AUTHENTIC YOUTH PARTNERSHIP & CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN GREEN SPACE INITIATIVES: A PRACTITIONER’S GUIDE

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Context - Challenge – Solution

There is now ample research showing that connecting communities and youth to nature increases health and well-being and is essential in developing the next generation of environmental advocates. As a result, there is an increasing movement to improve and enhance green spaces and programming, particularly in cities and urban centers. Referencing the work of the Child Rights and Child Friendly Cities movements, many of these efforts seek to include youth and community members in the development of these green space initiatives.

Most of these community and youth involvement efforts see youth as sources of information and ideas by which to improve the quality and relevance of the programs and spaces they design. Benefits for youth include understanding of civic processes, having a voice, developing public speaking skills, learn how to engage classmates, and expanded awareness of career opportunities.

While these are highly valuable experiences, there is a huge opportunity for increasing the benefits derived from engagement efforts, particularly for youth and communities that are typically subject to systemic injustice and oppression. By seeking to partner with youth and engage critically in the systemic issues affecting green space access for particular communities, green space initiatives can become opportunities to transform the lives of young people, the green spaces and programs they design, and the systems in which these operate.

This guide is for all practitioners seeking to improve youth connection to nature, especially those seeking to engage youth in planning and designing those efforts.

“NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US, IS FOR US”

- unknown

In This Guide

- What, Why, & How of Authentic Partnership and Critical Engagement
- Tensions & Considerations for Adults
- Case Study: Lake County, Colorado
- Additional Resources

Youth model for park re-design, Growing Up Boulder
The What

What do we mean by “authentic partnership” and “critical engagement”? By drawing on scholarship on youth partnership, civic engagement, youth organizing, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), and Critical Race Theory (CRT), these terms can help us to elevate our youth involvement practices and strategies and leverage them towards transformational change.

Authentic Partnership

Though well intentioned, efforts to involve youth on boards or in advisory roles often result in romanticizing (seeing their ideas as "cute"), tokenism (perfunctory or symbolic efforts at diversity and inclusion*) (1) and disempowerment, if youth are not able to substantially transform adult opinions. We can respect youth by moving beyond seeing them as sources for limited consultation to viewing them as capable co-creators of knowledge and experts in their own lives. This involves seeking to share power in decisions about both product and process, and interrogating the structures that inhibit this. (See “Ladder of Engagement” for more detail).

Critical Engagement

According to Fox and colleagues (2), literature on civic engagement often confuses lack of access to engagement for lack of motivation. In their work, they have observed that young people, especially those from low-income or immigrant communities, are more likely to take up civic engagement when it involves opportunities to confront structural injustice and human rights violations collectively" (pg. 3). They conceptualize critical youth engagement as a framework that facilitates youth leadership and organizing by linking "social inquiry to collective action for youth justice, and embody five threshold commitments: The recognition:

that youth carry knowledge and expertise about conditions of their everyday lives shaped in contexts of oppression, colonization and resistance;
that youth and adults can engage together in serious inquiry into the histories and contemporary conditions of injustice and struggle,
that it is crucial to examine cross-sector circuits of dispossession and pools of resistance as they intersect across time, space, communities and bodies that research should be linked to organizing and action,
that effective research teams include youth leaders and adult allies." (pg. 5-6)

If we truly care about empowering youth to improve their own outcomes, engagement in issues of access to nature, education, economic security, etc. must involve action based in an understanding of power structures and historical contexts of inequities*. Fierre (3) calls this combination of action and “critical consciousness” praxis. Ginwright and Cammarota (4) further argue that in order for organizations or individuals to be effective in building capacity for social justice work (healing), we need to understand what we are healing from. Green space initiatives often see nature as healing for communities and individuals. To engage in praxis in this work may mean first understanding the historic and current factors in unequal access to nature and the factors that cause us to need the healing power of nature in the first place.
# Ladder of Engagement

