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REVOLVE

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

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Youth participation is about giving young people the opportunity to voice their ideas and concerns on issues that are important to them or affect their lives, listening to what they have to say and involving them in decision-making. Youth participation is currently a significant issue in youth work practice in Australia and around the world. Growing amounts of literature highlights the benefits of youth participation for young people, organisations, governments and the general community. This literature suggests that youth participation is not just an optional extra for youth work in the 21st century, but an absolute necessity. This issue of Revolve will discuss youth participation and its relationship to Christian youth work, as well as provide frameworks and approaches to youth participation for further consideration.

THE FACTS

- Young people want to be more involved in their communities and to feel that their ideas and contributions are valued (NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2003).
- Young people are making valuable contributions at various levels of decision-making in organisations, communities and governments, for example in the National Youth Round Table and the Foundation for Young Australians' Youth Grant Makers initiative.
- Young people benefit greatly from participating in decision-making that affects their lives. These benefits include:
 - improved sense of connection and belonging to the wider community;
 - improved sense of personal identity;
 - increased self-esteem, self-achievement, confidence in their own decision-making, and skill development;
 - increased knowledge of resources and how to access them
 - increased social well-being (through meeting other young people and making new friends);
 - increased skills enhancing employability, for example teamwork;
 - improved sense of control over their health and well-being; and
 - improved ability to lobby for better services and resources for young people (The Second Story, 1997, cited in Stacey, Webb, Hills, Nagzdins, Moulds, Phillips and Stone, 2003).
- An organisation's policies and programs, which specifically target a youth audience, are more likely to have positive impacts and more effective outcomes, if they are designed and developed by young people who are affected by them (Office For Youth, 2003).

WHAT IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Youth Participation is “about the development of partnerships between young people and adults across all areas of life so that young people may take a valued position and role in our society and so that the community as a whole (as well as young people) can benefit from their contribution, ideas and energies” (The Australian Youth Foundation, 1996). It is about giving young people the opportunity to have their say on issues that are important to them and issues that affect their lives, listening to what they have to say, and involving them in decision-making.

At an organisational level, youth participation means including young people in decision-making about policies, projects and programs which are designed to reach and effect them in some capacity, for example involving young people in advisory roles for youth programs (The Australian Youth Foundation, 1996).

Youth Participation is important for many reasons. The Foundation for Young Australians (Wierenga, Wood, Trenbath, Kelly & Vidakovic, 2003; The Australian Youth Foundation, 1996) highlights that partnering with young people is important because:

- It benefits young people
- It is a right for all young people
- It leads to more effective decision-making
- It recognizes young people's agency and ability to act, and respects their full citizenship
- It encourages 'capacity building' in young people and their communities
- It builds connections between young people and their communities
- Organisations can tap into young people's expertise on their own social and cultural conditions
- Organisations can assist young people to develop skills, confidence and awareness so they can take initiative and become more confident in problem-solving
- It can challenge negative stereotypes of young people otherwise perpetuated in the community
- Young people can bring new perspectives and influence outcomes in new and unexpected ways
- It can make organisations more responsive, understanding and considerate of the young people it is working with.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



YFC Australia and Christian youth workers believe in young people and the importance of giving young people a say in decisions. We understand Jesus' heart for children and young people, as he said “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Mat 19:14). Jesus wanted children to come to him, he listened to them and what they had to say, and told us not to hinder them. Jesus did not want young people (and their voices) to be silenced, marginalised or excluded from society. The example of Timothy also has implications for youth participation. Timothy, a young worker in the Church, was urged to not let anyone look down on him because he was young (1 Tim 4:12). This highlights that age is not grounds for exclusion. God desires young people to stand up and actively participate in the life of the Church, and desires the Church to embrace such participation. It is on this premise that we need to embrace youth participation in our ministry, in our programs and projects, in our policies and even in our organisation or church culture. If we believe this, youth participation should happen in all aspects

and areas of ministry, including program planning, development, monitoring and evaluation, leadership roles, youth reference groups, youth participation on boards and committees, partnerships or community development roles, peer leadership, etc.

Youth participation offers so many benefits to our ministry. As the Foundation for Young Australians suggest, when young people are involved in developing and designing programs that are aiming to reach young people, these programs become more effective because they are shaped by young people's understanding of their needs, their cultures and their context. Young people can bring amazing insight into what will and won't work.

