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Barry Checkoway, Kameshwari Pothukuchi and Janet Finn
Journal of Planning Education and Research 1995; 14; 134
DOI: 10.1177/0739456X9501400206

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Youth Participation in Community Planning: What are the Benefits?

Young people are planning programs in communities nationwide. In Indianapolis they are assessing community needs and reviewing proposals for local improvement; in New York they are rehabilitating housing for the homeless; in Alabama they are formulating strategies for civil rights and social change; in New Mexico they are taking steps against environmental hazards; and in South Dakota they are setting priorities for small town development. These efforts vary from place to place, but together they demonstrate that young people can plan programs and create change.

Planners are strategically situated to involve young people in community planning. They operate in diverse institutional domains in several substantive fields and in urban and rural areas nationwide. Their Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct states that a planner should "strive to give citizens the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs; [that] participation should be broad enough to include people who lack formal organization or influence;" and that this includes efforts to "expand choice and opportunity for all persons recognizing a social responsibility to plan for the needs of disadvantaged groups and persons" (Wachs 1985). Presumably, this responsibility extends to young people.

However, planners have an uneven record of working with young people. Some planners include parks and playgrounds in master plans, relate schools to housing in land use decisions, and provide teachers with curricular materials on community development. These planners are not typical in the field, and even they themselves tend to "keep kids in mind" rather than involve them in the planning process or help them plan programs of their own.

This essay identifies various forms of youth participation; describes some of its benefits; and relates these to planning practice, research, and education. It draws upon extensive work in the field, including a national study of innovative program planning for community-based youth programs (Checkoway and Finn 1992). It is based on a belief that young people are community resources, that planners have a

role in promoting their participation, and that new knowledge of the benefits of youth participation can help increase young people's involvement in the planning process.

■ WHAT IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Youth participation is a process of involving youth in the institutions and the decisions that affect their lives. It includes initiatives to organize groups for social action, plan programs at the community level, and develop community-based services and resources. It is not a form of adult advocacy for local youth or of token representation of youth in the meetings of agencies, but a process through which young people solve problems and plan programs in the community.

Youth participation is part of the changing conception of youth in society. In the 19th century, youth were often portrayed as little adults and treated as regular workers on farms and in factories. Early 20th century reformers viewed young people as victims of urban-industrial society and sought measures to protect them from neglect and abuse by adults. Today there is a growing recognition of "youth as resources" (Kurth-Schai 1988). The notion is that young people have roles as active citizens, that they have a right to participate in community planning, and that adults can be allies in the process.

■ FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Youth participation can take various forms which can be distinguished in order to increase understanding in the field. The following initiatives are among the most important forms of youth participation.

Social Action

Social action involves youth by organizing groups around such issues as environmental protection, racial discrimination, and neighborhood revitalization. When youth join together for social action, they increase their collective capacity, a lesson which powerful adult groups learned years ago.

In Selma, Alabama, for example, youth from the 21st Century Youth Leadership Network organized against the process in which African-American students were tracked

into lower levels in the public schools. They organized protest demonstrations, called a citywide boycott, conducted a sit-in in the high school cafeteria, and influenced change in educational practice. Since then they have marched against toxic waste dumps, conducted tours of houses where landlords refused to make needed improvements, and mobilized residents against drug abuse in housing projects (Sanders 1991).

Community Planning

Community planning initiatives include efforts to plan programs at the local level. Planning may include steps to assess local conditions, formulate action plans, and build support for implementation.

Some planning is in reaction to issues in the community, as in Massachusetts, where young people learned about solid wastes that violated air quality standards and submitted a proposal to city planners (Lewis 1991); or in California, where they assessed neighborhood housing needs and made recommendations to development officials (Crabbe 1989). Other planning is more proactive, as in Indianapolis, Indiana, where they form planning committees, assess community needs, invite proposals for youth programs, and allocate funds for implementation (O'Neil 1990); or in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where they survey their peers, issue requests for proposals, and award grants for programs that involve youth in planning (Winn et al. 1992).

Public Advocacy

These initiatives include young people who advocate with legislators about policy proposals, hold agencies accountable for administrative regulations, and build coalitions supporting the interests of youth.

In Washington, D.C., for example, Latin American Youth Center youth leaders responded to announced municipal cutbacks in programs serving young people in the community. They circulated petitions, testified at public hearings, and demonstrated against the mayor at city hall. They staged theater productions in front of the city council chambers, visited council members in their offices, and helped convince them to restore the funds (Checkoway and Finn 1992).

