
Nourishing Growth: An Overview of Youth Engagement

Prepared for the City of
Prince George

An initiative of the Department
of Social Development and
youth of the 2010 Fraser Basin
Council Youth Mentorship and
Leadership Program

DRAFT



Table of Contents:

Foreword	P. 3
Executive Summary	P. 3
Defining Youth & Youth Engagement	P. 4
Building Organizational Capacity	P. 5
Access and Enabling Participation	P. 6
Models of Youth Engagement	P. 7-8
Snapshots of Youth Engagement Activities	P. 9
Conclusion	P. 10

DRAFT



Foreword:

This document originated over a cup of tea and an informal discussion on effective youth engagement strategies with Chris Bone, Manager of Social Development with the City of Prince George. The purpose of this document is to synthesize current conceptualizations of youth engagement, and mainly, to attempt to provide organizations with a brief introduction to effective youth engagement strategies.

Youth engagement is a dynamic and emerging field. Readers should be aware that the knowledge surrounding youth engagement and youth participation, volunteerism, and empowerment is vast and not fully captured in this document.

Lastly, the creation of this document was made possible through the 2010 Fraser Basin Council Youth Leadership and Mentoring Program, which provided the initial connection between the youth participant Simran Lehal and the City.

Executive Summary:

Discussion and prioritization of effective youth engagement strategies is long overdue in community civic and organizational spheres. Youth contribute to a significant part of population structures and volunteerism activities, but lack much of the input and decision-making influence held by other groups (CEYE 2003, HRM 2004). Both youth and organizations benefit from youth participation and engagement – effectively engaged youth report higher levels of self worth and lower incidences of risk behaviour, while communities and organizations report increased revitalization and novel approaches to community work (Milburn 2000, HRM 2004).

Authentic youth voice is a fundamental right of youth and a needed component of organizations, particularly of those whose work has an impact upon youth (UN 1989). It is by engaging and listening to a diversity of youth that inclusive participation and social change can occur to promote healthy community development.

This document introduces a definition of youth and youth engagement, followed by suggestions

“We must stop simply talking about ‘making decisions for our children’ and instead ACT on creating a better world for them and with them.” – Canadian Rio Earth Youth Summit Team, 2001.

concerning organizational requirements and issues surrounding youth participation. Models of youth inclusion are discussed, and finally, several organizations with effective youth engagement strategies are presented in the hopes to encourage further inquiry by the reader.

Defining Youth & Youth Engagement:

Who are youth? The definition of youth can vary greatly among organizations. Federally, the term youth refers to people between the ages of 15 to 30 (CEYE 2004).

Youth engagement is the meaningful involvement of young people in activities outside of the self, including involvement in organizations, systems, and the community as a whole (CEYE 2003; HRM 2004). Youth engagement can take place in policy making and planning, artistic or musical endeavours, conservation and habitat restoration, or any other arena imaginable. Youth engagement can and does have significant positive impact on both youth and the communities in which they live (Milburn 2000, CEYE 2003, HRM 2004, Hall et al. 2006).

Research consistently shows that youth who are involved in meaningful activities within their communities have higher self-esteem, better education and career opportunities, and healthier and more resilient relationships to family, friends, and community (Milburn 2000, CEYE 2003, HRM 2004, Hall et al. 2006, Shen 2006, Sharroid et al. 2010). Through effective engagement, involved youth have better leadership and life skills and are less likely to engage in risky behaviours.

Communities benefit through the fresh insights provided by youth, the energy and creativity in which youth pose and tackle tough questions, the unparalleled ability of youth to serve in hands-on project work, and the commitment of youth to social justice and community inclusiveness (Milburn 2000, CEYE 2003, HRM 2004).

Not all youth are alike - youth can be engaged in different ways and to different extents. However, all engaged youth share in common an interest and passion about the activities or organizations to which they care about (CEYE 2003, Shen 2006).

It's no wonder - the potential for youth to contribute to their communities can be enormous. Nationally, youth contribute the highest volunteer rates compared to all other age groups, with over 50% of youth volunteering (Hall et al. 2006). Effective youth engagement strategies which tap this considerable potential of youth can have a deep impact upon the whole community.

