



Addressing Barriers

to Learning

New ways to think . . .

Better ways to link



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Youth Participation: Making It Real

“Why should we be involved? Our opinions really don’t matter.”

“We are lied to and not listened to.”

“Social workers and foster parents agree on what is ‘best’ for us, without our opinion.”

Youth comments quoted in Ansell and colleagues, 2007

“A process designed for youth without their perspectives is fundamentally flawed; youth add a language and legitimacy that appeals to other youth.”

Interviewee Response Quoted in Whitlock & Hamilton

Thanks to advocacy for and by youth leaders, it is now commonplace at meetings across the country for several folks to stress “If we are going to plan for young people, we need their voices at this table.” However, reasons for bringing young people to the table vary. Advocates range from those who appreciate the importance of understanding the perspective of youth, on through those who also are dedicated to promoting youth development and empowerment, and on to those who stress that youth participation benefits families, adults, organizations, planners, policy makers, communities, and society in general.

There is particular concern about empowering youth voices to ensure hearing and understanding of concerns raised by those segments of the population that have little power to influence policy. As the National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education, and Families stresses

“Young people want and deserve a voice in their communities. City officials make decisions that affect youth on a daily basis. Yet young people often have no direct role in shaping or influencing local policies and programs. Even well-intentioned efforts to work for youth – by ‘protecting’ them from perceived threats or by ‘rescuing’ those who already are in jeopardy – can prevent us from recognizing the importance of working with youth to identify positive solutions and build stronger communities.”

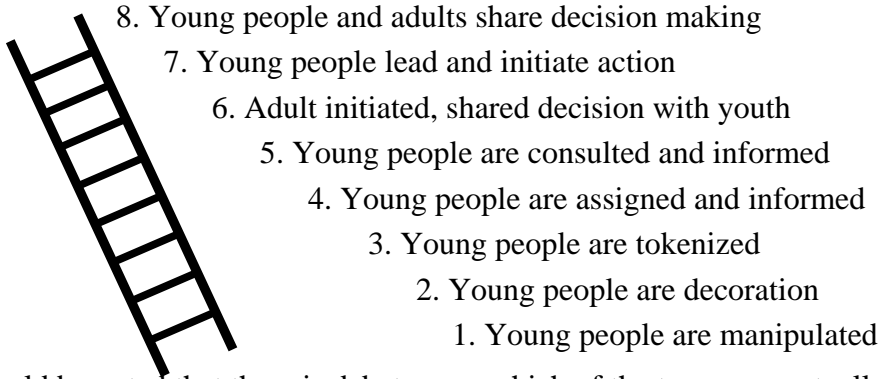
This article explores what is involved in ensuring meaningful participation in policy and planning for diverse groups of youth. Going beyond concerns for youth participation, policy makers and planners must draw on the wide range of available data about youth. Thus, the second article in this issue highlights sources for and examples of data that can inform efforts to promote healthy development and address barriers that interfere with the well-being of young people.

(cont. on p. 2)

Promoting Effective Youth Participation

Concern for youth participation encompasses a focus on civic engagement, youth rights, and intergenerational equity (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). As defined in a sociological and psychological context, *intergenerational equity* embodies fairness or justice in relationships between children, youth, adults and seniors, particularly in terms of treatment and interactions.

Youth participation in planning and policy may take the form of (1) bringing youth to the table of an established “adult” organization (e.g., providing input as consumers and clients, representing the voice of youth as a group participant, assuming a leadership role at the table), (2) youth establishing and operating their own organization, or (3) creating a new organization where youth and adults collaborate as equals. Hart (1997) conceptualizes types of participation as a ladder with the bottom three rungs (1-3) described as not true participation. In brief, the following are the rungs of Hart’s ladder from the top rung (#8) down:



It should be noted that there is debate over which of the top rungs actually is the most meaningful form of participation. Some argue that young people are most empowered when they are making decisions without adult influence (e.g., although adults may be involved in a supportive role). Others argue that shared decision making is the most beneficial form for both youth and adults as long as there is a generational power balance.

