the two organizations leading the research, through announcements in listservs belonging to allied organizations, and through announcements made during conference and webinar presentations. Participants confirmed that they were at least 16 years old and reviewed information on risks and benefits prior to gaining access to the survey. A total of 385 responses to the survey were received; however, 134 of those were non-complete (i.e., the responders stopped before the end of the survey). Non-complete responses were removed from the data set. Missing data in this reduced data set were relatively rare (1.3%), and all of the remaining 251 cases were retained. Respondents in this data set represented 40 states and 166 agencies/organizations.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the respondents and their agencies. Respondents' agencies were most likely to be involved in providing direct services to youth/young adults (n = 164, 65.3%) and/or to undertake advocacy or leadership development (n = 154, 61.4%). About half of the agencies primarily focused on mental health services and/or administration (e.g., Suncoast Center, Olive Crest, Carey Counseling Center, Colorado Department of Public Health; n = 124, 49.4%), followed by Y/YA development and/or advocacy (e.g., VOICES Youth Center, EmpowerMENT, Youth Power; n = 51, 20.3%). When asked to select a role category, the largest proportion reported their role to be staff working directly with young people (n = 79, 31.5%), followed by mid-level administrator (n = 49, 19.5%), youth/young adult paid peer staff and supervisor (n for both = 33, 13.1%), and organization leader (n = 23, 9.2%). Only small numbers of respondents identified themselves as current or former service recipients from the agency they were responding about (n = 7, 2.8%) or current or former service recipients from a similar agency (n = 4; 1.6%). Respondents were most likely to give their age as being over 30 (n = 162, 64.5%), followed by 18–26 years old (22.3%). Nearly all (n = 238, 94.8%) reported that they were directly involved in their agency's work to promote the Y/YA participation in agency-level advising and decision making. Among these respondents, 13.5% reported having been involved in these efforts for 1 year or less, 18.9% for 1–2 years, 27.7% for 2–5 years, and 29.8% for more than 5 years.

**2.2. Measures**

**2.2.1. Y-VAL test version**

The test version of the Y-VAL included 37 items. Each item described one or more aspects of a particular best practice. For example, the item on addressing barriers to participation includes the following aspects: The agency has worked with young people to create youth-

**Table 1**

Description of the validation study respondents and their agencies N = 251.

	n	%
Agency activities <sup>a</sup>		
Direct services provided to Y/YA	164	65.3%
Y/YA advocacy and/or leadership development	154	61.4%
Technical assistance to programs working with Y/YA	77	30.7%
Administration of services for Y/YA	71	28.3%
System-level advising and advocacy	100	39.8%
Agency primary focus		
Y/YA development, advocacy	51	20.3%
Family development, advocacy	22	8.8%
Mental health services, administration	124	49.4%
Child welfare services, administration	23	9.2%
Other	31	12.4%
Respondent role		
Service recipient, this agency	7	2.8%
Service recipient, similar agency	4	1.6%
Y/YA paid peer staff	33	13.1%
Staff working directly with young people	79	31.5%
Supervisor	33	13.1%
Mid-level administrator	49	19.5%
Organization leader	23	9.2%
Board member	5	2.0%
Other	18	7.2%
Respondent age		
Under 18	4	1.6%
18–26	56	22.3%
27–30	29	11.6%
Over 30	162	64.5%
Participated directly in work on Y/YA voice		
Yes	238	94.8%
No	13	5.2%

<sup>a</sup> Respondents could choose multiple categories of agency activities.

friendly meeting practices; These practices include providing meeting materials ahead of time, keeping meetings short and efficient, beginning with ice-breakers or sharing time, and taking regular breaks; Youth-friendly meeting practices also include scheduling meetings at times and locations that young people can attend, providing preparation in advance, and avoiding acronyms and jargon. For each item, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which the overall best practice was in place at their agency, using a 5-point Likert-type scale running from 1 = none of these aspects in place/not true for our agency to 5 = all aspects consistently in place/completely true for our agency. Respondents could also select don't know/does not apply to our agency.

