10-1-2003

Adult Attitudes About Youth Participation in Community Organizations

Marilyn F. Rasmussen
South Dakota State University, rasmussen.marilyn@ces.sdstate.edu

Recommended Citation

Adult Attitudes About Youth Participation in Community Organizations

Abstract
Many youth development professionals advocate for youth participation in civic and community organizations, but how do the leaders of these organizations feel about inviting youth to become partners in the decision-making process? A small-scale survey indicated that one-fourth of the responding organizations in South Dakota currently had some level of youth participation. More than half of the leaders of the remaining organizations indicated that youth should be consulted and invited to participate as members of their organizations. Youth development professionals should be encouraged by these results to explore potential youth and adult partnerships within their communities.

Marilyn F. Rasmussen
Youth Development/4-H Specialist
South Dakota State University
Brookings, South Dakota
Internet Address: rasmussen.marilyn@ces.sdstate.edu

Introduction

Adults frequently make decisions on behalf of children and youth without seeking input from the very audience they presume to serve. Service organizations, boards that oversee youth centers or after school programs, and public agencies make large and small choices everyday that affect children and youth in their community. For the most part, adults simply do not invite youth to participate in the decision-making process. The prevailing adult view of young people is of children as victims or as problems, rather than children as resources or as partners (Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

Conversely, youth are often unaware of opportunities to become involved in the decision-making process. Through church groups, 4-H, and scouts, youth have been made aware of and have embraced community service as a way to make positive changes in their communities, but they have not recognized the potential for social and political activism. According to a Harris Interactive survey, only 1 in 20 teenagers said that they might contact an elected official to effect change, and only 1 in 50 would consider getting involved in a political campaign. (Fund Raising Management, 2001).

These conventional view points have become the cultural norm for many reasons. An industrialized and enlightened society has banned children from dangerous workplaces. In the home, work-saving devices have eliminated many chores that children previously performed as their contribution to the family. In contemporary American families and homes, many young people are not expected to assume any responsibility; instead parents expect the child's primary responsibility to be to perform well academically. This is to ensure the child's future independence and financial success. Children and youth are viewed as passive recipients of knowledge and even cultural customs, rather than parents and adults inviting youth to be engaged in the dynamic formation of society (Kurth-Schai, 1998).

Progressive movements during the last part of the twentieth century recognized the contribution that youth could make to society. One such example is the abundance of youth involvement in planning and carrying out community service projects. However, individuals and institutions have not fully accepted youth as potential partners in contributing to and shaping society. Adults continue to be in charge of organizations and their resources, and they determine the outcomes

that adults deem appropriate for youth. Yet young people are seeking social commitment, a sense of ownership, and meaningful roles in society (Kurth-Schai, 1998).

Adults who are willing to engage youth in community leadership contribute to their development as productive members of society. Involvement is empowering for anyone, and that includes today's youth. Involvement is especially empowering for the disaffected or those who are traditionally excluded from the process. Youth can play a fundamental role in addressing important issues; their participation in the decision-making process of community organizations can reenergize communities (Hancock, 1994).

Purpose and Methods

During a series of local and regional conversations between youth and adults in South Dakota, participating teens expressed a strong interest in having a voice in the governance of civic and community organizations that make decisions pertaining to them. A survey was developed to gather baseline information with regard to the current status of youth participation in organizations within the state. The survey consisted of four parts:

- A description of the organization's mission statement or objectives,
- An assessment of current youth participation in the decision-making process within the organization,
- An assessment of desirable status of youth participation in the organization, and
- General comments or clarifications.

Twenty-five regional Youth Development/4-H Educators were enlisted to distribute surveys to the leaders (current officers) of organizations within their communities. Surveys were distributed to civic and community organizations in every geographic part of the state, as well as in rural and urban locations. Sixty-eight usable surveys were returned in this convenience sample.

Results and Discussion

The completed surveys represented opinions from a cross-section of organizational leaders, including governmental, religious, and service groups. An inventory of youth services provided by the organizations was gathered from the mission statement and used as the basis for assigning each organization to a category (Table 1). Over 93% of the organizations were service/community, religious, or government organizations that served a youth constituency exclusively or through at least one activity or program, such as adult-child mentoring and sponsoring recreational or sporting events. The organizations reporting youth participation in one or more aspect of governance included service/community, religious, 4-H/scout leaders, and youth center/after-school programs. None of the government or business organizations indicated youth participation in any facet of the decision-making process.