The rubric below was developed by Adam Fletcher, founder of the Free Child Project. It is based on the work of UNICEF sociologist Rodger Hart, who created a “Ladder of Participation” in which the bottom rungs represent non-participation by youth and the top rungs represent “intentional arrangements designed to foster authentic youth engagement in communities” (Fletcher, 2016). Fletcher explains that as roles for youth increase, the bottom rungs have come to represent “attend or fail” settings. Considering where our programs fall on the ladder, or where we would like them to fall, can help us design authentic partnership experiences. While in doing so it may be helpful to generalize to the group experience, Fletcher reminds us that at any moment individuals within a group may be experiencing different rungs. This rubric also helps to navigate potential disputes between adult and youth on youth’s levels of engagement. (6)

The following rubric breaks down what can be expected at the various stages of the Ladder of Youth Engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THE WAYS YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ENGAGED</th>
<th>CHALLENGE</th>
<th>REWARD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Youth/Adult Equity. All youth, young adults and older adults are recognized for their impact and ownership of the outcomes.</td>
<td>This is an exceptional relationship in communities that requires conscious commitment by all participants. Deliberately addresses barriers and constantly ensures shared outcomes.</td>
<td>Creates structures that establish and support safe, supportive, effective and sustainable environments for engagement, and ultimately recreates the climate and culture of organizations and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Completely Youth-Driven Action. These activities do not include adults in positions of authority; rather, adults are there in secondary roles to support young people.</td>
<td>Young people may operate in a vacuum, often without the recognition of their impact on the larger community. Activities driven by youth and young adults may not be seen by older adults with deserved validity.</td>
<td>Developing complete ownership in communities allows young people to effectively drive community engagement. Young people experience the outcomes of their direct actions on themselves, their peers and the larger community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Youth/Adult Equality. This is a 50/50 split of responsibilities, authority, obligation and commitment.</td>
<td>There isn’t recognition for the specific developmental needs or representation opportunities for young people. Without receiving that recognition, young people may lose interest and become disengaged.</td>
<td>Young people can substantially transform adults’ opinions, ideas and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Youth-Consulted. Adults actively consult young people while they’re involved.</td>
<td>Young people have only the authority that older adults grant them, and their engagement is subject to external approval.</td>
<td>Young people can substantially transform adults’ opinions, ideas and actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Youth-Informed. Young people inform adults.</td>
<td>Adults do not have to let young people impact their decisions.</td>
<td>Young people may influence adult-driven decisions or activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tokenism. Adults assign young people only token roles.</td>
<td>Youth and young adults are used inconsequentially by adults to reinforce the perception that young people are engaged.</td>
<td>Validates youth and young adults attending events without requiring effort beyond that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Decoration. Adults use young people to decorate their activities.</td>
<td>The presence of young people is treated as all that is necessary without reinforcing active engagement.</td>
<td>Attendance by youth and young adults is a tangible outcome that may demonstrate consideration for engaging young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Manipulation. Adults manipulate young people.</td>
<td>Young people are forced to attend without regard to their interest.</td>
<td>Adults experience involving young people and gain rationale for continuing activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rubric source: https://freechild.org/ladder-of-youth-participation/
The Why

Article 12 of The UN Convention on Rights of the Child says, “When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.” (7) In addition to the moral and ethical implications of viewing youth participation as a right, partnering with youth and engaging critically in the systemic issues surrounding social change (in nature access or other) benefits youth, organizations, and communities.

Benefits for Youth

A sense of responsibility to society; practice participating in democratic processes; feelings of empowerment, self-efficacy and self-worth that come from increased agency and control over their own lives; increased knowledge of their communities and understanding of their rights; improved relationships, school connectedness, academic outcomes, and social-emotional outcomes; skills in organizing, public speaking, work habits; opportunities to work with adults and peers, to have difficult conversations, and practice safe risk-taking (8, 9, 10).

Benefits for Organizations

Better understanding of youth abilities and desires which leads to an increased capacity to work with youth; increased understanding and ability to engage community; excitement about youth’s fresh perspectives that fosters renewed commitment to the mission; honest feedback; increased credibility and capacity (work force); improved quality, relevance, and validity of research or evaluation questions, methods, and data gathered; improved efficacy in achieving program outcomes and working towards social change by “including a key stakeholder’s perspective” (8, 9).