Community Education

Community education strengthens the consciousness, competence, and confidence of youth to "transform the world." Unlike the situation in which young people sit in silence and accept the roles which adults attribute to them, these initiatives encourage them to question their circumstances and change their communities.

In a low income neighborhood in Salt Lake City, Utah, for example, students identified a toxic waste site near the school. Ignoring health officials who had tried to discourage them, they conducted community surveys, spoke out at

meetings, and wrote resolutions that stimulated state legislation. There are many examples of young people who present educational programs to school children, perform sociodramas to popular audiences, and publish newspapers with critical perspectives on important issues in society (Lewis 1991).

Local Services Development

Local services development involves youth in efforts to develop community-based services responsive to needs such as education, employment, health care, housing, and economic development in urban (Irby 1991) and rural (Heartland Center 1988) areas.

For example, young people from the Youth Action Program of East Harlem rehabilitate abandoned housing for the homeless while also completing their education and preparing for employment. They operate a resource center and safe haven on New York's East 103rd Street, and form citywide coalitions to set priorities for the city. Each project is governed by an activist core of young people who serve on the governing body and make policy and budgetary decisions for the program overall (Stoneman 1988).

■ BENEFITS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

What are the benefits of youth participation? The following are some of the benefits on which there is relative agreement among researchers and practitioners.

Individual Involvement

Youth participation involves individuals in ways which produce positive psychosocial results. Studies show that participation can contribute to open-mindedness (Wilson 1974), personal responsibility (Conrad and Hedin 1982), social and civic competence (Newmann and Rutter 1988; Rutter and Newmann 1989), moral and ego development (Moser 1977), and a sense of efficacy and self-esteem (Zimmerman forthcoming). In contrast to the pattern of frustration and alienation in which youth withdraw from participation, these initiatives increase their interaction in the community (Calabrese and Schumer 1986).

Participation can provide experiential education and skills development. Consistent with theories of learning as a form of interaction with the environment, studies show that participation can strengthen academic achievement in the classroom and increase problem-solving capacity in the community (Checkoway and Cahill 1981; Conrad and Hedin 1991; Crabbe 1989). Indeed, some youth perceive that community service teaches them more than they learn in the classroom, including skills to challenge the conditions that perpetuate poverty, analyze the causes of racism, and critically reflect on important issues (Conrad and Hedin 1991; Nathan and Kielsmeier 1991; Newmann and Rutter 1988; Sheat and Beer 1989).

Psychosocial benefits of youth participation may have particular importance for at-risk or socially oppressed youth. In Chicago's Cabrini-Green housing project, for example, the Jesse White Tumbling Team performs, offering young males alternatives to gangs in the neighborhood (Irby and McLaughlin 1990). Community participation provides them with structure and discipline, a sense of personal identity, and social supports unavailable elsewhere (Heath and McLaughlin 1991).

Organizational Development

Youth participation can contribute to organizational development. It is difficult for young people to plan programs when they lack consciousness of themselves as competent community builders, when they accept the notion of adult control over youth services, or when they defer to adult advocates who represent their interests without involving them in the process.

However, youth participation can engage them in formal organizational efforts to set priorities, formulate plans, and implement programs, and in informal structures and personal relationships that provide social supports and, in some cases, surrogate family functions. Heath and McLaughlin (1991), in their study of participation in Chicago, document young people's capacity to build organizations where supportive intergenerational ties for mutual learning are cultivated.

For example, Students Educating Each other about Discrimination (SEED) is a group of teenagers who educate themselves and young children about discrimination. SEED started as an informal group of friends who assessed racial attitudes in the schools and built community support for its program. It has a core of people who recruit members and train more than 100 facilitators to work in the middle schools. Their organizational structure permits them to formulate plans and implement programs without adult intervention in a nonhierarchical dialogue process, while also dealing with the hierarchical systems of adults (Polakow-Suransky and Ulaby 1990; Winn et al. 1992).

Community Development

Youth participation can contribute to community development. One example can be found in New York, where youth, while completing their education, plan programs that rehabilitate abandoned buildings into permanent housing for the homeless (Stoneman 1988). Another example exists in rural North Carolina, where they take courses in entrepreneurship, develop businesses in cooperation with local institutions, and operate enterprises which enhance the economy (Heartland Center 1988). As young people become builders or entrepreneurs, they contribute to community development.

