

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Young people are not just the leaders of tomorrow. They are the leaders of today.

- San Diego Youth Congress

Experiential learning provides a one of a kind opportunity for the young and bright students to engage in responsible leadership topics outside of the classroom. Teaching and learning can become inherently spontaneous and student-centric when moved from classroom to communities. Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis. From the collaborative learning atmosphere that results from the unique relationships developed outside the classroom to the deep learning that occurs when students must put into practice “in the real world”. What they have theorized about from behind a desk, field experiences are unmatched in their learning potential. Teaching and learning outside the classroom immerses students in genuine cultures. Engaging students with communities exposes them to unique experiences. One way to escape the confines of the classroom and to afford students opportunities to grow is to encourage students to learn from and to serve the surrounding community.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the fact that, students who are privileged need to give back to the society especially to those who are not so privileged. Immersing students to community needs will surely help enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It would also add to greater personal efficacy and leadership development, thereby enhancing social responsibility and career opportunities.

KEYWORDS: Classroom, Curriculum, Community Development, Youth

INTRODUCTION

The youth, especially in developing countries have not been successfully integrated into civil society, decision-making frameworks and the general development process, which affect their present and future livelihoods.

The merging of community building and youth development has been at the core of youth engagement literature, (Nitzberg, 2005; Kubisch, 2005; Cahn & Gray, 2005; Lynn, 2005; Brennan, Barnett, & Lesmeister, 2006). It has identified that youth must be fully engaged and involved in change efforts at the community level if they are to function as effective members of society. Community building, for individuals, focuses on building the capacity and empowerment to identify opportunities for change within or outside of the community.

An understanding of youth motivations and efficacy to this kind of engagement are important so that Extension and other development professionals can maximize these valuable resources. As youth are brought into community organizations and civic roles that they have traditionally been excluded from, they

can participate in local decision-making at multiple levels. This collaboration leads to skill enhancement, confidence building, and ownership that prepare them as they navigate toward adulthood. The volatile youth must collaborate and understand the real need to today’s society. The privileged must work towards understanding and developing the underprivileged.

The development of community is a dynamic process involving all segments of the locality, including the often-overlooked youth population. Youth represent a vast and often untapped resource for immediate and long-term community development efforts. They also provide an invaluable resource for program planning and effective evaluation. As youth are brought into and connected with community development programmes that they have often times been ignored or excluded from, they can participate in actively and contribute in decision-making at multiple levels. As youth are engaged in more sustained positive relationships with adults, other youth, and community development experts, apart from realizing that they are valued citizens of their communities, such collaborations and participation may lead to skill enhancement, empowerments and confidence-building traits.

Youth involvement can benefit organizations and their programs as well as the youth themselves. Programs that are developed in partnership with youth are more likely to be effective at engaging the population and, therefore, to have a greater impact. Involving youth as partners in making decisions that affect them increases the likelihood that the decisions will be accepted, adopted, and become part of their everyday lives. In addition, empowering youth to identify and respond to community needs helps them become empathetic, reflective individuals, setting them on a course to potentially continue this important work in their future. Meaningful youth engagement views youth as equal partners with adults in the decision-making process. Programs and activities are developed with youth, rather than for youth. In this kind of equal partnership, both adults and young people need to be fully engaged, open to change in how things are done, and share a unified vision for the partnership.

INDIA: THE POTENTIAL YOUTH

We are an amazingly young country. In fact, if you just take the age group from 10 to 19, there are 226 million Indians, poised, in other words, to enter higher education, going through school and ready for higher education.

Now this is amazing because it's happening at the time when the rest of the world is aging. Right? If you look at the average age in India today, it's 28. But what you've got with the average ages at a time when the rest of the world is changing, so by 2020, the average age in Japan is going to be 47, in China it's going to be heading well past 40, Europe, 46, the United States, youthful US, also 40, and India's average age is going to be 29.

So we are potentially the people who are the youthful, productive, dynamic, young population, ready to work, and transform the world, the kinds of role that, say, China played in the last generation could be ours in the next. In fact, International Labour Organization has worked out that by 2020, we'll have 160 million people in the age group of starting work — 20 to 24 is what they calculate — and China will only have 94 million, at the same time. So we really are poised to do that.

But, and by the way, other countries will have a serious deficit that's estimated that the US will have 17 million short in terms of how many people they need of working age. We, in India, have the people.

