

**Youth-Activism and Participation:
A Literature Review on Best Practices in Engaging Youth**

Prepared for the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities

By

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March 2007**

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Introduction

Historically, working collaboratively with youth was not taken as seriously given the social and developmental stereotypes attached to youth. Too often, the talents and insights by youth were, and sometimes still are, overlooked by adults who consider the realm of youth-centered work to be that of “adults”. However, today, a shift has emerged in which youth are being given a platform to contribute to combating local and global inequities given the fundamental recognition that they are in essence the future. Interestingly within the educational discourse, discussion about how to educate children for their role as future citizens has negated incorporating the youths’ voices (Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). This literature review focuses on the best practices adults can employ when engaging with youth in social action orientated projects.

The practice of incorporating youth and their perspectives in program designs is now burgeoning particularly within the last decade. Contemporary research indicates that the area of engaging youth is a relatively nascent approach which requires further research to determine what is effective, what is not effective, and what gaps exists. Nevertheless, the last decade has witnessed a drastic change in its approach to addressing youth issues as the benefits of utilizing and engaging with youth in activism and participation as catalysts for social change has yielded much success and is more widespread given its observed successes.

The purpose of this literature review is to highlight some of the key best practices to employ when engaging with youth in youth activism to ensure that an effective mode

of practice is employed as well as to ensure that the programs developed and initiatives undertaken are conceptually and practically equipped with the youth at the forefront.

This review of the literature will begin by defining youth, followed by an overview of the contemporary demographics of Canadian youth. Then youths' understanding of issues will be discussed, followed by an examination of the barriers that prevent youth from engaging in social issues, and lastly, some strategies to incorporate with the youth in the area of social activism will be highlighted.

Defining Youth

The word youth is generally used interchangeably with terms such as teenager, adolescent, young adult, and/or young person. Although youth are “defined demographically as those humans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five” (Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002, p. ix), definitions can vary globally. For example, according to the United Nations General Assembly (2006), youth are classified as “those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusive”. The World Bank (2006) defines youth as a “[t]ime in a person’s life between childhood and adulthood...who are between the ages of 15 to 25”.

Demographics of Canadian Youth

According to the latest available statistics, youth between the ages of 15-24 account for 13.6% (approximately 4.4 million) of the total Canadian population in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006). 51.2% of youth were male and 48.8% were female (Statistics Canada, 2006). Approximately 2.1% of youth identified themselves as non-white; this percentage excludes youth of First Nations descent. Of this 2.1% population, the Chinese (24.9%), South Asian (22.0%), and Blacks (17.4%) were the three largest groups (Statistics Canada, 2001). Between 4% and 5% of 15-24 year old youth are First Nations (Statistics Canada, 2001a). It was found that a significant majority of First Nations youth, 70.7%, do not live on reserves: 18.9% live in rural areas and 51.8% live in urban areas, with 29.3% living on reserves (Statistics Canada, 2001b). 73% of the youth population between the ages of 15-24 reported their religious faith as Christian in 2001. The second largest religion report for both youth and the larger Canadian population is Islam at 2.4% (Statistics Canada, 2001c). With regards to mother-tongue, 62.3% of youth between the ages of 15-24 years old reported English as their first language, 21.9%

reported French as their first language, and 14.4% reported another language (Statistics Canada, 2001d). For the very first time, Statistics Canada collected information on sexual orientation in 2003. The results of the survey indicate that Canadians between the ages of 18-59, only 1% reported that they consider themselves homosexual and 0.7% reported that they consider themselves to be bisexual. More specifically, 2% of Canadians between the ages of 18-34 reported being homosexual or bisexual. More specifically within Alberta, 1.2% of the total Albertan population reported being either homosexual or bisexual (Canadian Community Health Survey, 2003). In 2001, 3.9% of the population of 15-24 year olds reported having a disability. Disability was “defined as those having difficulty with daily living activities, a physical or mental condition, or a health problem that reduced their activities” (The Daily, 2002).

Youths’ Understanding of the Contemporary Issues

There is a growing body of literature now emerging which is examining how children and youth make sense and meaning of the world in which they live in. This has occurred primarily due to the fact that in discussing how youth should be educated for their citizenry role, it was noted that the voices of youth were entirely omitted. Discussion of what young children and youth believe and how they perceive the world has been neglected and consequently not incorporated in the multi-layered design of youth studies, youth activism, youth participation, and so forth. Rather, it has been the voices of adults that have prevailed and contributed to the area.

