

Youth Participation: Grow it or Kill it – the Formula for Both

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Introduction

This presentation will be based on a paper written for Childrenz Magazine (Children's Issues Centre; University of Otago). This is due to be published in the near future.

Apathetic – what rubbish! Young people are interested in their communities and many are actively involved. Having said that, adults do act as gate keepers with regard to youth involvement in decision-making and there is a need to question why more community groups, local authorities and government departments do not involve youth in their development plans. The energy and commitment of young people to create positive social change needs to be harnessed – instead it is common for young people to be viewed as the cause of social deterioration. The failure of adults to involve young people in the search for solutions to community problems is both unfortunate and counter-productive.

The case for participation

If you give a child responsibility, generally they will behave responsibly. If you deny a child responsibility, you can not then complain if they behave irresponsibly
Unknown

Over the last few years I have attended meetings and conferences devoted to youth issues. Those where I have learnt the most are those where young people have been involved in the planning, in the presentations and as active participants. Despite the fact that young people are knowledgeable about their peers (not to mention their own experiences), it is not uncommon for entire conferences to focus on youth issues without any true youth involvement at all. Quite simply I'd like to stress that the product is better when young people are involved. In the library situation, I would simply suggest that whenever you set aside time to plan for your young clients, that you actually have young clients present during the discussions. If you are trying to reach young people who are not clients, seek assistance from those with strong youth networks – these non-library users may well have a great deal to offer your planning sessions and may provide valuable feedback as to why they don't utilise the current services provided.

Effective youth participation is key to community development and key to youth development. Strong well organised youth participation should enhance the integrity of the organisation because as the democratic process is strengthened, young people have the opportunity to view adults within the organisational structure as real people – educators, mentors, friends and allies. The vision of adults as 'controllers of the youth environment' changes to a vision of partnership within a developmental process. Young people themselves become better informed, decision-making within the organisation is more creative, and a new generation of skilled community and business leaders emerge.

An environment to foster youth participation

It is very easy to provide token gestures to involve young people in organisational planning or service delivery. It is much harder to accept or sustain a paradigm shift to true partnership and power sharing. We must differentiate between the type of participation that provides useful contribution and the type of participation that is simply window-dressing.

There are several important factors that contribute to successful youth participation within organisations:

- appropriate funding
- dedicated time to promote and progress youth participation
- a willingness to accept young people as they are – their diverse cultures, their forms of expression, their appearance and their ways of operating
- giving credit to the young people for their ideas and their work
- a belief that we can enhance our own organisation and build a stronger community by consulting and working with young people
- an acceptance that aspects of education can not be provided within a classroom and that community involvement can provide positive and productive learning experiences for young people
- a realisation that young people can be very busy and that meeting times may have to accommodate their other obligations
- an understanding that, like adults, young people can make mistakes and that these are part of the learning experience.

An environment to hinder youth participation

Some youth participation opportunities deserve a very cynical eye. Those that are no more than a token gesture or “window dressing” will do no more than satisfy the egos of adults who have a clause in their contract, job description, or work place policy indicating a need to consult or work with youth. Such situations will impact negatively on the organisation and have no long-term benefit for young people or the wider community.

Things that hinder youth participation include:

- young people not being reimbursed their expenses
- insufficient resources
- a lack of staff time to promote the need for youth participation within the organisation
- little or no orientation for young people new to the organisation
- a lack of training for the type of input being requested of the young person
- constant cynicism and put-downs
- ideas put forward by young people, being used by adults who then take the credit
- no real power sharing
- lack of respect for the young person’s views
- an environment where the young person is expected to be perfect.

Unfortunately many organisations do hinder youth participation in the ways listed above. When youth participation is a dismal failure, the true reasons are rarely sought, acknowledged or understood.

Christchurch City Council

In Christchurch, local government is committed to involving youth in decision-making processes. In accordance with the city's youth policy and youth strategy, council staff and elected members are continually exploring ways to make this happen. Not every attempt is a raging success but we are certainly committed to a power sharing model. If we did not try and we did not take risks we would not be as far along the path as we currently are.

We are indeed fortunate in Christchurch to have very strong networks of people and organisations dedicated to working in a positive way with youth. These networks link in with the Council on a regular basis and together (with young people) work towards a city environment where power is routinely shared with young people in decision-making and programme development. The concept of power sharing and active youth involvement is not only a matter of principle; it is also the path towards a better environment for all residents of the city.

Over 70,000 young people aged between thirteen and twenty-five are resident in Christchurch and slowly but surely they are becoming more visible within Council structures. The Youth Council has two representatives with speaking rights contributing to the Council's Community Services Committee and currently the Council is investigating broadening Youth Council representation to other standing committees.