**2.2.2. Youth-adult partnerships**

The first of the two previously validated measures included in the online Y-VAL validation survey was the assessment of youth-adult partnerships (Y-AP) developed by Zeldin and colleagues (Zeldin et al., 2014). The Y-AP measure includes two subscales/dimensions. The first subscale, Supportive Adult Relationships (SAR), is composed of four items (e.g., The staff take my ideas seriously and In this center, I am encouraged to express my ideas and opinions), which were slightly adapted to replace first person pronouns with nouns such as “youth and young adults” or “young people.” The second subscale, Youth Voice in Decision Making (YVDM), has five items (e.g., Youth and adults learn a lot from working together in this center and Youth and staff trust each other in this center). Respondents select a choice from a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. In the Zeldin et al. (2014) study, the SAR and YVDM had good internal reliability (α = 0.84 and 0.85, respectively) and strong factorial, discriminant and concurrent validity.

**2.2.3. Youth-centered policies and practice**

The online survey also included items selected from the Youth-Centered Policies and Practice subscale of the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA; Smith & Hohmann, 2005). For each item,



respondents select between three options describing, respectively, *no youth influence*, *moderate youth influence* or *high youth influence* over agency policies and practices in a specific area. One of the sets of items used in the current study focuses on the extent to which youth have an influence on the setting and activities of the organization (e.g., a high-influence example from the YPQA is *Youth and adults share the responsibility in determining program schedules and program offerings*), and the other set of items focuses on the extent to which youth have an influence on the structure and policy of the organization (e.g., high-influence YPQA example is *Youth participate in program quality review and plans for improvement*). Published reliability for the *Youth-Centered Policies and Practice* subscale of the YPQA was good ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ) and the [Smith and Hohmann \(2005\)](#) study presented evidence of strong construct, concurrent and predictive validity.

### 3. Results

Descriptives for each item on the Y-VAL were examined, and skewness and kurtosis statistics showed no worrisome deviations from the normal distribution. To examine reliability, Chronbach's alpha for the whole Y-VAL assessment and for each of the eight themes was calculated. Chronbach's alpha for the whole measure was 0.97, and for the individual themes this ranged from 0.76 to 0.93. [Table 2](#) shows the number of items, the alpha, the mean and standard deviation for the eight themes and for the assessment overall.

#### 3.1. Confirmatory factor analysis

While there were multiple respondents from 35 of the 166 agencies represented in the survey data, the intraclass correlation (ICC) statistic was 0.004, thus fitting a multilevel model for the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was not indicated. Missing data, which included all responses of *don't know/does not apply to our agency*, was handled using the imputation function built in to the AMOS module of SPSS ([Arbuckle, 2014](#)), which was used for the CFA. Ten imputed data sets were produced and averaged, and this data set was used in subsequent analyses. For the CFA, each item was specified to load freely on its intended factor (theme). The metric of each factor was set by fixing the factor loading of the last item to 1. Model fit was assessed with a combination of goodness-of-fit indices: chi-square, comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), following the recommendations of researchers ([Bentler & Bonett, 1980](#)). For the model to be deemed an acceptable fit for the data, the chi-square statistic should be nonsignificant, indicating that scores from the model do not significantly differ from those observed. However, due to its sensitivity to large sample sizes, the chi-square statistic is often overly conservative, as it nearly always rejects sufficient models. As such, attention was focused on the other fit statistics ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#)). Generally, values greater than 0.95 for the CFI and TLI indicate good model fit, whereas values between 0.90 and 0.95 indicate adequate fit and values under 0.90 indicate poor fit. For the

**Table 2**  
Reliability and means for the individual themes and overall scale.

	Number of items	$\alpha$	Mean	SD
1. Overall vision and commitment	8	0.93	3.36	1.03
2. Collaborative approach	5	0.91	3.52	1.03
3. Empowered representatives	5	0.93	3.24	1.08
4. Facilitation and support for participation	3	0.78	3.47	1.15
5. Workforce development and readiness	4	0.76	2.94	1.12
6. Impact on programs and policies	5	0.91	3.07	1.08
7. Role in program evaluation	4	0.87	3.12	1.14
8. Leading initiatives and projects	3	0.84	3.04	1.16
Overall scale	37	0.97	3.24	0.93

**Table 3**  
Model fit statistics for confirmatory factor analysis.

	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
YVAL model	1020.24	581	0.934	0.942	0.054	0.065
Single-factor model	2124.34	629	0.8	0.788	0.098	0.102