Today, the focus of inquiry with children and youth is generally embedded within larger contemporary-oriented themes which centre around their micro/macro perception of the world they live in, as well as, which micro/macro world issues are of most concern to them (see for example Bennett, Cieslik, & Miles, 2003; Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002). Within the field of education, this burgeoning field is referred to as “youth futures¹” (Gidley & Inayatullah, 2002; Hicks, 2004).

The literature indicates that the focus on local-global issues was not a priority among educators during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It was not until others

¹ It must be noted that Johan Galtung and Elsie Boulding “were also prominent in the establishment of futures studies as an international field” (Hicks, 2004, pp. 176-177).

intimately connected to the area of contemporary local-global issues forged partnerships within the educational realm that this area emerged. As Hicks (2004) explains

local-global issues [have been] largely neglected by mainstream educators. The impetus variously came from existing academic fields, the work of non-governmental organizations, and the concerns of social/political activists. Each focused on a specific issue, each had some notion of education as a tool for change....What they all share in common is their focus on contemporary problems (content) and a belief in participatory and active learning (process) (Lister, 1987; cited in Hicks, 2004, p. 165).

With regards to children, contrary to popular assumptions, children are aware and have an age-appropriate understanding of the macro world they live within well before reaching adolescence. For example, a study conducted by Holden (2002) asked seven year old British students how optimistic they felt about their personal future. It was found that approximately 75 percent of students felt optimistic. The common themes that emerged were a desire for

- a good education;
- a good job;
- material success (“the good life”);
- fulfilling relationships (children, partner);
- lack of health problems (cancer, AIDS and so on,);
- happiness per se (p. 134).

With regards to their “hopes and fears for the local future,” the following were the most common themes that emerged

- less pollution;
- better amenities;
- less crime;
- greater prosperity (p. 134).

With regards to their “hopes and fears for the global future,” it was found that students “were the least optimistic about a better global future” (p. 135). The major themes that emerged were

- a desire for no war, or peace;
- no poverty/hunger;
- good international relationships;
- less pollution or more environmental awareness.

What these findings indicate is that despite these children's young age and perceived naïve and limited view of the world, they are in fact aware of local-global issues in accordance to their age and developmental ability. According to Hicks (2004), what this research shows is "that an 'adult' understanding of time begins to appear around the age of eight" (p. 169).

Frank Hutchinson's (1996) work with Australian youth in secondary schools revealed more "complex" findings. Although students had a pessimistic perspective about the future, they nevertheless had an "inspirational" view of it (cited in Hicks, 2004, p. 170). The findings are summarized below

Box 1. Australian teenagers' views of the future

Probable futures

- *Uncompassionate world* – depersonalized and uncaring
- *Physically violent world* – with a high likelihood of war
- *Divided world* – between the 'haves' and 'have nots'
- *Mechanised world* – of often violent technological change
- *Environmentally unsustainable world* – with continued degradation of the biosphere
- *Politically corrupt and peaceful world* – where voting is a waste time

Preferable futures

- *Technocratic dreaming* – uncritical acceptance of technofix solutions for all problems
 - *Demilitarization and greening* – of science/technology to meet genuine human needs
 - *Intergenerational equity* – accepting responsibility for the needs of future generations
 - *Making peace* – with people/plant via a reconceptualisation of ethics/lifestyles
- (Hutchinson, 1996; cited in Hicks, 2004, p. 170).

Similarly, Eckersley's (1999) work with Australian youth between the ages of 15 to 24 years old examined what students expected and wanted of their country in 2010.

The future most young Australians want is neither the future they expect, nor the future they are promised. Most do not expect life in Australia to be better in 2010. They see a society driven by greed; they want one motivated by generosity. Their dreams for Australia are of a society that places less emphasis on the individual, material wealth and competition, and more on community and family, the environment and cooperation.

Major concerns included: pollution and environmental destruction, including the impact of growing populations; the gulf between rich and poor; high unemployment, including the effect of automation and immigration; discrimination and prejudice; and economic difficulties,

including the level of foreign debt.... In the preferred future problems have been overcome. There are: clean environment, global peace, social harmony and equity, jobs for all, happy families (although not necessarily traditional families), better education and health (cited in Hicks, 2004, p. 170).

A report from Amnesty International (2006) highlighted the types of issues that American youth are actively engaged with. The following are listed in sequential order starting with the most common.

