
Issue Editors' Notes

YOUTH PARTICIPATION is defined in multiple ways; we understand it as *a constellation of activities that empower adolescents to take part in and influence decision making that affects their lives and to take action on issues they care about*. As this volume of *New Directions for Youth Development* demonstrates, the range of these activities can be broad and their impact—on individuals, communities, and institutions—deep.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume share the view that youth participation is a central feature of youth development. The authors provide evidence for the notion that adults must take youth seriously, not just as potential future actors but as actors now. Exploring youth participation in diverse settings, ranging from classroom organization to political organizing, they deflate myths that apathy, laziness, and “storm and stress” are necessary features of adolescence. At the same time, they avoid a cheerleading approach, opting instead for a careful analysis of the possibilities for youth participation and the challenges that exist, a topic taken up specifically in Chapter One.

Chapters Two through Four together form a cluster, taking on issues of civic participation and democratic education, a major theme in the youth participation field. In Chapter Two, Shawn Ginwright and Taj James argue that youth development advocates must see young people not just as assets but as agents of change. In recognizing that most youth of color grow up in social contexts characterized by oppression and inequity, they outline strategies that youth organizing groups are adopting to engage youth of color in political

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participation and social change. The social justice youth development approach they articulate joins key youth development principles with a social-ecological analysis of the context of youth's lives.

Mark Pancer, Linda Rose-Krasnor, and Lisa Loiselle, also concerned with the political participation of youth, take a somewhat different approach, focusing on the more formal setting of youth conferences for bringing young people into conversation with government officials at the national level. In Chapter Three, they describe a process by which youth from across Canada come together to talk about social issues and brainstorm solutions. Drawing on research with the participants in these settings, the authors articulate a model for describing processes of youth engagement in terms of initiating and sustaining factors.

In Chapter Four, Robert Sherman describes one foundation's response to the emerging interest expressed by youth in civic activism and engagement. He outlines the strategy that the Surdna Foundation has taken to support youth organizing and provides examples of the work that youth have done. The chapter reminds us that youth participation is not merely about becoming part of adult institutions, but also about critiquing and transforming institutions that are not functioning effectively for youth and their families.

Youth participation is not just about politics or community-based organizations. Observers note that too often youth participation efforts focus on out-of-school settings or after-school programs, even though young people spend most of their time in school. In Chapter Five, Barbara Cervone and Kathleen Cushman apply youth participation principles to their research looking at students' experiences in public school. The authors highlight youth voices in order to shed light on the features of classroom organization and teacher relationships that support youth's desire to participate and learn.

This volume closes with a contribution from Youth IMPACT, a program that trains young people to evaluate city-funded services for youth in San Francisco. After the first study was completed in 2001, its recommendations were incorporated into the funding criteria for city-supported youth programs. In Chapter Six, we present excerpts from their 2001 report, describing their process and

key findings, as well as interviews with current youth members and the former adult city department director. The interviews shed light on the key elements of this partnership between adults and youth that help it to be effective.

These chapters together contribute to our understanding of what youth participation is and can become. Youth participation truly is a new direction for youth development, one that requires both sympathetic support and careful scrutiny.

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