5

Continuum of Youth Involvement in Research

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How best to classify youth-led research efforts presents a conceptual challenge for the field. Classifying youth-led research efforts that are not monolithic in character or "one size fits all" is a challenge not for the faint of heart. Being able to select the most appropriate model based on a series of considerations will result in a higher likelihood of success. It is best to conduct youth-led research projects utilizing a model that effectively identifies the roles and expectations of both youth and adults. Calvert, Zeldin, and Weisenbach (2002) note that the field of youth development will benefit tremendously from further research into a variety of areas and arenas. Youth can play significant roles in defining questions, collecting and analyzing data, and disseminating results. Before they can achieve this, however, there must be a vision in place.

Woods's (1990) vision for youth places them in contributing roles in society, both now and in the future:

> We need young people as democratic citizens . . . (who) will have the ability to use academic skills to make a difference in the world; a sense of the importance and value of their contribution to their

community; a commitment to fundamental values such as equity, justice, and cooperation; and the self-confidence tempered with empathy that it takes to act on behalf of the common good. (p. 34)

Woods's expectations of an active citizen within a democratic society are certainly lofty but well within the grasp of all societies.

Use of a continuum that takes into consideration degree of youth involvement and in decision-making roles along the research path can be an effective tool in helping youth, practitioners, and academics better conceptualize youth-led research. Jones and Perkins's (2003) continuum of youth-adult partnerships is such an example (see Chapter 2). A continuum facilitates the creation of markers or indicators that lend themselves to assessing the progress of the research along distinct stages (Save the Children, 2000):

Before any project begins it is very important to carry out a situation analysis, which is also known as a needs assessment. Central to this process should be the participation of children and young people, as well as other stakeholders. These analyses should focus on the change the project is aiming for and the main barriers to reaching change. Setting indicators for a project in this way is central to any participatory monitoring and evaluation process. (p. 32)

Any serious effort to better understand the role of youth as researchers will necessitate that this vision also involve adults in some manner or degree, depending on the model being used. Adults can fulfill a variety of roles, such as providing expert advice on research-related matters, motivating youth during difficult phases in a research project, role-modeling democratic decision making, validating experiences, helping youth reflect and tie learning experiences to other areas of their lives, and providing advice on personal or social aspects of the lives of youth (Matysik, 2000). Youth-led research, as a result, can take on a variety of forms depending on the setting and the goals that have been established for the research. This flexibility in model selection makes youth-led initiatives, such as those utilizing research, easier to embrace. Rigid models invariably have very limited shelf life. Flexible models, in turn, do not.

In this chapter, I provide the reader with several continuums currently in use from which to compare the various models that can be used in youth-led research and program evaluation. Fortunately, there

are various prominent frameworks that focus on increasing youth participation, each lending itself to particular organizational and community considerations. I do not endorse one framework over the others because they all have value. Instead, readers can select the model that best suits their circumstances purposes.

❖ POTENTIAL PITFALLS OF YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

It is very easy to view youth-led research from a perspective that highlights its potential contributions and ignores its potential limitations. Eschewing potential limitations, however, will only serve to set the field back rather than successfully promote it forward. Consequently, I begin this chapter by discussing limitations, so as to ground the reader in the factors that must be considered prior to conducting youth-led research.

Seven critical areas have been identified that must be seriously considered when advocating for youth-led research. This list is far from exhaustive. Nevertheless, these areas signify important factors or considerations that cannot be ignored in the process of advocating for and initiating youth-led research. The field's willingness and ability to address these issues in an open and fair matter will bode well for the future of youth-led research.

First, youth-led research is not a panacea for all the ills confronting children and youth in this society. Although it clearly has elements of an intervention, it is not an intervention in the same category as other social interventions with a youth focus, such as youth-led community organizing (Delgado & Staples, 2005). I would never recommend research as the only activity in helping youth develop. Youth development programming, for example, is very often highly time and resource intensive with the use of many youth engaging in activities over a prolonged period of time that is best measured in seasons and years rather than weeks or months. Youth-led research would make an excellent corollary to other forms of youth programming, but it should not stand alone as a way to enhance youth competencies. Thus, youth-led research can best be conceptualized as part of a broader field of practice, one that includes other programming dimensions.

Second, although research must ultimately lead to social change, it is important that youth do not overreach and look to research as the primary means of achieving significant social change. Research

is the first step. However, major social change is a lengthy and labor-intensive process that cannot be easily predicted and will necessitate youth entering into partnerships and coalitions with adults to achieve success (Delgado & Staples, 2005). If youth enter a research project thinking that once findings are disseminated change will automatically follow, they will be disappointed and may eschew any future role in a research undertaking. This action may well prove to be a terrible disservice to any youth-led movement, but it has particular relevance for youth-led research.