Our focus here is on bringing youth to existing planning and decision making tables. We leave discussion of youth-led organizations to those who are immersed in this movement (e.g., see *Youth-led Organizations* in Wikipedia > http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Youth-led_organizations <; also see the Summer, 2009 issue of *Focal Point* on “Youth Empowerment and Participation in Mental Health Care” from Portland’s Research and Training Center on Family Support and Children’s Mental Health <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu>).

Given the decision to bring youth to the table, the question arises about *who*. In some cases, a couple of “representative” youth simply are invited to join the discussion. Unfortunately, many factors can arise that interfere with making this strategy work in a truly valid way. After studying such situations, Whitlock and Hamilton (nd) note:

“Virtually all struggled with finding an adequate way to involve youth in the decision-making processes. Serious logistical problems arose when meeting times conflicted with school and work hours, problems that also affected parent and community participation. Respondents agreed they saw limited value in appointing one or two youth to a committee. Not only did the youth become bored, but they couldn’t represent the full range of youth perspectives regarded as important.”

Furthermore, they found that

“Respondents expressing the greatest satisfaction with youth participation had established separate youth advisory boards that functioned as an auxiliary committee to the primary decision-making committees. Using youth as trainers also was an effective technique for inviting youth participation. One respondent, a seasoned facilitator ... across two states, commented that many of the adults she worked with were resistant to including youth: ‘They think that including youth will slow down the process, that it’s too cumbersome.’”

In their guide for engaging youth in the *Child and Family Services Review* process, Ansell and colleagues note that many youth feel their voices are not heard and that their input makes no difference. The authors emphasize that

“Typical classroom-based and adult-led community ‘youth engagement’ activities are done *to* or *for* young people, meaning that adults conceive of these activities, design them, institute them, and evaluate them afterwards. There are many problems to this approach, the main one being that oftentimes they actually serve to *disengage* the very young people they are intended to engage. ... ‘Real’ involvement requires good planning and preparation Participation of youth needs to go beyond token involvement. Youth have been clear that to be a part of the process, ‘we all need to speak the same language.’ Acronyms and jargon need to be explained. Intimidation and fear of intimidation need to be addressed.”

Involving Youth and Making Their Participation Meaningful

Given that youth are coming to the table, planning must address the following questions:

- What will be their responsibilities (roles, functions) and accountabilities? (In what ways will the responsibilities and accountabilities be the same and in what ways will they differ from the adults at the table?)
- Who should be recruited and how?
- How will they effectively be inducted into the operational infrastructure and prepared for their roles and functions?
- How will they be reimbursed for time, effort, and costs?
- How will meetings and workgroups be arranged to accommodate their school and work schedules?
- How will the group provide for continuously developing the capacity of youth (and all others) and support everyone’s efforts in ways that enhance motivation for working together productively?
- Are there plans for regular debriefings and evaluations?

To aid in planning, several resources suggest principles and steps to enhance meaningful youth participation. The following synthesis draws heavily on the work of Barnett and Brennan, 2006; Bloom, 2000; Matarese, McGinnis, and Mora, 2005; and Martin, Pittman, Ferber, and McMahan, 2007.

1. Provide and expand youth opportunities to become long-term contributors to school and community development. Establish and institutionalize as many ways as feasible to involve youth and enable them to participate in decision-making, planning, problem solving, evaluation, and in taking action. Special attention must be paid to the special needs of youth with respect to scheduling, transportation, access to computers, etc.

2. Be inclusive – reach out to all youth. Being inclusive means recognizing diversity and differences (e.g., in socio-economic status, age, ability, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, life style, etc.). Particular emphasis should be placed on engaging those who have been under-represented such as the many disconnected youth (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009) and those who often are experienced as disabled, disturbed, or delinquent. Participation enables those who are viewed as problems to become problem-solvers.

