C

Community Engagement

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Overview

Community engagement of youth and adolescents is a set of processes by which young people become involved and constructively exercise agency in their surrounding environments. Young people can become engaged through involvement with existing organizations and government institutions and the establishment and leadership of new organizations. Community engagement is consistently regarded as an important facilitator of youth development. Less frequently (but increasingly) recognized are the ways in which youth community engagement contributes positively to adult development, community development, and a functioning civil society. This essay makes the case that youth community engagement is important from a civil society perspective, a social justice perspective, and that multigenerational partnerships are particularly critical in contemporary society. Recent literature is synthesized, drawing particularly on examples of youth–adult partnerships, youth involvement in governance, and community organizing involving young people. Finally, it provides recommendations for future research, policy, and practice.

Definition and Introduction

Young people's engagement in communities has become a topic of interest from many perspectives in research and practice. Early research on the topic centered on political socialization, intergenerational stability, and adolescents' cognitive development (see Flanagan 2004). In recent decades, community engagement of young people has been studied from civic engagement and social capital perspectives (Coleman 1988; Jarrett et al. 2005). The term "youth" for us includes both adolescents and those in their early to mid-20s. "Community" can have a variety of meanings ranging from neighborhoods and organizations to larger (even global) collectives (Kadushin et al. 2005). Drawing on these components, youth community engagement is defined as a set of nested processes through which young people become involved and constructively exercise agency in their surrounding environments, primarily through organizations and civic life (formal/informal) in the communities in which they live.

This essay begins by presenting a pragmatic case for involving youth in organizational and community change. Next, three models of youth community engagement are considered: volunteerism, youth in governance, and community

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organizing that involves young people. Youth–adult partnerships are then discussed as a core element of each model. Within this frame, nested processes of youth community engagement are described: individual, interpersonal, organizational, and cultural. The following section addresses the role of youth community engagement in facilitating youth development, adult development, and community development. The final section provides recommendations for policy and practice and highlights gaps in the current knowledge on youth community engagement.

A Pragmatic Case for Engaging Youth in Contemporary Society: Constructing a Civil Society and Confronting Age Segregation

At a societal level, there have been several prominent themes in arguments for the importance of youth community engagement. Many of them hinge on the concept of *civil society*, which can be understood as a society in which citizens are active in ensuring that rights are upheld and responsibilities met – one that is constantly working on balancing public interests with the interests of individuals (Hunter and Milofsky 2007). Civil society encompasses public, quasi-public, and independent spaces and institutions and serves associational, representational, and contestatory functions (Edwards and Foley 2001). A civil society exists when citizens are learning about issues and choosing to engage in processes of change and collective decision-making. Thus, civil society is fluid and procedural rather than structural. As a process, however, it can only be as "good" as the values that find expression through it.

Inclusivity and diversity are among the values espoused by civil society theorists (Bellah et al. 1985). A prominent theme in arguments for engaging young people in communities is the need for diversity and inclusivity in democratic processes. While these arguments have been successful in extending participatory and representational rights to some other historically excluded groups, such rights have yet to be extended to young people (Camino and Zeldin 2002). Youth are routinely prevented from engaging in their communities, through both formal and informal mechanisms of exclusion. This exclusion is particularly pronounced as it relates to youth of color and immigrant youth (Fine et al. 2004; Seif 2011). A civil society perspective argues that the exclusion of young people is not only unjust but that it constrains the ability of the entire society to work toward the common good by leaving out the perspectives of some members of the society (Checkoway et al. 2005).

A second theme in arguments for youth community engagement is social justice. Social justice perspectives on youth community engagement address the challenging circumstances facing youth – particularly youth of color – in contemporary society (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002). Youth from poor families or minority groups often face compounding disadvantages, and in many cases, youth are blamed for consequences of the societal forces that affect them. Over the past decade, a mutual disengagement between youth and adults has been documented. In brief, youth often fail to vote, show little knowledge of civics, and show little interest in engaging with mainstream public institutions; conversely, it has been documented that adults choose to remain segregated from youth in their communities, that adults know little about youth concerns, and feel ambivalent about young people's ability to contribute to the community (Zeldin and Topitzes 2002). Community engagement – particularly through models that draw on a justice orientation such as youth organizing – can be effective at confronting marginalization, age segregation, and ageism (Conner et al. 2013).

