

Assessing the Meaningful Inclusion of Youth Voice in Policy and Practice



Over the past two decades, stakeholders have recognized that young people should have a range of opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making influence within the systems that affect them.¹ This is particularly true for arenas in which organizations are responsible for successfully engaging young people, such as public service systems, local governance bodies, and community-based programs for youth and emerging adults. Whether referred to as youth voice, participation, advising, governance, leadership, advocacy, or civic engagement, a common underlying principle is that young people have expertise and insight relevant to decision-making within youth-serving systems, agencies, and programs.² However, few tools or frameworks have emerged to assist organizations in evaluating their efforts to include youth and young adult voice. Further, though stakeholders may agree with the idea of including youth voice in principle, they may not be aware of supportive policies and best practices that ensure the consistent and meaningful engagement of young people in decision-making processes. This article uses selected frameworks to help stakeholders think about youth and young adult participation in policy and practice, and introduces two new tools for self-assessment of the conditions that support the meaningful inclusion of youth voice. (Note that the terms youth, young adults, young people, and emerging adults are used interchangeably here, as the literature and principles of meaningful participation are generally applicable for young people ages 14-25.)

There are a number of mechanisms for including youth and young adult voice in systems or organizations,³ including youth advisory boards, seats for young people on governance boards, partnerships between youth-led groups and other stakeholders to drive community action, participatory research, policy change, and employment of young people as youth leaders and ongoing advisors in youth-serving organizations. Involving young people in decision making is also a way to employ positive development principles in mental health treatment systems and settings, where young people can be meaningfully involved in service improvement activities through civic engagement strategies that are widely associated with developmental skill building in general. From this perspective,

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we can consider the interpersonal and organizational conditions that engage and support the meaningful participation of young people as stakeholders in the policy and practice decisions that affect them, whether this occurs within youth-serving programs, agencies, and/or systems.

For example, one way for organizations to focus on the process of meaningful youth and young adult participation is to identify and promote interpersonal mechanisms that facilitate contributions to decision-making in a range of contexts. Zeldin and colleagues conceptualize this as *youth-adult partnership* (Y-AP), which is characterized by the explicit expectation that youth and adults will collaborate in all aspects of group decision making from visioning, to program planning, to evaluation and continuous improvement.⁴ Similarly, Y-AP has been framed as a positive youth development practice in which young people and adults are partnering within the program, organization, or community to make decisions or take action, consistent with their own interests and skill.⁵ To create a culture of youth participation and partnership, practitioners can facilitate three distinct aims in their community context – *voice*, *decision-making*, and *leadership* – by building positive relationships, engaging youth in first-hand learning, and supporting developmental progression.^{5,6}

However, it can be difficult for organizations to promote the intentional involvement of young people as an innovative practice without clearly described examples of what meaningful participation looks like when implemented in everyday settings. This can result in a mismatch between stakeholder goals to ensure meaningful participation and the installation of policies and practices to do so, such that the participation of young people is often limited to information gathering from advisory groups of young people, versus empowering young people to influence decision-making. Relevant

organizational frameworks can be used to address the gap between “lip service” and actual power-sharing with young people. For example, Blanchet-Cohen and Brunson describe power-sharing practices at multiple ecological levels:⁷

- *Individual-level* practices support youth capacities to participate (e.g., rapport-building).
- *Group-level* practices foster social interactions and activities that actualize the youth-led approach (e.g., facilitation to support and guard the process).
- *Setting-level* practices create structures that support and protect youth-led group process and activities within the larger organizational setting.
- *Organization/system-level* practices promote a favorable environment for youth leadership (e.g., adopting a youth-led philosophy, providing seats for youth on the board).

Describing the adult role in supporting and/or structuring youth-led processes at different levels underscores the dynamic nature of power-sharing with young people, which is expected to involve ongoing adaptability and responsiveness to youth strengths and needs, as well as regular negotiation of multi-level tensions within and between the youth-led group, the program or setting staff, and the broader organizational administration. This is especially true when participation occurs as part of a satellite youth advisory board or a youth-led program within a larger organization or system, which can selectively block or dismiss youth-involved decisions that challenge the status quo or standard practice.

High-level administrative commitment, resource allocation, and ongoing reflection are required to install and sustain meaningful participation within a larger context. Zeldin and colleagues outline supportive conditions for meaningful participation as an innovative practice for organizational and community change, identifying six managerial guidelines for initial adoption and implementation: (a) gain clarity and consensus on the purpose of partnership between young people and adults; (b) mobilize and coordinate a diverse range of stakeholders; (c) create favorable narratives about partnership; (d) construct theories and stories of organizational change; (e) affirmatively address issues of power; and (f) institutionalize new roles for young people.⁸ This reflects a multi-level effort to build awareness, secure resources, and maintain commitment for a range of approaches to involve young people in decision-making (not limited to creating youth advisory boards, for example).