"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline." – Kofi Annan

Building Organizational Capacity:

There is an increasing shift and expectation in governments and youth-serving organizations of youth participation and engagement strategies, rather than “adult” delivery of services and programs (Milburn 2000). Often, youth participation and engagement is more meaningful and impactful than adult delivery alone (Hart 1992, CEYE 2000).

Effective youth engagement programs require a real and authentic transfer of responsibilities and decision-making from adult organizational structures to youth. Youth have an intrinsic civic right to meaningfully participate, be heard, and influence the communities in which they live - this participation should avoid being tokenistic (UN 1989, Hart 1992). Hence, an organizational *culture* which facilitates youth inclusion and a commitment to youth programming must be in place for youth engagement strategies to be effective.

Traditional “adult” protocols in meetings and workshops may not be effective in engaging youth participants (HFRP 2004, HRM 2004). Organizations should strive to recognize and acknowledge youth contributions. Organizations should also recognize the opportunities for wider youth roles than have been made traditionally available or where youth are underrepresented (Rhodes 2004).

Adult mentors and advocates may be used to facilitate the structures of youth expression and may act as a liaison in bridging and engaging a dialogue between adult and youth projects, ideas, and energy (HRM 2004, Rhodes 2004). Overall, feedback and partnership between adult and youth activities is encouraged in youth engagement strategies.

To a certain extent, involving youth in organizational projects can be a catalyst for organizational change itself (Cameron, 2010). When organizations start examining their purpose and mandate in the view of creating greater opportunity for youth engagement, there also often occurs a revitalization of the organization as a whole with the end result often being better services and approaches for the whole community (HRM 2004, Cameron 2010).

Access and Enabling Participation:

Historically, different social groups possess unequal access to power and decision-making (Shen 2006). To ensure that everyone – across age, socio-economic status, cultures, sexual orientation, etc. – has access to information on and opportunities to influence policy and other relevant community or organizational processes, inclusive structures and policies should be implemented, maintained, and reviewed.

Youth face many challenges and changes such that many youth struggle to find a space to participate and be heard in their communities (Sherroid 2010). Belonging to a marginalized group or to communities that do not genuinely place value on youth voices exacerbate the obstacles preventing youth engagement.

A significant barrier to youth engagement is that youth might not feel that their input or voices are legitimate or credible (CEYE 2003, HRM 2004). Other barriers may include a lack of information, skills, or resources; lack of clarity about rights and responsibilities, and a general lack of access to decision-making processes and structures (Bridgman 2004, CEYE 2003). Other factors, such as employment and parental or peer-group pressure may prevent some youth from engaging in participation and activism (Shen 2006).

To successfully enable access and participation of youth in the community and organizational sphere, it is important to present issues creatively and in such a way as to make them relevant to young people's lives – that is, it is important to identify and access the channels through which youth communicate (CEYE 2003). For youth who show resistance to traditional school-like authority, for instance, traditional workshops and trainings may not be effective. Hence, effective communication and dialogue through advocacy and youth-friendly policies are essential to coordinating youth involvement. If organizational capacity allows, incentives may be effective in recruiting and retaining youth, particularly for youth facing unemployment or economic hardship where volunteering may be unaffordable (Shen, 2006).

Overall, it is essential to ensure that youth and under-represented youth are involved in organizational and community development in order to facilitate better information and wider involvement of citizens and the community as a whole. In this way, youth will be enabled to push for the space that is needed to be heard.