RMSEA, a good model fit is generally reflected by a value of 0.06 or lower, while values between 0.06 and 0.08 are fair, 0.08 to 0.10 are adequate, and values above 0.10 are poor. For the SRMR, the conventional cutoff criterion is less than 0.08 for a good-fitting model ([Brown, 2006](#)). Full information maximum likelihood was used for estimating model parameters. Modification indices (MIs) were inspected and errors for items within a given theme were allowed to correlate where MIs suggested fit could be improved substantially. The resulting model with the proposed factor structure fit the data quite well, and, using the nested model comparison method ([Dedrick & Greenbaum, 2011](#)), was shown to fit significantly better than the model with all items loading on to a single factor (change in  $\chi^2 = 1104$ ,  $df = 48$ ,  $p < .001$ ). [Table 3](#) shows the model fit statistics and [Table 4](#) includes the loading of the items onto their proposed factors/themes.

Theme and item means are shown in [Tables 2 and 4](#), respectively. Theme means in the study were higher for themes 1–4, which focus more on structures and general attitudes related to participation in advising and decision making. This is exemplified by the items with particularly high mean scores: *respectful partnering* (i.e., agency leaders and staff are “respectful and responsive” to young people’s ideas when they are presented) and *culture of partnership* (i.e., leaders and staff genuinely view young people as having valuable experience and ideas that can improve the agency). In contrast, mean scores were lower for themes 5–8, which focus more on specific types of activities within which young people may have influence. Thus, for example, some of the lowest means were for items pertaining to young people’s participation in hiring and evaluation processes; in helping to select, adapt or improve the agency’s programs; and in deciding how to spend funds that they had helped to raise.

#### 3.2. Assessment of concurrent and convergent validity

A univariate ANOVA was constructed with the total YVAL mean score as the dependent variable and two binary fixed factors: development/advocacy organizations versus service-providing agencies and service recipients/youth peer staff versus other roles (see [Table 1](#) for categories). Both main effects in this model were significant ( $p < .05$ ) with the means for development/advocacy organizations and for young people significantly higher than the respective comparison categories. The interaction effect was not significant. In the advocacy organizations, the mean for young people was 3.96 while the mean for others was 3.58. In the service-providing agencies, the respective means were 3.25 and 3.02.

The mean total score on the YVAL was positively and significantly ( $p < .01$ ) correlated with the two subscales of the Y-AP (SAR 0.59, YVDM 0.66) and the two subscales from the YPQA (*Settings and Activities* 0.66, *Policies and Practices* 0.70).

### 4. Discussion

There is growing consensus that young people should have a range of opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making influence within the organizations that serve them. However, to date few tools have emerged that can help service-providing agencies to understand best practices in this area, or to evaluate the extent to which they have implemented those practices. This paper describes the development and validation of the assessment of Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL), which is intended to measure the extent to

**Table 4**  
Item means and factor loadings.

Theme	Item	Mean	SD	Factor loading
Overall vision and commitment	1(a) Commitment to meaningful participation	3.66	1.186	0.709
	1(b) Formal policy	3.17	1.302	0.885
	1(c) Culture of partnerships	3.88	1.067	0.794
	1(d) Structure for involvement in decision making	3.42	1.312	0.730
	1(e) Structure for broad engagement	3.40	1.313	0.821
	1(f) Access to decision makers	3.21	1.355	0.739
	1(g) Clear roles	3.16	1.320	0.773
	1(h) Assessment of participation efforts	2.98	1.262	0.751
Collaborative approach	2(a) Collaborative partnering	3.45	1.226	0.808
	2(b) Respectful partnering	3.92	1.108	0.830
	2(c) Youth/Young adult-friendly meetings	3.63	1.201	0.813
	2(d) Information sharing and communication	3.40	1.198	0.790
Empowered representatives	2(e) Transparency in decision making	3.23	1.274	0.835
	3(a) Sufficient and consistent representation	2.98	1.224	0.837
	3(b) Appropriate representation	3.30	1.262	0.828
	3(c) Support for thorough preparation	3.25	1.226	0.840
Facilitation and support for participation	3(d) Support for meaningful participation	3.27	1.249	0.809
	3(e) Leadership development	3.38	1.207	0.885
	4(a) Dedicated staff time	3.37	1.459	0.672
	4(b) Addressing barriers to participation	3.64	1.212	0.804
Workforce development and readiness	4(c) Stipends and incentives	3.39	1.430	0.739
	5(a) Participation in hiring	2.56	1.448	0.678
	5(b) Staff training	3.11	1.338	0.660
	5(c) Responsive staff evaluation	2.74	1.447	0.767
Impact on programs and policies	5(d) Peer roles	3.19	1.410	0.658
	6(a) Programs and practice models	2.81	1.271	0.780
	6(b) Improving services	2.97	1.257	0.765
	6(c) Engagement and retention efforts	3.02	1.281	0.881
Role in program evaluation	6(d) Cultural responsiveness efforts	3.19	1.207	0.821
	6(e) Respect for youth/young adult culture	3.33	1.274	0.798
	7(a) Feedback on services	3.48	1.309	0.854
	7(b) Participation in evaluation activities	2.84	1.379	0.871
Leading initiatives and projects	7(c) Responsiveness to feedback on services	3.17	1.249	0.801
	7(d) Transparency regarding evaluation	3.07	1.334	0.682
	8(a) Support for initiatives led by young people	3.33	1.221	0.724
	8(b) Funding for initiatives	3.11	1.344	0.757
	8(c) Control of funds	2.45	1.394	0.831

