Trying Hard: An Investigation of Youth Engagement and Voice in Community Programs

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Many youth organizations have stated missions of fostering youth engagement and voice by involving youth in decision-making. Some successfully meet their goals whereas others seem to try hard but fall short. This qualitative study of eight San Francisco Bay Area organizations looked for those practices that fostered youth decision-making. Evidence gathered suggested that adults' youth development knowledge, their willingness to share power with youth, and sufficient resources are key to fostering youth engagement and voice.

Current research indicates that organizations that foster youth engagement and voice attract diverse youth who achieve greater developmental outcomes than those programs that employ traditional youth development strategies (e.g., CIRCLE Foundation, 2004; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). Youth engagement and voice is also widely believed to lead to innovative solutions, stronger communities, and an increased sense of self-worth among participating young people who feel supported by adults rather than controlled by them (National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 2000). Non-formal youth development programs that foster intentional partnerships with adults have become important venues for promoting youth engagement and voice (Zeldin, 2004). Depending on the underlying philosophy and nature of implementation (e.g., youth development, youth empowerment, civic engagement, and so forth) organizations generally fall on different points of a continuum in fostering youth engagement and voice (Goggin, Powers & Spano, 2002). At one end are those that successfully engage youth in all aspects of the program while the other end represents organizations that provide youth with no power at all. Implementation models also vary. There are some organizations that add one or two young people onto their boards while other organizations create separate youth entities to advise adults.

Salient characteristics of successful youth engagement and voice programs, regardless of program focus or model, include:

1) Provide young people with meaningful and authentic experiences (Goggin, Powers & Spano, 2002).
2) Facilitate partnerships in which youth and adults contribute equally, learn from one another, and share decision-making power (Fiscus, 2003).
3) Infuse or involve youth in innumerable aspects of the program and the organization (Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes & Calvert, 2000).

However, gaps seem to exist between "good intentions" at fostering youth voice and engagement and actual outcomes. (e.g., Murdock et al., 2009). This paper shares findings from a study conducted to examine successful practices employed by organizations with a stated mission of providing youth with experiences that foster youth engagement and voice. Specifically, we examined those practices that led not only to youth being "at the table" but also

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having an influential role in affecting organizational and/or public policy decision-making that could lead to improved youth development outcomes.

METHOD

The research team examined eight diverse San Francisco Bay Area organizations, five non-profit and three governmental, with a stated mission of promoting youth engagement and voice (Table 1). The following questions guided the investigation:
1) What practices and factors encourage and/or limit an organization's ability to foster youth engagement and voice?
2) How do resources such as time, money, personnel, and infrastructure, influence youth engagement and voice?

Sample and Data

We used reputational sampling, seeking organizations that were recommended as using promising practices (Patton, 2002). Telephone interviews were conducted with staff to learn about their programs and the youth served. Results of the phone interviews, along with supporting information, were used to select organizations for in-depth review. We sought a diverse sample in terms of the types of organizations, youth served, and geographic location. This purposeful (rather than probabilistic) sampling ensured information-rich cases (Creswell, 1998).

All the organizations provided different program contexts (e.g., local government, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, leadership development, and empowerment of students of color and of youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender).

Using a piloted protocol, principal investigators interviewed 12 adult staff (Table 2) individually or in pairs. Staff were asked nine core questions and encouraged to share additional reflections. The interviews were designed to be conversational and the interviewers asked follow-up questions as appropriate.

Youth program participants, ages 13 to 19 (Table 3), were interviewed in groups of four to eight from each organization. Interviews were conducted by a youthful research assistant using a piloted protocol. Participants were treated to refreshments and a $10 store gift card.

TABLE 1
Programs in the Study

	Program Focus	*Scope*	*Funding*
1	Develop community leadership among youth	Multi-county	Foundation grants
2	Advise policymakers	City	City government
3	Develop youth employment	City	City government
4	Prevent drug and alcohol abuse	Community	Foundation grants
5	Advise policymakers	City	City government
6	Support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) youth and educate public on GLBT issues	Community	Foundation and government grants
7	Promote racial tolerance	6 schools	Foundation grants
8	Develop personal leadership skills among youth	Local chapter of a national organization	Private

TABLE 2
Adult Staff Interviewed

Characteristic	*Number*	*Characteristic*	*Number*
Gender		*Education*	
Females	8	Some college	1
Males	4	College degree	10
		Post graduate	1
Age		*Years in Position*	
18 - 30	7	0-5	10
31 – 55	5	5-15	1
		15+	1
Ethnicity		*Previous Experience*	
White	8	0-5	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	5-15	7
Other	2	15+	1
Household Income		*Hours Worked Per Week*	
> $30,000	3	0-19	3
$30-60,000	5	20-29	3
< $60,000	3	30-39	0
no response	1	40+	6

TABLE 3
Youth Completing Demographic Surveys*

Total	35
Gender	
Males	14
Females	21
Age	
13 - 14	3
15 - 16	16
17 - 18+	16
Ethnicity	
White	12
Asian/Pacific Islander	12
African American	5
Latino	5
Other	1

*Not all youth interviewed completed the survey

Data Analysis

Taped and transcribed interviews were analyzed using qualitative methods of data analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Research team members summarized the coded data into recurring themes and included innovative ideas collected from interviewees.

