

An exploration of Youth Engagement: Inspiring Tomorrow's Leaders

PARC Symposium

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Contents

- I. What is youth engagement?
- II. Models of youth engagement
- III. Challenges and best practices
- IV. Ideas for moving forward

I. What is Youth Engagement?

- The term “youth engagement” is used in two related contexts.
- “Youth engagement” refers to the need to involve youth in **decision-making** about their own programs and activities.
- In addition to building confidence and leadership skills, involving youth in governance and decision-making ensured that programs would be relevant and could reach out to youth.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

- In addition to involving youth in decision-making, youth engagement programs foster **active citizenship**. (Other words used include “civics” or “civic engagement”).
- Youth engagement programs develop **social awareness** and instill a sense of **social responsibility**, especially in relation to the issues and challenges that affect the youth, their peers and their community.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

- YE programs and activities provide **skills** for civic engagement. Skills can include learning how to hold a press conference, run a community newspaper, manage an organization, host a community forum, or develop an after-school program.
- Youth engagement programs, especially those within an **anti-oppression framework**, have been found to be especially effective with older, marginalized youth of colour. These are youth who have not been reached or have not responded to traditional youth-serving agencies

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Characteristics of youth engagement

A. Skill development and capacity building.

Like conventional youth development programs, activities have an educational component – they aim to develop academic, intellectual, civic, emotional, physical, employment, social and cultural competence.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Characteristics of youth engagement

B. Leadership / Decision-making.

“Leadership” in the youth engagement context means providing youth with decision-making power. This can mean the power to determine the direction and content of their own programs or, more broadly, engaging youth to become active in the issues that impact their lives.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Characteristics of youth engagement

C. Critical analysis on identity.

Youth are encouraged to develop a critical analysis of identity issues. Through discussion, activities and exercises, the youth develop a politicized understanding of themselves and their position in society.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Characteristics of youth engagement

Once youth develop a politicized understanding of themselves, they are able to make the link to the systemic factors that affect their community and society at large.

Understanding self ⇔ community ⇔ society

Arts based anti-oppression initiatives have been very effective (especially hip hop based programming).

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Characteristics of youth engagement

D. Developing a sense of social responsibility.

The transition from self-awareness to social awareness leads youth to reflect on the responsibilities of citizenship. Youth are encouraged to consider what they can do to affect the barriers and challenges in their lives. Youth may be provided with the skills to instigate positive changes in their community.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Who is “youth”?

- City of Toronto defines youth as 13 to 24.
- Service Canada (federal) defines youth as 15 to 29.
- Laidlaw Foundation defines youth as 12 to 24.
- At CASSA (Council of Agencies Serving South Asians), “youth” is divided into 3 ranges: 13-16, 16-24, and 24-30.

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Who is “youth”?

- Consider the difference in capacity between youth in high school and those in college or university, in the workforce, or living away from home.
- Consider the differences amongst and between youth: socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation and other dimensions of diversity
- For example, on a youth advisory panel: the older youth may be much more vocal and dominate the younger youth.
- What is an appropriate age range in the context of your particular program or initiative?

I. What is Youth Engagement? (cont'd)

Who is “youth”?

One study found that it is not until age 15 or 16 that youth have sufficient confidence to engage effectively with adults. It was also found that in order to have the respect of other youth, the young person needed to be at least 15.

