ABSTRACT
                  In 2000, a study entitled "Youth in Decision-Making: A Study
on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations," examined organizations
that actively involved youth in decision making roles and found that adults
and organizations had experienced significant positive changes as a result.
Building on focus groups and interviews conducted in developing this study,
researchers hosted a meeting of youth and adult researchers and practitioners
to generate questions that could guide research, policy, and practice. This
agenda highlights the interests and concerns of conference participants,
focusing on six issues: the impact of youth involvement for the individual
youth, adult partners, organizations, and communities; the implications of
youth development and associated range of skills and interests for the
policies and practices that promote maximum community and organization
involvement of diverse youth; how to understand and measure the process and
impact of youth involvement across contexts; how to sustain youth
involvement; who is advocating, promoting, and participating in youth
involvement nationally and internationally; and how the current movement to
increase youth involvement relates to the historical narrative, policy
frameworks, and other social movements. Recommendations include involving
youth in research and fully funding evaluation projects dedicated to youth
involvement. (SM)

Youth Involvement for Community, Organizational and Youth Development:

Directions for Research, Evaluation and Practice

A joint effort of...

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INNOVATION CENTER
for community & youth development

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Research Agenda Overview

In 2000, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development published Youth in Decision-Making: A Study on the Impacts of Youth on Adults and Organizations. This research, conducted by Shepherd Zeldin, Annette Kusgen McDaniel, Matt Calvert and Dimitri Topitzes from the University of Wisconsin – Madison, focused on organizations that actively involved youth in decision-making roles and found that adults and organizations had experienced significant positive change as a result. This points to the promise of youth involvement as a strategy for youth, organizational and community development. However, the youth development field, and especially the research community, have only recently begun to examine the processes by which this development takes place. This lack of understanding has proved to be a significant barrier to giving serious consideration to youth involvement as an effective youth and community development strategy. Foundations and other funding sources are asking for documentation that youth involvement is a strategy worthy of further investment. Advocates working with policy makers to further youth involvement have asked for better research and evaluation. And organizations and communities need the support of promising examples of practice to partner with young people in meaningful and authentic ways.

Building on the interviews and focus groups that were conducted in the development of the Youth in Decision-Making study, the Innovation Center hosted a meeting of a group of youth and adult researchers and practitioners. They were given the task of generating questions to guide research, policy, and practice. The group generated nearly 70 questions that raised issues of the fit between youth competencies and youth roles in organizations; the competencies of adults needed to partner with youth; community and organizational antecedents of successful youth involvement; individual, organizational and community impact; and issues of best practice and strategy. They also sought descriptive information about varied youth involvement practices and the demographics of those involved. They thought more information was needed about the historical, policy, cross-disciplinary and international contexts of the work. At the most fundamental level, the group sought definition and clarity for the elements and dimensions of youth involvement.

This agenda highlights the interests and concerns of the conference participants. It also builds upon the knowledge gained from our many conversations with young people, youth workers and others engaged with youth involvement. Clearly, an agenda is already forming and it is time to capture it and connect the diverse research and practice that contributes to the field. Since the agenda speaks primarily to the research and policy community, many issues important to practitioners are beyond its scope. However, it is also intended to be strategic—to identify areas for researchers and reflective practitioners to explore, which are likely to respond to the important questions of policy, social justice, and democracy which underlie many of the issues.

The research agenda is intentionally broad. We hope it will spur policy makers and funders to examine their priorities, encourage researchers to think of their work and interests in the light of youth involvement issues, and stimulate practitioners to undertake the innovations that push the field forward and to build the learning communities that are needed to support the youth involvement movement. As specific research projects develop, it will be essential to involve young people and their allies as participants in framing, designing, and carrying out these research programs.

Applied research questions and evaluation questions are outlined alongside more basic research issues. This emphasizes the need for partnership between the two to develop a full understanding of the real-world experiments that contribute to changes in policy and practice. In reviewing the recommendations of the meeting participants, it became clear that they could be grouped into six main questions:

1 What are the impacts of youth involvement for the individual young people, adult partners, organizations, and communities?