FINDINGS

We do not suggest that the programs were either successes or failures. All seemed to provide something desired or needed by the youth. For the purpose of our study, however, we refer to programs as being successful or more successful if they employ strategies identified in the literature as leading to youth voice and engagement.

For example, a good model of *authentic youth engagement* was a youth commission created by voters in which the youth advocate for legislation on topics such as recreational services, juvenile justice, and public transportation. This same commission provided a strong example of a *youth-adult partnership* because the youth and adults shared equal decision-making power and drew upon one another's strengths. An example of successful *youth infusion* came from an institute in which the youth are actively involved with nearly every aspect of the organization.

We found three factors present in successful programs which supported authentic youth engagement, youth-adult partnerships and youth infusion: 1) strong staff knowledge and understanding of youth development and youth engagement and voice; 2) staff's willingness to relinquish some power normally held by adults; and 3) adequate resources to provide opportunities for youth engagement and voice.

Staff Knowledge

The staff we interviewed were college educated with varied academic backgrounds. None studied youth development but all demonstrated at least a working knowledge. Programs with staff who seemed most knowledgeable about youth development principles made youth engagement a focus.

Staff in these more successful programs viewed their primary role as providing training and support. They taught youth a wide range of skills including meeting facilitation, public speaking, conducting needs assessments, teaching, writing press releases, accessing elected officials and outreach to other youth. They actively sought authentic opportunities for youth to practice these skills.

This contrasted sharply with the apparent lack of knowledge demonstrated by some organizations' staff. For example, one staff member said they didn't provide youth with advocacy training because *"some of these guys have raging hormones. . . put them in front of the media and they are crazy"*.

Programs that were less successful seemed to focus on a philosophy or issue (e.g., multi-cultural awareness or drug and alcohol abuse prevention) rather than youth engagement and voice. For example, a staff person from a multi-cultural awareness program had a college degree in, and passion for, ethnic studies but no formal education or experience in youth development. He thought the program was highly successful. However, the youth indicated that they did not have the same level of decision-making found in more successful programs.

When youth voice and engagement was not the primary program focus, adults seemed to feel so responsible for producing an end-product (e.g.,

teaching other youth about multi-cultural or sexual minority issues) that they did not take the time to teach youth skills or did not trust that youth would produce the same result.

Willingness of Adults

The willingness of adult staff to partner with youth emerged as a critical factor to program success. Whereas all the adult staff seemed to genuinely enjoy the youth with whom they worked, they varied significantly in their perceptions of youths' capabilities.

> *"(Sometimes) when I'm on an adult board, (people say) 'Oh, you're so knowledgeable for a young person'. It's like saying, 'Oh, you're so knowledgeable for a person of color. . . or you're so knowledgeable for a woman."* Youth

All adult interviewees claimed to involve youth in decision-making. The programs that most closely matched the ideals described in the research literature employed adult leaders who recognized the capabilities of youth and ensured that youth were involved in decision making at all levels of the program and when possible, the organization.

> *"Our Board of Directors has young people on it. The external training has young people who lead it. In all areas we have young people . . . from the decision-making process to the planning process."* Adult Staff

The amount of program control that adults relinquished varied widely. In one governmental agency the adults planned the agendas and facilitated all the youth meetings. The adult staff members' attitudes about youth's capabilities seemed to guide program control.

> *" . . . the issues that the Council deals in are complicated and they're really not things that the youth can contribute a lot to."* Adult Staff

There were two issues with which all staff, in all organizations, struggled. One was that organizational structure often discouraged youth participation. For example, staff of one youth-led empowerment program were never able to seat youth on the umbrella organization's board of directors. Other barriers included meeting times that conflicted with school; hundreds of pages of reading material on complex topics; open meeting laws that require advance publicity; liability and insurance issues; and use of jargon. Another issue was the attitude of adults outside the youth program. For example, in one program a youth reported that adults stated that *"they had been through life and they knew what would have to happen to get things done"* resulting in the youth's ideas being ignored.

On other occasions adults professed to support youth voice but succumbed to political pressure: school boards denied youth opportunities to present HIV/AIDS information; principals looked the other way when gay/lesbian support posters were torn down; elected officials quashed a youth-led initiative to mandate gun-locks.