Council working parties, service planning groups and advisory forums are increasingly seeking ongoing youth input. This happens more often when items under discussion are of greater relevance to young people than to other population groups, but youth are increasingly being included in general community and city-wide planning. Within local government we must remind ourselves that young people are perfectly capable of excellent input on matters such as traffic calming, waste management, heritage sites, library services and the design of public buildings. We must be careful not to stereotype youth involvement to categories such as entertainment, skateboarding and city violence. The Christchurch youth population is diverse, their interests are diverse but one thing most have in common is that they want their city to be a great place to live.

Why foster youth participation within council?

Christchurch City Council policies indicate a commitment to a city that is a good place to live, and a commitment to plan for the needs of the whole community. Young people are a significant sector of the community (20.94%) and should therefore be seen as a major part of the Council's business.

Young people are often viewed as problems, when in reality they are members of the Council's constituency. Some older youth are already voters, ratepayers and leaders, while younger youth must be viewed as potential voters, ratepayers and leaders.

It is important for the Council to foster the enthusiasm of young people and to use this for the benefit of the entire community. If the city fails to provide opportunities for its young people their energy, creativity and community participation will be lost, resulting in economic and social costs for Christchurch.

The case for involving and targeting young people in the Council's activities and policy development can be divided into three categories: political, legal and social.

The political rationale for youth participation acknowledges the benefits of involvement such as:

- improved services
- a strengthening of representative democracy by giving a voice to those unable to vote for political representation
- a raising of awareness within the youth population of political processes
- the creation of an environment where young people have the opportunity to develop the skills to make a positive difference to their city.

The legal rationale for young people's involvement in the Council's activities rests largely on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the New Zealand government in 1993. The Convention has the status of international law, and grants a range of participation rights to people up to the age of 18 years. The Council is well placed to implement the convention because the breadth of work carried out by the Council's units has a significant impact on the day to day life experiences of the city's young people.

The social rationale for young people's involvement in local government centres on young people making up 20.94% of the Christchurch population. This large group within the community should share the same fundamental right to participate. They should not have to argue their case for possessing the same rights as other Christchurch residents.

A city which is attractive to young people, and which involves, values and acknowledges young people creates benefits for the whole community.

Youth forums in Christchurch

Bringing young people from different suburbs, cultures and life experiences together to discuss issues of importance to the city, or to young people generally, can be an energising experience for all concerned.

When organising a forum, it is essential to have clear objectives and that these are communicated to the young people who may attend. If they are to share information, they must know how the organisers intend using that information – this is a fundamental courtesy. Over the last two years several youth forums have taken place in the city. Although the Christchurch City Council has been a willing co-organiser, the initial momentum has usually come from the community.

In late 1998 the Canterbury Youth Worker's Collective motivated others in the city to work together to organise a large-scale youth forum, focusing on the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child. The forum was to give young people an opportunity to learn about the convention and to provide feedback on relevant articles of the convention and the concept of "Global Voice" was born! The Christchurch City Council agreed to sponsor Global Voice and an interagency planning group was set up to prepare for the event.

The interagency planning group, which included young people, provided a magnificent opportunity for the city's youth to discuss children's rights. The day was totally youth focused with the keynote address being given by a young soldier, the Master of Ceremonies being 15 years old, and the entertainment between workshops being provided by young entertainers. All were extremely competent.

The venue and food were both of a high standard, which indicated respect for those attending the forum. This connection was commented on several times throughout the day by young people attending the forum.

Over 270 young people from a diverse range of backgrounds attended Global Voice. There was a sense of connectedness and good will that prevailed throughout the day – those from one part of town were immensely motivated by knowing that their peers from the other side of the city were concerned about the same issues. They shared concerns, they shared possible solutions and they broke down barriers.

In addition to the clearly defined purpose for holding Global Voice, I believe that the city benefited from several positive spin-offs. A successful youth forum helps to promote a culture of youth participation. Several people who participated in Global Voice were motivated to have a higher level of community involvement, and young people who met at Global Voice became friends despite different geographical, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The integration of young people into local government, central government agencies and community organisations means:

- changing the culture of our work places and creating power sharing opportunities between groups of adults and young people
- providing appropriate resourcing to progress the concept of partnership. This must include financial resourcing as well as dedicated staff time and administrative support.
- providing space for young people
- listening to young people – really listening
- finding ways to involve young people who have not traditionally been the type to put themselves forward
- incorporating and acting on the ideas of young people and giving them full credit for any results and outcomes
- providing mentoring opportunities through which they can build their sense of belonging to a community and develop leadership skills in the context of the real world.

I feel certain that young people could become integrally involved in library planning and that young people not currently accessing libraries could, given the right environment, work with you to make library services and facilities more accessible to this group. I know many of you will already have youth consultation procedures in place but I challenge you to take that extra step and work toward a partnership model.