



THE EXPERIENCE OF YOUTH IN FOCUS

Youth Development Through Youth-led Research, Evaluation, and Planning

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners in the youth development field have long advocated youth leadership in community affairs. More difficult is identifying specific "best practices" to promote and sustain youth leadership over time. For ten years, Youth In Focus has worked to strengthen youth-serving organizations and enhance youth development by building the leadership capacity of youth and the capacity of the youth-serving institutions to integrate and sustain youth leadership. Our primary method has been research, evaluation and planning processes in which youth play leadership roles in collaboration with adult staff and professional consultants. We have found that our Youth REP (Research Evaluation Planning) programs provide a range of benefits to youth participants, youth serving organizations, and the broader community. This article will provide a brief overview of Youth In Focus' services and their positive effects. The article concludes with observations about the implications of the Youth REP process for the youth development field, and in particular, its applications to mental health.

YOUTH IN FOCUS

Youth In Focus (formerly Community LORE), a project of the Tides Center, is a nonprofit consulting and training organization dedicated to institutional, community and social change. We believe that youth should be partners in community and institutional development, and that youth-serving organizations should find ways for youth to meaningfully participate in the research, evaluation, and planning of programs and policies implemented in their name. We think having "youth in focus" is a crucial step in fostering youth growth and well-being, effective and innovative programs and organizations, and just and sustainable communities. Getting "youth in focus" requires that youth possess the capacities to serve as organizational and community leaders, and that adults learn to partner with youth in organizational and community development.

Youth In Focus helps community-based institutions, schools and public agencies throughout

northern California and elsewhere promote youth leadership by playing several support roles.

- 1) Coaching organization leaders and professional evaluators on working with youth as full partners and integrating youth leadership into organizational structures and cultures;
- 2) Developing curricula for adult facilitators and youth leaders on planning and facilitating research, evaluation and/or planning processes;
- 3) Training youth within organizations to design and conduct research, evaluation and planning processes;
- 4) Facilitating the application of data and analysis from Youth REP processes into strategic planning within organizations;
- 5) Supporting the integration of sustained youth leadership within the collaborating organizations; and
- 6) Advocating for systemic changes in public policy, funding, and organizational cultures that will better support meaningful youth engagement in research, evaluation and planning processes.

Youth In Focus organizes its services around the "Stepping Stones." The Stepping-Stones framework provides the skills and knowledge necessary to engage in a research, evaluation and/or planning processes. These steps begin with "Getting Ready," and continue through "Orientation," "Project Framework," "Project Planning/Instrument Development," "Data Collection," "Data Analysis," "Recommendations," "Implementation/Next Steps." Train the trainer sessions and coaching for site staff, and direct youth training retreats with youth team members are all keyed to the Stepping Stones. We also offer shorter training programs in Youth REP methods, customized strategic and policy consulting, and technical support.

Two recent Youth In Focus projects include the Plumas County 21st Century Community Learning Center and the Juvenile Justice Evaluation Project in San Francisco. In Plumas County (located in the California's northern Sierra Nevada mountain region), Youth In Focus worked with the local 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) staff to design and implement youth-led assessments of youth needs, interests, and concerns.

Their work was coordinated with that of an external evaluator. The data and analyses are now being used to plan future 21st CCLC programs and to serve as a baseline for evaluation of these programs. In the next year, Youth In Focus will help site organizations to institutionalize youth leadership through research, evaluation and planning and to develop processes to implement the youth recommendations from the initial need's assessments.

For the Juvenile Justice Evaluation Project, we worked with a coalition of organizations including (RYSE) Rising Youth for Social Equity, Coleman Advocates for Youth, and the U.C. Berkeley Institute for the Study of Social Change to conduct a youth-led evaluation as part of the Delancy Street Foundation's comprehensive reform plan for San Francisco's juvenile justice system. Youth In Focus trained a team of youth to evaluate the impact of reforms (primarily alternatives to incarceration). This process enabled the Delancy Street Foundation to hear directly from youth, and to make important modifications to their reform approach in response.

OUTCOMES OF THE YOUTH REP PROCESS

Youth REP programs have resulted in powerful and long-term outcomes for host organizations including the following:

- Restructured programs to better serve and engage youth based on the youth-generated data and recommendations to improve current programs
- Innovative new programs to respond to service "gaps" identified through the Youth REP process.
- Strengthened funding proposals that incorporate Youth REP findings.
- Increased youth participation in program and policy development by providing a forum for youth input and leadership, and the skills to fulfill these responsibilities.
- Changes in the way that organizations and communities value and integrate youth as partners in decision-making. Youth In Focus provides consulting and capacity-building services to adult staff to help organizations more effectively collaborate with youth.
- Integration of evaluation processes as an integral part of ongoing planning.

The outcomes of these programs can be seen at the individual as well as systemic scales. An example of individual development is the case of a staff member in the Plumas 21st CCLC who participated in one of the Youth REP orientation sessions. After participating in an activity called "Where do you stand? A continuum of

youth involvement," this staff member requested copies of the activity to help promote greater youth involvement in the organization. In a letter to Youth In Focus he wrote,

My idea is to use the "models" in the continuum as a guide to map and target the aspects and level of youth involvement in our program(s). I saw an image of our current state in the scenario that [Jean] had...youth involvement up to the planning stage, but the programs run by the adults. Aside from the youth projects, we have no "positions" being filled by youth...no leadership, youth staff, or council type positions. And no particular "models" to work towards, 'til now.

One example of institutional impacts of the Youth REP process is the upcoming development of a Plumas County Youth Leadership Network to coordinate and sustain youth leadership on a countywide scale. Another example is the integration of youth-based evaluation processes into organizations participating in Youth REP programs such as the City of San Francisco Department of Children Youth and Families, San Francisco State University/RFK Fellows, and the St. John's Educational Thresholds Center.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

The Youth REP process developed by Youth In Focus is a promising model and resource for youth development programs and mental health in particular. Youth REP can open a window into the perceptions and needs of youth regarding mental health services and programs. It can provide youth with the skills to identify challenges and assets—on both an individual and community level—related to mental health, and the capacities to analyze and communicate their recommendations based on their findings to improve mental health and other youth services. Youth REP also enhances the abilities of professional staff, organizational leaders, and policy makers involved in mental health to work with youth as full partners, not simply as clients or constituents. This capacity building with adults is an often overlooked element of youth development, but one that we have found indispensable for sustained and effective youth development processes.

For more information contact Youth In Focus, 216 F Street #6 Davis, CA 95616. Telephone: 530-758-3688; or 1203 Preservation Park, Suite 103, Oakland, CA 94612 Telephone: 510-251-9800 or email at comlore@igc.org

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Jonathan London is Co-Director of Youth In Focus (Formerly Community Lore), San Francisco, California. Mr. London is a community planner and educator who brings his participatory research and leadership development skills into the work he coordinates with youth.