

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.”

These guidance notes explore 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.

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:



8. Young people and adults share decision making
7. Young people lead and initiate action
6. Adult initiated, shared decision with youth
5. Young people are consulted and informed
4. Young people are assigned and informed
3. Young people are tokenized
2. Young people are decoration
1. Young people are manipulated

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 Barnett and Brennan, 2006; Bloom, 2000; Matarese, McGinnis, and Mora, 2005; and Martin, Pittman, Ferber, and McMahon, 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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http://www.actforyouth.net/documents/youth_dev.pdf

>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