Preparing for Youth Engagement: Youth Voice, Youth-Adult Partnership, Youth Organizing

by Shepherd Zeldin, Jill Gurtner, and Brie Chapa

Professionals from diverse fields – youth work, adolescent health, education – are engaging youth in key decision making in organizations, schools, and communities. There are many forms of youth engagement, including in governance, media, and community service. Public attention has recently focused on youth organizing. It is inspiring, for example, to watch young people and their adult partners address the critical issues of gun violence, voter registration, and school safety.

Preparing organizations for youth engagement quickly runs up against a daunting challenge: high quality engagement looks very different in different settings. There is no best model for all situations. Because of this ambiguity, even the most experienced professionals often wonder if they are doing it correctly.

Fortunately, there are research-based guidelines to help us. Scholars and field professionals have identified effective practices that cross-cut different types of engagement. In this article, we first focus on youth voice and youth-adult partnership (Y-AP). These practices are central to the design and quality implementation of all forms of youth engagement (Christens & Zeldin, 2016). We then turn our attention to youth organizing, a specific type of Y-AP.

Youth Voice

Youth voice is fundamental to youth engagement. Youth voice is the means through which young people become actors in their own learning, participate in the decisions that affect them, and become active citizens.

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Most organizations and schools do not seek to maximize youth voice, unfortunately. The imperative is to change this status quo.

A necessary first step for organizations is to reflect upon and answer the following questions: Is youth voice embedded in the most important things that we do? Why and where do we most need youth voice within our organization? Do we provide young people, on a daily basis, with opportunities to express their views? Do we legitimately give weight and respond to youth opinions? When youth do engage, do we exaggerate their contribution and patronize them or do we show respect by pushing them to step out from their comfort zone?

It is critical for staff and youth to explore these core questions in a deep way. Once consensus is reached, programming or instruction can be changed accordingly. These questions are simple to ask, yet hard to answer. Your organization must be prepared, therefore, to make time for the ongoing reflection and problem solving that is necessary to answer these questions and consider the implications. Those organizations that consistently allocate time are far more likely to successfully maximize youth voice in a sustainable way.

Youth-Adult Partnership

The term "Youth-Adult Partnership" refers to a group of youth and adults who are working together for a common purpose. Y-AP reflects the core belief that if we seek to transform oppressive and limiting structures into affirmative and developmental practices, we must heed the voices of those most impacted by such structures (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Zeldin et al., 2013). In the Y-AP model, youth and adults jointly identify the issue, design possible solutions, and implement these solutions. Within community organizations, Y-AP typically focuses on governance and program planning. Youth and adults also work together on delivering workshops, conducting research, and fundraising. Within schools, Y-AP often focuses on issues such as curriculum redesign, classroom practices, discipline policies, and school-community collaborations.

Youth voice reaches its potential only when there are adults who are willing and able to be real partners with youth. This reality is illustrated by findings from a

Figure 1: Youth Voice and Supportive Adult Relationships are Critical to Civic Development
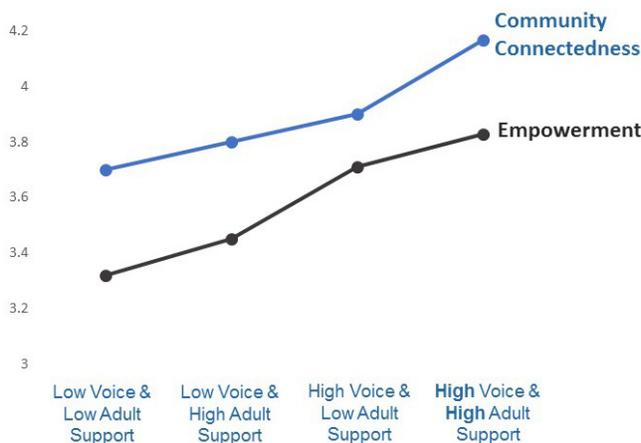
recent study conducted in Malaysia, Portugal, and the United States (figure 1). The study measured young people's belief in their ability to effect change ("empowerment") and their sense of connection to their communities ("community connectedness") within the context of community-based youth programs. Those youth who strongly believed that they had a powerful voice in making program decisions ("high voice") were very likely

to also feel personally empowered and emotionally connected to their communities. But those youth who experienced high voice and who also experienced adults as their partners ("high supportive adult relationships") were even more likely to feel empowered and connected (Zeldin et al., 2017).

