

Youth Participation and Community Change: An Introduction

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Youth participation is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes initiatives that emphasize educational reform, juvenile justice, environmental quality, and other issues; that involve populations distinguished by class, race, gender, and other characteristics; and that operate in rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and neighborhoods of large cities in developing areas and industrial nations worldwide.

As expressions of participation, young people are organizing groups for social and political action, planning programs of their own choosing, and advocating their interests in the community. They are raising consciousness, educating others on matters that concern them, and providing services of their own choosing. No single strategy characterizes all approaches to participation.

Activities like these can be conceptualized in various ways. For example, Roger Hart (1997) identifies activities and places them on the rungs of a vertical “ladder of participation” in accordance with the power they exercise; Danny HoSang (2003) analyzes youth organizing, youth development, and other models on a horizontal continuum; and

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David Driskell (2002) describes several “steps in the process” from gathering information to program evaluation.

These activities have potential to produce outcomes at multiple levels. Studies of several population groups show that participation can strengthen social development, build organizational capacity, and create changes in the environment. There has been relatively little systematic study of youth participation outcomes at multiple levels, but the research with other populations suggests that studies with youth will find positive effects on such measures as personal confidence, social connectedness, civic competencies, and leadership development. At present, however, the potential benefits of participation on youth have not been identified by systematic research.

Youth participation is about the real influence of young people in institutions and decisions, not about their passive presence as human subjects or service recipients. Although participation studies often assess activities in terms of their scope—such as their number, frequency, and duration—quality is their most significant measure. Just because a number of young people attend a number of meetings and speak a number of times, is no measure of their effect. Quality participation shows some effect on outcomes, including its effect on community change.

Youth participation includes efforts by young people to plan programs of their own choosing; by adults to involve young people in their agencies; and by youth and adults to work together in intergenerational partnerships. However, the issue is not whether the effort is youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational, but rather whether young people have actual effect.

Youth participation is consistent with the view of “youth as resources,” and contrasts with the image of “youth as problems” that permeates the popular media, social science, and professional practice when referring to young people.

For example, the media often portray young people, especially young people of color, as perpetrators of crime, drug takers, school dropouts, or other problems of society. With these images in mind, many adults think of young people as problems, and young people accept adult images of their deficiencies rather than viewing themselves as agents of change.

Social scientists reinforce this view with studies of poverty, racism, and other forces that cause poor housing, broken families, and worsening social conditions, and result in youth violence, drug abuse, and other social pathologies that require intervention.

Social workers and other professionals who adopt this view of young people seek to save, protect, and defend them from conditions that affect them. When the curricula at professional schools construct youth as victims of society, professionals are prepared roles in helping them and their families do something about their terrible personal and social conditions. When people focus on others' needs and deficiencies, it de-emphasizes their assets and strengths, weakens their ability to help themselves, and empowers the professionals who serve them.

However, another view that portrays young people as competent citizens with a right to participate and a responsibility to serve their communities provides a significant alternative. Proponents of this view want to build on the strengths of youth by enabling them to make a difference in ways that provide them with tangible benefits and develop healthier communities. Young people who view themselves as change agents, and adults who are their allies, are instrumental to this approach.

Social workers are strategically situated to promote youth participation, but many of them have been conditioned to "care" about young people rather than to "empower" them. Those social workers who emphasize the rights of young people to participate in society and their responsibilities to serve the community are not typical of the field.

There are explanations for why this might be the case. For example, Janet Finn (2001) argues that social workers are agents of an "adolescent pathology industry" which provides services to "troubled and troubling" young and perpetuates their roles as passive recipients rather than active participants. Whatever the explanation, social workers still have substantial contact with young people which offers opportunities for them to promote active participation rather than provide reactive services.

Youth participation can be expected to increase in the future. Several private foundations have increased their funding for community organizations and civic agencies; national associations have expanded their support for local initiatives; and intermediary organizations have broadened their training and technical assistance. Recent conferences and publications have increased awareness among popular and professional audiences, and there is talk of a "youth participation movement" in the making.