We also must remember that young people can be those aged between 12 and 25. Many Christian ministries and organisations have staff who are in this age bracket. It may be valuable to create opportunities for these young people (and others within the community) to contribute to decision-making within the organisation. Some ideas include young people sitting on boards and committees, establishing a youth board that feeds into the decisions made, and young people in leadership roles and active mentoring roles. An example of this is the YFC Young Leaders Forum, which provides a platform for young leaders within the organisation to offer a youth perspective to leadership and instigate change alongside other organisational decision-making processes.

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YOUTH PARTICIPATION PRINCIPLES, STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

A continuum of youth involvement was developed by Westhorp (1987, cited in The Australian Youth Foundation, 1996), which describes the various options for youth participation (See figure 1). Different options will be more appropriate in some situations and decision-making can occur at any point along this continuum. Youth participation strategies do not have to begin within number one and move through the various options—you can start with any option. However, participation that moves towards control allows young people direct and ongoing involvement in the places where decisions are actually being made (Wierenga et al, 2003).

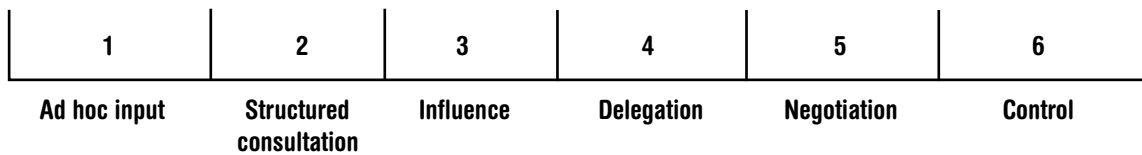


Figure 1: Westthorp's continuum of youth involvement (1987, cited in Wierenga et al, 2003).

1. **Ad hoc** input allows young people to share their ideas or information about their needs. The views and concerns of young people are heard and incorporated into the project.
2. **Structured consultation** involves deliberately developing a strategy for seeking young people's opinions. Consultation implies a two-way flow of information and ideas (for example, focus groups, forums, etc).
3. **Influence** involves formal, structured input and ensures a minimal level of young people's influence on the organisation (for example, advisory groups, youth representatives on management, etc)
4. **Delegation** gives young people real responsibility for particular tasks within an organisation. Clear guidelines must be provided and a mutual understanding of young people's power within the organisation must be clarified (for example, peer education, peer support, youth spokesperson, young people researching youth issues, etc).
5. **Negotiation** means that young people and the organisation each contribute ideas, information and opinions. Decisions are reached by consensus and compromise (for example, youth advocates, youth participation committees, etc).
6. **Control** implies that young people make all or many of the crucial decisions within the organisation (including financial management, hiring and firing of staff, policy and programming). This option is rare, except in organisations that are initiated and managed by young people.

(The Australian Youth Foundation, 1996).

There are several key principles for appropriate and effective youth participation strategies. These principles, described by The Australian Youth Foundation (1996) and the South Australian Office for Youth (2003), address issues which have been identified as barriers to youth participation, such as tokenism, lack of trust by adults in the abilities of young people, young people's alienation/lack of understanding of formal decision-making procedures, cultural/racial/spiritual background, gender, etc. These principles describe youth participation as:

- Based on young people's choice to be involved
- Enjoyable, fun and challenging
- Related to issues perceived as relevant by young people
- Raising young people's awareness of social, political, economic, cultural and personal issues affecting them
- Involving training and skills development
- Providing ongoing support for young people, for example through a 'mentor' system which links young people to staff in the organisation
- Providing young people with a sense of ownership and belonging regarding decision-making
- Providing young people with a sense that their participation is valued
- Involving adequate resourcing, such as time, space, funding, information, facilities, etc.
- Acknowledging the contribution of young people
- Acknowledging that young people often have limited access (for example, financial and transport constraints)
- Based on careful recruitment and selection
- Involving a monitoring and review process to explore the experiences and obtained outcomes for individual young people and the organisation
- Giving young people the opportunity to identify and define the problem as they see it
- Based on negotiation between young people and adults/staff
- Recognising and respecting the needs and contributions of all involved

Essentially, these principles are encompassed by three key elements:

Meaning – participation is meaningful for young people;

Control – young people have or share control over what happens; and

Connectedness – the projects and the young people are connected into wider community resources and relationships (Wierenga et al, 2003).

These elements are interconnected and effective youth participation strategies involve doing these three elements well (Wierenga et al, 2003). For instance, meaning and control without connectedness may lead to alienation, control and connectedness without meaning can be tokenistic, and connectedness and meaning without control may be manipulative. The diagram below illustrates the interconnection of these three elements and can be used as a reflective tool for youth participation projects and strategies.