The same results were found in a study of high school youth in the United States (figure 2). Those students who experienced high voice were most likely to be cognitively engaged in their school work. However, when students also perceived that their teachers had created a sense of safety and supportive relationships, they also experienced a high level of emotional connection and mattering, which in turn contributed to even more engagement in their schoolwork (Zeldin et al., 2018).

Adults have a hard time being partners. Sometimes we take over and dominate. Sometimes we abdicate our own ideas and expertise in the mistaken belief that this is how youth voice rises. On the contrary, being prepared for Y-AP means being willing to work in a reciprocal manner with youth and to have high expectations for performance. Y-AP

Figure 2: Youth Voice and Supportive Adult Relationships are Critical to Cognitive Engagement in High Schools
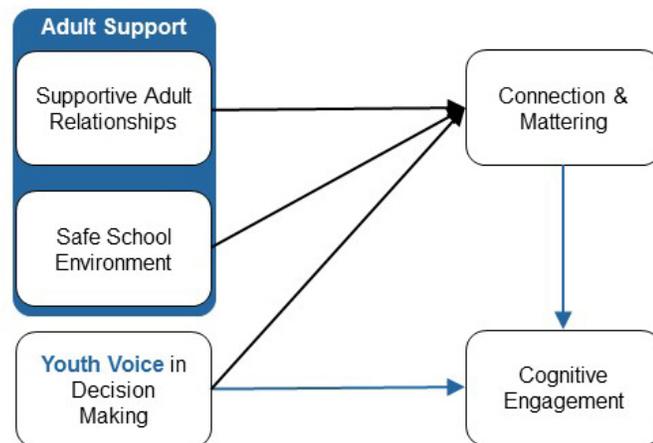
works when adults teach young people things, be it new skills or viewpoints, they did not know before. At the same time, adults learn things from youth that they did not know before. If this is happening in an authentic way, your Y-AP will be successful.

This does not mean that youth and adults have equal power. The aim is to allocate real power and influential roles among diverse people, including those of different age. Ultimately, the guiding principle is that all Y-AP members, younger and older, have the opportunity to participate in a way consistent with their own choices, skills, and time availability. The aim is to ensure that everybody's strengths are fully utilized, not hidden. When this happens, power hierarchies become flattened. Healthy organizations and schools require the engagement of everybody.

Y-AP means that adults will have to be prepared to be challenged by youth. As youth find their voice, they will demand to be heard. There will be frequent negotiations over the project direction, goals, and time-scale. And, of course, youth will also need to be prepared to be challenged by adults. Creating organizational structures and norms for group decision making and conflict resolution are therefore fundamental to preparation.

Being prepared for Y-AP also means investing time to garner the active support of influential adults (e.g., agency directors, school superintendents, community leaders). These persons may be highly skeptical or unaware of the benefits of youth

voice and partnership (see sidebar). Being prepared to detail the outcomes of Y-AP will be essential to getting these persons on board with your initiative.

Youth Organizing

Youth organizing is a specific type of Y-AP. It is similar to community organizing, the primary difference being that youth take on key leadership roles alongside their adult partners. But the aim is the same: to build networks of local residents and institutions that serve as a catalyst for changing oppressive structures and practices within community and educational systems.

Youth organizing has traditionally been situated in high schools. The focus of activism has been as clear cut as improving cafeteria meals or as complicated as curriculum reform. When organizing happens within the school, teachers serve as advisors. Other experts are often brought in to assist. More recently, youth organizing has also been initiated by community organizations as part of their social justice mission. The majority of these initiatives are still centered on education issues. Youth and their adult partners have also found common purpose in issues of the environment, adolescent health, public safety, and criminal justice.