But do we have the ability to equip the people to take advantage of this, to be the workforce of the work engine for the world? If we get it right, we educate and train them, we really transform not just our own economy and our society, but the world. If we get it wrong, the demographic dividend that I'm talking about becomes a demographic disaster.

STEPS TO TAKE

1. **Provide youth opportunities to contribute.** Consider new ways to involve youth and allow them to offer input during decision-making, problem-solving, and action-taking activities.

2. **Present opportunities for personal self-growth, skill enhancement, and leadership development.** Allow youth to work with adults in active collaboration toward local community development. Integrating youth into committees with adults as mentors and guides will enable them to build the leadership skills and personal characteristics necessary for their future adult involvement.

3. **Partner with the youth.** Adults must partner with youth to develop the capacity to serve in organizations and become community leaders. In order to make this a successful venture, adults must first recognize and develop their own existing capacities, motivations, and barriers to partnering with youth.

4. **Engage youth actively.** Youth provide new ideas and voices that will stimulate enthusiasm and investment in community structures. In order to engage youth, adults must understand the invaluable impact of youth involvement. This includes respecting youth culture, getting youth involved on all levels, and respecting their invaluable contribution to society. Instead of youth involvement that is strictly limited to task-oriented volunteerism, youth should be empowered to become full partners in the community development process. Doing so allows them to establish a vested interest in long-term participation and contribution to their community.

5. **Form connections to teachers.** Teachers who actively engage youth in community issues can increase youth involvement. This may include student government groups, as well as school entrepreneurship and business education organizations that promote local community

development by teaching life skills, fiscal responsibility, and leadership. Introducing community needs and opportunities through teachers at area schools reinforces the importance of youth involvement in community action and policy making and will increase local investment and encourage youth participation. Tiebacks to citizenship, political science, and civics education in the community will provide classroom opportunities connected to real world scenarios.

6. *Link youth to planning and policy efforts.*

This can be accomplished by involving youth in the examination of existing policies as well as determining and evaluating potential policy alternatives. By considering youth input into exploration of policy impact, policy alternative criteria for evaluation, and analysis of policy alternative feasibility, youth will move from their role of inactive citizens to fully engaged stakeholders. This powerful connection to real community issues will involve youth not only in present decisions, but in future outcomes, leading them to investments that will provide potential ties toward future commitments as adults.

7. *Allow youth to identify their own interests.*

Within the greater social framework of community development and policy making, youth may have expertise or interests in a specific topic. As youth are brought into and connected with organizations and civic roles that they have traditionally been excluded from, they can participate in active and equal decision making at multiple levels. An increased exposure to shared norms and values through discussion on community issues and concerns will engage youth to consider where their interests lie, and encourage them to seek activities where they can create positive change for greater good.

8. *Involve youth in confronting more serious social problems.*

This will allow them to see themselves as community development agents capable of transforming their environments. By taking passive citizens waiting for adulthood before they become involved in systemic change and allowing them to be active citizens engaged in the process, youth will have a voice in decisions that

transform policies, make institutions more accountable, and affect their lives.

9. *Assess, evaluate, and readjust.* On a regular basis, evaluate the outputs and outcomes of youth involvement in community development process/projects. This will help in identifying strengths and capitalizing on them, as well as identifying weaknesses and addressing them in order to improve the overall effectiveness of youth engagement in community development. Evaluation data will also help in gaining more meaningful youth involvement in community development.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that youths participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their futures. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account. There is need to engage youth in recreational activities that enhance social cohesion. This includes development of community based infrastructure, promoting arts, culture, sport and overall entertainment of youth. This will promote social and national integration of youth. There is need to channel and redirect young people's energies towards positive direction by creating an environment that will enable them to reclaim their space for creative cultural expression. This will inculcate in youth a sense of belonging, self-worth and self-identity. This can be achieved through active mobilization and engagement of youth on issues affecting their lives. The cultivation of nationhood, patriotism as well as respect, understanding and tolerance of fellow human beings irrespective of their culture and religion will help promote well balanced youth who actively participate in the development of the country.

Every community is being changed by its young people. Unfortunately, most change is destructive and the few adult partners young people have do not, for the most part, guide the creativity and energy of youth towards the good of the community. No serious community development effort can possibly succeed, much less be sustained, without the creativity and energy of its young people.

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