The multi-level, multi-stage nature of implementation suggests that stakeholders need to embrace meaningful youth participation strategies as “the way we do



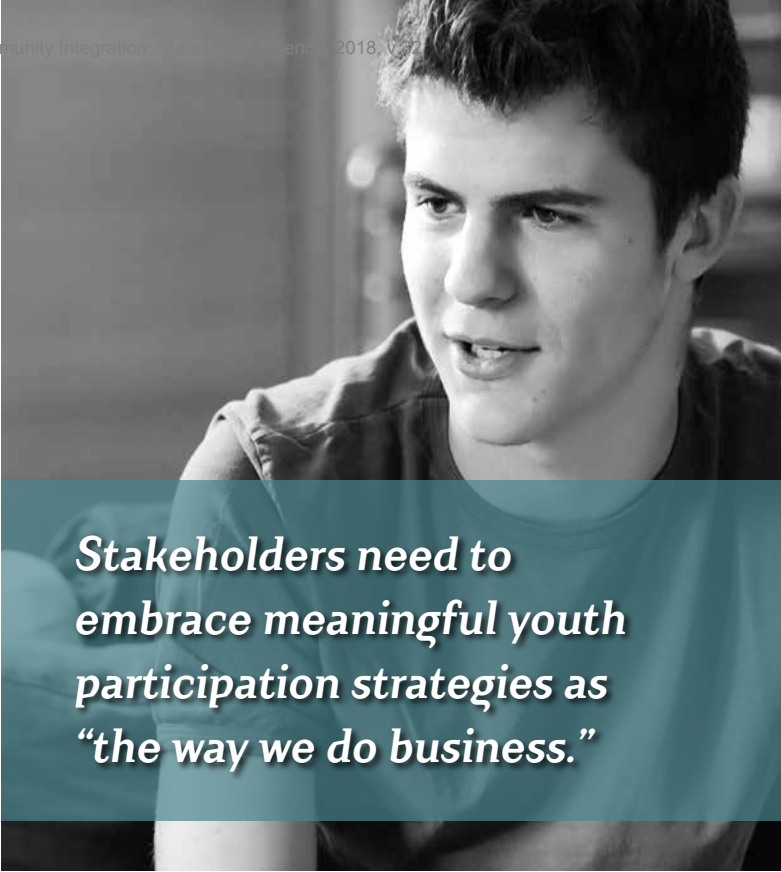
business.” To assist with this process, they can assess the extent of their own understanding, commitment, capacity, and supportive practices to ensure young people consistently have a voice in decision-making. Further, validated assessment tools can be used to evaluate initiatives to increase participation within organizations or systems, as well as for practice improvement, when assessment provides guidance about specific practices that could be further developed in individual agencies or systems. Therefore, researchers at Portland State University have developed two new assessment tools in partnership with Youth MOVE National, and are in the process of establishing measure reliability and validity for both.

The first, the *Youth/Young Adult Voice at the Agency Level* assessment (Y-VAL), was developed in partnership with young people and organizations working to promote meaningful participation in agency-level advising and leadership, and is intended to help such organizations to conduct self-assessment and to identify areas for additional technical assistance. To do this, the Y-VAL assesses the extent to which organizations have installed a comprehensive array of best practice strategies to support meaningful participation and voice in advising and decision-making. This includes mechanisms to initially engage young people (such as youth leadership groups), best practices for including young people in advising and decision-making for planning and evaluation purposes, and activities that support ongoing skill development (e.g., peer-support roles, youth leaders as paid staff). The Y-VAL measures the presence of supportive policies and practices within eight critical dimensions (e.g., overall vision and commitment, empowered representatives, workforce development) and gives examples of fully-developed policies or practices in each dimension.

The second tool, the *Youth/Young Adult Voice on Councils/Committees* (Y-VOC) is currently being finalized and validated for eventual use in the field. The Y-VOC is similar to the Y-VAL in assessing a range of supportive policies and practices for the inclusion of young people on committee and council advising systems. Although the inclusion of young people on system-level advisory groups is becoming a widespread practice, the Y-VOC is expected to be the first validated system-level measure of support for the meaningful inclusion of young people’s voice in these decision-making bodies.

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Stakeholders need to embrace meaningful youth participation strategies as “the way we do business.”

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