Organizations embarking on youth organizing must be prepared to establish relationships with public and private entities outside their own walls. The key tasks of organizing – issue identification, coalition building, public awareness, collective action – are complicated and require capacities that typically exceed what a single organization or age group can offer. Consequently, most youth organizing is funded by private grants and donations. When partnership is achieved, youth organizing is powerful, as Blinder and colleagues (2018) have illustrated in their analysis of local March for Our Lives rallies. They write that the demonstrations "represented twin triumphs: of organic, youthful grassroots energy, and of sophisticated, experienced organizational muscle. . . . Although the events . . . were inspired and often led by students, many protests simultaneously benefited from groups with more financial resources and organizational skills than the teenagers had on their own."

Action research and other types of "intelligence gathering" have become a central component of youth organizing (Christens & Dolan, 2011). Organizations must be prepared to help youth collaborate with teachers or professional researchers in the formulation of research questions, data collection, analysis, and presentations.

Organizing is always controversial. Therefore, youth and adult partners as well as their sponsoring organizations have to be prepared for push-back. Subsequent to the March for Our Lives rallies, for example, many youth organizers have been bullied and isolated from peers, especially in rural areas supportive of gun rights (Healy, 2018). The implications are straightforward. Adult partners and youth organizers have to be fully prepared to deal with backlash, especially after public events or dissemination efforts.

A Y-AP Checklist

Preparation for quality Y-AP is at the heart of any youth engagement effort. It is necessary to establish a clear set of goals that define quality Y-AP in your organization. Being prepared means establishing and using processes for monitoring your progress toward these goals. One way to do this is to consider the cross-cutting best practices of Y-AP that have been identified by research (see checklist). Working consistently toward these criteria will result in quality. Success will come most quickly if you identify and monitor the best practices that are most meaningful to your organization, the adults, and the youth.

Your Checklist for Quality Youth-Adult Partnership

How will your organization or school monitor the quality of your Y-AP? This checklist will help. Make time on a regular basis to discuss this checklist to identify the strengths and limitations in your partnership. You will be amazed at the successes your group will experience.

Relational Environment

- All participants—younger and older—feel as though they matter.

- There is freedom to explore, to stumble and fall, and to learn by doing. But expectations are always high.

- The group explicitly strives to build a culture of respect and equality.

Opportunity Role Structures

- Power hierarchies in decision making are flattened to the greatest extent possible.

- There are clear roles, large or small, for all participants.

- Responsibilities are assigned based on participants' own choices, skills, and access to power and social connections.

Core Participant Experiences

- Adults are readily available to coach youth.

- Youth have the chance to teach adults and their peers.

- There is ample time for group reflection, decision making, and celebration of success.

Values and Principles

- Adults listen and respond to youth voice, and vice versa.

- Everybody is encouraged to participate, at a level consistent with their interest and time availability.

- All members understand how their own participation is contributing to the common purpose of the Y-AP.

Conclusion

Preparing for youth engagement requires central attention to youth voice and adult partnership. Less is more. To prepare for youth engagement, it is best to direct change efforts toward a limited number of organizational functions or programs. Trying to do it all at one time rarely works. Continuous improvement – plan, do, reflect, and repeat – will be the best preparation strategy. By carefully selecting your most important goals, using the checklist as a guide, you can embark on a process toward full youth engagement. The positive benefits of voice and partnership are maximized over time. ★

Practical Resources

Promoting children's participation in democratic decision making
https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/insight6.pdf
Published by the United Nations Children's Fund, this guide is an essential resource, perhaps the best one out there.

Being Y-AP Savvy: A primer on creating and sustaining youth-adult partnerships
http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_y-ap-savvy.pdf
This action-oriented manual is highly relevant for organizations that want to begin or to strengthen partnership efforts.

Youth-Adult Partnerships in Evaluation
http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_yap-eval-guide.pdf
This resource guide offers tip sheets on all aspects of participatory evaluation conducted with youth.

Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence (YALPE)
http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_yalpe-workbook.pdf
In this kit you'll find resources and tools for conducting, analyzing, and reporting on program assessment and action planning.

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