Benefits for Community

When organizations have a better understanding of key stakeholder perspectives, they can select and design more relevant and effective strategies and solutions, therefore increasing benefits for the community. Partnership in research (academic studies, but also formative, developmental, and summative program evaluation) “allows communities to take ownership over the research influencing their lives” (9) and minimizes potential harm caused by researching pain or seeing communities as broken or in need of fixing (11). For communities and individuals within them, providing opportunities for praxis (critical reflection and action) “can be a vessel to deal with internalized racism and to support developing confidence and a sense of self through the lens of CRT, leading to higher levels of engagement” (10).

Navigation vs. Transformation in Green Space Initiatives

The “why’s” above can be seen as applying to almost any youth partnership project. Why focus in particular on authentic partnership and critical engagement when involving youth in green space initiatives? The main reason is the distinction that Dr. El Amin of the Harvard Graduate School of Education makes between navigational and transformational. Green space projects that teach students about government structures & public processes & allow them to experience having a voice in those systems are teaching them to navigate those systems. Projects that share power and investigate these systems inspire and empower youth to transform said system, not just work within it.
Is this for me?

Urban educator and theorist, Jeff Duncan-Andrade talks about three different types of educators in urban schools—those who don’t care, those who did care, and those who still care. He calls this last group “ridas” after the pop-culture notion of “ride or die” (12), a name which reflects the difficulties of this work: navigating tensions (see Tensions); having hard, awkward, or just new conversations; bearing witness to difficult realities; acknowledging your own biases—to name a few.

Given the difficulties, it is important to ask yourself: Who am I as an educator or youth worker? Is this work I feel capable or willing to do? Am I energized by youth’s fresh ideas, by building real relationships with youth, by the struggle for social justice? It’s okay to feel that this doesn’t resonate, or that only some parts of it do. The Avarna Group recommends being aware and honest about these choices (13). If you are excited to work with consistency, humility, patience and impatience, affirmative love, tolerance for naivety of students (14), start with tips below:

- It is hard to critically engage in issues of power and inequity if you have not thought about your own position, especially in relation to the youth or community that you work with. Are you an outsider or are you familiar? What are your reasons for wanting to help (15)? What are your privileges or implicit biases? (See Resources)

- If you are going to treat youth as equal partners, it may help to examine if you think youth can really be experts, even if only in matters of their own lives. What counts as knowledge? Who/what do you trust to give you knowledge? Can knowledge be created between people or does the “truth” exist out there?

- Find allies – those with a willing ear or hug, who understand youth’s agenda is central, can help move the youth’s agenda forward, help you check your assumptions, and know when to step up (lead, teach) or step back to give youth more power.

- Think about self-care. How will you balance “being all in” with being able to keep going and stay in this work for the long haul?

- Ask yourself: What makes me most nervous about the idea of sharing power with youth? What assumptions underlie this fear? What can you do about it?
The How

Authentic partnership and critical engagement are mindsets more than concrete strategies. They are about starting with shared understanding and values, and moving towards sustainable action (16). We can cultivate an awareness of the challenges, pitfalls, and tensions of this work and use frameworks like YPAR and CRT to understand and guide the development of specific projects. Here are some things we can keep in mind as we seek to incorporate these ideas into green space initiatives:

- In seeking to share power, consider all of the roles youth can play - researchers, planners, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers, and advocates.

- In designing youth engagement projects or aspects, consider: What are the interests of adults in these spaces and how do they silence or support children’s own interests? What are the interests of children in these spaces? What do children stand to gain from being involved? How will we define success? Who gets to decide? Remember YPAR is about youth researching their own lives for action, not them participating in your research (17).

- Remember not everyone in a community is having the same experiences.

- Trying not to romanticize youth or offer false or hokey hope—or let other adults do so (18).

- Seek to build community capacity over specific solutions. Success is about increasing will and power to fight the next battle better, because this work never ends (17).