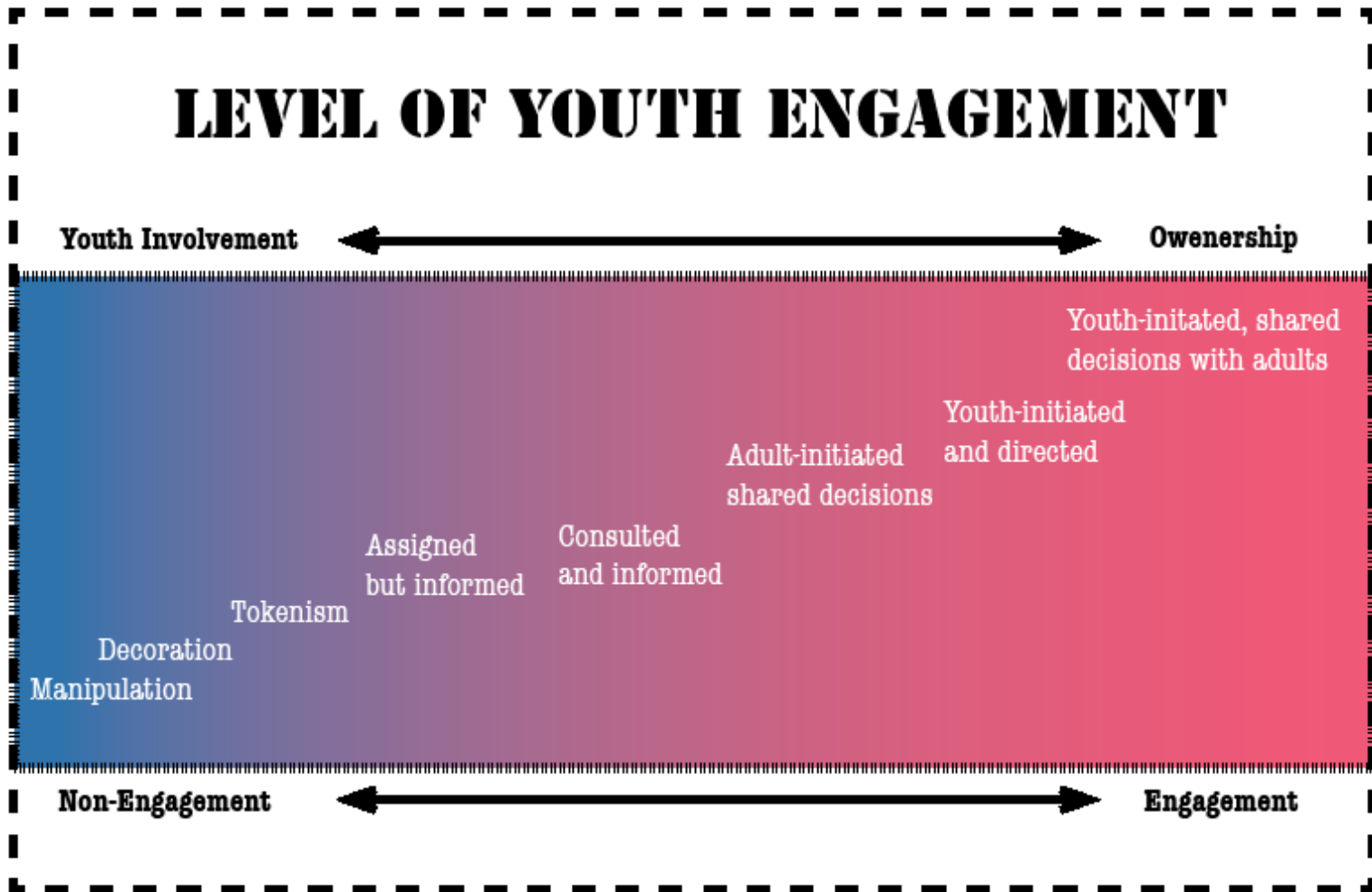
Wright, Susan (1999). *Youth as Decisions Makers: Strategies for Youth Engagement in Governance and Decision-Making in Recreation*. Toronto ON: Laidlaw Foundation.

II. Models of Youth Engagement

- There are many different models of youth engagement that are currently being used in the sector. No one paradigm is better or more effective. They are simply different ways of mapping how youth may be involved in decision-making within an organization.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Hart's Continuum



II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

three types of organizations

- **Youth-led organizations** – where youth are the participants, decision-makers and initiators.
- **Youth-infused organizations** – where adults may be participants, staff and decision-makers but youth lead with respect to participation, program delivery, decision-making, strategic development and governance.
- **Youth-serving organizations** – where adults act as the leaders and initiators while the youth act as participants and volunteers.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Continuum of Youth Involvement

- **Control.** Youth make all or many of the crucial decisions within the organization, from policy and programming to financial management, hiring and firing of staff.
- **Negotiation.** Youth contribute ideas, information and perspectives. Decisions within the organization are reached by consensus and compromise. Youth possess real bargaining power and decisions are acceptable to all parties.
- **Delegation.** Youth are provided with responsibility for undertaking particular tasks within the organization. There are clear guidelines on the scope of power of the youth.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Continuum of Youth Involvement

- **Influence.** There are formal and structured forums and opportunities for youth to influence the organization.
- **Structured Consultation.** Deliberate strategies are developed to seek the opinion of youth, for example, to identify their needs and receive feedback on programs and services.
- **Ad hoc input.** Youth contribute ideas and information but it is largely informal and there is no commitment from the organization to implement input.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

- To avoid tokenistic involvement of youth, there must be **support from adult members** of the Board. There should also be 3 or 4 positions set aside for youth.
- The youth must be **properly oriented** to organization and their responsibilities as Board members. Participation on the Board should provide real opportunities for learning.
- Meetings need to be **responsive to the needs of the youth**. This includes scheduling meetings after school, providing food and or TTC.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

Youth participate on adult-focused boards and councils.

- For organizations that service youth or provide youth programming, involving youth at the Board level helps to ensure that decisions are youth-friendly, relevant and programs effective.
- Youth involvement at all levels of the organization (board, staff, volunteers) creates a “critical mass” of youth .