- Human rights
- Peace / Anti-war / Disarmament
- Environment
- Education
- Politics
- Community Development
- Women's rights
- Racism
- HIV/AIDS
- Animal rights
- Sexual identity rights
- Social welfare
- Political party
- Poverty
- Death penalty
- Children's rights
- Civil rights
- Student union
- Ethnic minority issues
- Globalization and global trading systems
- Religious groups
- Health
- Sustainable Development
- Clean water
- Migration, trafficking, displacement and refugees
- Indigenous people's rights
- Law/impunity
- Alternative media initiatives
- International solidarity
- Employment
- Trade union

When British students in Holden's (2002) study were asked about "what their schools did to help pupils create a better future, the response was mixed" (p. 136). Students concerns

centred around a rigid curriculum and a lack of practical application in how to address the issues directly.

Many eleven-year-olds thought the curriculum needed to be adjusted to include more “discussion classes” and that they needed more information about “environmental things and things we could do.” Older pupils often praised their schools’ efforts to raise money for charity but otherwise did not feel their schools did much to help them be actively involved in local or global action. As one fourteen-year-old said “We learn the facts about what’s happening but we don’t learn what you can do.”

An eighteen-year-old thought the problem was that teachers were “not allowed to talk about politics,” while others said that the current curriculum was a constraining factor (p. 136).

In Head’s study (2002), students made clear recommendations as to how their contribution to the future could be achieved. They are summarized as follows.

- They see a need to be better informed about current affairs and their placement on global, national, and local maps. The wealth of information available is not necessarily consciously accessed by the students and may overwhelm to the point of apathy without guidance and some simplification for the age level. Their relationship with the world is based on knowledge of the world.
- They see a need for positive as well as negative information. Apparently, negative events and issues can be examined in terms of both basic attitudes. (Positive for whom? Negative for whom?). Students can be made aware that there is often a choice of attitude.
- They need to know that their opinions are valued. Surveys of student responses help them clarify their own thoughts, and personal reflection after a topic has been concluded reinforces the connection between student and issue. However, they also need feedback from surveys to reinforce the sense of self-worth and a feeling of community with the other students.
- To help build regard for themselves as participating and influential member of the community, they need to know action taken is based on their opinions and suggestions. Their sense of self-worth is partly based on an active relationship with the community.
- They would like to know more about methods of taking action open to them, whether they be pastoral, environmental, or political. This will

help create a feeling of empowerment in their relationship with the community.

- They see a need to engage with environmental issues at local and global levels. Many students feel this is a priority in its own right (p. 215).

Barriers for Engaging with Youth

As the previous segment highlighted, children and youth have their own age-appropriate perceptions and understanding of the world they live and would like to live in, and would like to be involved in shaping the direction of their future in a positive and supported environment by adults. However, there are some key challenges that exist in the youth and adult relationship.

Firstly, according to van Linden and Fertman (1998), because teenagers can be a source of apprehension for many adults, communication can be somewhat challenging for both particularly when adolescents do not share the same perspective as adults.

For adults, adolescents can be a great source of anxiety, pride, frustration, and joy. Probably the biggest challenge for adults working in the area of adolescent leadership development is to provide teenagers with the support and guidance they need, while not blocking or restricting their individual growth. Communication with adolescents can be highly problematic. Teenagers frequently come into conflict with adults as they develop their individuality....Through practice and experience, teens learn how they can and cannot affect their world. When adolescents express opinions differing from other people's (especially adults'), adults frequently view this as troublesome or argumentative behaviour. When this sort of conflict arises, teens sometimes assume that adults are objecting to the *fact* that their opinion is different, not to the *quality* of that opinion. In such a situation, teens usually exhibit one of two behaviours: they stop voicing their opinions, or they become even more vocal than before (pp. 121-122).

This can be problematic particularly when the intent is to seek the youths' voice and insights.

Public Health Agency of Canada has identified youth participation as a key component in the healthy development of young people. A study (2002) was conducted by the government of Canada to "gather information on what is currently going on in Canadian communities with respect to youth participation". The intent of the study was to capture a snapshot of contemporary realities associated with youth participation and

understand "what works" and to identify 3 or 4 "best practices" models to use when engaging in the area of youth participation (ibid). The following key questions were investigated in this study (paragraph 7):

- What are the most important concerns currently being expressed by young people in your community?
- How does your community identify the concerns of its young people?
- Do young people from all sectors of the youth population, including marginal and high risk youth, have an opportunity to participate?
- What would be the best way of involving young people in your community?

Data collection consisted of a literature review, focus group session, telephone interviews, 52 in-depth interviews with were municipal officials, representatives of youth serving agencies and police officers familiar with police-based youth initiatives, and site visits to fifteen Canadian communities. The results are as follows (paragraphs 9-11).