- When in doubt: act with humility and care; focus on building real, deep relationships with youth; be transparent about what is being taught and learned, rules and power dynamics in the group and in partner organizations, and the fact that results may not be immediate (19).

Lake County: Methods

Adult coordinator modeled & designed the project using principles from: Positive Youth Development, qualitative research methods, Youth Engaged in Learning and Leading (YELL), Rural Youth-Led Evaluation toolkit, Critical Civic Inquiry, YPAR

Youth Research Team members were recruited by partner agencies and job descriptions that were sent to every high school student and posted online. Selection process involved written applications and phone interviews.

The team meets weekly during school to coordinate activities and uses early dismissal days to do site visits and community research.

Youth’s research methods include: Interviewing, Storymapping (transect mapping), Interactive Mural "Window to the Outdoors," site visit evaluation tool

The youth researchers will analyze their data and present findings at the Lake County GOCO Inspire Coalition retreat in May, 2016.
Looks like, Sounds like, Feels like

One way to measure and evaluate authentic partnership and critical engagement is to first imagine what we hope these efforts will look like, sound like, and feel like to do this work with youth. Here are some examples generated by one group of educators*—what do you imagine?

Standing and sitting in circles, everyone has a purpose and ways to achieve it—figure out their strengths and how to use them, collaborate vs. hierarchical, internal culture that references norms ie. hand signals for agreement, candy if you’re late, - visible and positive, sharing food

Transparency, honesty, asking and answering—why, laughter, diversity of voices/stories, youth leading/directing, regular constructive feedback

Uncomfortable (not wanting to police people, wanting people to challenge each other, productivity is defined by the person experiencing discomfort—if you think you’re the only one experiencing this, it can feel like an attack, trust, vulnerability, pride

More Strategies

Suggestions for managing tensions and moving towards authentic partnership and critical engagement:

◊ Involve youth from the beginning.
◊ Designate someone to watch for negative patterns from society playing out in the group (ie. ageism, sexism, etc.)
◊ Use art—as an elicitation device, for storytelling, for organizing
◊ Create systems for feedback—among youth and for yourself, especially to help yourself find the balance between stepping up and stepping back. Include different ways to contribute to hear other voices (written, spoken)
◊ Have youth facilitate/create the process not just the product
◊ Provide opportunities and pathways for youth to move into leadership roles and mentor across youth generations
◊ Start with an intro curriculum of communication skills, social justice learning, team building, and research methods (if appropriate) (20)
◊ Use your own power, gender, etc. as an example/teaching tool
◊ Have youth think about their own skills and interests—what they are good at, what do they want to improve at, can they apply these to the project
◊ Consider having two products—one that meets youth needs, one that meets funder or community needs
◊ Be clear about “when to do what we need to do, to do what we want to do” (Neeru Sekhon)


*Students of S501 at Harvard Graduate school of Education, spring 2016
Tensions

It is not easy, nor may it ever be possible to resolve the tensions inherent in this type of work. The aim is to be aware of the tensions, to work together to find ways to surface them and manage them, and to create safe spaces in which to do so, and use them towards furthering the work. Each method and set of tools has its own tensions—here are a few that are particularly applicable in green space initiatives:

How much to lead vs. how much to support: This balance between “stepping up” and “stepping back” is difficult because in making choices between providing youth with differing degrees of safety or agency, one often comes at the cost of the other. If adults take too much control, there is a risk that youth with disengage, however, if we allow youth to lead, we may not meet target outcomes for them or for partner organizations. (This relates to other tensions —product vs. process, or youth agency vs. traction on issues). One of the ways that this plays out is in adult values and pragmatic concerns impacting the group’s choice of issue or action to focus on—not surprisingly, this tends not to be as much of a problem in “lower-risk” decisions (20).

Valuing youth’s experiences vs. wanting to expand their experiences: Imagine you are asking youth to design a park. You want to value their ideas as experts in their own lives and communities, but what if they have never been outside their community? How do you expose them to new ideas and broaden their horizons without devaluing their expertise or what their community does have? How do you select what information to show them? If you show only pictures of suburban parks with public art and fancy features that were expensive to build, who’s standards are you using for nature connection (21)? We want the best for youth we work with, but how to we know what is “best”?