which youth- and young adult-serving agencies have implemented best practices to ensure that the perspectives of service recipients are meaningfully represented in organizational-level advising and decision making.

The Y-VAL project was carried out as a collaboration between university researchers and staff and members of a national youth-driven organization. Substantial stakeholder feedback (both from young people and older adult stakeholders) was solicited throughout the numerous iterations of item development. Stakeholder feedback, and particularly data from the final stage of development of the Y-VAL—during which expert stakeholders overwhelmingly described each of the proposed items as “essential” for inclusion on a measure of voice at the agency level—provide support for the face and content validity of the assessment. Importantly, stakeholders’ endorsement of the proposed items revealed shared and high aspirations for youth/young adult voice at the agency level, with expectations that young people should have substantial influence in areas such as hiring and preparing staff, and choosing, adapting, improving and evaluating programs and services. There was also a clear expectation that young people should take the lead in developing and carrying out their own initiatives.

Findings from the confirmatory factor analysis indicate that the proposed model for the Y-VAL—i.e., an overall scale comprised of eight subscales—was a good fit for the data, and that the proposed model fit better than a single-factor model. Internal reliability for each of the subscales, and for the overall assessment, was very good. Finally, findings from the analysis of variance—showing higher scores in youth development and advocacy agencies versus service-providing agencies—and correlations with other assessments with known psychometric properties provided additional evidence of validity.

Mean theme scores for the whole sample were close to or somewhat above the midpoint of the scale. However, means were higher for themes 1–4, which focused on developing policies and procedures, and generally setting the stage for meaningful youth/young adult participation. In contrast, means were lower for themes 5–8, which focused on the extent to which young people actually had influence in specific areas of agency activity, such as hiring and program evaluation. The pattern of theme means appears to be generally in line with the stages in the process through which agencies develop and sustain of meaningful youth/young adult voice, as described by both [Head \(2011\)](#) and [Zeldin et al. \(2008\)](#). In both cases, the process begins with building awareness of the value of promoting voice, followed by the developing policies and procedures, and then by consistently integrating youth/young adult voice and participation into a variety of agency activities and functions.

Importantly, the Y-VAL was developed with the understanding that stakeholders who have formally committed to the purpose and principles of including youth and young adult voice in advising may nonetheless be unaware of, or may struggle to implement, meaningful power-sharing practices when the participation of young people influences decisions in ways that potentially challenge the status quo. This study establishes the Y-VAL as a tool for stakeholder self-assessment and ongoing reflection as agencies move towards full implementation of the kinds of operating practices that provide scaffolding for the meaningful participation of young people at multiple levels of advising and decision making. For example, the Y-VAL item for *Staff training* (within the *Workforce Development and Readiness* theme) describes three strategies contributing to the sustainable inclusion of youth voice through specific activities, including the transmission of youth voice principles and supportive agency policies and practices during staff onboarding,

involving young people in developing and delivering this training, and providing ongoing professional development opportunities around promoting Y/YA voice, empowerment, and leadership.