Third, like any tool, youth-led research must be placed in the right hands. Youth-led research can only achieve its potential when planned and implemented by knowledgeable and committed youth and adults. Organizations and communities cannot simply assume that these types of projects can be carried out without the requisite expertise and the willingness to put the time and effort into their planning. To do so will only increase the likelihood of failure. In situations where organizations or communities wish to undertake youth-led research but do not have the necessary expertise, they may wish to collaborate with other institutions and communities that do have the expertise. Youth-led research, like any other form of research, cannot and should not be done by the "seat of one's pants." A healthy respect for the intricacies associated with research will convey to youth the seriousness of their endeavor.

Fourth, youth-led research must be viewed from a broad perspective and researchers must be willing to integrate innovative methods when the goals of the research warrant it. Innovation for the sake of innovation often results in a lack of focus and the dissipation of valuable energy and commitment; in this case, conventional approaches may be more suitable for the project. Research projects are hard enough to plan and implement without making the process that much more challenging because of a "need" to be innovative when the situation at hand does not require innovation. Innovation brings with it a sense of excitement. Nevertheless, it also brings with it immense responsibility; researchers must be deliberate and sensitive to the inherent nuances of the research.

Fifth, like other forms of participatory research, youth-led research will necessitate considerably more time and energy when compared to conventional research models. This will make the estimation of financial costs more difficult. Youth-led research projects need leaders competent in research, education, and activism—a tall order under most

circumstances (Maguire, 1993). In an extended project relying on participatory principles, researchers may well be tempted to use short-cuts. No facet of the research project must be subject to shortcuts regardless of demands on time and expertise. Youth researchers, as a result, must temper their energy and impatience and allow participatory research to run its natural course. It is imperative to emphasize that the process is as important, or even more important, than the outcome. Shortcutting the process serves to shortcut youth, undermining the very principles on which youth-led research is based.

Sixth, research methodologies that stress participatory goals are not without controversy and debate surrounding the generalization of sociological knowledge. Thus, it can be expected that the findings from youth-led research will undergo more than their rightful share of scrutiny. If, based on the findings, researchers recommend significant change within an organization or community, intense resistance might follow and a harsh critique of research methods and data analysis might ensue. Youth researchers may be disheartened by this reaction and turn away from a possible promising career in research. Youth researchers must be properly prepared for this possible reaction. Reactions such as these may not then be construed as a setback but rather as "natural," effectively relieving tensions and feelings of disappointment.

Seventh, maintaining youth in a research project is a challenge not normally encountered in adult-led and staffed projects (Anyon & Naughton, 2003):

Consistent participation was a particular problem. For example, only eight students in the first cohort of sixteen youth researchers met the expected yearlong commitment. Several left because the program was not what they had anticipated. But more troubling were the students forced to leave for reasons unrelated to the project, such as their arrest or their family's eviction. Barriers to full participation came from multiple arenas of the youths' lives, from their school environment to their families' background. (p. 3)

Thus, the realities faced by youth from socially and economically marginalized communities can also find their way into the best-designed project.

The seven considerations that I have outlined here are quite formidable. Nevertheless, these limitations must not hinder the use of youth-led research, as adult-led research, too, has its share of limitations,

particularly when it addresses youth-related issues and needs or marginalized communities in general. Each of these limitations or considerations touches on a variety of dimensions pertaining to the research process, those carrying it out, the organizations sponsoring it, and the ultimate beneficiaries of the research, such as youth and the community at-large.

❖ FRAMEWORKS FOR YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

There are a number of frameworks that have originated out of the youth-led movement that can easily be used or modified to fit a specific project. These frameworks not only spell out the role of youth, but also the role of adults. Norman (2001) does a very good job of capturing the essence of what is meant by youth-adult partnership:

> A true partnership is one in which each party has the opportunity to make suggestions and decisions and in which the contribution of each is recognized and valued. A youth-adult partnership is one in which adults work in full partnership with young people on issues facing youth and/or on programs and policies affecting youth. (p. 1)

To achieve this partnership, however, adults must eschew the propensity of engaging in what is commonly referred to as "adultism." Stoneman (1988), as cited in Mullahey et al. (1999), in what is probably one of the earliest references to the concept of adultism in the professional literature, defines it as

> the attitudes and attendant behaviors that result when adults presume they are better than young people and that young people, because they lack life experience, are, therefore, inferior to adults. . . . As a result young people are talked down to and not seen as contributing individuals with valuable opinions and ideas who are capable of making responsible decisions. Many become passive recipients of information rather than people who assert themselves to voice their particular concerns or viewpoints. (p. 7)