What are the most important concerns currently being expressed by young people in your community?

- both adults and youth report that young people have nothing to do
 - concerns about the future and getting a job were common
 - youth feel they have no where to go and that they get "hassled" in stores, coffee shops, on the street and in malls
 - concerns were expressed about the negative image society has of youth.
- How does your community identify the concerns of its young people?
- . youth voices are not heard in many communities.
 - . there are few systematic opportunities for identifying youth concerns.
 - . surveys, needs assessments and forums are used as to identify youth concerns.
 - . most agencies rely on front-line staff to identify youth concerns.

Do young people from all sectors of the youth population including marginal and high risk youth have an opportunity to participate?

- participation and involvement mean different things to different young people.
- those interested in being heard and getting involved usually find a way.
- communities have difficulty involving marginal youth and youth from various ethnic and cultural groups.

What would be the best way of involving young people in your community?

- many argued that the community level is key.
- issues must be "real" for people to get involved.
- the need for interagency support for youth participation was noted.
- the political level was seen as crucial for legitimizing youth participation.
- many argued that a multi-level approach was required which includes community, interagency and political level support.

The studies overall conclusion was that "best practices" models of youth participation and involvement generally exist in theory as the dynamics are multifaceted. It was noted that

a more complex set of structures and processes was found in the communities that participated in this study. Young people often find it difficult to get their concerns heard. While some formal opportunities exist for youth involvement at the municipal level, considerable frustration was found with the lack of progress made on youth issues. Most respondents agreed that a combination of local, interagency and political level involvement were required for a successful and sustainable youth participation strategy. Many also felt that youth leaders should be identified and encouraged to participate with support and mentoring by "youth friendly" adults (paragraph 12).

Community Youth Development (CYD) (2006a) is an organization that works in “partnership with youth to change communities. [It] is a national movement that believes youth have the power, capability and desire to make their communities a better place for themselves and others. [This] means giving youth opportunities to be not merely recipients but also participants involved in designing, delivering and evaluating services that benefit their own community”. They have developed a “framework for understanding adultism...[and] they ways that adultism plays out in our day-to-day decision making, belief systems about youth, as well as in the programs and services....” (ibid). The following is a checklist for adults when working with, and engaging with youth to ensure “best practices” (Visions, Inc. and Camino and Associates, Inc, 2006).

1. Dysfunctional rescuing means helping young people on the assumption that they cannot help themselves or helping youth in such a way that limits their ability to help themselves.

2. Blaming the victim means attributing the behavioral problems of young people solely to the youth themselves, without considering that many young people have grown up in poverty, in dangerous neighborhoods, in inferior schools and among adults who don't prioritize them or their needs. The result is that young people don't get the support that they need.
3. Avoidance of contact indicates the lack of regular social or professional contact with young people and the lack of effort to learn about youth and the environments in which they live. The result is that adults create programs based on their own needs, not on the needs and interests of young people.
4. Denial of cultural differences, a form of adultism, is often motivated by egalitarian ideals because it involves "age-blind" or "color-blind" approaches. Age and cultural differences are assumed to be merely superficial. The consequence is that young people are denied the opportunity to bring their own beliefs, skills or lifestyles into settings.
5. Denial of the political significance of adultism indicates a lack of understanding or denial of the social, political, and economic realities of young people.

Bell (2006) developed key “best practices” “guidelines” and strategies when working with, and engaging with youth. The following are the key points that need to be incorporated when working with youth today.

1. Listen to young people. Really listen.
2. Ask questions about how they feel, how they think what's going on with them etc.
3. Validate their thinking.
4. Lay back. Curb your inclination to take over. Support initiatives of young people.
5. Be willing for them to make mistakes.
6. Reverse the power relationships whenever possible and appropriate.
7. Provide training for them to take on greater levels of decision making and leadership.
8. Always respect all young persons, no matter what age and expect them to respect each other at all ages.
9. Have high expectations of their potentials, and a real assessment of their current abilities.
10. Do not dump your adult distress on them.