2 What are the implications of youth development and the associated range of skills and interests for the policies and practices which promote maximum community and organizational involvement of diverse young people?

3 How can we understand and measure the process and impact of youth involvement across contexts?

4 How do organizations and communities sustain youth involvement?

5 Who is advocating, promoting, and participating in youth involvement in the United States and across the world?

6 How does the current movement for increasing youth involvement relate to the historical narrative, policy frameworks, and other social movements?

Understanding and Measuring the Impacts

①

What are the impacts of youth involvement for the involved young people, other youth, adult partners, organizations and communities?

Researchers can help describe the processes of individual development within youth organizations and other contexts that use youth involvement strategies. This knowledge will add to what has been learned about development in more adult controlled and structured settings.

Researchers have learned a great deal about the impact of structured environments such as families and schools on youth development. Less is known about the more fluid effects of settings such as neighborhoods and community-based youth organizations. Researchers have rarely

distinguished between the involvement of young people in significant decision-making roles and those in other less intensive organizational and community activities. Good measures of this involvement and its impacts will help to advance the practice of youth development. It is necessary to begin to research the quality of youth experiences in different contexts through the observation of group activities and youth-adult partnerships in decision-making.

Studying youth development programs that provide good fit for young people will give insight into the way in which young people create identities as agents of community and organizational change. Contexts in which young people exercise control over a program or geographic space may afford opportunities to explore generative identities—mainstream or countercultural—that are developmentally significant.

Research is needed to understand the positive effects of youth involvement on organizations. Such findings, when combined with the positive effects on individual young people, provide an important impetus to decision-makers considering youth involvement strategies.

Researchers' attention has only recently turned to the effects of young people upon the organizations in which they participate. Organizational

effectiveness and flexibility depend on factors such as sense of community, mission, entrepreneurial decision-making, leadership, and non-bureaucratic relationships. Adding young people to the equation, both in research and in program development, could make a major difference in organizational effectiveness in several of these domains. These data could also provide an important rationale for government and philanthropic investment in youth involvement.

Research is needed to examine the ways in which youth involvement practice affects community life.

Studies of organizations and communities that have infused youth at significant levels might help to answer these complex questions about how public ideas are formed and changed. Researchers should investigate the impact of youth action on social capital or other measures of the strengths of communities and institutions. This requires attention to both the formal and the informal spaces where young people have impact.

Research is needed to examine the impact of young people on individual adults—both the direct effects of youth action and indirect effects such as changing adult perceptions and expectations of young people.

Studies and polls show adults have divergent, and often negative, perceptions of young people's competence and potential, and that these perceptions are influenced by the adults' community connections as well as by their personal experiences. Significant questions remain about the possibility of influencing the attitudes and beliefs that adults have about young people. The Youth in Decision-Making study reported that adults who have direct experience with young people's competence undergo changes in attitude and motivation that go beyond the immediate situation. These findings bear further exploration.

Youth Development and Diversity

②

W hat are the implications of youth development and the associated range of skills and interests for the policies which promote maximum community and organizational involvement of diverse young people?

Despite their generally high levels of cognitive and moral development, young people are often excluded from participation in decisions relevant to their own lives. Researchers can help to apply what is known about the development of competencies in young people to build the support systems and scaffolding that help young people serve in roles where they are most likely to thrive and most able to contribute to positive organizational and community development.

Youth social policy in the United States has focused on protection—protecting vulnerable children from social dangers as well as protecting society from dangerous children and adolescents. If youth involvement practice and policy is going to break this pattern, we need strong evidence that communities and individuals have more to gain from involving young people than from isolating them. Well-documented principles and examples for practice will help communities take steps toward youth involvement in a social and policy environment that often regards such efforts with suspicion.

Young people gain formal reasoning skills comparable to adults between the ages of 11 and 15, though they may require different supports than adults to overcome a lack of experience. Given appropriate support, young people can participate in decision-making in ways that enhance their own development and provide valuable perspectives and contributions to organizations and communities. Evidence of the competency of youth will help make the case for policies that maximize the inclusion of young people in civic life rather than arbitrarily exclude them based on age. Interpersonal and organizational commitments to empowerment and participation can complement larger policy initiatives that support the participation of citizens in civic societies, but it cannot replace them completely. Research-based information is needed to support the advocates and policy

makers who promote youth involvement on a broad scale.