Probably the most widely cited youth-led framework is the one developed by Hart in the early 1990s. Hart (1992) developed an

eight-step framework, or ladder, that specifically focuses on the degrees of youth participation, with manipulation of youth by adults on one end and complete youth empowerment on the other end. The first three steps can best be thought of as *nonparticipatory*: (1) *manipulation*; (2) *decoration* [appearances]; and (3) *tokenism* (adults include youth but do not act on their suggestions or provide meaningful opportunities to exercise power). Steps four through eight focus on *degrees of meaningful youth participation*: (4) *assigned but informed*; (5) *consulted and informed*; (6) *adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth*; (7*) youth-initiated, shared decisions with youth*; and (8) *youth-initiated*, shared decisions with adults.

Although Hart's framework was not created specifically for youth-led research, it lends itself to this youth activity when taking into consideration the importance of inclusion (Canadian Health Network, 2001; Children's Society, 2001; Edwards, 2000; Scottish Parliament, 2002). This framework specifically addresses the relationship between adults and youth in the decision-making process. In addition, it highlights different key stages regarding youth roles and responsibilities. Each stage represents a distinctive perspective on how adult and youth collaborate and engage in decision making.

R. Campbell's (2002) critique of Hart's (1992) framework brings to the fore a different set of considerations that must be weighed when discussing youth-led initiatives:

> Participation should be able to encompass a wide range of approaches without necessarily presenting a hierarchy of approaches—for example, that an entirely youth-initiated and led activity is automatically superior to one in which adults contribute to initiation and supporting the process. Hart's ladder, although useful in identifying different stages young people might go through in a participation process, unfortunately tempts people to see the highest rung as the holy grail. This concern is particularly important in terms of social inclusion—means of participation must be open to young people who do not necessarily have the personal or social skills, or physical abilities to do things without adult support. (p. 3)

Youth participation, at least the model advocated by R. Campbell (2002), can take on various approaches, all of equal importance, and can accommodate youth of differing abilities and one could argue,

interests and commitments. The balance of youth-adult relationships is influenced accordingly. Merrifield (1993), identifies four critical questions that must be asked and answered before undertaking any form of research:

- Who determines the need for the research?
- Who controls the process of research and makes decisions along the way which affect its outcome?
- Who controls the dissemination of results?
- Where does accountability lie? (p. 83)

The answers to these questions will set the foundation for any research endeavor. However, they take on added prominence within youth-led research because youth are not only possessing but also answering these questions.

The Hart (1992) framework, unlike the other frameworks I discuss in this chapter, specifically sets collaboration between youth and adults as a central goal of any initiative. Other frameworks seek to place only youth, and not adults, in leadership positions and thus represent a more encompassing perspective of youth development. Adults in these frameworks, however, can still be involved in roles dictated by youth needs, and this represents a more encompassing perspective of youth empowerment. Their ultimate role is dependent on how youth define it and not the other way around, which is usually the case in youth initiatives.

Youth in Focus (2002), however, developed a seven-step framework specifically for assessing institutional capacity and readiness for youth-involved research (see Figure 5.1):

- Step 1—No Youth Involvement. This step, unfortunately, represents the prevailing mode in the field of youth services.
- Step 2—Little Youth Involvement. This step typically focuses on viewing youth as an important source of information but does not involve them in any other way.
- Step 3—Low Involvement. Youth assume roles in collecting data but not in conceptualizing or leading the study.
- Step 4—Medium-Low Involvement. Youth play an active role in providing feedback and input into adult-designed questions.
- Step 5—Medium-High Involvement. Youth design and carry out research instruments but do not analyze findings or write reports.
- Step 6—High Involvement. Youth are active throughout the entire research process.

Figure 5.1   Institutional-Youth Readiness Continuum
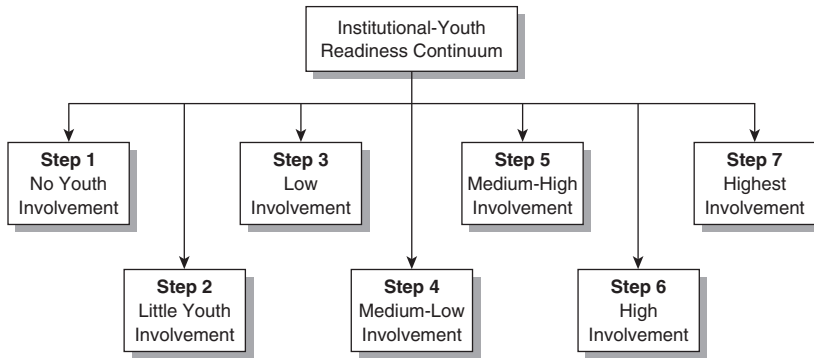
SOURCE: Youth in Focus (2002).