3. Develop the capacity of youth to participate and lead effectively and the capacity of adults to work with them in supportive ways. Capacity building must focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for working together productively (e.g., development of communication skills, teamwork, collaboration, and conflict and stress management). Adults should consistently

convey that they value and need youth involvement. Mentoring should be mutual – respecting the reality that adults and youth have much to learn from each other. Properly designed, such capacity building encourages and facilitates pursuit of opportunities for personal self-growth, skill enhancement, and leadership for all participants.

4. Engage youth actively in providing new ideas that stimulate enthusiasm and investment in strengthening communities, families, schools, and young people. This requires actively facilitating youth input and ensuring that young people’s ideas are recognized as of value. All ideas must be heard with respect. Youth bring to the table a fresh perspective for identifying issues and possible solutions.

5. Design the working environment to ensure equity and safety for young participants; pay special attention to the distribution of power between young people and adults. Establish member and leadership positions of authority, responsibility, and accountability for young people, and design discussions in ways that facilitate and maintain motivated participation and that ensure voting rights in decision making on all issues and solutions. If there are paid staff positions, some should be offered to young people as a way of ensuring a youth perspective is available on a daily basis.

6. Through collaborative mechanisms integrate and weave together the resources of schools, homes, and communities to support meaningful youth participation and a wide-range of networking for accomplishing the group’s mission. Resources should be budgeted to underwrite the costs of effective youth participation and networking.

7. Link youth to comprehensive planning and policy efforts. This includes participation in bodies that analyze existing policies and propose new ones. Ensure they have ample opportunity to identify their own interests within the context of community and societal policy making and program development. Involve them in confronting serious social problems and conditions that will allow them to see themselves as agents for the positive transformation of their environments. Such participation can be a major step toward long-term participation and contributing to community programs/policy.

8. Self reflect, evaluate, and celebrate the group’s accomplishments in ways that recognize differences in perspective and contribution. A key factor in capacity building for participating and leading is the ability to learn from experiences. This is facilitated by structured reflection and debriefing and by formative evaluation. It is important to use the opportunity also to let everyone, and especially youth know, that their involvement is valued and to inform the community and public at large about progress and encourage formal recognition and official thanks.

Concluding Comments

We leave the last words to Barnett and Brennan (2006) who sagely write: “Community involvement is central to the development of community. From this perspective, community development is facilitated by the ability of local people to mobilize resources to address local needs. Youth are in a position to be the stable and long-term contributors that help guide this process. Youth represent a vast and often untapped resource, for immediate and long-term community development efforts. They also provide an invaluable resource for program planning and effective evaluation. Through their collaborations with adults and organizations, youth achieve skill enhancement, confidence building, and leadership development. The important role of youth in community development and their motivations for this kind of civic engagement remains an important research and program development focus. With such knowledge, youth and community workers can better understand how to maximize these powerful resources and enhance local development efforts in both the short and long-term.”

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>A Few Websites

- >>The FreeChild Project – <http://www.freechild.org/index.htm>
- >>SoundOut: Student Voice in Schools – <http://www.soundout.org/>
- >>Youth on Board – <http://www.youthonboard.org/>
- >>UNICEF'S Child and youth participation resource guide – http://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/resourceguide_protection.htm
- >>National Youth Rights Association – <http://www.youthrights.org/>
- >>AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research – <http://cydpr.aed.org/>
- >>Arsalyn (a non-partisan program of Ludwick Family Foundation, promotes youth civic and political engagement) – <http://www.arsalyn.org/>
- >>America's Promise – <http://www.americaspromise.org/>
- >>Innovation Center for Community Youth Involvement – <http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/>
- >>The McCreary Centre Society's Youth Action – http://www.mcs.bc.ca/ya_ladd.htm

Data About Youth in the United States

Given the growing amount of data on and from youth, the problem confronting policy makers is not really that of hearing from a few more young people or arranging to have a youth representative or two at the table. Addressing the matter in that way risks continuing the type of tokenism and use of youth as decoration that has been commonplace and also risks short-circuiting analyses of the larger body of available data. Meaningful youth participation always should be promoted. But promoting participation must not be confused with the parallel need for a comprehensive body of data on and from youth.