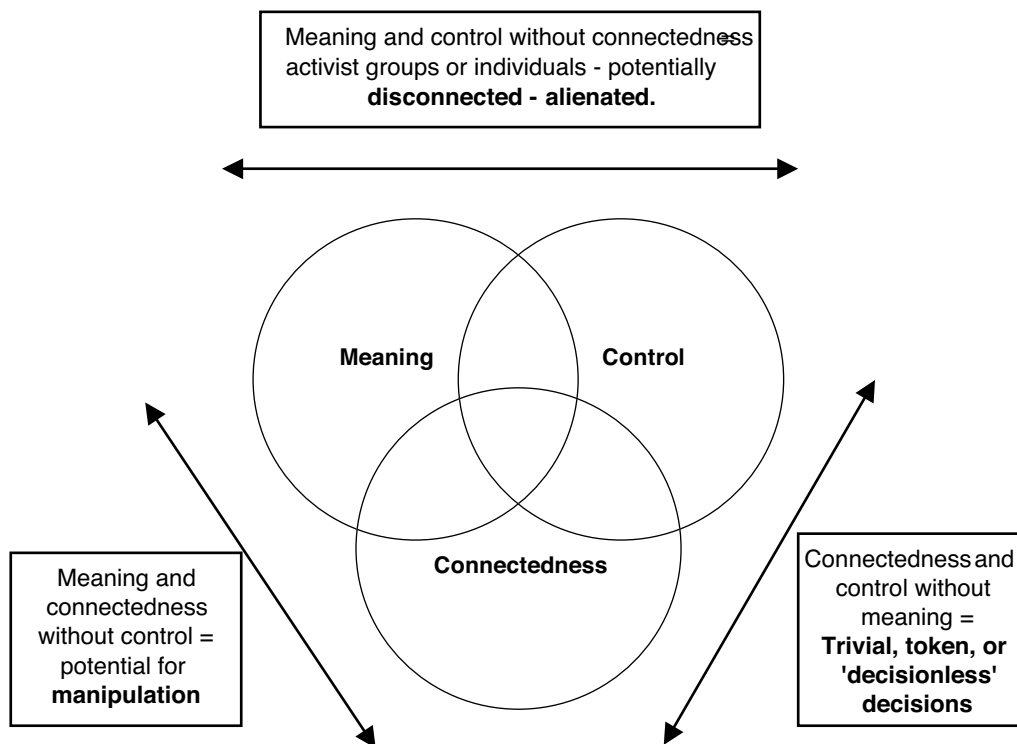


Figure 2: Youth Participation Reflective Tool (Wierenga et al, 2003)

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE – THE GENR8 MODEL

A number of YFC Australia's programs currently incorporate youth participation. One example is the GenR8 program. This pilot program is a volunteer development program aiming to equip community volunteers to link with and support young people. Within this program youth participation occurs at various levels and involves a number of different aspects. This model is essentially based on the need to listen to and empower young people. Youth participation can be summarised as occurring in the GenR8 program at four levels.

1. **Initial survey.** At the outset of the program, a survey of young people in the area is conducted to give young people the opportunity to voice their concerns about their community, their needs and the type of event/program that they would like to see established in their area. The young people who fill out the survey gain a sense of ownership and connection to the program, which is reinforced when they attend the event and see that their ideas and suggestions have been incorporated.
2. **Community Youth Advisory/Leadership Group.** This group is made up of young people between the ages of 15-25 who come from a variety of backgrounds. This group receives skill development training, has a level of responsibility in setting up the events, and the opportunity to negotiate processes in running the event to make it more effective. Older young people in this group are encouraged to be team leaders for various aspects of the event (such as sound and lighting) and take on mentoring/leadership roles to assist and support other young people in the group.
3. **Tribal Groups.** Tribal groups are lead by people aged between 18-30 from the local community. Young people from the community youth leadership group or from the event can attend. Tribal groups spend time discussing questions and issues raised by the young people, as well as having fun. In terms of participation, these groups create a strong sense of belonging, connection and meaning. Young people who want to get involved in the GenR8 leadership team or other aspects of community life are supported to do so.

Other aspects of youth participation in the GenR8 team include tailoring the involvement of young people to their specific interests and abilities. For example, in one pilot of the GenR8 program, a young person who was interested in journalism was invited to write articles for the GenR8 newsletter. Another aspect involves acknowledging and appreciating the contribution of young people by giving them small gifts at the end of the year, free training, and offering a range of personal benefits such as skills development enhancing employability. Finally, an essential aspect of this model is the support that young people receive from the GenR8 team at all levels of their involvement.