11. Give young people real information about the way the world works, about our experiences. Never lie to them.

Another important strategy and guiding principle for individuals working with youth is to model and create an ideal climate for appropriate behaviour. Covell & Howe (2001) stress the importance between rights and moral education, and discuss the incorporation of rights and moral education, not as an add-on in the classroom or curriculum, but weaved as a way of life in schools “through the 3 Rs: rights, respect and responsibility” (p.31). This is especially important especially when engaging and interacting with youth, as they must see the appropriate values modeled particularly given that the root of most activism is to address some form of injustice. In Covell & Howe’s study (2001) with Canadian children in Nova Scotia

[a] children’s right curriculum was developed that was incorporated into the existing health and social studies curricula in Grade 8 classes (age 13-15) at five different schools over a 6-month period. The curriculum was designed to teach adolescents about their rights and responsibilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in an egalitarian and student-centred manner. Assessment of the impact of the rights curriculum showed that, when compared with their peers who did not receive the rights curriculum, the adolescents who did indicated higher levels of self-esteem, perceived peer and teacher support and increased rights-respecting attitudes (p.31).

This is important particularly give that “young people are locked in an adolescent ghetto, separated form meaningful interaction with adults (Conrad & Hedin, 1982, p. 66; see also Clary and Rhodes, 2006). Therefore, the teaching and modeling of rights produces morally desirable behaviour. Therefore, teachers, educators, and other adults should not misinterpret the teaching, modeling, and implementation of rights as a loss of power, but rather as an effective tool and practice in producing respectful and responsible citizens.

Guidelines for Program Initiatives

In ensuring that “best practices” are employed when working with youth, Community Youth Development (CYD) (2006b) provided key tips for adults when working with youth as partners.

1. Don’t expect more from the youths than you would from another adult.

2. Make sure that you don't hold the young person to a stricter standard than you would adults.
3. Conversely, don't excuse all indiscretions just because you are dealing with a youth.
4. Treat youths as individuals; don't make one youth represent all youths.
5. Be careful at interrupting youth when they are speaking or have the floor.
6. Remember that your role in a partnership is not to be a parent.
7. Don't move too fast.

Community Youth Development (CYD) (2006b) also formulated ten commandments for adults involved in working with youth in youth/adult partnerships.

1. Always start with the gifts, talents, knowledge and skills of young people-never with their needs and problems.
2. Always lift up the unique individual, never the category to which the young person belongs. It is "Frank who sings so well" or "Maria the great soccer player," instead of the "at-risk youth" or "pregnant teen".
3. Share the conviction that: (A) Every community is filled with opportunities for young people to contribute to the community. (B) There is no community institution or association that can't find a useful role for young people.
4. Try to distinguish between real community building work and games or fakes because young people know the difference.
5. Fight-in every way you can-age segregation. Work to overcome the isolation of young people.
6. Move as quickly as possible beyond youth councils or advisory boards, especially those committees with only one young person on them.
7. Cultivate many opportunities for young people to teach and to lead.
8. Reward and celebrate every creative effort, every contribution made by young people. Young people can help take the lead here.

9. In every way possible, amplify this messages to young people: We need you! Our community cannot be strong and complete without you.
10. Be open to surprise! Stand back and see what young people can do.

There are 14 characteristics that are required for youth work and youth development programs to be successful (Community Youth Development (CYD), 1996). They are as follows:

1. A focused and articulated vision.
2. A broad spectrum of services and opportunities tailored to the needs and interests of young adolescents.
3. Services and opportunities that recognize, value and respond to the diverse backgrounds and experiences that exist among young adolescents.
4. Understanding youth in the context of the family.
5. A supportive, flexible atmosphere for staff and volunteers.
6. Collaboration with other community programs and outreach to families, schools and other community partners in youth development.
7. A supportive atmosphere for young people and caring relationships between staff/volunteers and young people.
8. Youth workers who are committed and act as vigorous advocates for and with youth.
9. Collective as well as individual efforts to extend the program reach to under-served populations.
10. A feeling among young people that the staff/volunteers can be trusted, care about them and respect them.
11. A commitment to empowering young people which enhances their role as resources to their communities.
12. Creative problem-solving, including working to stabilize funding bases and to adapt or circumvent traditional professional and bureaucratic limitations in order to meet the needs of participants.
13. A solid organizational structure, including energetic and committed board leadership.

14. Services that are coherent, easy to use, and offer continuity.

For those organizations who are embarking on starting a youth participation group for social, political, environmental, etc change, and/or are in the initial stages of group formation, the following points are useful could be incorporated (Community Youth Development (CYD), 2006).

1. Gather young people together to discuss current events (local and / or national).
2. Ask them how they feel about the events.
3. Ask them if they think there is anything that they can do to make change at the local, state or national level.
4. Ask them if there is anything they want to do to change them. If yes, start with one thing and help them to develop a plan of how they can go about making those changes.
5. Ask them what kind of support they need from adults to carry out their plan.
6. Guide, inspire and help motivate them to make change a reality!
7. Evaluate what happened, what they learned; what went well, what they can improve on, etc.
8. Ask them how they feel about what they did.