A third theme in the arguments for community engagement of young people in contemporary society hinges on globalization. According to this view, globalization and associated phenomena present a heightened need for youth community engagement (Flanagan and Faison 2001). As political, economic, and environmental systems become more interrelated and complex, the need for members of younger generations to gain experience working on community issues is increased. For instance, the pace of change and the

interconnected nature of events across the globe greatly increase the complexity inherent in modern life. From a practical perspective, then, engaging people in community leadership processes while they are young equips them to more effectively deal with this complexity throughout their lives as they presumably acquire greater responsibilities.

Models for Youth Community Engagement

Volunteerism

Volunteerism is most often coordinated through nonprofit organizations, which have been referred to as *mediating structures* or *mediating institutions* (Berger and Neuhaus 1977) due to their role in mediating between individuals and families and the society's larger institutions (e.g., government, mass media, corporations). These organizations include neighborhood associations; parent–teacher associations; faith-based institutions; and local chapters of national nonprofits devoted to housing, education, recreation, child development, and a range of other issues. Many of these groups seek young volunteers, and many young people are encouraged or required to volunteer by their schools or religious organizations. The US government has increasingly provided support for volunteerism. An example is the creation of the Corporation for National and Community Service, which administers grants and programs including AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America.

Voluntary participation is the most widespread model of youth community engagement. It makes direct contributions to civil society, often through provision of services. Additional benefits of volunteerism include the development of civic identity (Martínez et al. 2012; Youniss and Yates 1999) and the potential for interactions between people of diverse backgrounds. Volunteerism is often treated as an unmitigated good or a societal panacea, yet it has limitations as a model of community engagement. Volunteer activities are too often divorced from political issues or the root causes of the social problems they target. There is also evidence that the membership of voluntary groups tend toward homogeneity and that voluntary activity does not lead to political activity (Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2005).

Youth in Governance

The goal of youth engagement in governance is to enhance youth influence by getting them as close to the seats of institutional power and decision-making as possible (Camino and Zeldin 2002). In many cases, youth are granted the same rights and responsibilities as their adult colleagues. On nonprofit boards of directors and appointed advisory boards, for example, it is not unusual for youth to have an equal vote in making policy decisions (Checkoway et al. 2005). In other settings, such as legislative bodies, school boards, and public commissions, prevailing legal or public norms often preclude youth from being fully involved in public deliberations or in voting. In such cases, individual youth or youth boards advise and consult to the formal decision makers.

Quite often, localities create youth councils or similar bodies that are designed to advise existing governance bodies, with the youth commenting on proposed legislation, administrative directives, and dispersion of public or philanthropic monies (Ferber et al. 2002). Most typically, youth focus on policy direction and budget in areas such as youth services, recreation, library, and other community-oriented programming. Increasingly, the Councils conduct public education on upcoming issues or seek to mobilize support for specific positions. In the most innovative cases, such as the Multnomah County Youth Commission in Portland, Oregon, youth, by statute, take leadership in both policy making and in organizing young people around issues of justice and programmatic concern (Petrokubi and Zeldin 2015).

Like the other models of engagement, youth in governance has distinct strengths and limitations. On the positive side, youth are "at the table" or close to the table where policy decisions are made. Adults do look to youth on issues that they perceive youth to have expertise, and the presence of youth reminds adults that young people can participate in collective decision-making. Positive impacts on policies and programs can result

(Zeldin 2004b). Of course, adults can, and often do, ignore the voice of youth in settings of governance. In many cases, young people are dependent on adult allies to ensure that other adults seriously consider youths' perspective. The number of participating youth can be relatively small unless the youth in governance effort also includes a public education or mobilizing component (Petrokubi and Zeldin 2015).

Youth Organizing

If governance reflects deliberation and action on the "inside rail" of civil society, then organizing can be conceptualized as complementary strategies occurring on the "outside rail." The goal of organizing is not to pressure public institutions and their governance bodies to simply renew themselves but, more fundamentally, to transform themselves to better address issues of equity (Delgado and Staples 2008; Rogers et al. 2012). When youth are supported to develop power and leadership, that is, when campaigns are designed to help youth to speak in a collective voice to power elites, in harmony with their adult partners, then it is assumed that public and nonprofit institutions will become more responsive to community concerns, particularly, but not limited to, those that impact youth (Checkoway and Gutierrez 2006).

