

Creating Inclusive and Effective Environments for Young People: Exploring **Youth Voice** and **Youth-Adult Partnership**

Everyone Benefits When Youth Are Consulted

An effective and evidenced-based way to improve schools, nonprofits, and government agencies is to learn from the perspective of those being served. Research has shown that giving youth a voice results in increased feelings of engagement and ownership. For example, students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice.ⁱ



What Is Youth-Adult Partnership?

Gathering feedback from young people and using that feedback to improve services is a best practice for all youth-serving organizations. But that only scratches the surface. Out-of-school time programs, community-based organizations, and local government agencies can all benefit from the intentional inclusion of youth in their policies, programs, and structures.

Figure 1. Youth-Adult Partnership Settings and Activities



Source: Adapted from Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2007.

Youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) is defined as a group of youth and adults working together to make decisions and take action on important issues.ⁱⁱ Y-AP is not a specific program model or curriculum. Instead, it is a set of principles and practices that may be applied to a wide range of settings and activities (Figure 1). Y-AP is not just about giving young people a voice, it's about shared decision-making. In Y-AP settings, youth are increasingly serving alongside adults as facilitators and educators, board members, researchers, media producers, community organizers, and fundraisers.

Y-AP is a fundamental strategy for positive youth development. The use of empowering practice is a core competency for youth workers,ⁱⁱⁱ and youth participation in decision-making is a key indicator of youth program quality. For example, it is a core feature of many assessments that measure high-quality out-of-school-time environments, such as A Program Assessment System (APAS) from the National Institute on Out-of-School Time and the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA).

However, many organizations struggle to move beyond voice—occasionally asking youth for input or feedback on decisions that adults make—to a more meaningful engagement of young people in authentic decision-making, where young people work alongside adults over time to grapple with real-world issues and choices.^{iv} Research suggests that youth experience higher levels of empowerment when there is this type of “shared control” among youth and adults.^v

Why Does Youth-Adult Partnership Matter?

A synergy happens when both youth and adults are expected to contribute their resources and perspectives toward a common goal.^{vi} Through mutual learning and collective action, Y-AP has powerful influences on youth empowerment, adult development, organizational effectiveness, and community issues.

Figure 2. Youth-Adult Partnership Promotes Thriving Youth, Programs, and Communities



Source: Petrokubi, 2014.

Four core principles underlie Y-AP: authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocity, and community connectedness.^{vii} Each principle works together to create a dynamic environment with thriving youth.

Reflecting on your program, school, or organization, consider:

- To what degree do youth have the authority to make decisions that matter to themselves and others?
- What are some settings in which youth work alongside adults who share their interests?
- How do youth and adults learn from each other?
- How do we foster a sense of belonging?
- How do we help young people feel like they have a role to play in our community?

How Can We Grow Youth-Adult Partnership Within Our Organization?

Y-AP challenges adults to think differently about their role in relationship to youth. Some adult partners adopt a mindset of “leading from behind,”^{viii} which involves making space for youth to step into roles and responsibilities previously reserved for adults. Both youth and adults need support and scaffolding for this type of relationship. Effective organizations take steps to align their norms and structures to build a “culture of Y-AP” in which young people participate in multiple aspects of decision-making.^{ix}

Just like adults, young people want the freedom to choose where and how they engage in decision-making. Not every young person is interested in becoming a board member. There are many ways youth and adults can share decision-making in everyday settings such as afterschool programs and classrooms. These opportunities can help lay the foundation for Y-AP in less typical settings, such as organizational operations and management.

Table 1. How Are Decisions Currently Being Made in Your Organization?

	<i>Adults control</i>	<i>Youth and adults share control</i>	<i>Youth control</i>
Decisions in settings where there are more youth than adults			
Establishment of group norms and expectations			
Management of conflict			
Recruitment of new program participants			
Use of space			
Program development and curriculum design			
Facilitation of program activities			
Planning of special events			
Decisions in settings where there are more adults than youth			
Fundraising			
Communications and outreach			
Governance and policy			
Evaluation			
Staff hiring, orientation, and evaluation			

Why Should You Invest in Promoting Youth-Adult Partnership?

Y-AP is an issue of social justice. This is expressed in the saying “Nothing about us, without us.” Participation can be viewed as a basic human right that should not be denied to children because of their age.^x For example, Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child states that the views of children should be taken into consideration in accordance with their age and maturity. Many countries that ratified the convention have institutionalized youth participation in public institutions.^{xi,xii} In the United States, many youth organizers view equal participation as a social justice issue and make it a central part of how they operate.