• Step 7—Highest Involvement. Youth are not only involved throughout all facets but are also acting as peer trainers, and the youth-led research is institutionalized as part of an organization's planning cycle.

The importance of organizational readiness and competence cannot be minimized in determining the ultimate success of any youth-led initiatives, including those that are research focused.

Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2002) present a very good framework consisting of four dimensions for looking at youth research roles: youth as subjects, consultants, partners, and directors. Each of these roles, in turn, is examined in relation to discrete research tasks. There is a need, however, for a broader conceptualization of roles for youth-involved research, along with a more detailed examination of their relationship to research tasks. For example, one possible continuum would have at one end youth as subjects and playing no other role in the research. At the opposite end of the continuum would be research projects that are totally conceptualized and implemented by youth with consultation and advice from adults only when requested. Projects co-led by youth and adults fall just before this latter category. Other models can be placed on the continuum based on the degree of control exercised by youth and the functions they serve on projects. Each of these models would rely on adults stepping back but not disengaging from the research process (Earls & Carlson, 2002).

This continuum helps readers conceptualize what model best meets their needs, and the needs of the organization or community sponsoring the research project. It may well be, for example, that youth-led research can best be thought of from a developmental perspective where over time youth, as they gain experience and develop competencies, can play a greater role. However, initially they may only play limited roles with the hopes of an organization or community building a cadre of researchers that can be used by different organizations and projects. Based on an analysis of fifteen youth-led research projects, Horsch et al. (2002) concluded that the field should utilize a variety of models to engage youth rather than rely on one model: "We conclude by emphasizing that one approach to youth as researchers is not preferable over another. Further, multiple priorities can be met in the same youth-involved research and evaluation project" (p. 7).

This flexibility has both advantages and disadvantages for the field. It allows local circumstances and goals to dictate the most optimal research approach. Nevertheless, this flexibility places a tremendous amount of pressure on organizations and communities to recruit, train, support, and sustain a cadre of youth researchers with the necessary research competencies—no easy task, particularly in socially and economically undervalued communities.

❖ CATEGORIZING YOUTH-LED RESEARCH PROJECTS

Categorizing youth-led projects represents an important conceptual step in explaining the nature and expansiveness of the field. The reader, as a result, must be prepared to embrace an expansive view of social research when it includes youth-led research. This expansive conceptualization of research can prove quite exciting from a practice perspective because of the endless possibilities for youth to use new and highly imaginative methods. Conversely, the expansive perspective can create a tremendous amount of confusion and anxiety in deciding what research is and how it relates to more conventional and widely embraced methods.

Is there such a thing as a typical youth-led research initiative? Based on an extensive review of the field, J. C. Smith (2001), found that there is no typical research and evaluation project or initiative:

There seems to be no "typical" evaluation and research project that involves youth. Most of those we talked to grounded their work in youth development practices that are asset-based, incorporating a possible youth development focus within the context of evaluation and research work. They mentioned different frameworks for this work including youth development, risk and prevention, participatory action research, community development, and empowerment evaluation. Those who engage in this work focus on establishing youth as partners or leaders in the research and evaluation endeavor, involving youth in determining the right questions to ask, designing and conducting the study, and engaging with the community and other decision-makers in a discussion of findings and action steps. (p. 1)

This flexibility in conceptualizing youth-led research, as already noted, can be both a reward and a challenge for the field (P. Campbell et al., 1994).

There are numerous examples of youth-led initiatives. However, regardless of type, they are usually founded on one basic premise that connects each of these diverse endeavors by a common purpose (Youth Research Institute, 2002). This premise, broadly speaking, seeks to identify youth assets, commitments, visions, and barriers that either facilitate or hinder the completion of key developmental tasks or stages. Completion of these stages is a prerequisite for opening up opportunities for career advancement and personal growth.

It is best to think of youth-led research methods and approaches as falling into three distinct arenas represented by concentric circles, such as an inner circle that is referred to as "Conventional," a surrounding circle called "Emerging," and the final outer circle referred to as "Unorthodox" (see Figure 5.2).

Conventional methods and approaches signify highly accepted and utilized research designs and methods that are widely covered in the professional literature, in the field of practice, and in academic training programs. Emerging methods and approaches are exciting and slowly are being considered conventional research. Oral histories, a qualitative research method that recognizes the importance of data emerging from interviews, is probably the best example of a research method working its way into the mainstream of research.