Researchers should connect youth involvement practice and youth development research. If we fit what we know about the differing attributes of younger adolescents, older adolescents, and young adults with the opportunities and supports in organizations and communities, we can involve a broad range of young people and improve outcomes at each stage.

Research on the relationship of child and adolescent developmental needs and organizational characteristics has demonstrated the connection between appropriate settings and developmental outcomes. Settings that provide an appropriate balance of choice, safety, support, and challenge have been successful in engaging adolescents. A mismatch of these developmental trends and organizational contexts has negative motivational consequences and often contributes to poor developmental outcomes. In addition, younger adolescents, older adolescents and young adults generally require different opportunities and supports to succeed. It is important for researchers to study and articulate the appropriate fit of roles and supports for different age

groups while remaining cognizant of the diversity of interests and abilities of people of all ages. Many of these organizational supports also improve the decision-making process for adults as well, and researchers can help to differentiate between youth-specific factors and those which affect other groups as well.

Researchers should ask whether involved youth reflect the diversity of the community or organization when evaluating youth involvement policies. Such attention will help organizations and communities avoid including only those young people who fit most easily.

> **Research-based information is needed to support the advocates and policy makers who promote youth involvement on a broad scale.**

Little is known about more fine-grained issues of the fit of young people and organizational and community roles. Our society's diversity of personalities, cultures, genders, abilities, and social support systems clearly calls for flexibility and choice in the spectrum of involvement available to young people in a community. Exploring the relationship between young people's skills and preferences and the roles they choose will also help organizations and communities work with diverse young people. Better knowledge about the range of choices and activities that will engage diverse young people will ensure that

youth involvement in civic and organizational life is not limited to those who fit most easily into the existing adult-dominated structures. Policy development can account for developmental and individual differences by providing multiple avenues to youth involvement in organizational and community activities.

------------------------------------③------------------------------------

How can we understand and measure the process and impact of youth involvement across settings?

Research is needed to develop instruments, procedures and methods that help us to understand youth involvement and that distinguish it from other youth development practices. Such tools will allow researchers and practitioners to track the experiences of individuals, organizations, and communities and to relate outcomes to contextual factors such as organization type, and age and socioeconomic status of participants.

Youth involvement, as a broadly-recognized form of best practice, is in danger of becoming a meaningless term without definition and, more important, measurement. Research and evaluation must differentiate youth involvement from other youth development practices such as mentorship, formal education, community service,

and competitive sports. A research and practice-based set of indicators that differentiates effective youth involvement principles from other youth development strategies will help researchers sort out the impacts of youth involvement practices.

As the elements of youth involvement become better understood by both practitioners and researchers, scholars can build a set of indicators of an effectively youth infused organization, coalition, or community. This set of indicators is needed to build more generalizable knowledge about the impact of what practitioners already recognize as best practice. It would also promote the effective evaluation and replication of youth involvement practice.

Many of the elements of a reliable instrument to measure youth involvement in an organization, coalition, or community are available from existing measures. However, youth involvement is characterized by reciprocal influences—changes in both young people and in the adults with whom they work, and also shifts in the character of their relationships over time. This dynamic process has not been measured adequately. To be useful, an instrument also must apply across communities and organizations with varying contexts and practices and should include measures of the beliefs, climate, sense of community, role fit, and relationships that must be effectively addressed in all settings. Such an instrument will also allow the broad generalizations about outcomes that are likely to gain the

attention of policymakers and funders. It will be invaluable in guiding research and practice to the areas with the most impact.

Systems-level research is also needed to connect the experiences and outcomes of youth involvement and other community and youth development strategies to the relationships of individuals, families, communities, and societies. This type of research is complex, but it engages the large social and policy issues that structure the role of young people in society.

We should develop indicators for effective practice as well as research. Research-based indicators of youth involvement can be transformed into tools for practitioners to examine and improve practice.

