

What Aspects of Youth Programming Have Lasting Effects? Perspectives from Wisconsin PATCH Alumni

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ABSTRACT

Background: As clinicians and scholars continue to emphasize the importance of actively involving youth in the Maternal and Child Health workforce, this evaluation explores the programmatic elements of the Wisconsin-based Providers and Teens Communicating for Health (PATCH) Program that previous participants found impactful.

Methods: Semistructured interviews were conducted with program alumni. Qualitative thematic analysis utilized a combined deductive and inductive approach.

Results: Fourteen interviews were completed. Analysis revealed 6 key themes highlighting impactful elements of PATCH: education, employment and workforce development, sense of community and belonging, youth-driven programming, facilitating community connections, and youth-adult partnership.

Discussion: Multiple elements of PATCH have led to sustained positive health and development outcomes among program alumni, providing valuable insights for effectively engaging youth.

BACKGROUND

Clinicians and scholars continue to emphasize the importance of actively involving youth in the Maternal and Child Health workforce.¹ Initiatives like the Wisconsin-based Providers and Teens Communicating for Health (PATCH) Program exemplify these efforts. PATCH originated in 2010 as an adolescent health care communications initiative rooted in advocacy and youth-led education to support public health.^{2,3} Evolving over time, the program has played a crucial role in authentic youth engagement across Wisconsin, addressing the strong demand for meaningful youth input in adolescent health efforts.⁴

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At present, PATCH utilizes 2 youth-driven programs to engage youth. The PATCH Teen Consultant Program supports YOUTH in consulting on adolescent health initiatives, policies, and practices, whereas the PATCH Teen Educator Program promotes open, honest, and medically accurate conversations between adolescents and their health care providers via teen-facilitated workshops. Program goals differ, but the approach to engaging youth remains consistent. Teams of 8 to 12 youth (aged 14 to 19) are formed through a deliberate selection process, including the release of job descriptions, submission of applications, interviews,

and employment contracts. Each youth makes a 9-month job commitment as either a Teen Consultant or Teen Educator. They are supervised by a program coordinator and paid for their time and expertise to participate in multiday onboarding training; 2-hour, bimonthly enrichment sessions; consulting sessions (Teen Consultants); and/or PATCH workshop facilitation (Teen Educators).

While previous evaluations have demonstrated programmatic effects,²⁻⁴ this manuscript explores specific programmatic elements that have proven impactful or meaningful to past participants, hereafter called alumni. It offers valuable insights into effective practices and strategies, highlighting their importance and implications for enhancing program outcomes and informing future initiatives.

METHODS

This evaluation followed a mixed-methods survey of PATCH alumni administered in the fall of 2023, which identified sustained impacts on participants (Jewell TI, Aeschbach CJ); unpub-

lished data, 2023). Semistructured, follow-up interviews were conducted to gather alumni's insights on (1) the program's impact, (2) the specific aspects of PATCH that contributed to these impacts, (3) important programmatic components, and (4) additional experience or thoughts regarding their participation. Based on the University of Wisconsin–Madison Quality Improvement/Program Evaluation Self-Certification tool, this project was identified as program evaluation that did not meet the federal definition of research pursuant to 45 CFR 46 and did not require review by the Institutional Review Board.

Participant Recruitment

Interview participants were recruited from all previous Wisconsin PATCH alumni (N=299, from 2010 to completion of the 2022–2023 program cycle). Recruitment was conducted alongside the alumni survey using documented email addresses, a private alumni Facebook group, and direct outreach by staff. After completing the survey, respondents could opt in to a brief follow-up interview via a separate link. Alumni also had the option to bypass the survey and contact the team directly. No incentives were provided for participation in the interviews.

Data Collection

An interview guide was developed in partnership with PATCH's evaluation team, which includes representatives from program leadership, staff, youth participants, and external stakeholders. Study team member TIJ conducted interviews, ranging from 18 to 38 minutes, in January and February, 2024. Interviews were recorded with participant consent, then transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Detailed demographics were not obtained to ensure anonymity and due to the survey findings indicating no meaningful differences in program impacts. Program records confirmed participation years and the specific PATCH youth engagement programs of interviewees.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a thematic approach. A preliminary codebook was developed deductively based on PATCH's youth engagement model and staff insights. Two independent coders, study team members TIJ and ARS, conducted the analysis to mitigate potential biases. They utilized the preliminary codebook to analyze 3 randomly selected transcripts, resolving discrepancies and refining codes for clarity and additional themes. The revised codebook was used to independently analyze the remaining transcripts. Consensus on all codes was achieved through discussions between coders, who identified key themes and subthemes through an iterative, inductive process.