Y-AP strengthens democratic society. By actively participating in group decision-making, young people develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they need to be active and engaged community members.^{xiii,xiv} Research suggests that Y-AP plays a role in bridging the “civic empowerment gap.”^{xv} Participation in collective action may cultivate the agency and sociopolitical development of underrepresented youth.^{xvi} In addition to preparing youth to lead in the future, Y-AP strengthens communities today, by promoting more responsive public policy and more inclusive community institutions.^{xvii, xviii, xix, xx}

Y-AP is developmentally responsive practice. Youth thrive in settings that support their ability to make a difference. Like adults, they want to feel a sense of purpose, and they want to engage in activities that make a meaningful contribution to their community.^{xxi,xxii,xxiii} Programs that provide opportunities for Y-AP may see higher retention and engagement.^{xxiv,xxv} Quality Y-AP cultivates a sense of self-efficacy and belonging and promotes the development of skills such as strategic thinking, group process, and leadership.^{xxvi,xxvii, xxviii, xxix}

Youth-Adult Partnership in Schools

A growing body of research has documented the benefits of school-based Y-AP. Schools that use a Y-AP framework have documented enhanced student-teacher relationships,^{xxx} improved school climate,^{xxxi} and improved instruction and curriculum.^{xxxii} Y-AP reminds teachers, administrators, and parents that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives that can bring to light issues that may otherwise go unnoticed and often provide the most effective strategies for addressing those issues.^{xxxiii} There are many ways in which schools can build Y-AP into their planning, including practices that focus on the classroom, school, district, or even state.

Tips for Educators and Youth Workers

1. Reflect on how youth are currently engaged with different aspects of your programming, decision-making, and operations. Are there opportunities for more youth involvement? What are they?
2. Advocate for the importance of a youth perspective. For example, push for the meaningful inclusion of youth in policymaking and governance.
3. Practice scaffolding—break down projects and actions into their component parts to help youth understand the full scope of a project and how they can effectively contribute to its success.
4. Consider how to strengthen the training, coaching, and professional development provided to your staff, so they learn to gradually take a more supporting role.
5. Examine the options available to young people. Too few options and too many options can both be problematic.
6. Hire staff members that already understand the importance of youth voice and Y-AP.
7. Realize that effective Y-AP is built upon relationships and a communal sense of belonging. How can you build strong youth-adult relationships and promote that sense of belonging?
8. Make sure you gather a broad range of youth perspectives, not just those of high-achieving or well-connected young people.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations. (2016). *School voice report 2016*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- ⁱⁱ Zeldin, S., & Petrokubi, J. (2006). Understanding innovation: Youth-adult partnerships in decision making. *Prevention Researcher*, 13(1), 11–15.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Starr, B., Yohalemn N., & Gannett, E. (2009). *Youth work core competencies: A review of existing frameworks and purposes*. Seattle, WA: School's Out Washington.
- ^{iv} Akiva, T., & Petrokubi, J. (2016). Growing with youth: A lifewide and lifelong perspective on youth-adult partnership in youth programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 69, 248–258.
- ^v Wong, N. T., Zimmerman, M. A., & Parker, E. A. (2010). A typology of youth participation and empowerment for child and adolescent health promotion. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(1/2), 100–114.
- ^{vi} Camino, L. A. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(Supp. 1), 11–20.
- ^{vii} Zeldin, S., Christens, B. D., & Powers, J. L. (2013). The psychology and practice of youth-adult partnership: Bridging generations for youth development and community change. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(3/4), 385–397.
- ^{viii} Larson, R. W., & Angus, R. M. (2011). Adolescents' development of skills for agency in youth programs: Learning to think strategically. *Child Development*, 82(1), 277–294.
- ^{ix} Zeldin, S., Petrokubi, J., & Camino, L. (2008). *Youth-adult partnerships in public action: Principles, organizational culture & outcomes*. Washington, DC: Forum for Youth Investment.
- ^x Lansdown, G. (2001). *Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making*. Florence, Italy: United Nations Children's Fund, Innocenti Research Centre.
- ^{xi} Hill, M., Davis, J., Prout, A., & Tisdall, K. (2004). Moving the participation agenda forward. *Children & Society*, 18(2), 77–96.
- ^{xii} Mason, A. (2005, December). *Demographic dividends: The past, the present, and the future*. Paper was presented at the 21st Century Center of Excellence Program, Kobe, Hyōgo, Japan.
- ^{xiii} Youniss, J., & Levine, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Engaging young people in civic life*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- ^{xiv} Larson, R., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Development of initiative and teamwork within a youth program. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 159–184). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- ^{xv} Levinson, M. (2012). *No citizen left behind*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- ^{xvi} Watts, R. J., & Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth civic engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), 779–792.
- ^{xvii} McLaughlin, M., Scott, R., Deschenes, S., Hopkins, K., & Newman, A. (2009). *Between movement and establishment: Organizations advocating for youth*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- ^{xviii} Petrokubi, J. A. (2014). *Building bridges, making change, and inspiring engagement: A case study of youth-adult partnership in a local government youth commission*. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A. The Humanities and Social Sciences*, 75(08); Ramey, H. L. (2013). Organizational outcomes of youth involvement in organizational decision making: A synthesis of qualitative research. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(4), 488–504; Sirianni, C., & Schor, D.M. (2009). City government as an enabler of youth civic engagement: Policy design and implications. In J. Youniss & P. Levine (Eds.), *Engaging young people in civic life* (pp. 121–163). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- ^{xix} Ramey, H. L. (2013). Organizational outcomes of youth involvement in organizational decision making: A synthesis of qualitative research. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(4), 488–504; Sirianni, C., & Schor, D.M. (2009). City government as an enabler of youth civic engagement: Policy design and implications. In J. Youniss & P. Levine (Eds.), *Engaging young people in civic life* (pp. 121–163). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