With regards to implementation, within the classroom specifically, as teachers develop lesson plans for successful teaching and learning, the following best practices highlighted by Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde (1998), are noted to be most effective.

- **Student Centred:** The best starting point for schooling is young people's interests; all across the curriculum investigating students' own questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected content.
- **Experiential:** Active, hands on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.
- **Holistic:** Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.

- **Authentic:** Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water-down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.
- **Expressive:** To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media-speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and visual arts.
- **Reflective:** Balancing the immersion in experience and expression must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned.
- **Social Learning** is always socially constructed and often interactional; teachers need to create classroom interactions that “scaffold” learning.
- **Collaborative:** Cooperative learning activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.
- **Democratic:** The classroom is a model community; students learn that they live as citizens of the school.
- **Cognitive:** The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.
- **Developmental:** Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.
- **Constructivist:** Children do not just receive content, in a very real sense, they re-create and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.
- **Challenging:** Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning.

Although not centred on youth activism per se, a study-program investigated financial illiteracy among American youth. Researchers were interested in developing effective finance education to improve financial literacy levels. More specifically they were interested in developing a model educational program. The outcomes of the four key components of this model can be supplanted on to the development of other literacy’s

such as global literacy, GLBTTQQ literacy, democratic literacy, etc, as it provides a framework that is both effective and productive in engaging youth for youth participation and activism. The four main components of the model are (Mandell, 2007):

1. ***A model program is realistic:*** According to the research, “[s]tudents will respond best to lessons that depict life as they know it in the 21st century” by depicting reality (p. 7).
2. ***A model program is experiential:*** This would entail an action plan for a particular topic, research will have to be done; a hands on interactive realistic activity (ie a game).
3. ***A model program appeals to emotions:*** Literacy depends “on the student’s personal level of aspiration” (p. 7). “[D]ecision making results from an appeal to emotion rather than straight logic.” Important to equip “students with a higher level of analytical ability” (p. 8). “A second, more promising, approach is to deal directly with emotions, attempting to cause people to do the right thing instinctively” (p. 8).
4. ***A model program begins early:*** “get them while their young” (p. 8) approach.

Strategies for Engaging with Youth

An overview of some of the tensions, dynamics, and realities that exist for both adults and youth when engaging with one another in youth-centred activism have been highlighted. While engaging in youth activism, youth participation, etc, it is important to ensure that “best practices” are employed to not only meet the project/initiative objectives, but to also ensure the positive and healthy development of youth for future participation as citizens. The following segment highlights key strategies and practices to employ when engaging with youth. The bulk of the strategies have come from the youth themselves.

There are many reasons why engaging with youth effectively can fail. Amnesty International (2006) put together a very comprehensive publication entitled “Good Practices and Essential Strategies for Impact”. Within this publication, youth conveyed the “best ways to engage with young people in rank order beginning with the ‘most attractive’ strategy.

1. Long-term Human Rights Education
2. Music festivals or gigs
3. Outreach programmes in schools and universities
4. Television
5. Celebrity endorsement
7. Cinema adverts
8. International youth meetings
9. Public demonstrations
10. Youth newsletters/magazines/media
11. Friends and relatives
12. The web
13. Community festivals
14. Meetings and forums
15. Street canvassing/face-to-face
16. Radio
17. Sport
18. Theatre
19. Religious groups
20. Newspapers
21. Workplace
22. Social forums (eg. World Social Forum)

In creating materials for engagement, it is important to keep in mind that today's youth are saturated within a culture of capitalism, consumerism, and technology. Therefore, to capture the youths' attention, it is important to employ a similar model that "markets" the proposed issues within a youth-orientated framework which should be "fun", technologically-oriented, participatory, interesting, and sustainable. For example, in using websites, the Amnesty International report provided reasons why a website venue can be ineffective, as explained by youth (ibid).

- The Youth Coordinator is given the task of building the youth website despite the fact they have no knowledge of graphic design or website development.