Adults Amassing Information About Youth

Data about youth are gathered from many sources and are readily available on the internet. For example, national and state reports regularly summarize statistical data about the condition of young people across the country (see Exhibit 1). And localities increasingly are publishing “report cards” on the status of children and youth.

Here, our main focus is on procedures designed by adults to elicit information *from* youth. A wealth of data are available from major surveys, polls, and research studies. We stress, however, that the large data-sets generated always have methodological limitations and so what is reported must be interpreted with care and sophistication (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

Also note that when procedures are designed by adults, the emphasis is on those matters they designate as most important. To counter this bias, a few efforts have been pursued to enable youth to speak their minds, including growing interest in engaging youth as partners in participatory research and evaluation. However, we could find no examples of *large scale surveys* using *youth defined* indicators of needs and interests.

The rationale adults provide for surveying and polling youth vary with the type of problem they want to address. For example, the news release from *America’s Promise Alliance* about the 2009 Gallup Student Poll states that it will help school systems and communities benchmark progress and determine solutions to the dropout crisis. The report stresses that

“Currently, one in three American students does not graduate from high school. ‘When more than 1.2 million young people drop out of high school every year, everyone needs to work together to address the crisis – educators, parents, business and community leaders,’ said Alma Powell, chair of America’s Promise Alliance. ‘For too long the voice of youth has been missing from the national dialogue. This poll gives insights into the daily experiences, challenges and aspirations of our young

people, so that we can better identify ways to meet their needs and help them be successful.’”

(See Exhibit 2 for the Gallup Poll’s main findings.)

The majority of youth surveys are designed to gather data about a range of problems experienced by youth (e.g., risk behaviors, prevalence and incidence of mental disorders, students diagnosed for special education, youth in the juvenile justice system) and on use of services. Below are examples of major national and local surveys that ask school-aged youth (as young as 6th grade) to volunteer answers relevant to physical health and psychosocial and mental health concerns:

>*Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System YRBSS* – The YRBSS includes a national school-based survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state, territorial, tribal, and local surveys conducted by state, territorial, and local education and health agencies and tribal governments. The national Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) monitors the following six categories of CDC priority health-risk behaviors among youth and young adults including

- behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence;
- tobacco use;
- alcohol and other drug use;
- sexual behaviors that contribute to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection;
- unhealthy dietary behaviors; and
- physical inactivity.

It also monitors prevalence of obesity and asthma. <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/brief.htm>

Presented in the box on page 9 is an example of recent findings.

(text cont. on page 9)

Exhibit 1

Examples of National Sources for Statistics on the Status of Youth

Child Trends – An independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan research center whose mission is “to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children, including program providers, the policy community, researchers and educators, and the media.” It has data on Child Poverty, Child Welfare, Early Childhood Development/School Readiness, Education, Fatherhood & Parenting, Health, Indicators of Child Well-being, Teen Sex & Pregnancy, Youth Development, and Children of Immigrants. (See <http://www.childtrends.org/index.cfm>) *Child Trends* has developed “A Guide to Resources for Creating, Locating, and Using Child and Youth Indicator Data (http://www.childtrends.org/files/child_trends-2009_01_05_FR_childindicatorguide.pdf)

KIDS COUNT – The Annie E. Casey Foundation supports the KIDS COUNT Data Center with national, state, city, and community-level data on over 100 child well-being indicators, including economic, health, safety, and risk factors. Users can create maps, graphs, and charts for presentations or on organization websites. (<http://www.aecf.org/KnowledgeCenter/PublicationsSeries/KCDataBookProds.aspx>)

America's Children in Brief: Key National Indicators of Well-Being – The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics provides yearly reports on the well-being of children and families. Their reports draw on data from 22 Federal agencies and are organized into seven domains relevant to children's lives: *Family and Social Environment, Economic Circumstances, Health Care, Physical Environment and Safety, Behavior, Education, and Health*. (<http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/index.asp>)

Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) – Major summaries of statistics relevant to those concerned with youth are prepared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and included in the *MMWR* Series. For example, see “Mental Health in the United States: Health Care and Well Being of Children with Chronic Emotional, Behavioral, or Developmental Problems— United States, 2001” in the Oct. 7, 2005/ 54(39); 985-989 issue. (<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5439a3.htm>)

National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) – Examines the physical and emotional health of children and adolescents from birth through age 17. The 2007 survey updates data collected for the 2003 NSCH and includes new indicators of children's well-being under the topics of physical and dental health, emotional and mental health, health insurance coverage, health care access and quality, community and school activities, family and health activities, neighborhood safety and support. <http://www.nschdata.org/Content/Default.aspx>

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) – The primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education. Publications include *The Condition of Education* which each year summarizes “important developments and trends in education using the latest available data. The report presents 46 indicators on the status and condition of education. The indicators represent a consensus of professional judgment on the most significant national measures of the condition and progress of education for which accurate data are available. The 2009 print edition includes 46 indicators in five main areas: (1) participation in education; (2) learner outcomes; (3) student effort and educational progress; (4) the contexts of elementary and secondary education; and (5) the contexts of postsecondary education.” (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)

In addition to the above, a variety of longitudinal studies provide data on factors associated with adult status. For example, the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)* continues to follow a nationally representative sample first interviewed in grades 7-12 during the 1994-95 school year. The most recent in-home interview was in 2008, when the sample was aged 24-32. “Add Health combines longitudinal survey data on respondents’ social, economic, psychological and physical well-being with contextual data on the family, neighborhood, community, school, friendships, peer groups, and romantic relationships, providing unique opportunities to study how social environments and behaviors in adolescence are linked to health and achievement outcomes in young adulthood. The fourth wave of interviews expanded the collection of biological data in Add Health to understand the social, behavioral, and biological linkages in health trajectories as the Add Health cohort ages through adulthood.”

Exhibit 2

Main Findings from the Gallup Student Poll Reported in May 2009

The online survey of students in grades 5-12 is described as “a new, groundbreaking survey administered anonymously in America’s schools.” The survey is seen as “the beginning of what will quickly become the largest-ever survey of American children.” It was designed to assess hope, engagement and well-being, which are described as “true indicators of student success that link to grades, test scores, retention and employment. Gallup will conduct the poll twice annually, in March and October. The national results will be used by America’s Promise Alliance, the American Association of School Administrators and others in designing appropriate responses that support youth.

The following data were gathered in March 2009. The Poll surveyed “more than 70,000 students in grades 5-12, located in 18 states and the District of Columbia. More than 330 schools and 58 school districts participated. The results were verified by polling a nationally representative sample.” Questions focused on:

- Hope — the ideas and energy students have for the future;
- Engagement — the level of student involvement in and enthusiasm for school; and
- Well-being — how students think about and experience their lives.

On the hope index, the responses are interpreted as follows:

- 50% were considered hopeful
- 33% were considered stuck
- 17% were considered discouraged

On the engagement index the responses are interpreted as follows:

- 50% were considered engaged
- 30% were considered not engaged
- 20% were considered actively disengaged

On the well-being index the responses are interpreted as follows:

- 63% were considered thriving
- 36% were considered struggling
- 1% were considered suffering

The headline for the news release states: *First-Ever Gallup Student Poll Shows That One-Third of America’s Young People Are Struggling Or Suffering*. The first line stresses this and also states that half are not hopeful. See the news release at

<http://www.americaspromise.org/About-the-Alliance/Press-Room/Press-Releases/2009-May-5-Gallup-Poll.aspx>

For a copy of the full report or more details about the upcoming polls,
visit <http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com>.