A research-based evaluation instrument will allow researchers and evaluators to examine youth involvement within its full community context, and to guide action in effective directions. Young people and adults participating in a research-based assessment process will be more likely to focus attention on organizational, community and cultural constraints that are most susceptible to change. They could be challenged to think about the constellation of leadership opportunities and the decision-making roles for young people that exist inside a community's organizations as well as beyond them within coalitions and government agencies.

Instruments have been developed for examining youth participation, but they tend to focus narrowly on organizational roles or on broad perceptions of young people and do not bring attention to the structures, beliefs, and practices that support authentic youth involvement. The tools we call for are intended to draw the attention of adults and youth in a community, coalition, or organization to the areas of youth involvement that facilitate community change.

Implications for Practice

④

H ow do organizations and communities sustain youth involvement?

Research and evaluation can help adapt and disseminate promising examples to schools and other organizations in which youth involvement is minimal or less systemic. To do this, researchers can focus on the organizational dynamics that support successful youth involvement and advance organizational goals.

Youth involvement has become widely accepted as good youth development practice in community-based youth organizations. However, the field of youth involvement is currently challenged to expand to new contexts. Community-based youth development organizations have been the most hospitable environments for youth involvement because of their reliance on voluntary participation, their grounding in communities, and their independence from bureaucracy. These are among the elements that distinguish many youth organizations from formal school institutions, government, companies, families, and other settings where young people generally have limited influence over their participation. However, despite their structural limitations, other organizations, especially schools, are also potentially influential because of their scope and size. A strategy for engaging students in school reforms that will lead to increased youth inclusion in decision-making roles must remain part of a long-term strategy of research and practice. In making choices on where to focus research and practice in youth involvement, schools and youth organizations with extended membership and participation are likely to be the sites of greatest interest.

Research to support the sustainability of youth involvement practice must focus on the areas where organizations struggle in initiating and maintaining youth involvement. The dissemination of knowledge on successful initiation strategies, necessary adult competencies, and issues of organizational preparedness will help organizations plan and prepare for youth involvement work. Better understanding of the types of interaction between youth and adults that promote partnerships, and the systems that provide training and opportunities at multiple levels for youth and adults will help organizations

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do the difficult work of sustaining youth involve-
ment as they bring new adults and youth into
the process.

*Case studies of youth involvement implementation
are needed. They provide models as well as data
that reveal the interpersonal and organizational
complexity of youth involvement activities. They
can also address dynamics at the community and
policy level.*

Case studies of organizations and communities
that have successfully infused young people in
authentic leadership roles are needed. Such
studies provide examples for other organizations
and policy-makers. Case studies can examine the
critical degree of youth involvement and the
kinds of roles and daily practices that lead to the
strongest outcomes. For example, some organiza-
tions that limit youth involvement to planning
processes have been shown to have less impact
on young people's learning and sense of shared
mission with adults than others that involve
young people in implementation and evaluation
phases of a project.

Several urban areas are marked by an unusual
amount of youth involvement in civic affairs. In
those communities, the young activists operate
at multiple levels—individual, organizational, and
community—and youth involvement is champi-
oned by leaders in the public sphere and in

community coalitions. This multi-level action,
endorsement; and visibility provides young
people and their allies in local organizations with
the direction and energy to do the daily work of
youth infusion. Examining the policy contexts,
social and cultural supports, and efforts of
individuals and groups that contributed to these
local cultural shifts will build understanding of the
individual and social processes of youth involve-
ment on a broad scale.

*Longitudinal studies of youth involvement are need-
ed. They will allow researchers to track individuals as
they change roles and move to new settings.*

Longitudinal observation allows researchers
to capture the elements and outcomes of
youth development over time. Research
that follows a young person's "career" in
an organization or role will give insight into
the developmental processes at work. Such a
research design will also provide data on
organizational change which is difficult to
capture after changes have taken place in
organizational structures, dominant beliefs, and
organizational narratives. Longitudinal studies of
young people as they move to new settings will
also give insight into the transfer of skills and
identities between contexts.

Social and Policy Contexts

⑤

Who is advocating, promoting, and participating in youth involvement in the United States and across the world?