- Content is not produced in a style with youth in mind, or is too simplified and speaks down to young people.
- Lack of recognition that websites require ongoing maintenance including fresh content to encourage users to visit the site regularly, as well as ongoing moderation of discussion for user engagement and the protection of minors.
- Failing to generate easy content – such as re-publishing other content already distributed by the organization in other formats, allowing user-created content to be featured, or holding content competitions.
- Failing to promote the website – having a "build it and they will come" mentality.
- Unnecessarily re-purposing and/or duplicating content that is already available on the main organizational website – young people will react against anything that patronizes them, and does not offer anything of additional value.
- Not being the best website in the category – duplicating effort doesn't add value.
- Lack of internal technical capacity to maintain the site as technology develops and changes or it becomes more popular and outgrows its web-hosting arrangements.
- Lack of appropriate language support for the intended audiences. The web is global and should be available in core global languages.
- Goes to youth, rather than expecting youth to come to the programme.

Similarly, youth discussed reasons why “many big NGO brands do not appeal to youth”.

- Use of acronyms that all sound the same and mean nothing to outsiders.
- Association with celebrities that appeal to the converted, rather than broader audiences. It takes time to cultivate celebrity support, while trends in youth music and culture move quickly.
- Lack of differentiation between charity brands in a crowded space – many still use similar "charity colours" such as blues and greens.

- Little exposure of the organization and its brand outside of high-brow news media which is little read by younger audiences.
- Failure to communicate simply the organization's mission, with a tendency to focus on complicated or less attractive methods rather than vision for change.
- Public presence (outside news media) dominated by "old fashioned" premises such as second-hand goods shops, rather than cool brands or products.
- Seen as big and institutional – disconnected from the grassroots, where the real action often happens.

Once youth have been engaged with, it is important to ensure that the engagement sustains itself. Again, from the youths' voice, the Amnesty publication provided "eight reasons why youth engagement efforts can fail". They are as follows:

- Not enough accommodation by adults – it would help to hold meetings being held during school hours.
- Adults use language such as "text messaging format" which is supposedly "hip" but is just embarrassing!
- Tendency to begin with the "most difficult" groups to reach or the most unlikely to join ... when in fact it is a much more likely – and safer – bet to start with those youth that have a predisposition to the cause, just as you would with any other age segment.
- Assumption that youth engagement is about speaking to youth, when in fact many of the best initiatives create spaces for dialogue and expression by young people.
- Failure to include young people during the initial phase – when in fact, saying you'll listen to young people is one of the best ways of getting their attention!
- Tendency to assume that all young people (at least from a similar geographic area) think alike or are motivated by the same things.
- Failure to recognize that one of the key ways in which young people seek to stand out is by their choice in music: running a music project without

paying close attention to the style of artists engaged may not have the expected results.

- Little emphasis on what comes next – now you have their attention, what do you want them to do?

The following lists some of the challenges that youth face, particularly with those programs/initiatives that include youth at various institutional levels/boards (ibid).

- Length of appointment – sometimes members can only develop full understanding and make a real contribution over the course of multiple terms, whereas youth representatives are usually replaced after just one term.
- Young people are unlikely to have expert knowledge of a practical area valuable to the board (such as law or accounting).
- There is often a lack of respect for young people’s contributions, even when they do have relevant expertise or personal experience.
- The youth brief is often limited to trivial or purely cosmetic areas.
- Youth placed in a board environment for the first time can experience intense culture shock. As can other board members who may therefore patronize and further limit the youth’s participation.
- There may be a lack of proper briefing on organizational structures, history, policy and strategy.

Irrespective of the images of a loud and disorderly mass of students that the term activism triggers, the above points all indicate that the area of youth activism is much more organized with key ingredients’ that are very specific to youth and the way youth are today. Although many points have been highlighted, it should be clear that there is no one right way to structure a youth program as each organization and its mandate differs, and the youth involved is also contingent to the participation design. Therefore, the most successful program can be measured by those that incorporate a variety of approaches to meet and address the diversity and complexity of the youth involved, and the issue(s) engaged with.

Recommendations

Although a number of specific best practices have been highlighted, this segment will provide key points for educators, NGOs, community-based organizations, government organizations, and administrators, and others, to employ in their work with youth and their respective futures. Based on the literature review, the following recommendations have been noted as key strategies, practices, concepts, and/or principles to employ when engaging with youth for youth activism and participation.