Findings from the present study should be considered in the context of its limitations. A key limitation is that there is no information about the extent to which the sample is representative. Given that almost 95% of the sample reported being directly involved in efforts to build youth/young adult voice *and* that the modal amount of time respondents reported having been involved in these efforts was more than 5 years, it seems very likely that the respondents' agencies were further along than average in terms of their development of support for voice. Nevertheless, the sample included a large number of agencies distributed across 40 states, and there is little reason to assume that these agencies are not representative of youth- and young adult-serving agencies that have made at least an initial commitment to promoting youth and young adult voice in advising and decision making.

A related limitation stems from the fact that a large number of people who began the survey did not complete it. Inspection of data from the 134 respondents who did not complete the survey showed that the large majority of them (84.3%) stopped the survey after the questions about themselves and their organizations, and prior to completing the first theme. Non-completers were significantly more likely to report that they were not directly involved in efforts to increase youth/young adult voice their agency,  $\chi^2(1, N = 385) = 6.98, p < .01$ , and/or that they were not very well informed about these efforts,  $\chi^2(1, N = 385) = 8.58, p < .01$ . Additionally, a test of linear-by-linear association showed a significant effect for age group,  $(1, 385) = 4.57, p < .05$ , with older respondents being less likely to complete the survey than younger respondents. Inspection of data from non-completers also shows that some of them had roles or were from "organizations" that did not fit well with the purpose of assessment (as shown by text responses indicating "other" roles or "other" types of agencies), which may have become apparent to them once they saw the full text of items. There was not much attrition of respondents after the first theme, which suggests that fatigue was not an issue. Further, since younger respondents were less likely to stop the survey, it does not seem to be the case that young people in particular became fatigued with the survey.

In conclusion, this study introduces the first validated tool for self-assessment of the extent to which agencies have implemented policies and practices that support the meaningful and sustainable participation of young people in a range of advising and decision-making activities. The *Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level (Y-VAL)* assessment is intended both for research and evaluation purposes, as well as for quality improvement efforts to identify areas for ongoing development and technical assistance. Additionally, a corollary system-level self-assessment tool, the Y-VOC (*Youth/Young Adult Voice on Committees/Councils*), is currently being validated; the Y-VOC assesses a range of supportive policies and practices for the inclusion of young people on committees and councils convened to advise youth- and young adult-serving systems. Although the inclusion of young people on system-level advisory groups is becoming a widespread practice, the Y-VOC is expected to be the first validated system-level tool aimed at measuring the meaningful inclusion of young people's voice in these decision-making bodies.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### Ethical approval

The authors obtained human subjects approval from the Institutional Review Board at Portland State University prior to data collection.

### Informed consent

Information about risks and benefits stemming from the study were provided to potential participants as part of the study invitation they were sent via email. The invitation email also stressed that participation was voluntary and that participants could stop the survey at any time. Per procedures approved by the Institutional Review Board at Portland State University, and because the study was deemed low risk, consent was assumed if participants proceeded to the survey.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all of the stakeholders who shared their time and expertise during the development of the Y-VAL. The contents of this product were developed under a grant with funding from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, and from the Center for Mental Health Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, United States Department of Health and Human Services (NIDILRR grant number 90RT5030). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Support was also received from support from the National Technical Assistance Network for Children's Behavioral Health operated by and coordinated through the University of Maryland, and under contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Contract # HHSS280201500007C. The contents of this product do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, HHS, or of SAMHSA, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