More knowledge of youth participation as a subject of study will contribute to its quality as a field of practice. We surmise that participation has several strategies, that their activities have effects at multiple levels, and that their outcomes are influenced by forces that facilitate or limit

them. However, we know that there is too little systematic research, and that more knowledge of participation will strengthen their practice.

This volume provides new perspectives on youth participation in organizations and communities. It considers the changing context of youth participation, models and methods of participatory practice, roles of youth and adults, and the future of youth and community in a diverse democracy. It includes approaches which promote participatory community-based research and evaluation, and involve youth groups in economically dis-invested and racially segregated areas.

The articles in this collection are diverse, including conceptual and theoretical discussions, empirically-based case studies and best practices, and interdisciplinary work that draws upon psychology, sociology, social work, public health, education, and related academic disciplines and professional fields. The authors include youth and adult practitioners, researchers, and educators whose experience and expertise are not always represented in publications like this.

The first articles provide conceptual frameworks for understanding young people and their participation. In contrast to “youth as problems,” Silvia Blitzer Golombeck defines “youth as citizens,” a concept consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Rather than emphasizing the age of young people as a defining characteristic of citizenship, she emphasizes their involvement in civic activities. She offers examples from a Norwegian city whose strategic plan identifies young people as “fellow citizens” and from an American city whose youth participate in the urban planning process, as a way to substantiate her definition.

Louise B. Jennings, Deborah M. Parra-Medina, DeAnne K. Hilfinger Messias, and Kerry McLoughlin formulate a critical social theory of youth empowerment as a way to understand youth participation. They draw upon a number of existing empowerment models—including adolescent empowerment, youth development, transactional partnering, and the empowerment education model formulated by Paulo Friere—as a basis for framing their own notion of participation whose dimensions include assessing its effects at the individual and community levels.

What are some ways to prepare young people for active participation in a diverse democracy? Esmenia M. Luluquisen, and Alma M. O. Trinidad, and Dipankar Ghosh describe Hawaii’s *Sariling Gawa* youth council as an approach to youth leadership which is consistent with empowerment principles and which promotes positive ethnic social identity, and builds organizational and community capacity, of Filipino youth. Through this program, young people set priorities, formulate

plans, and organize action groups. They attend cultural events, conduct community conferences, and complete service projects. In the face of discrimination, they position themselves for social change.

Melanie D. Otis describes the Lexington Youth Leadership Academy as an effort to prepare participants for leadership roles. Young people develop knowledge for problem solving, program planning, peer mentoring, and community collaboration through a program which includes dialogues on diversity and a community change agent project. Program evaluators assess its effects on their self-concept, social action orientation, and other measures.

Cindy Carlson describes an exemplary effort in Hampton, Virginia to engage young people in public policy at the municipal level. Starting with a city council decision to create a coalition and make the city a better place for youth, they have developed a multi-tiered system of participation opportunities, including a youth commission which involves young people in public policy and leadership development. As part of the process, they address attitudes and create cultural changes among adults that fail to recognize young people as resources. She shows that the municipality has real potential for youth participation, and identifies “adults as allies” in addition to youth leaders as key participants.

Participatory research and evaluation are ways to involve young people in community change. In contrast to the usual pattern in which knowledge development is viewed as a process in which technical experts conduct research and ordinary people play passive roles, participatory research is an approach in which people collaborate in defining problems, gathering information, analyzing findings, and using the knowledge. Although this approach is increasing among adult groups distinguished by class, race, gender, and other characteristics, young people are not normally at the table.

Our authors have a different take. For example, Kysa Nygreen, Soo Ah Kwon, and Patricia Sánchez assume that young people can and should participate in the research process, and report on efforts to involve three different groups of urban youth who are normally marginalized, namely a multi-ethnic school-based group of students transforming curriculum in an alternative high school, a Latina group conducting research on transnational experiences, and pan-ethnic Asian and Pacific Island groups focused on youth organizing and social justice. They conclude that these youth are a vital resource for community transformation.