1. Do not assume that you know what youth want and need, etc. An effective strategy to implement would be to ask the youth directly for insights. The method of inquiry employed would be dependent on the context and nature of inquiry. This could be carried out in the form of an interview, focus group, survey, dialogue, to a conversation.
2. In initiating, designing, or implementing a youth initiative, it is important, particularly for adults to connect with youth. What this means is to venture into their “space”, rather than wait for them to find you.
3. It is important to remember that there is no “correct” structure when engaging with youth. The overall structure is contingent upon the organization, and the youth members involved.
4. It is important to ensure an inclusive environment in which all youth feel appreciated and respected, in which they can have a platform to engage with the issues of the world. This is vital not only to the success of the initiative, but for their overall healthy development as well.
5. To keep the interests of youth alive, it is important that youth oriented strategies be incorporated. Such elements would include technology, music concerts, forums, and overall “fun” within a collaborative and nurturing context.

Conclusion

By keeping the diverse needs of individual youth at the forefront in conjunction with the best practices highlighted above, it is more likely that the project/initiative that youth will engage in will observe a higher rate of impact in the intended objective. The best way to ensure success, not just for the program or initiative, but the overall cause/intent is to include youth throughout the entirety of the design. Ask for their input and let their insights guide the initiative. By asking for their input, not only is the program design and objective compatible to their worldview, but youth will take personal

ownership of the cause and become the leaders and advocates. It is important to ensure and that “youth learn they can shape, not only react to, their futures” (Jackson, Burchsted, & Itzkan, 2002, p. 201).

List of Some Recommended Websites For Youth Activism

There are an overwhelming number of websites which either directly or indirectly focus on youth led projects and initiatives. The following sites have been randomly highlighted.

46664. www.46664.com

Adbusters. www.adbusters.org

African Youth Alliance. www.ayaonline.org

Canada World Youth. www.cwy-jcm.org

Chat the Planet. www.chattheplanet.org

Cirque du Monde. www.cirquedusoleil.com/CirqueDuSoleil/en/company/socialaction

Free the Children. www.freethechildren.org

Generation Why. www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy

Global Child Rights & Peer Education. www.savethechildren.org.uk

Global Nomads Group. www.gng.org

Global Youth Employment Summit Campaign (YES). www.yesweb.org

Highly Affected, Rarely Considered. www.iyp.oxfam.org/news/publications

iEARN. www.iearn.org

I-to-I. www.i-to-i.com

Leaders Today. www.leaderstoday.com

Make Poverty History. www.makepovertyhistory.org

Meetup.com 20 Million Loud. www.20millionloud.meetup.com

Never Again. www.nigdywiecej.org

Oxfam International Youth Parliament. www.iyp.oxfam.org

Rock the Vote. www.rockthevote.org

Seeds of Peace. www.seedsofpeace.org

TakingITGlobal. www.takingitglobal.org

The Colombian Children's Movement for Peace.
www.peacenews.info/issues/2444/cameron.html

The Innovative Learning Initiative. www.ashoka.org

The Noise Festival. www.noise.net.au

The World Summit on the Information Society Youth Caucus. www.wsisyouth.org

UN Youth Delegates. www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/youthrep.htm

UNESCO's Youth Forum. www.unesco.org/youth

World Social Forum Intercontinental Youth Camp. www.acampamentofsm.org

World Youth Centre. www.worldyouthcentre.com

List of Some Recommended Toolkits for Youth Activism

There are a number of websites which have accessible toolkits for youth activism.

The following sites have been randomly highlighted.

Toolkits on including youth in the design and delivery of Human Rights Education
Youth Voice: A guide for Engaging Youth in Leadership and Decision-making in service learning programmes (Points of Light Foundation)
www.kidsforcommunity.org/pdf/tools/youthguide.pdf

Human rights education (AIUSA)
www.amnestyusa.org/education/index.html

Youth oriented Action Toolkits Seven Steps to Social Action (Free the Children)
www.freethechildren.com/youthzone/makeithappen/startupkit.htm

Youth Guide to Action (TakingITGlobal)
www.takingitglobal.org/action/uidetoaction/YouthActionNet

Toolkit (International Youth Foundation) www.youthactionnet.org/toolkitFireItUp

A youth action manual (Youth Action Network)
www.youthactionnetwork.org/rac/Fireitup/index.html

Just Add Consciousness (Oxfam America)

www.oxfamamerica.org/materials/just_add_consciousness/justaddconsciousness.pdf

Organizational Development Manual for Youth-Driven Organizations (Environmental Youth Alliance) Action Guide Tips (Shine)

www.shine.com/resources_action_guide_tips.php

Navigating International Meetings: A Pocketbook Guide to Effective Youth Participation

www.unac.org/en/pocketbook/index.asp

Youth Involvement Toolkit (National Foster Youth Advisory Council) includes a resource on intergenerational partnership www.fyi3.com/fyi3/toolkit/index.cfm

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