### References

- Akiva, T., Cortina, K. S., & Smith, C. (2014). Involving youth in program decision-making: How common and what might it do for youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 43(11), 1844–1860.
- Akiva, T., & Petrokubi, J. (2016). Growing with youth: A lifewide and lifelong perspective on youth-adult partnership in youth programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 69, 248–258.
- Arbuckle, J. L. (2014). *Amos (Version 23.0) [Computer Program]*. Chicago: IBM SPSS.
- Bentler, P. M., & Bonett, D. G. (1980). Significance tests and goodness of fit in the analysis of covariance structures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 88(3), 588.
- Brown, T. A. (2014). *Confirmatory factor analysis for applied research*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Checkoway, B. (2011). What is youth participation? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(2), 340–345.
- Checkoway, B., Allison, T., & Montoya, C. (2005). Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(10), 1149–1162.
- Checkoway, B., & Richards-Schuster, K. (2003). Youth participation in community evaluation research. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 24(1), 21–33.
- Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative. (2017). Viewing young people as organizational assets (Retrieved from Child Welfare Information Gateway) <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/youth-development/blueprint-series/>.
- Collins, M. E. (2004). Enhancing services to youths leaving foster care: Analysis of recent legislation and its potential impact. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26(11), 1051–1065.
- Collins, M. E., Augsberger, A., & Gecker, W. (2016). Youth councils in municipal government: Examination of activities, impact and barriers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 65, 140–147.
- Cooper, D. G., & Hays, S. P. (2007). Engaging youth for positive change: A critical analysis of case studies on local action. *Children Youth and Environments*, 17(2), 433–453.
- Dedrick, R. F., & Greenbaum, P. E. (2011). Multilevel confirmatory factor analysis of a scale measuring interagency collaboration of children's mental health agencies. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 19(1), 27–40.
- Forum for Youth Investment (2012). Youth program quality assessment – Form B organization items. *Subscales V-VII*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.
- Friesen, B. J., Koroloff, N. M., Walker, J. S., & Briggs, H. E. (2011). Family and youth voice in systems of care. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, 7(1), 1–25.
- Gyamfi, P., Keens-Douglas, A., & Medin, E. (2007). Youth and youth coordinators' perspectives on youth involvement in systems of care. *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 34(4), 382–394.
- Havlicek, J., Lin, C. H., & Villalpando, F. (2016). Web survey of foster youth advisory boards in the United States. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 60, 109–118.
- Head, B. W. (2011). Why not ask them? Mapping and promoting youth participation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 541–547.

- Hu, L. T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 1–55.
- Koroloff, N., Friesen, B., & Buekea, N. (2017). *Changing the rules: A guide for youth and young adults with mental health conditions who want to change policy*. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.
- Koroloff, N. M., Osher, T., Jivanjee, P. R., Pullmann, M., Sofich, K., Guthrie, L., ... Murphy, S. (2010). Under new management: Research collaboration with family members and youth. *Children's Mental Health Research: The Power of Partnerships* (pp. 40). .
- Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Research Center.
- Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 57–74.
- Luluquisen, M., & Pettis, L. (2014). Community engagement for policy and systems change. *Community Development*, 45(3), 252–262.
- Martin, S., Pittman, K., Ferber, T., & McMahon, A. (2007). *Building effective youth councils: A practical guide to engaging youth in policy making*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment (July).
- Pittman, K., Martin, S., & Williams, A. (2007). *Core principles for engaging young people in community change*. Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc (July).
- Richards-Schuster, K. (2012). Empowering the voice of youth: The role of youth advisory councils in grant making focused on youth. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2012(136), 87–100.
- Serido, J., Borden, L. M., & Perkins, D. F. (2011). Moving beyond youth voice. *Youth & Society*, 43(1), 44–63.
- Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society*, 15(2), 107–117.
- Smith, C., & Hohmann, C. (2005). *Full findings from the Youth PQA validation study*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2016). *Youth engagement guidance: strategies, tools, and tips for supportive and meaningful youth engagement in federal government-sponsored meetings and events*. HHS Publication No. SMA 16-4985Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
- Wu, H. J., Weiss, J., Kornbluh, M., & Roddy, L. (2014). *Youth-adult partnership rubric: A tool for professional development and program evaluation in youth settings (Version 1.0)*.
- Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75–90.
- Zeldin, S., Camino, L., & Mook, C. (2005). The adoption of innovation in youth organizations: Creating the conditions for youth–adult partnerships. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(1), 121–135.
- Zeldin, S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The psychology and practice of youth–adult partnership: Bridging generations for youth development and community change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(3–4), 385–397.
- Zeldin, S., Krauss, S. E., Collura, J., Lucchesi, M., & Sulaiman, A. H. (2014). Conceptualizing and measuring youth–adult partnership in community programs: A cross-national study. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3–4), 337–347.
- Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth on adults and organizations*. Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council.
- Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., & MacNeil, C. (2008). Youth-adult partnerships in decision making: Disseminating and implementing an innovative idea into established organizations and communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(3–4), 262–277.