

ABSTRACT

In communities struggling with youth violence, gangs, and poor academic performance, adults and community members often view youth and delinquent youth behaviors as “the problem”. In doing so, adults may neglect to view young people in the context of their lived experiences and unique paths to creating powerful identities, meaning, and well-being and may lose the opportunity to engage youth as powerful social change agents within their communities. This dissertation engaged youth in a collaborative inquiry about their lives and experiences, the impact of abuse in relationships, and ways they survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

Beginning in May 2011, Families Thrive, the Antioch Unified School District, and the Youth Intervention Network, collaborated to invite a group of twenty high school youth in Antioch, CA to participate in a powerful approach called Choppin’ it Up. This approach to working with youth extends beyond solving problems and instead focuses on weaving new narratives and co-constructing alternatives by increasing our understanding of each other, generating new ways of being in relationship, and imaging positive possibilities together.

In the first part of our work together, youth explored and developed their skills for holding dialogues with each other. These dialogues examined the impact of abuse in relationships, explored what a healthy relationship looks like to them, and identified ways teens survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

From these dialogues between and with youth, we also began to see how youth can be powerful social change agents in their communities. The young people also realized that dominant narratives about youth often influence the beliefs people hold about them, the stories that are told about them, and how often the stories are told. Youth looked at how these stories impact the way adults are in relationships with youth and the possibilities and alternatives that are constructed. By subscribing to and participating in problematic dominant narratives, adults often miss seeing and hearing the multitude of strengths, dreams, and hopes youth have through which together we can imagine positive possibilities and build better worlds together. We may forget that despite the many challenges that children and youth may face in their lives, many not only survive but also thrive and flourish.

Youth were clear that they needed the support of adults to create the positive change they wanted to see in their communities. They also recognized that they may need to change perceptions adults might have of them in order to create the kinds of partnerships they envisioned. And they did it. Through their commitment and leadership, these youth demonstrated the power of youth as social change agents in their communities, envisioning and building communities that are good for all people, of all ages.

This story of transformation is centered on how adults and society view youth who are labeled at-risk or troubled, how youth view themselves, and in altering the relation, including the language we use and stories we tell, between youth and adults in order to create positive change in our communities.