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

- The composition of the board or council should **reflect the target demographic** of youth.
- It may happen that the council is co-opted by high-achieving youth, so-called “young politicians” who are not reflective of the community and view the council as an opportunity for personal achievement.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

Youth-led programming within or connected to adult-led organizations

- Adult-run organizations operate youth-led programming, sometimes in a trustee relationship. The youth control their own budget, seek own funding and are accountable for program reports and outcomes.
- Adult or youth staff provide support as needed, encouraging autonomy, leadership, and skill-building of youth participants.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

- There needs to be clarity on the **role of the staff support person**. Is the staff person acting in an advisory position, or is she merely providing administrative support?
- What happens when the youth advisory wants to take on issues and projects beyond what they were originally mandated to do?
- How will the organization respond when the youth begin to challenge the governance of other parts of the organization?

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

- **Continuity** is a major challenge. The success of these programs often turns on a few key youth who are the main initiators. When the youth move on -- to college or university, to another organization, lose interest, or simply grow-up – the program dies with their departure.
- How can your organization build in mechanisms to ensure continuity and sustainability?

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

Youth as staff

- Youth staff are often hired to run youth programs. They bring fresh ideas, energy, an understanding of youth issues and are better able to relate to the youth.

II. Models of Youth Engagement (cont'd)

Youth in governance and decision-making

- Work conditions for youth staff tend to be poor when compared to adult staff. Youth staff are often part-time, contract and paid lower wages. They often work in isolation from the other parts of the organization, but are expected to be responsible for everything related to youth.
- Youth staff require equity in their employment conditions, ongoing training and support.

III. Challenges and Best Practices

- **Continuity and Sustainability**
- **Higher Risks**
- **Role of adults in youth engagement**

III. Challenges and Best Practices (cont'd)

Continuity and Sustainability

When working with youth, stability and continuity of programs are critical because they require long-term and sustained development building. Unfortunately, there are significant barriers:

- **Funding** is scarce, unpredictable, and usually project-based. Once the money runs out, the program ends, and the organization loses both the youth, and the staff person.

III. Challenges and Best Practices (cont'd)

Continuity and Sustainability

- **Transience.** Youth is a demographic characterized by transience. This is especially true for marginalized youth whose lives may be very precarious (eg. unstable home, in and out of school, etc). Youth also “age-out” of youth programs. This transience is compounded when programs are youth-led.
- **Shorter Time Horizon.** Youth want to see immediate action and results. For youth, short-term is a matter of days whereas long-term means months. They can become frustrated at the lack of progress and consider only the needs of the moment or the immediate future, but not long-term.

III. Challenges and Best Practices (cont'd)

Continuity and Sustainability

- Consider ways for youth “graduates” to be absorbed into the organization, as staff and board members.
- Are there other organizations that the youth may be referred to?

Higher Risks

- “Youth-led” and “youth-driven” means that the adult-hosting organization has **less power and control** in determining the process and outcomes.
- Work with youth populations also poses a higher risk of failure, as well as other challenges such as absenteeism, lateness, disinterest, or personality and group conflicts.

III. Challenges and Best Practices (cont'd)

Governance and Accountability

- Issues related to governance and accountability are some of the most challenging in the youth engagement context.
- Recall, one of the essential characteristics of youth engagement is to provide youth with decision-making powers. This often means the youth are holding positions of power for the first time.
- Many of these youth are not familiar with considerations of governance and accountability and may be resistant, even critical of intervention or support.

III. Challenges and Best Practices (cont'd)

Role of adults in youth engagement

Consider the following:

- How to access the wealth of skills, knowledge, and expertise of adults working in the sector → and open up opportunities for adults and youth to work collaboratively
- Older organizations offer stability, continuity and the infrastructure for long-term intervention
- Older organizations have valuable contacts, connections and relationships with other community organizations, government ministries, politicians, police, media and other institutions

IV. Ideas for Moving Forward

- The current climate favours youth-led programs and initiatives.
- However, is the youth-led always the most appropriate model for the services provided. Keep in mind that:

IV. Ideas for Moving Forward (cont'd)

- the range of services and initiatives fulfill different needs
- adults play a vital role in the development of youth, this can be especially important for youth who do not have the benefit of strong adult role models and mentors, and
- there is a diversity of youth in Ontario that all require assistance and support to succeed.

Youth-Adult Partnership

- Youth and adults share the work and power.
- Adults balance high expectations for youths' performance with realistic assessment of their current abilities to engage.
- Adults encourage youth to develop their own ideas, but are available to provide assistance and guidance.

Youth Voice

- When youth are provided legitimate opportunities to have a voice in their programs and community projects, they are transformed from participants into partners; from care recipients into key resources.
- Respect for, and commitment to, youth voice is best expressed by incorporating youth voice and advice into program implementation and community improvement.

Building Capacity for Youth Engagement and Decision Making

- The program engages youth through various decision-making roles; for example, serving on boards, programming planning, community outreach and public relations, community training, and other key committees.
- Adults and staff at all levels are committed to youth engagement, and strive to serve as role models for the practice.

Building Capacity for Youth Engagement and Decision Making

- The program or community group has written policies about youth engagement that are known and understood by staff and participants.
- Youth engagement is a focus of discussions and program planning.
- Youth and adults receive training and support on how to work in partnership with one another.



Thank you!

- Questions, comments:
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