



Making youth engagement a reality in YouthScape

**Natasha Blanchet-Cohen, International Institute for Child Rights and
Development**

Funding from the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

Key Words

Free-listing, Pile Sorting, The Wheel, Activity Domain, Network Dynamics, Forum, Civic Engagement, Youth, YouthScape, Canada, vulnerable youth, planning, community development, decision-making, evaluation, Participatory Action Research

Context

- YouthScape (YS) was launched more than two years ago in five Canadian cities with the goal of building stronger communities by including young people, especially disengaged and vulnerable youth, in planning and implementing community development initiatives.
- The YS approach recognizes that youth engagement has often been limited to celebrating youth voices in one-time events and individual programs. Making youth engagement a reality will require engaging youth with adults in shared decision-making and bringing many stakeholders together.
- SAS² tools applied to both specific activities and to the general YouthScape program. Some tools were used to deal with program design while others dealt with the overall impact of the program. Of significance is how the SAS² tools informed assessment, research, and planning.

Objectives

- To create space for collaboration between young people and community stakeholders.
- To change stakeholders' perceptions of young people so that young people are viewed not as problem-makers but as community-builders.
- To identify key elements for building strong communities through youth engagement.

Participants

- Young people aged 13 to 24 years, stakeholders in Halifax, NS; Thunder Bay, ON; Saskatoon, SK, Calgary, AB; and Rivière-des-Prairies, QC, as well as at the national level.

- Convening organizations in communities
- Community stakeholders, such as representatives from schools, governments, youth centers, and youth-led organizations

The number of participants per workshop ranged from five to 40.

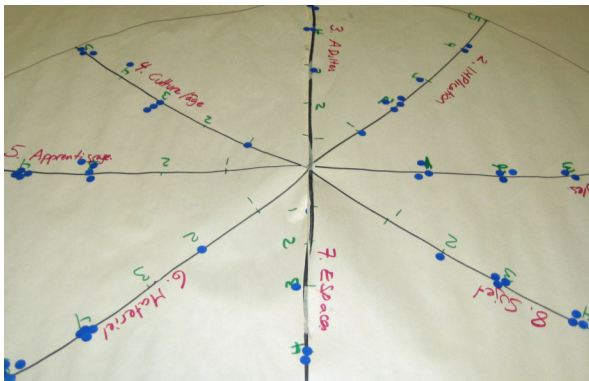


Tools

- Free-listing and pile-sorting
- The Wheel
- Activity Domain
- Network Dynamics

Results

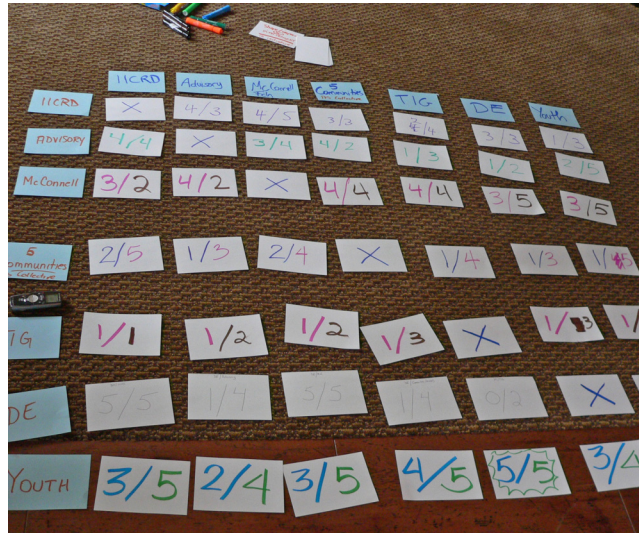
- During **the Wheel** activity in Rivière-des-Prairies, young people questioned adults' high ranking of "rippling out" in organizations. This led to a brainstorm activity with youth and adults on defining an organization that meaningfully involves young people. The group identified sharing of power, learning in community, and a friendly environment as key factors in such organizations.



-
- Low ranking in **the Wheel** activity in Calgary on youth leadership made young people request youth-only sessions, and led to reconfiguring local steering committees.
 - **Activity Domain** helped to clarify the broad scope of YS activities and give direction.
 - Young people used **Free Listing** and **Pile Sorting** to select criteria to assess their summer mapping experience. We learned how youth identify leaders amongst themselves, how peer leaders address team dynamics, how age is part of diversity, and how adults play a role in coaching youth leadership. Seeing the lack of rippling out, youth called for greater involvement of community; this resulted in planning a community forum for young people to present their findings to community leaders.



- Using **Network Dynamics**, YouthScape teams rated their current and ideal levels of interaction. Results indicated a network density of 33 percent, while an ideal scenario would almost be doubled, to 61 percent. Agreements emerging from the bilateral discussion between teams included increasing the links between the administrators and advisors and shifting the focus of developmental evaluators from project coordinators to community activities.



Broad Outcomes

- What emerged from using the SAS² tools was a framework that identifies six key components of building a resilient community: youth leadership, strength-based, rippling out, learning community, diversity, and accountability. These guideposts will support both young people and communities in pushing the boundaries. The hope is that this framework will both invite and create innovations that are youth paced and community based.

Future directions for using SAS²

- **Involve community partners in design.** As communities become involved in the design and delivery of the SAS² activities, this provides training opportunities and results in greater community ownership. At times, there may need to be trade-offs in the rigour of using the tools.
- **Interpret numbers in context.** Discussion and probing are critical to provide context for ranking. In Rivière-des-Prairies, for instance, the group ranked youth leadership high but discussion then revealed that both the

adults and youth were referring to one specific YouthScape activity and not to the partners' organizations.

- **Vary the make-up of groups.** Consider using several formats for the sessions, some with only youth or adults and others together. In Halifax, for instance, both youth-only and adult-only sessions were held. This allowed both groups to speak openly. In Rivière-des-Prairies, the first session was held together and then a follow-up session was held with the youth. Being together put pressure on the adults, but also later resulted in youth questioning adults.
- **Adapt to your audience.** Paying attention to the format you use is important, particularly if you want to involve less engaged young people. In Halifax, for instance, the guideposts were presented not in the form of a wheel but in a human body shape with fists out for strengths, a coiled body for ownership, etc. We also used a system of green-yellow-orange-red cards for ranking.