Staff of more successful programs used multiple strategies to improve the chances of youth being heard by adults outside the program and to mitigate logistical barriers. For example, one staff was able to get principals to count youths' participation on the board as independent study. Others identified and linked adult community allies with the youth who appreciated the partnership:

> *". . . it was a totally new experience. It was exciting. . . like all the press coming. We were excited because we are actually youth influencing our communities. So, we are making a difference, you know."* Youth

There was agreement among all staff that youth engagement programs are hard work. They stated that it is sometimes difficult to be a habitually good role model; to be friendly without being "pals"; to motivate youth without pushing them. They acknowledged that for many tasks, "It would be easier to do it myself," but recognized that doing so would not build leadership and decision-making skills.

Resources

Basic structural and contextual resources were needed by all programs. Youth ofter noted that staff are the

most important resource.

Resolving logistical issues was crucial to youths' participation. All programs faced transportation challenges, especially those serving young teens not licensed to drive. Meeting schedules often created stress for teens who arrived tired, hungry or worried about completing homework. Staff's sensitivity to these issues helped youth participate more fully. For example, staff and parents sometimes shared transportation duties; refreshments were typically provided; meetings were scheduled at convenient times, etc. Nonetheless, staff acknowledged that it was often challenging.

More successful programs created infrastructures that promoted a sense of family or team membership. There was a balance between formality, such as officers and voting, and informality, such as free-flow discussions that supported a more social atmosphere without losing focus.

Most programs offered workshops, conferences or other learning opportunities not usually available to youth. Other concrete resources, such as name badges, business cards or mentors, varied widely among programs. But all successful programs offered a variety of rich experiences that improved the teens' competencies and increased their sense of participation.

DISCUSSION

Our study suggests successful youth engagement and voice programs depend on three interwoven elements: adequate resources, knowledgeable and committed staff, and willingness to employ strategies, such as youth-adult partnerships, that foster voice. These mirror common themes that have emerged across other research studies (e.g. Camino, 2000; Frank, 2006; Jones & Zeldin, 2008; MacNeil, 2006; Murdock et al., 2009; Norman, 2001; Texas Network of Youth Services, 2002; Zeldin et al., 2000; Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, & Calvert, 2005; Zeldin & MacNeil, 2006; Klindera, Menderwald, & Norman, 2001; Ginwright, 2005).

Adults' underlying perceptions of youth seemed to heavily influence their willingness to partner with youth and provide them with engagement and voice opportunities. Overall, society's view of youth is often negative, especially regarding behavior and characteristics (Bales, 2001; Bostrom, 2000; Males, 1999). Although teens acknowledge that hard work, honesty, and altruism are important characteristics and their behaviors show this to be true, many adults think of youth as spoiled, irresponsible and lazy (Bostrom, 2000). None of the staff we interviewed voiced these negative perceptions but their unwillingness to relinquish control may suggest this general view to some degree. Some teens in our study attributed some of these negative perceptions to the media and research supports their hypothesis (O'Hare, 2003). Possibly staff have unconsciously applied these perceptions to the youth. Intentional partnerships with adults have been recognized as an important venue for promoting youth in decision-making (Zeldin, 2004) and to favorably increase adults' perceptions of youth (Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002) yet this cannot be accomplished unless the adults enter into and support these partnerships.

Since the youth had no basis for comparing their programs with highly successful programs, they seldom complained or made suggestions. In fact, they sometimes excused the adults for adultist attitudes. We suspect that the program met some need, such as a sense of belonging to a group or skill acquisition. If not, they would have voted "with their feet."

Resources alone did not ensure success because several well-funded programs fell short. But all the more successful programs had ample monetary resources. It may be that they were able to offer competitive salaries that attracted well-qualified adult applicants. Related to resources, an important element appeared to be institutionalization. Institutionalization can be important because it frees adult staff from worries about continued funding and allows them to focus on working with youth.

Based on this study, the research literature, and our own work in the field, we believe that a fundamental element of all successful programs is excellent youth development staff, described as "wizards" in McLaughlin and Irby's (1994) book, *Urban Sanctuaries*. We encourage more communication among practitioners to learn from one another and adopt strong practices from other programs.

Shared decision-making is identified as the most salient element in fully realizing authentic youth engagement and voice (Fiscus, 2003). The final element that appeared to be critical in successful programs was adults' willingness to employ strategies, especially youth-adult partnerships, that lead to shared decision-making. Youth-adult partnerships require that adults share power while providing youth with the tools and training to succeed as full partners in the decision-making process (MacNeil, 2000). This process is not the way that adults typically work with young people. A staff person suggested this process requires close critical examination of past practices, unlearning them, and learning new ones.

We acknowledge limitations of our study, including: a limited sample size, our own favorable bias toward youth engagement and voice, and limiting organizations to those believed to be successful. We also recognize the limitations of qualitative research, particularly the potential inability to fully capture the meanings of the spoken words. These limitations may reduce the generalizability of our findings.

CONCLUSION

Promoting youth engagement and voice is an intuitively sensible concept that is well supported by research. The staff we interviewed very much wanted to provide meaningful experiences for youth. To be effective, programs need adequate resources and staff who are committed to fostering strong partnerships with youth. Without these essential elements some programs will continue to try hard but will fall short.

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