Models of Youth Engagement:

Youth engagement can take many forms, including individual volunteerism, to voting in elections, to working with individuals in informal groups, or by participating in more formal organizational structures (CEYE 2003, Checkoway 2006). Several models of the latter are presented below: ¹

- **Youth on Boards:** Having youth on boards is a good strategy for organizations introducing youth engagement planning, and allows youth to experience how decisions are made. However, this strategy has major pitfall: how should youth be included on boards without becoming a token “representative of all youth? “ And, how do organizations ensure that the input of youth on boards has definite meaning? Some best practices to follow include: having a proportional number of youth at the table and ensuring youth have full voting rights, well-defined roles and responsibilities, and opportunities to see their results in action. A mere increase in number without understanding and addressing relevant issues is hardly productive.
- **Youth Advisory Councils:** A Youth Advisory Council (YAC) is a team of youth representatives from the community who provide input and advocate youth needs to a governing body. The YAC and the main governing body are considered to be in a partnership. Best practices to follow include ensuring diverse youth representation, genuine power transfer, and consistent and supportive mentors. YAC inputs should be impactful – that is, tokenistic YACs designed to make the governing organization “look good” should be avoided.
- **Youth Action Teams:** Youth Action Teams (YATs) are more informal bodies which may or may not be adjunct to a more formal YAC. YATs often address specific youth concerns and focus on a particular, tangible item. YATs are beneficial in that they can mobilize a greater diversity of youth and can often allow youth to see the results of their efforts.
- **Youth-Led Organizations:** Youth-Led Organizations occur where youth design, implement, and assess their own projects by making their own decisions. Adults and governing bodies do not necessarily need to be excluded, but instead can take the role of advisors to the youth who are the decision makers.

Other factors to consider:

- **Ongoing dialogue:** Consultation with youth regarding their ideas, content, and projects is necessary for effective partnerships between youth and governing structures. This process should occur regularly formally or informally, and can help to speed up communications or provide novel insights. Ongoing dialogue also helps to facilitate more sustained movements.

- **Sustainability:** Youth is a great time of development, growth, and change at a much quicker rate than adults. Youth will move on to other projects, graduate, find work, or move from the community, threatening the longevity of their projects and activities. This is normal and is to be expected. Adult mentors and advisors can provide a source of “institutional memory” for future groups. However, it is important for organizations to be aware that it is expected that future “cohorts” of youth may take different approaches than youth currently serving.

- **Consultative approaches:** This approach involves consulting with youth on a pre-determined, specific topic such as homelessness or food security, and allowing youth to voice their experiences and opinions. Consultative approaches generally aim to gather information and can make use of such avenues as interviews, focus groups, surveys, or workshops. Effective approaches should ensure that youth are informed about why their participation matters, how the information will be used, and the resulting actions taken from the analysis. Ideally, youth should be involved in the actions and follow-up of the consultation.

- **Shared networks:** The coming together of multiple organizations around the single issue of youth engagement may be a tool that can be used to address common concerns and perhaps to build a shared network of youth engagement activities. Lack of communication and potential resource concerns may be pitfalls to avoid here.

"There's a radical – and wonderful – new idea here that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. It's an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously."

– Deborah Meier

- **Thinking outside of the box:** For example, some communities are changing their ideas of public space to promote greater connectivity and interaction between people, and in facilitating youth engagement. Perhaps the creation of a green space or repairing of an outdoor venue for theatrical performances in the summer can transform the ways in which youth and adults interact with space and with each other.

¹ adapted from Bridgman 2004, Camino 2000, Hart 1992, and HRM 2004

Snapshots of Successful Youth Engagement Activities:

Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA) – The EYA builds youth capacity in the community through environmental and community well-being initiatives and research projects. For two decades, EYA has facilitated youth leadership and driven youth-led programming in coastal British Columbia. www.eya.ca

LetsStopAIDS – LetsStopAIDS was founded in 2004 by a small group of high school students and now is a registered Canadian charitable organization that develops and promotes youth led community programming related to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. www.letsstopaids.org

McCreary Centre Society (MCS) – The MCS focuses on addressing the health concerns of British Columbian youth via community-based research and health promotion activities. A Youth Advisory Council (YAC) initiates youth driven projects and has provided a youth voice to MCS programming for over 15 years. www.mcs.bc.ca

HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development – Based in Nova Scotia, Heartwood is considered a model centre for youth engagement policy and practices. HeartWood serves to link youth with their communities, supporting meaningful connection in ways that promote youth action and leadership. www.heartwood.ns.ca

Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYE) – The RMYC, based out of Thunder Bay, Ontario, links youth across rural communities in North-western Ontario with a mandate of creating inclusiveness and cross-cultural interaction. RMYE works to improve regional social conditions through a variety of programs, and provides a strong voice for Aboriginal and immigrant youth. <http://my.tbaytel.net/manwoyc>

Santropol Roulant – Founded and run by young people in Montreal, Santropol Roulant uses food to bridge community barriers by engaging youth in a meal delivery program. Now upheld as a model throughout Canada, Santropol Roulant is important in engaging and mobilizing citizens for action and has become an important and renowned community and cultural space. www.santropolroulant.org

Street Spirits Theatre Company – Based out of Prince George, BC, Street Spirits is a youth-driven theatre company promoting awareness and solutions to issues surrounding social action and justice. Street Spirits has performed and provided workshops around topics such as substance abuse, racism, poverty, and homophobia to audiences across North America. www.streetspirits.com

The Cultch Youth Panel (CYP) – The CYP provides input to The Cultch - a theatre, dance, and music organization in Vancouver, BC – and is responsible for organizing an annual youth arts festival which pairs Vancouver youth with artists across the Lower Mainland for a unique mentorship experience. www.thecultch.com

TakingITGlobal – Manages education programs and an online social network community promoting connectivity and global youth engagement. www.tigweb.org

Conclusion:

There is an old proverb which says it takes a village to raise a child. But how many children does it take to “raise the village?”

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that youth have a fundamental right to participate in the decisions that affect them – to seek access and equal opportunity, to participate, to seek social justice, and to make their views count (UN 1989). In our communities, this starts with creating an environment of inclusion and support for our youth. This starts with the development of principles and core values of youth engagement, followed by the creation of organizational frameworks developed in partnership with youth to put these values into action.

Thus, the call to the village is to genuinely support youth initiatives, to listen and learn about the avenues in which youth communicate, and to provide a safe, inclusive environment enabling full participation of youth. Investing in our youth in this way is an investment for the entire community, now and for the future.

DRAFT

“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

—Eleanor Roosevelt

References:

- Bridgman, R. (2004). Child-friendly cities: Canadian perspectives. *Children, Youth, and Environments*, 14, 178-200. Retrieved December 30, 2010 from www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/
- Cameron, S.D. (2010). A million futures. Canada: D&M Publishers.
- Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: New territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4, 11-20.
- Canadian Rio Earth Youth Summit Team. (2001). Youth engagement in decision making. Available online: www.unac.org
- (CEYE) Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. (2003). Youth engagement and health outcomes: Is there a link? Retrieved December 27, 2010 from: www.engagementcentre.ca
- Checkoway, B., and Gutie'rrez, L. (2006). Youth participation and community change. Haworth Press.
- Hall, M., Lasby, D., Gumulka, G., and Tryon, C. (2006). Caring Canadians, Involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2004 Canada survey of giving, volunteering, and participating. Ottawa: Minister of Industry.
- (HRM) Halifax Regional Municipality. (2004). Halifax Regional Municipality youth engagement tool kit. Retrieved December 29, 2010 from <http://www.halifax.ca/rec/YouthEngagementToolKit.html>
- Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship. Italy: UNICEF International Child Development Centre.
- (HFRP) Harvard Family Research Project. (2004). Moving beyond the barriers: Attracting and sustaining youth participation in out-of-school time programs. Retrieved December 29, 2010 from <http://www.hfrp.org>
- Milburn, T. (2000). Connecting with young people and youth issues. *Youth & Policy*, 68, 47-57.
- Rhodes, J.E. and Clary, E.G. (2004) Mobilizing adults for positive youth development: Strategies for closing gap between beliefs and behaviours. Springer.
- Shen, V. (2006). InvolveYouth 2: A guide to meaningful youth engagement. Toronto: City of Toronto. Retrieved December 27, 2010 from www.toronto.ca/involveyouth/youth2.htm
- Sherroid, L.R., Torney-Purta, J, and Flanagan, C. A. (2010). Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- (UN) United Nations. (1989) Convention on the rights of the child. Retrieved December 27, 2010 from <http://www.cirp.org/library/ethics/UN-convention/>