- ^{xx} Sirianni, C., & Schor, D.M. (2009). City government as an enabler of youth civic engagement: Policy design and implications. In J. Youniss & P. Levine (Eds.), *Engaging young people in civic life* (pp. 121–163). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- ^{xxi} Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 119–128.
- ^{xxii} Lerner, R. M., Lerner, J. V., Almerigi, J., Theokas, C., Phelps, E., Gestsdóttir, S. . . . von Eye, A. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth-grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 25*(1), 17–71.
- ^{xxiii} Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ^{xxiv} Akiva, T., Cortina, K. S., & Smith, C. (2014). Involving youth in program decision-making: How common and what might it do for youth? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 43*(11), 1844–1860.
- ^{xxv} Deschenes, S., Little, P., Grossman, J., & Arbreton, A. (2010). Participation over time: Keeping youth engaged from middle school to high school. *Afterschool Matters, 12*, 1–8.
- ^{xxvi} Evans, S. D. (2007). Youth sense of community: Voice and power in community context. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(6), 693–709.
- ^{xxvii} Kirshner, B. (2007). Youth activism as a context for learning and development. *American Behavioral Scientist, 51*(3), 367–379.
- ^{xxviii} Larson, R., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Development of initiative and teamwork within a youth program. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs* (pp. 159–184). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; Zeldin, S. (2004). Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership. *Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(5), 623–641.
- ^{xxix} Zeldin, S. (2004). Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership. *Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(5), 623–641.
- ^{xxx} Rudduck, J. (2007). Student voice, student engagement, and school reform. In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 587–610). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- ^{xxxi} Mitra, D. L. (2004). The significance of students: Can increasing “student voice” in schools lead to gains in youth development? *Teachers College Record, 106*(4), 651–688.
- ^{xxxii} Rudduck, J. (2007). Student voice, student engagement, and school reform. In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 587–610). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- ^{xxxiii} Kushman, J. W. (Ed.). (1997). *Look who's talking now: Student views of learning in restructuring schools*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Levin, B. (2000). Putting students at the centre of education reform. *Journal of Educational Change, 1*(2), 155–172; Mitra, D. (2007). Student voice in school reform: From listening to leadership. In A. Cook-Sather & D. Thiessen (Eds.), *International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school* (pp. 727–744). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer; Rudduck, J., Day, J., & Wallace, G. (1997). Students' perspectives on school improvement. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Rethinking educational change with heart and mind* (pp. 73–91). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; Thorkildsen, T. A. (1994). Toward a fair community of scholars: Moral education as the negotiation of classroom practices. *Journal of Moral Education, 23*(4), 371–385.

Suggested citation:

Petrokubi, J., & Janssen, C. (2017). *Creating inclusive and effective environments for young people: Exploring youth voice and youth-adult partnership*. Portland, OR: Education Northwest, Institute for Youth Success.