>*Youth Survey, Communities that Care* – This survey is described as “a reliable and valid instrument to measure the incidence and prevalence of substance use, delinquency and related problem behaviors, and risk and protective factors that predict those problems in your community.” The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has added Communities that Care (CTC) as a part of the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention toolkit.
<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/features/ctc/resources.aspx>

>*National Survey on Drug Use & Health* (formerly the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse) – This SAMHSA survey provides yearly national and state-level data on the use of alcohol, tobacco, illicit and non-medical prescription drugs in the United States. Other health-related questions also appear from year to year, including questions about mental health.
<http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nhsda.htm>

>*Monitoring the Future (MTF)* – Funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), a component of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and conducted by the University of Michigan. Since 1975, this survey has measured drug, alcohol, and cigarette use and related attitudes among adolescent students nationwide. Survey participants report their drug use behaviors across three time periods: lifetime, past year, and past month.
<http://www.drugabuse.gov/drugpages/MTF.HTML>

>The following are a few examples of state and county healthy youth surveys:

>>*California Healthy Kids Survey* – Students in grades 5-12 answer questions about youth health risks, assets, and behaviors. An example of recent findings is presented in the box below.
http://www.wested.org/cs/chks/print/docs/chks_overview.html

Example of Findings from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey

http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/pdf/yrbs07_us_overview.pdf

- >18.0% of students had carried a weapon (e.g., a gun, knife, or club) on at least 1 day during the 30 days before the survey.
- >7.8% of students had been threatened or injured with a weapon (e.g., a gun, knife, or club) on school property one or more times during the 12 months before the survey.
- >35.5% of students had been in a physical fight one or more times during the 12 months before the survey.
- >5.5% of students had not gone to school on at least 1 day during the 30 days before the survey because they felt they would be unsafe at school or on their way to or from school.
- >14.5% of students had seriously considered attempting suicide and 6.9% of students had attempted suicide one or more times during the 12 months before the survey.

Example of Findings from the California Healthy Kids Survey

http://www.wested.org/cs/chks/print/docs/chks_overview.html

Aggregated State Data for 2005-2006 & 2006-2007 Grades 7, 9, & 11

	Percentage of Students Scoring High, Moderate, and Low								
	Grade 7			Grade 9			Grade 11		
	H	M	L	H	M	L	H	M	L
External Assets*									
Caring Relationships	59	35	6	54	39	7	59	35	6
High Expectations	67	30	3	61	35	5	66	31	3
Meaningful Participation	33	51	16	26	51	23	27	52	21
*averaging responses for ratings of school, community, peer, & home environments									
School Connectedness	41	44	15	33	50	17	27	48	24
Internal Assets									
Cooperation and Communication	52	41	7	46	46	8	49	45	5
Self-efficacy	59	36	5	54	41	5	57	39	4
Empathy	55	37	8	54	37	8	60	35	6
Problem Solving	49	40	11	44	42	13	47	42	11
Self-awareness	63	31	6	58	36	7	59	34	6
Goals and Aspirations	81	16	3	79	17	4	81	16	3

>> *Washington State Healthy Youth Survey* – Students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12 answer questions about safety and violence, physical activity and diet, alcohol, tobacco and other drug use, and related risk and protective factors. <http://fortress.wa.gov/doh/hys/>

>> *Fairfax County Youth Survey* – An anonymous, and voluntary survey of risk and protective factors and various health behaviors that influence the health and well-being of the county's youth. Beginning in Fall 2009, the survey will be administered every year in the public schools in 6th, 8th, 10th, and 12th grades.

http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/demogrph/youthsurvey_pilot.htm

For more on surveys and other youth data gathering activity, see the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Youth Development*
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/youthdev.htm>

What Do Youth Say Without Adult Prompts

David Nyberg has labeled the “strong tendency for interpreting a child’s behavior in adult terms” as *adulthoodism*. And those calling for inter-generational equality have coined the term *adulthoodism* to label the tendency for adults to shape and make all the decisions that affect children and adolescents. The concerns underlying these terms highlight the need for empowering youth to provide an insiders viewpoint of youth experiences, needs, and wants.