Ahna Ballonoff Suleiman, Samira Soleimanpour, and Jonathan London examine efforts by young people to participate in research projects in seven school-based health centers. The notion that the schools are a

vehicle for using research as a form of education for democracy is not new, but the promise of this approach is generally not realized. The authors describe specific strategies and reflect on the lessons learned from these initiatives.

Caroline C. Wang describes photovoice as a particular participatory action research tool for involving young people in communities. She describes an approach in which youth employ cameras to record their community's strengths and concerns, promote critical dialogue about community issues through group discussion of photographs, and communicate their concerns to policy makers. She draws upon data from ten projects in which youth used photovoice to advocate community health and well-being.

Youth participation in research and evaluation is an international movement, which is also represented by our authors. For example, Reima Ana Maglajlić, Jennifer Tiffany, and their colleagues describe participatory research in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an area affected by political violence in recent years. With support from a global UNICEF initiative, adults launched a project in which young people in three towns assessed conditions related to HIV/AIDS, drug use, and human rights. Young researchers gathered information and produced recommendations.

Louise Chawla and David Driskell describe the Growing Up in Cities Project supported by UNESCO, an initiative inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to promote participation in communities. They describe a case study in Bangalore, India in which young people played active roles. They conclude that young people are able and willing to participate in this way, that the most effective approach is when youth and adults work together, and that adult decision makers do not always have accurate information about such possibilities.

Who has responsibility for facilitation of youth participation? Although participation initiatives might be youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational in their origins, we recognize that none of the ones described here is truly youth-led. However, we reiterate that the quality of participation is not contingent on this approach, and that it is as likely that quality youth participation might be adult-led or intergenerational as it is that youth leadership might not be participatory.

Some authors address the roles of young people as peer facilitators. Nance Wilson, Meredith Minkler, Stefan Dasho, Roxanne Carrillo, Nina Wallerstein, and Diego Garcia describe the training of high school and graduate students as peer facilitators of a university-community partnership which involves elementary school students in research

which promotes problem-solving, social action, and civic participation among underserved elementary school youth. Their work represents a youth-to-youth model in which some young people learn best from others who are slightly older and have more experience than they.

Julie A. Scheve, Daniel F. Perkins, and Claudia Mincemoyer describe collaborative teams in which youth and adults work together in intergenerational partnerships. Because young people are often isolated from adults, this approach enables them to connect with adult allies, gain adult support, and collaborate in activities which have potential for community change.

Youth development or youth organizing? Although social workers often conceptualize youth participation as a form of youth development and distinguish this from traditional provision of services to at-risk youth, young people also play roles as organizers and planners of initiatives which increase their involvement and build healthier communities.

None of the articles here is about youth organizing as an approach in which young people take initiative and organize groups on their own. Michelle Alberti Gambone, Hanh Cao Yu, Heather Lewis-Charp, Cynthia L. Sipe, and Johanna Lacoé examine the differences among these and other efforts. They examine different types of agencies and find that there are significant differences in outcomes among youth organizing, identity-support, and traditional youth development organizations in terms of outcomes like civic activism and identity development. Youth organizing agencies show higher levels of youth leadership, decision making, and community involvement. There is no a priori reason why youth development efforts cannot serve as a vehicle for activism, but their research suggests that this is not now the case.

Overall, we are heartened that social workers, public health workers, and others are increasing the involvement of young people in the community, reflecting upon their experience, and writing about the lessons learned from empirically-based practice. We believe that strengthening youth participation as a subject study will contribute to the scope and quality of its practice, and hope that these articles will contribute to the process.

Social workers and other professionals are ideally positioned for strengthening youth participation for community change. If only a fraction of them were to take leadership for fostering this work in their respective fields, the results would be significant.

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