Action research is a core strategy for many youth-organizing efforts (Dolan et al. 2015). Research is also an effective tool for representation. When students survey their peers or community residents about an issue, subsequent organizing can proceed with the knowledge that it reflects the priorities and concerns of key constituent groups. Research also provides the organizing group with legitimacy and access. When institutional leaders understand that young people represent an informed, and large, constituency, they are pressured to respond. In addition to developing as action researchers, youth – like many adult participants in grassroots community organizing – develop leadership and relational skills (Christens 2010). These networks of relationships and understandings of social power and local systems (Kirshner 2009) are then harnessed for effective advocacy to improve the local community by modifying institutions, policies, and practices (Speer 2008).

Youth community organizing is an auspicious model for engaging youth. It explicitly links youth development with community development and change (Christens and Kirshner 2011). Leadership development and understandings of social power are pursued both as outcomes and as precursors to achieving community-level change on pressing social issues such as violence, education, environmental justice, and the enhancement of local opportunities for recreation and employment. Additionally, youth organizing efforts can produce new opportunities for youth community engagement through, for example, the creation of new youth councils. However, youth organizing that delivers on all of this promise is still relatively rare. Some youth organizing efforts suffer from a lack of consistency or sustainability over time. Adult partners of youth successfully engaged in community organizing must possess a diverse set of skills that are in short supply.

Youth–Adult Partnerships

No model of youth community engagement is more essential than the other – all are needed for civil society, and all are dependent on successful youth–adult partnerships for sustainable quality (Zeldin et al. 2013). Comparing models of youth community engagement demonstrates differences in assumptions about policy change, power, and strategy. Advocates for youth in governance, for example, emphasize the role of deliberation and policy making in forums of public and nonprofit decision-making. Advocates for youth organizing, in contrast, focus less on the strengthening of institutions from the inside and more on transforming policy and programming through outside pressure. Volunteerism is often described in charitable terms (e.g., "giving back" to the community). Scholars similarly focus on the differences between models. Governance, for example, is most often characterized as an "adult-led" model, with organizing characterized as a "youth-led" model. On closer inspection, however, the commonalities between these two models become

equally vivid. Youth often perform the same functions and take on similar roles in both governance and organizing. Additionally, the dominant roles of youth and adults do not fall neatly into separate categories. In some contexts, adults take the lead, and in other cases, youth take the lead. Moreover, it is often impossible to determine which age group is "leading." This is because the youth are doing the governance and organizing in partnership with adults, not as independent actors (Blanchet-Cohen et al. 2014; Camino 2005; Christens and Dolan 2011).

A focus on youth–adult partnership in public action can provide a useful lens – one that subsumes particular models such as youth in governance and youth organizing – for conceptualizing the ways that youth contribute to public institutions and community organizations. Indeed, the core elements of youth-adult partnership – authentic decision making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness – appear to be vital for all types of community engagement (Zeldin et al. 2013), even from a cross-national perspective (Zeldin et al. 2015)). Looking at engagement through the lens of partnership may serve to broaden the assumptions and practices endorsed by those studying and working to support community engagement.

Individual and Interpersonal Processes

As a set of nested processes, youth civic engagement can be viewed from several perspectives. At an individual and interpersonal level, young people who are engaged in their communities develop new competencies. Through youth–adult partnerships, young people are challenged to develop interpersonal and leadership skills they would not be challenged to develop if restricted to youth-only settings. For example, Larson and Hansen (2005) demonstrate the development of strategic thinking and communication skills among youth involved in activism. Additionally, community engagement processes support the development of what Larson (2000) describes as *initiative*; "many youth do their schoolwork, comply with their parents, hang out with their friends, and get through the day, but are not invested in paths into the future that excited them or feel like they originate from within" (p. 170). Community engagement processes can provide settings where youth are challenged to come up with strategy and creative solutions and where their work is valuable to others. Involvement in these types of settings can impact understandings of self and capabilities in ways that transcend specific processes and settings (Zeldin 2004b).

Young people engaged in their communities become psychologically empowered through increased perceptions of sociopolitical control, participatory competence, and domain-specific efficacy (Christens and Peterson 2012; Holden et al. 2005). Engaged youth also develop understandings of processes of oppression and liberation (i.e., critical consciousness) (Watts et al. 2011). Watts et al. (2003) describe these developments as sociopolitical development. Sociopolitical development root causes of social problems (Watts and Flanagan 2007). Similarly, the development of critical social analysis can be understood as part of the formation of critical social capital (Ginwright 2007) or the cognitive component of psychological empowerment (Christens et al. 2016b). Youth–adult partnerships are key drivers of youth psychological empowerment processes (Krauss et al. 2014; Zeldin et al. 2014).