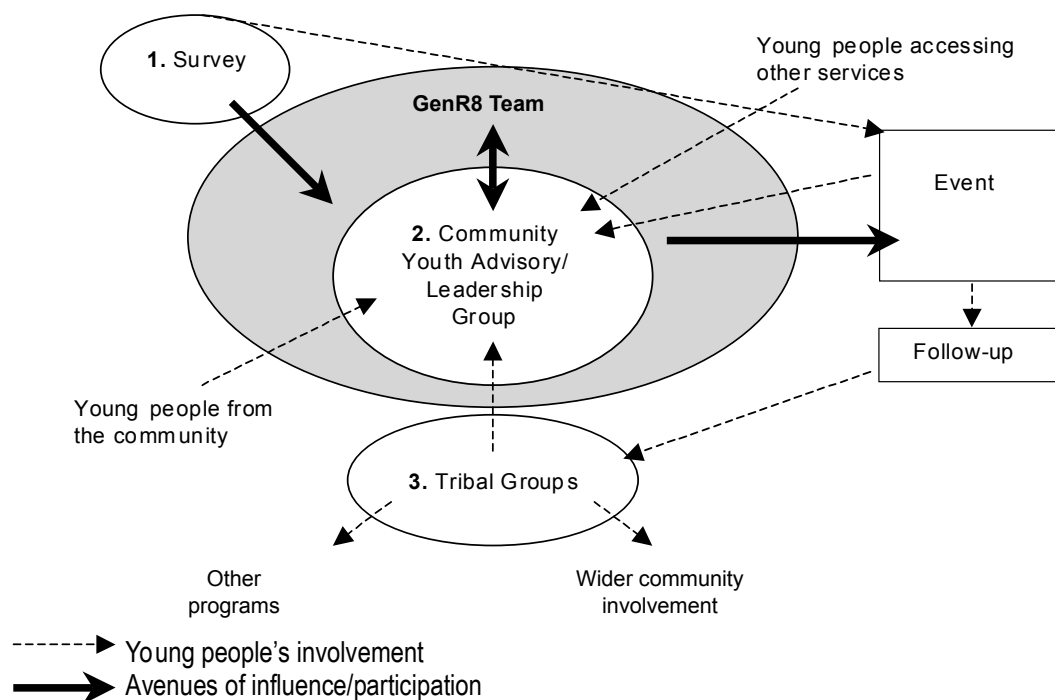


Figure 3: GenR8 Youth Participation Model

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YFC & CHRISTIAN YOUTH WORKERS?



Incorporating youth participation is a developmental process. There are various aspects of youth participation and each aspect may be incorporated in different ways depending on the needs of the program/project, the desired outcomes and the needs of the young people. In light of changing needs, approaches or strategies to youth participation need constant evaluation and re-negotiation. We are not going to get it perfect the first time, but it's important to start somewhere and improve from there. Some good questions to consider in developing a youth participation framework within your branch, church or program/project are:

1. What are our reasons for involving young people?
2. What outcomes do we want to see for young people, our program/project, and our organisation?
3. How can we involve young people?
4. How can we incorporate best practice principles into our approach?
5. What resources (human, physical, etc) do we need to support this approach and the young people involved?

If youth participation is already an aspect of your organisation or program, it is important to evaluate how effectively youth participation is being carried out. To assess how well we enable young people to participate, some good questions to consider are:

1. Are we actively involving young people in our program/organisational decisions?
2. Are we really listening to young people?
3. Is young people's involvement meaningful to them? Are young people feeling connected to the organisation and the wider community? Do young people have some form of control over decisions and what happens within the organisation or program?
4. How well are we supporting the young people involved (in terms of training, skills development, resources, encouragement, assistance, etc)?
5. How can we improve our youth participation strategies and move towards better practice?

Youth participation offers exciting prospects and benefits to our work with young people, the young people themselves and our organisations. Listening to and involving young people in decision-making is a powerful way to show God's love and acceptance, and can be a great tool within evangelistic approaches.

For further information on developing youth participation strategies, please contact the Youth Research Officer at Youth For Christ Australia on (03) 9890 2100 or email youthissues@yfc.org.au.

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REVOLVE

Revolve is a quarterly document that provides updates on the current trends and issues pertinent to young people in Australia. Revolve provides an interpretation as to what the research means for YFC and Christian youth workers, which incorporates recommendations about how we can do our ministry and mission better. Revolve is a means by which we can be attuned to the issues and needs of Australia's young people so as to better meet and respond to them.

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