In the 1960's, the anthropologist Robert Edgerton broke ground in the disabilities field by recognizing that the literature reflected only the views of professionals. He was the first to make a sociocultural attempt to understand and analyze the experiences of people with disabilities from their own perspective.

Since then, efforts to ask segments of the youth population about their lives have burgeoned. However, clearly society is still on the cusp of moving *beyond the ways adults frame matters* in learning about how youth perceive their world.

Efforts to enable youth to relate their views without being too constrained by adult frameworks are seen in the growth of youth councils, youth summits, and youth media groups, and publication of findings from youth focus groups, unstructured and open-ended interviews, and in the increasing attention being paid to youth participatory research and evaluation. The strongest movement for promoting uninhibited expression of organized youth voices and agenda are the growing efforts to establish youth-led organizations. Some of these are involved in youth participatory action research and are developing surveys that include young people’s views of what to ask. An example related to mental health concerns is seen in a recent youth-led needs-assessment by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth in Sacramento, California.*

Finally, the internet clearly has opened up channels for youth voices, and eventually, efforts will be made to capture and summarize a significant sample for sharing and interpretation.

See Exhibit 3 for one sampling of what youth say in the absence of adult prompts.

*Sánchez, J., Lomelí-Loibl, C., & Nelson, A. (2009). Sacramento’s LGBTQ Youth: Youth -Led Participatory Action Reserach for Mental Health Justice with Youth In Focus. *Focal Point*, 23, 6-8. <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu>

Concluding Comments

Many youth advocates are concerned about how data on youth are used and misused (often by ignoring positive findings and appropriate comparisons with adults). Promoting youth participation and hearing directly from youth are critical in efforts to counteract the tendency to view young people mainly as problems to be dealt with rather than as resources to be mobilized. Just like their parents, youth represent an amazing range of diversity and a source of human and social capital that every community and school needs to build upon. At the same time, we must be careful not to end up drowning ourselves in “needs” data on young people. And, policy makers must ask themselves: Are we spending more money on gathering and reporting data on the problems confronting youth than we are on solving those problems?

Why do they keep asking us the same needs-assessment questions over and over again?

Because it's cheaper than doing something to address our needs!



Exhibit 3

An Example of Youth Voices from the *What Kids Can Do* Website

What Kids Can Do (WKCD) is a national nonprofit founded in 2001. The aim is “to promote perceptions of young people as valued resources, not problems, and to advocate for learning that engages students as knowledge creators and not simply test takers.” Just as urgent, the organization wants “to bring youth voices to policy debates about school, society, and world affairs.”

“Using the Internet, print, and broadcast media, WKCD presses before the broadest audience possible a dual message: the power of what young people can accomplish when given the opportunities and supports they need and what they can contribute when we take their voices and ideas seriously. The youth who concern WKCD most are those marginalized by poverty, race, and language. WKCD presents young people's lives, learning, and work, and their partnerships with adults both in and out of school.”

Below, from the website, is a sampling of youth voices on a couple of school-related matters.
(<http://www.whatkidscando.org/featurestories/a.html?../archives/featurestories/stpfeature.html>)

On working things out . . .

“Students are the main source, and if you don't tap into it, then you're never going to know what to do. Every time something major is about to change about the way things are run in your school, like schedule or curriculum, you should run it by your students. And if it's something that would affect students in a bad way, and you can't do anything about it, then you should say that to them.” (Asiya)

“A student always wants to feel like they have accomplished something and they have done something positive. I think it's just how you approach the students, not making the student feel that they're always doing something wrong, but that they can do something right, and there's rewards out there for you to do something right.” (Rayna)

“Everybody wanted to listen to CD players with headphones, during break when we went from one class to another. The principal didn't really trust us to make that a law, but allowed it 'cause they were like, ‘We'll see what will happen.’ The students don't listen to it during class, they pause it but just leave it on their table, and the teachers don't mind 'cause they know it's turned off. And then during break they turn it on.” (Enka)

“Adolescents are known to be rebellious. And the only way to get over that is to be in an environment where the administration isn't just as stubborn as the students.” (Adit)

On keeping us safe . . .