Organizational Processes and Structures for Youth Engagement

In order for youth community engagement to be effective as a support for youth, adult, and community development, the organizations and settings in which youth are engaged must have characteristics that support these processes. Four processes are fundamental: (1) adults demonstrate respect for youth and build supportive relationships with them, (2) adults find a proper balance in sharing power with youth, (3) youth have experiences of membership and importance, and (4) youth have opportunities to contribute on their own terms (Camino and Zeldin 2002; Li and Jullian 2012). These interpersonal processes must be supported by organizational culture. Organizations can sustain youth engagement over time by promoting partnership values,

creating structures for partnership, and visibly highlighting the collective action of youth and adults to community stakeholders (Zeldin et al. 2008a). A key characteristic of organizations that promote youth community engagement is ownership – youth must be legitimate partners with true decision-making power and responsibilities comparable to those of adults (Mitra 2008; Zeldin et al. 2008b).

Theoretical and Empirical Outcomes of Youth Community Engagement

Youth community engagement processes are capable of facilitating youth development, adult development, and community development (Zeldin 2004b). In terms of youth development, community engagement has been linked to the development of competence and confidence, as well as increased community connections that often become tangibly useful (e.g., for obtaining employment) (Hurd et al. 2014). Youth community engagement is also key to the development of psychological sense of community (Evans 2007) and community-level improvements such as violence prevention (Zeldin 2004a). Engaged youth are more likely to continue participating in civic life as adults (Smith 1999). Participation in organizing and social movements has been linked to lasting changes in young participants' identities and life trajectories (Conner 2011; McAdam 1990). Increasingly, however, young people are being viewed as potential contributors to community well-being and as assets to their adult partners (Flanagan 2003).

Youth–adult partnerships present opportunities for adult development as well as youth development. Adult partners of engaged youth develop confidence and competence in sharing power and collaborating with youth, as well as a sense of satisfaction from seeing a younger generation benefit from their experience, known as generativity (Zeldin 2004b). Youth involved in community organizing make distinctions between their adult partners in organizing and adults "in power" (i.e., city council members, school board members), who are sometimes confronted for their failures to support a civic agenda favorable to youth (Christens and Dolan 2011). Yet, "adults in power" and community leaders who encounter engaged youth frequently reflect on their assumptions about youth and become advocates for youth participation (Zeldin et al. 2008a).

One of the most important benefits of youth community engagement – yet perhaps the most hidden – is that it can help to strengthen the fabric of civic life in communities. Research demonstrates that youth community engagement can help prepare a new generation of community leaders while, concurrently, strengthening the motivation and ability of current community leaders to address issues important to young people (Snyder 2008). In this sense, the impact of youth community engagement ripples out as others see it in the community, sometimes challenging preexisting perspectives on youth and social systems (Conner and Rosen 2015). Further, youth community engagement promotes effective citizenry – it is a potent vehicle for participatory democracy, especially among underrepresented populations, and serves as a catalyst for motivating community coalitions and collaborations to take collective action on behalf of youth and community well-being (Evans and Prilleltensky 2007). Over time, youth participation becomes an institutionalized norm, youth voice is expressed in civic agendas, coalitions are formed with a wide range of community partners, and institutions are altered to more effectively serve youth with new resources, programs, and policies (Petrokubi and Zeldin 2015; Ramey 2008).

Conclusion

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Nearly 70 years ago, the sociologist Hollingshead (1949) completed a comprehensive study of youth in the United States, with particular attention to the influences of economic class and opportunity on the developmental experiences of young people. One conclusion from this research was that: "Policy tends to segregate children [teenagers] from the real world that adults know and function in. By trying to keep the maturing child ignorant

of the world of conflict and contradictions, adults think that they are keeping him [sic] pure" (p. 149). This attitude persists today. The notion that youth should, or even can, be productively engaged in public action is not embedded within the United States culture. Indeed, most scholars conclude that a culture of nonparticipation by youth, and isolation from adults, is still endemic within forums of community governance and organizing.

From a policy perspective, there is little downside to encouraging youth community engagement through each of the three models. There are differences, however, in the ways that policy impacts youth engagement in different models. In a volunteerism model, for example, policies should continue to be considered that incentivize active participation of young people in their own communities. This model of youth community engagement is less frequently constrained by policy and practices than youth in governance and youth organizing. Youth who volunteer for charities, for example, are seldom penalized and often rewarded while youth participating in community change processes may well be deterred from participation or suffer negative consequences as a result of their engagement.