Unorthodox methods and approaches represent innovations in the field that have found places within research agendas, but most

Figure 5.2   Youth-Led Research Methods and Approaches Circles
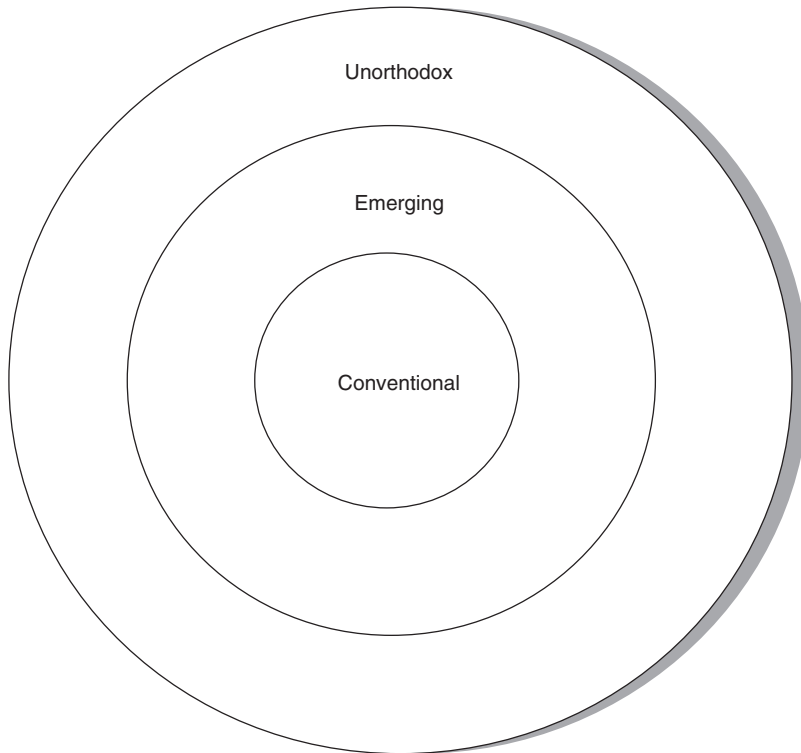
researchers have either not heard of them or, if they have, do not have an in-depth understanding and appreciation of what they entail. Whether these methods eventually find their way into emerging methods and approaches or achieve a conventional status will be determined in time. Use of photographs or sketches done by youth, analysis of community murals, videos, and art projects typically fall into this category.

Distinguishing between a project that can be categorized as "art" (such as a photography exhibit by a group of youngsters) and a research project using photography requires examination of (a) the goals of the project, (b) degree of collective effort in the training and implementation of the project, (c) level of analysis of findings incorporating individual and collective interpretation, and (d) evaluation

process and outcomes. These four dimensions help the process of determination.

The final product that is often an artifact of a conventional research project does not have to be a written report. It can be a video, photographic exhibit, or an actual social change that can be measured. The ultimate success of researchers undertaking "emerging" or "unorthodox" research rests on their methods for communicating the results of their research to each other and to those doing conventional research, and providing documentation of the effectiveness of these methods to the "scientific" world (Brydon-Miller, 1993).

Whether one method or approach transcends a category is very much determined by the interplay of a variety of key factors, such as the degree of academic support and funding. I suggest youth researchers be open to using innovative and therefore controversial research tools and approaches in the field. The development of new ways to solicit answers to research questions effectively opens up new population groups that can participate in research. The effective inclusion of these groups may well represent the hallmark of youth-led research. Organizational and community support for or against certain methods will ultimately dictate the best match between research methods and goals.

❖ CONCLUSION

The field of youth-led research is certainly not suffering from the absence of frameworks influencing the conceptualization and implementation of research. As I have shown in this chapter, the importance of research frameworks is not to be underestimated, as frameworks serve a variety of important roles, not least of which is to inform scholarship. Nevertheless, frameworks play an instrumental role in helping to shape practice by helping practitioners organize their goals and tasks along developmental lines and thus helping youth researchers acquire a better understanding and appreciation of how research projects bear similarities and differences with the planning of a program or service.

Further, from my standpoint and that of other advocates, the field of youth-led research is still very much in its infancy and will no doubt enrich the general field of social research before the movement is no longer considered a "movement" but part of the establishment. There

are numerous highly innovative ways that youth can carry out the role of social researcher, and this certainly bodes well for the future of this field. Determination of how and when these methods are embraced by the broader field of social research is impossible to predict, although it is hoped that a responsible and systematic process is followed. Anything short of this would be a great disappointment and would limit the potential of the youth-led research field to progress.