Community vs. youth development: The language of many green space initiatives goes back and forth between outcomes for the community or for the ecosystem and outcomes for youth. Often these go together, but what do we do when they conflict? What if, through authentic partnership and critical engagement, we hear that what youth need most or are most interested in investigating is not parks or nature access, but stable housing, quality of education, or employment?

Boundaries vs. bridges: Building trusting and authentic relationships requires vulnerability that may or may not be comfortable, legal, or even, at some point, helpful to youth. When and where are boundaries appropriate? In being transparent about and critical of power dynamics, how do we address dynamics between youth and adults without reinforcing the boundary?

Age appropriateness of transformational work: Many green space initiatives work seek input from a wide range of ages—from preschool all the way through teenage years. Though it may seem difficult or inappropriate to partner with younger ages or engage them in critiquing systemic issues, remember that children notice everything and are often the most honest and forthcoming with questions and concerns about issues like homelessness that might affect green space initiatives.

Appropriation: There is a fine line between borrowing ideas from other groups or communities in a respectful way and in a way that may be unintentionally harmful to them. Be careful when looking to other cultures for facilitation methods, imagery, ceremonies, rituals, etc.
Lake County: Challenges & Tensions

Even in a strong model there are challenges & tensions. For Lake County, these include:

Time constraints—school schedule only allow for short meetings; urgency can create blind spots; difficult to match with adult allies/partner schedules; build relationships necessary for critical engagement; or see projects as part of long term efforts for systemic change (16); hard to practice/get into alternate ways of being from dominant spaces when you have to go back quickly

Aging out—youth are excited to learn about recreation and green career courses at the community college, but seniors have expressed disappointment at not being able to take advantage of these opportunities

Stepping up/stepping back—balancing using adult power to get things done with keeping students feeling empowered

Starting with Different ?’s

Many efforts to involve youth in green space initiatives solicit opinions or answers to questions about how to design parks or programs. Can we build critical capacity and improve outcomes for youth, organizations, and communities by asking different questions? What questions do youth have about the importance of nature? Here are a few to start the conversation (adapted from Richard Louv’s “12 Questions About Equity Capacity”, 22):

1. How do different groups or individuals within our community (urban vs. rural, ethnic background, legal status, ability, etc.) connect to nature? Are there specific barriers that they face? Are there tools, traditions, or unique nature-oriented abilities that we can learn from or should be encouraged or revived?
2. What is the availability of nearby nature, in terms of quantity and quality, in our community? What factors, political or otherwise, might affect the way these spaces are distributed?
3. Which institutions and organizations do the best job reaching underserved populations; what new approaches are emerging, and where (ie. libraries)?
4. Do any efforts to increase youth access to nature come at a cost? To whom?
5. How likely is it for adults in our community to take children to nearby nature or wilderness to learn and explore? Who gets to go to camp? Are there any factors that make it hard for adults to support children in getting outside?
6. What role does prejudice — based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability — play in the nature experience?
7. What is, or will be, the impact of the widening income gap on the nature experiences of children? Are there other economic factors, such as housing prices, that affect nature experiences of youth?
8. How will current or future cuts in education, nature-based programs and parks impact different socio-economic levels?
9. How aware are residents of the benefits of repeated and regular nature exposure? How do they define these benefits?
10. Do people believe that nature experiences — and the availability of them — should be considered a privilege or a human right?
Additional Resources

- “Revolutionizing Education” an introduction to YPAR edited by Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine: http://tinyurl.com/hk9gy9l
- Youth on Board—free downloads with tips from youth on working with youth http://www.youthonboard.org/#!download/c230u
- Free research-based test to reveal biases you may not be aware you carry: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html
- Danger of valuing a single way of connecting to nature: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en
- Effects on relevance of green space initiatives that don’t hear all voices: http://www.citylab.com/design/2016/03/why-race-matters-in-planning-public-parks-houston-texas/474966/


References

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