Researchers can help to gather and present descriptive information and statistics describing the scope and range of youth involvement activity.

Knowing who is engaged in youth involvement is particularly critical to examining the relationship of such activities to social justice and diversity. Demographic information on youth involvement which includes gender, race, class, and age will give important insight into who is and is not involved. Researchers and organizations and communities need a map of the range of practices—youth-led activities and youth-adult partnerships in educational and work settings, across culture and class,

urban, suburban and rural contexts—that make up the movement toward youth involvement. Eventually, the field will need to link the map of the range of activities to the findings on impacts. This process will help to develop priorities for the most fruitful areas of youth involvement.

Research should examine and describe youth involvement in a variety of settings. Understanding the involvement of young people outside of youth development and youth serving organizations will expand the field's focus.

We also need improved understanding of the types of organizations that have involved young people and the consequential actions they perform within these organizations. Youth involvement is a common principle in youth development organizations, but young people are less represented in community development and advocacy organizations. For policy and practice to adopt youth involvement principles and practices, descriptive data on models of youth involvement in a variety of organizations is a necessary partner to impact data that show change in community and organizational function.

⑥

How does the current movement for increasing youth involvement relate to the historical narrative, policy frameworks, and other social movements?

Research can contribute to an understanding of the policy contexts and implications of youth involvement in public life. Historical research can provide an important perspective on the policy questions of our own time.

The social role of young people has changed dramatically since the industrial revolution and, today, new circumstances and contexts may be contributing to an emergent youth movement. Social historians have only begun to uncover the roles played by disempowered groups in the shaping of culture and institutions. Women and people of color are being written into the history books, but little attention has been focused on young people per se. History can also contribute to questions raised and lessons learned in the past that lend contemporary policy questions the complexity they deserve. Understanding the historical context and scope of this social movement will help build self-consciousness within the movement and public awareness of the policy issues related to youth.

> **Women and people of color are being written into the history books, but little attention has been focused on young people per se.**

Contemporary policy also demands attention and analysis. Participation in the national discourse on young people's competence and needs as well as in policy decisions such as establishing funding priorities for youth development programs will build understanding and support for improved public policy. Previous movements to include clients and consumers in informing government policy have had an impact, though they have often fallen short of winning access to the most important decision-making venues. The same problem exists with young people, particularly those doubly disenfranchised by the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as their status as youth. Sustained work is required for success. Advocates will benefit from a fuller understanding of the interests supporting and opposing increased youth involvement.

The public discourse about youth development and youth problems provides the framework within which policy is debated and decided. Researchers bring the legitimacy and theoretical frameworks needed to connect innovative local practice to the larger policy and cultural context.

This process can help to shape the debate on youth policy and have an impact at the national level. Research can give advocates and practitioners some of the tools they need to shape social policy that supports youth involvement across many communities and institutions.

A new motivation for policy changes related to youth involvement is the idea that youth involvement is not just good for young people, but that it can benefit organizations and communities. This case, if made convincingly, is sustainable and worthy of the investment of public resources.

Next Steps

In light of the questions we have outlined, here are some recommended next steps for researchers, practitioners, funders and policy makers.

Researchers can:
• Involve young people in defining questions, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating results.
• Shift focus to include youth involvement issues when conducting related research.
• Add depth to the understanding of youth involvement.
• Include age as a variable in studies.
• Focus on the impact of youth involvement on organizations and communities.
• Share research implications with practitioners.

Practitioners can:
• Document their practices and impacts and share their work.
• Connect to others engaged in youth involvement work and build a learning community.

• Build time for reflection and evaluation into their work.
• Share their expertise with researchers and policy makers.

Funders and policy makers can:
• Fully fund evaluation in projects dedicated to youth involvement.
• Commit to developing the understanding needed to justify investments in youth involvement.
• Share research findings and the agenda for further work with other funders and policy makers.
• Include youth involvement criteria when making funding decisions and reporting guidelines.
• Involve diverse young people in decision-making.

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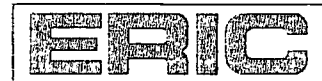
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