A civil society depends on youth and adults working together, yet it must be acknowledged that schools have not bought in to this agenda. Youth are rarely involved in school reform in the United States, despite the calls for such involvement since the days of John Dewey and later, during the experiential education movement of the 1970s. Even today, as school reform emphasizes community and service learning as vehicles for civic renewal, young people most often sit on the sidelines. Beyond established forums such as Student Councils, youth are seldom asked their opinions or asked to contribute to the educational missions of their schools. Research further indicates that youth who struggle academically or socially are most often excluded or ignored when adults deliberate. It is no wonder, therefore, that students' levels of disenfranchisement and disengagement are tremendously high in many high schools. As settings with a profound influence on the lives of youth, schools must become more supportive of youth community engagement. Youth participation within schools must move beyond student councils to a point where youth are partners with legitimate ownership of schools as institutions. Furthermore, schools must become supportive of young people as leaders and activists in the broader community.

Gaps in Knowledge and Priorities for Research

While there is mounting evidence on the positive impacts of youth community engagement, gaps in knowledge remain. Specifically, there is a need for comparisons of specific forms of youth community engagement for longitudinal studies that reveal the effects of these different forms of engagement over time and for studies that situate these processes in particular contexts (i.e., using multilevel, geographic, and/or relational designs or ethnographic methods). Moreover, there is a need for more action research to be conducted alongside youth community engagement efforts.

Systematic evaluations. Most of the results reported in the research literature on youth community engagement are individual-level outcomes. When community- or setting-level outcomes are reported, it is most often done in the form of descriptive studies or other methods that provide little in the way of falsifiability. In a more extreme case, researchers may inflate or adjust results to favor programs they prefer or are otherwise invested in (Gorman 2003).

Comparisons of different approaches. Much of the research literature on youth community engagement is composed of reports of the impacts of a single program or initiative. There is a need for comparison studies of different models or modes of engagement or studies that use similar methodologies and examine the quality of common processes (e.g., youth–adult partnership) across different types of youth community engagement.

Capturing context and development. More systematic inquiries of community- and setting-level outcomes of youth engagement in community processes should be undertaken. Network analysis (Wasserman and Faust 1994) and applied longitudinal data analysis (Singer and Willett 2003) provide promising methodologies for

understanding change over time while capturing contextual influences on youth development in the context of community engagement, including the impact of networks of relationships between individuals.

Action Research. The research on youth community engagement comes from many disciplines including psychology, education, political science, and social work. Researchers should continue to build transdisciplinary linkages and involve practitioners, communities, and youth in decision-making about research processes (Christens et al. 2016a). A promising move in this direction is the interest in participatory action research (Ozer and Wright 2012).

Cycles of Youth Community Engagement or Disengagement

Both engagement and disengagement of youth in communities create cycles that are self-reinforcing or path dependent. For instance, the attitude that youth have little to contribute leads to exclusion and a self-fulfilling loop. Young people are keenly aware of adult stereotypes and their lower status within communities and schools. This awareness negatively influences their decisions to engage. Organizations, meanwhile, interpret the responses of young people as a lack of commitment or interest. Consequently, adults fail to assertively reach out to young people. Over time, the risk is that this cycle of noncollaborative participation can become institutionalized into the organization's culture. And, over time, it becomes ingrained into societal policies. It is worth emphasizing, for example, that the United States is the sole remaining member of the United Nations not to have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). The United States, in other words, is exceptional in that it does not formally endorse the idea that all children have the right to be heard on matters affecting them, including policy matters. Should we not be surprised that schools fail to prioritize youth engagement or that young people often feel as though their voices are not heard in community forums?

It is time to break that cycle and start a new one – youth community engagement can promote a self-sustaining cycle of participation and further engagement. Youth engagement helps strengthen community leadership and representation and sparks collective action. In addition to promoting positive youth development and providing needed policy and programmatic help to communities, youth community engagement in public action strengthens local leadership and can be a potent vehicle for effective citizenry.

Public institutions and nonprofit organizations take notice. These institutions respond with policies and programs that encourage more youth participation and collaboration with adult partners. Over time, the engagement of young people becomes an institutional norm and community expectation. The result is civic agendas that fully consider and incorporate youth concerns and priorities. The cycle continues. Youth engagement is not a magical remedy for societal ills. But, when society takes on youth development, social justice, and civil society as a priority and in a serious manner, youth engagement will most certainly be a necessary strategy toward the collective good.

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