Table 1.
Convenience Sample of Youth-Serving Organizations in South Dakota

Organizations	Number
Service/Community	29
4-H/Scout Leaders	13
Government, local	8
Religious, church council	8
Youth center, after school program	7
Business/business related	2
Other	1
Total	68

Nineteen respondents (28%) indicated that youth were involved in the functioning or decision-making process of their organizations. The level and nature of youth participation in these 19 organizations was assessed by responses to six statements. A Likert-like scale (1=low or none, 5=high) was employed to gauge the extent of participation in six categories. The statements are listed in descending order of mean scores (Table 2).

The most common level of youth participation was in an advisory capacity where youth were included in discussions at the committee level or at regular meetings. In half of these organizations, youth had voting privileges. In only four of the 19 organizations did youth serve in the same capacity as adult members, that is, with voting privileges, on committees, and as officers.

Table 2.
Current Level of Youth Participation

Youth in Our Organization . . .	Mean Score
Participate in discussions	3.8
Are informed about the issues facing the group	3.7
Contribute toward problem solving	3.6
Take action on issues	3.5
Share in decision-making	3.3
Serve in leadership roles	3.1

Youth participation in group discussions yielded the highest mean score. When examining the decreasing participation dimension of the responses in this sample, it is apparent that youth were involved in discussing issues, were frequently informed about the issues, and made a contribution toward solving problems. In these organizations, youth were slightly less likely to take action on an issue or participate in making decisions.

Finally, the lowest mean score was obtained for youth participating in leadership roles. These data do not provide sufficient information to discern whether this was a result of youth preference or the amount of participation allowed by the adults. Responses in the general comment section of the survey generally indicated that the organizations were not structured to include youth in leadership roles, that is, in the organization's by-laws.

All respondents indicated interest in some type of youth involvement in their organizations; however, there was a lack of agreement on the type and extent of responsibility that youth should assume. Four statements were designed to capture attitudes about a suitable role for youth in their organizations (Table 3). Most of the respondents (87%) considered it highly important for their organization to seek the opinions and ideas of youth. Even elected officials considered it important to seek ideas and opinions from youth.

Table 3.
Organizational Leaders' Attitudes on Youth Participation in Organizations

In Our Organization, Youth Should Be . . .	Agreement in Groups with Youth Members n=19		Agreement in Groups Without Youth Members n=49		Agreement in All Groups n= 68	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Consulted on decisions related to youth activities	18	95%	41	84%	59	87%

Represented as members	18	95%	31	63%	49	72%
Represented in leadership roles	17	89%	24	49%	41	60%
Included in all facets of governance	12	63%	20	41%	32	47%

Although 72% of all the respondents agreed with the statement that youth should be members of the organization, only eight organizations (12%) acknowledged that youth were actually members. In the general comments portion of the survey, a few respondents characterized the barrier to youth participation as the highly demanding schedules of young people, rather than their own organizational culture, structures, or by-laws.

Although representatives of organizations with youth participation strongly agreed that youth should be in leadership roles and active in all facets of governance (89% and 63% respectively), less than half of the remaining organizations agreed (49% and 41% respectively). One service organization sponsored more than 30 youth-oriented activities; yet, the respondent indicated that any level of youth participation in the organization was not appropriate. The respondent indicated that any information the organization needed about youth programming was obtained from adults.

Conclusions

This survey provided baseline information on the status of youth participation in civic and community organizations in South Dakota. Slightly more than one-fourth of the organizational leaders who responded to the survey indicated that youth participated in their organizations. In approximately half of these organizations, youth held full membership and leadership roles. If it was not already a reality, representatives of organizations with youth participation strongly agreed that leadership and governance are appropriate roles for youth in their organizations for the future.

Although the remaining 49 organizations reported no youth involvement at this time, more than 40% of these respondents agreed that their organizations should involve youth as members and leaders. Twenty percent of the organizational leaders could not envision youth and adults working together as partners in their organizations. General comments indicated that many organizational leaders are interested in engaging youth but that they perceive that young people are already very busy and have very little time for additional commitments.

The study described here was limited by the sample size and population. A larger sample size would help to gain better insight into adult attitudes about forming and maintaining partnerships with youth in their civic and community organizations. In addition, the survey was limited to adults, so it does not address the opinions and interests of youth about becoming involved in community organizations. The joint conversation of youth and adults in South Dakota indicated that youth do desire a role in decision-making, especially in the organizations that directly impact choices and opportunities for youth.

References

Finn, J. L., & Checkoway, B. (1998). Young people as competent community builders: A challenge to social work. *Social Work* 43(4), 335.

Hancock, M. (1994). Collaboration for youth development: Youth action programming. *National Civic Review,* 83(2) 139.

Kurth-Schai, R. (1988). The roles of youth in society: A reconceptualization. *The Educational Forum,* 52(2), 117.

Survey profiles young people's views on community involvement. (2001). *Fund Raising Management* 32(8), 8.