“We're kids, and we're bound to mess up. Kids make mistakes, everybody's not perfect. We're not just doing it because we feel like it, you know what I'm saying? There has to be a deeper reason, a reaction, for every action. So don't just put us in a jail cell. We need-information at least.” (Kayla)

“There's nothing constructive about kicking kids out of school. Or suspending kids, when in fact, you could have some kind of more helpful program for the kids themselves. In the end, you don't just want the safety of everyone. You want the kids to become better people.” (Adit)

“We need a principal that enforces rules and teachers that aren't afraid to approach students and keep them in line. That may seem like it's cracking down on individual liberties, but the reality is, if you have kids who are getting jumped and no one really feels safe, you have to put safety ahead of a vibe.” (Luke)

“It's enough that we have security guards patrolling our school, but to have cameras watching everything we do-it's very demeaning. I mean, we talk to our friends, we have boyfriends.” (Eleonora)

“Our school is [near a subway stop that] most students have to walk through, not a really safe area, and a couple of students were jumped and beat up. We had an assembly about it, so the principal could let us know a whole bunch of precautions-other routes, other options, don't walk by yourself, things we could do to take care of ourselves. Also, they got more police in the area, and the teachers even went themselves to make sure students are okay.” (Apocalipsis)

What's New?



The list of *Center Resources and Publications* is at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/selection.html>. Below are a few new resources.

New from the Center

>State Education Agencies & Learning Supports: Enhancing School Improvement

As the focus on school improvement at a state education agency moves from mostly a compliance approach to playing a greater role in capacity building, the agency's leadership needs to rethink student and learning supports. The report is at – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/seals.pdf>

>First Steps at State Ed Agencies and School Districts in Developing a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports as an Essential Component for School Improvement & Student Success

This set of guidance notes is designed to accompany the above report. Online at – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/firststeps.pdf>

>Learning Supports and Small Schools

How are small schools providing student and learning supports and how can they do it better? Begins with a brief description of the current movement toward establishing small schools; then, outlines the problem small schools confront in trying to address barriers to learning and teaching. Concludes with recommendations for how small schools can enhance learning supports.

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/learningsupportssmallschools.pdf>

The Center for Mental Health in Schools operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project in the Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.

Center Staff:

Howard Adelman, Co-Director
Linda Taylor, Co-Director
Perry Nelson, Coordinator
. . . and a host of graduate and undergraduate students

Support comes in part from the Office of Adolescent Health, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Admin., U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services.

All great achievements require time.

Maya Angelou

When adults ask kids for their opinion, they often are amazed by what they learn.

Want resources?

Need technical assistance?

Use our website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Or contact us at E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu

Ph: (310) 825-3634 Toll Free Ph: (866) 846-4843

Write: Center for Mental Health in Schools, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

If you're not receiving our monthly electronic newsletter (ENEWS) or our weekly *Practitioners' Exchange*, send your E-mail address to smhp@ucla.edu

For the latest on Center resources and activities, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> – click on *What's New*

From Around the Country

Adolescent Health Services: Missing Opportunities

This policy-oriented report from the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine provides a review and offers recommendations for strengthening the health system for adolescents in the United States.

Can be read online at no cost
http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12063

Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities

A review, analysis, and recommendations – also from the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies.

Can be read online at no cost
http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12480#toc

For other reports and news items from across the country, go to *What's New* at

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/whatsnew/newsitems.htm>

Quick Finds

Our Center's youth involvement includes hiring undergraduates. When asked what topics we should focus on next in expanding our online clearinghouse, they suggested and then developed the four Quick Finds listed below. Take a look!

>Divorce and children – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/divorce.htm>

>Military families and student mental health – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/military.htm>

>Racism and schools – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/racism.htm>

>Transition to college – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/transitiontocollege.htm>