RESULTS

Forty alumni expressed interest in a phone or virtual interview, with 16 scheduling and 14 completing interviews. Interviewees included 12 former Teen Educators, a former Teen Consultant,

and another who participated in both programs. Qualitative analysis revealed 6 key themes highlighting impactful elements of PATCH as identified by alumni (Table). While the vast majority positively described PATCH, a few comments highlighted negative experiences that conveyed the importance of a specific programmatic element.

Education

Most interviewees indicated the importance of being exposed to new information, resources, and connections through training and enrichment. They highlighted how these conversations not only enhanced their understanding of stigmatized health topics but also empowered them to openly talk about these issues with others. One interviewee described the positive effects of learning from local content experts in the community:

“Having someone who works in mental health come and talk about mental health is really powerful because they have their own experiences they can share... they can also talk about how the system [is] operating and what needs to be done, what is being done ... Not only because then we can give really good workshops, but also because we can have those educational experiences.”

Employment and Workforce Development

Interviewed alumni discussed the value of their paid job responsibilities, such as workshop facilitation and consulting, which helped develop skills and confidence in supportive professional environments. They also had the opportunity to interact with professionals who represented diverse potential career paths. One interviewee discussed how it led to them pursue a career in medicine:

“... it made medicine something that was approachable, friendly, and welcoming and something that I could actually—after being part of the program—could actually see myself being a part [of] professionally.”

A Sense of Community and Belonging

Participants highlighted the welcoming and inclusive PATCH environment, which encouraged them to embrace their uniqueness. Bringing together diverse identities and perspectives for a common purpose facilitated personal growth, exploration, a sense of belonging, and the development of meaningful relationships. One interviewee explained, *“... it was a really diverse group of people, and we got to learn a lot about each other and share things with each other about our life experiences and backgrounds that we otherwise maybe wouldn't share.”*

Youth-Driven Programming

Individuals emphasized how PATCH leveraged the strengths of both adults and youth, with adults establishing structured program goals and expectations, while youth provided continuous input. They expressed feeling valued for their expertise and observed the tangible effect of their contributions—particularly

Table. Qualitative Insights on Impactful Programmatic Components

Key Theme/Subtheme	% (n) Mentioned	No. of Mentions	Representative Quote
Education			
General education	92.9 (13)	42	"I learned a lot of new information just in general...we had to talk to different people every week, who knew completely different things. And so hearing their knowledge and then learning from them, it was really interesting."
Health education	92.9 (13)	30	"...being taught how to...understand what your doctor is telling you...like knowing whether a positive test or a negative test is actually a positive or negative thing."
Employment and workforce development			
Workshop facilitation	85.7 (12)	34	"... the mere act of getting up and presenting to providers, presenting to other teens...that experience...felt really profound."
General work experience	64.3 (9)	20	"I felt like PATCH was different because it gave me a lot of direct experience...for instance, like art club, wouldn't give you."
Job exploration	50.0 (7)	13	"I think it actually opened my eyes to a lot of different careers within public health that maybe weren't medicine."
Teen consultant work	7.1 (1)	2	"...youth can really talk to adults...and have their voice heard and really have an impact..."
A sense of community and belonging			
Peer connections	92.9 (13)	42	"... it really is different from any other opportunity because you're part of a community that really values community and, like camaraderie. And being a part of PATCH is like having almost like an instant family, you just have people that you can trust and count on, and vice versa."
Sense of belonging	71.4 (10)	26	"...as a team, everybody decided to just kind of accept each other. And that was really nice, because that led to this, freedom of expression that we all got to kind of indulge in...everybody was just really open about who they were, and it made me at least feel like I could do the same."
Youth-driven programming			
Adult-initiated and youth-driven structure	85.7 (12)	29	"PATCH has it down pretty well in terms of getting youth in a space together where they can do this kind of work but also giving them enough space to...still be a kid and like have other commitments."
Youth voices are valued and centered	71.4 (10)	26	"...the mere act of getting up and presenting to providers, presenting to other teens, and having our ...voices, be the...drivers of the conversations that we facilitated...when you're kind of held as this like expert, and even if it's an expert in your own lived experience, the way that makes you feel valued and heard and like, the way that impacts our self-esteem, especially as a teen...that was extremely profound for me."
Longitudinal engagement	42.9 (6)	7	"I started PATCH when I was 15...and I stayed in the program until I graduated from high school...being able to have that consistent involvement with the community and the PATCH group itself was really wonderful."
Facilitating community connections			
Engaging with health care providers	78.6 (11)	24	"... it's very empowering to be able to look at these people and also just see them as people who want to learn and really do best for their patients and be in a collaborative setting."
Interacting with the community	64.3 (9)	25	"The nice thing about partnering with the adults in the community is, we are able to learn from their knowledge and learn from their ... not necessarily mistakes, but ... what they've grown from and what they've learned."
Advocating for issues in the community	42.9 (6)	10	"I felt so involved in the city and the well-being of the state ..."
Youth-adult partnership			
Trusted, supportive, reliable adult(s)	92.9 (13)	39	"...I really found it helpful that our program coordinator very clearly...knew all of us, she cared about us, and she was just very hands on...just having like a very supportive, positive person, who's also very passionate about the work, as the team leader, is really good."
Mutual respect	28.6 (4)	7	"They weren't like teachers or camp counselors who can't tell you what's really going on...we were like honest with each other as much as you're honest with the teenager, and they...gave the impression that they...had our backs."
Clear roles, expectations, and boundaries	14.3 (2)	4	"... it was just really nice being treated like an adult...and with that they definitely didn't expect us to behave as adults."

through prolonged engagement with the program. One interviewee said, *"PATCH was one of the first times where I felt like my voice, my perspective, my expertise – and not just mine but our kind of like community of adolescents – was so highly respected and valued."*

Facilitating Community Connections

Alumni recognized how PATCH created safe spaces for youth and professionals to learn from each other, where both parties were seen as experts and learners. They also indicated the value of hav-

ing guidance, connections, and support to make positive changes within their community. One interviewee described learning about and bolstering community resources:

"Some other really big, important aspects of PATCH ... are finding what your community resources are and how you can build on them and help them. And utilizing those resources."

Youth-Adult Partnership

Most alumni mentioned the importance of having a trusted and reliable program coordinator who set clear expectations and

boundaries, held everyone accountable, and treated all participants with respect. One interviewee discussed how the transition from a very experienced coordinator to a new one affected their experience in the program.

“The coordinator was new ... things weren’t up when they were supposed to be, or we didn’t get our checks when we were supposed to ... it sort of felt like we were teaching [the coordinator] how to do [their] job.”

Limitations

While consistent themes emerged across interviewees, others may not have been captured due to the small sample (14 interviewees among 299 total alumni) and potential bias with those who volunteered for interviews. Moreover, the sample predominantly consisted of Teen Educator alumni, reflecting the longer tenure of this program since 2010 versus the newer Teen Consultant Program established in 2016. While both programs aim to engage youth similarly, it is important to further investigate the newer program’s impact. Lastly, alumni participated in PATCH across various years, which enhances diversity in perspectives but also introduces potential recall bias—particularly among those involved many years ago.

DISCUSSION

This evaluation identifies key programmatic elements that PATCH alumni deem impactful, providing insights for effectively engaging youth. Through structured, youth-driven programs and fostering youth-adult partnerships, PATCH creates diverse, safe, and supportive environments for exploration, learning, and growth. Alumni attest that this approach has supported them in exploring their identities and passions, developing essential job and life skills, forming meaningful relationships, and making positive impacts within their communities.

Engaging youth effectively requires significant investments in time, capacity, resources, and expertise. However, these investments can yield substantial returns in terms of youth development and program impact. PATCH serves as a catalyst for workforce and leadership development, promotes positive youth development, improves health outcomes, and supports broader public health goals by amplifying the voices of today’s youth.

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