Youth participation can contribute to political development as well. Public policy affecting young people operates

in an imbalanced political arena where interest groups concerned with adult issues mobilize more resources than do representatives of youth, or where child welfare advocates concerned with problems affecting youth—such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency—mobilize more resources than do those who emphasize youth as resources.

However, youth participation can involve young people in the policy process. There are young people who effectively participate in public proceedings, conduct voter registration campaigns, serve on organizational boards and committees, and act like leaders in the community. They persuade public officials to allocate resources for programs, and they pressure agency staff to comply with administrative regulations (Lewis 1991).

■ PLANNERS AND PARTICIPATION

Planners are strategically situated to promote youth participation in planning. They operate in various institutional settings and fields of service and in a range of geographical locations, all of which have populations of young people. Most standard methods of citizen participation are available for work with young people (Rosener 1975; Dale 1978), if planners were to think of youth as participants.

Some planners show concern for the health of children in overcrowded housing, design streets and sidewalks to keep them safe from automobiles, and favor facilities for those whose working parents are away from home during the day. Such efforts recognize young people as another group in society, but emphasize the delivery of services to youth rather than youth participation in the planning process.

Most planners do nothing to promote youth participation in community planning. They do not consult with young people, represent them on committees, invite them to meetings, or assist them in planning programs of their own. There is no planning agency, of which we are aware, that actively involves young people in the planning process, although we invite readers to notify us of the contrary.

Whose participation do planners promote? Studies show that planning agencies do not broadly represent their area population, that they often overrepresent businessmen and others with a concentrated economic interest in land use decisions, and that they underrepresent minority groups (Checkoway 1982). Those few planners who reach out to traditional nonparticipants emphasize underrepresented adults, not young people.

Other professionals focus on young people more than planners do. For example, there are social workers who protect youth from neglect and abuse by adult society, landscape architects who involve them in the planning of parks and playgrounds, and public health workers who mobilize them and their parents for maternal and child health programs (Sutton 1985, 1992).

Planning researchers have done nothing to develop knowledge of youth participation in community planning. There are studies of participation by low income people, African Americans, women, and other populations. There are studies of participation in land use, economic development, transportation, housing, and human services. But where are the studies of young people?

Some planning educators and planning schools have developed curricula and courses with readings that emphasize biracial or multicultural competence and sensitivity to special populations, but they usually ignore young people. Feminist planning educators have addressed concerns of women and their families, but the tendency is to discuss children only insofar as they affect the status of women. Is it possible that in the entire history of planning research and planning education, including the entire contents of the *Journal of the American Planning Association* and the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, there is not one scholarly article or core course on youth participation?

What explains the uneven record of planners on issues concerning young people? There are three common ways to explain the gap between promise and practice in community participation. First is to attribute the gap to the characteristics of the participants. It is difficult to involve young people when they know very little about planning, find few issues that capture their imaginations, or do not view themselves as a group that should participate in the process. Young people are socialized into a subservient orientation where an acceptance of the adult monopoly in the family or in society is transferred to community planning. It is no surprise that they may question their own legitimacy or show symptoms of alienation from the community. If they strengthened their skills for collective action, then they too would participate.

The second view attributes the performance gap to planners and planning agencies. It is difficult to involve young people when planners do not recognize their legitimacy as a constituency group or when planners lack the resources to make participation work. Planners often perceive laypersons as uninformed amateurs, and emphasize technical efficiency and administrative control, which are the antitheses of participation. Agencies select safe methods—such as public hearings—designed to provide public relations and serve administrative ends without transfer of power to ordinary citizens. If they had more expertise, or more resources for the purpose, then they would promote participation with fervor (Checkoway 1982; Checkoway and Finn 1992).

The third view contends that the performance gap is the direct result of the community context in which planning operates. Simply stated, adults perceive that they, not youth, should control community planning. For example, child welfare advocates view young people as vulnerable members of society who are too often neglected or abused by adults or

victimized by forces beyond their control. Advocates seek to strengthen services for youth, but usually without young people's participation, thus relegating them to secondary or tertiary roles rather than allowing them primary roles in the planning process. To the extent that the process is—or should be—reflective of the community, it is no surprise that planners favor adults rather than young people. It is not that planners are captured by adults, but that planners respond to the most powerful inputs they receive, and these come from adults, not children. To promote the participation of youth, it first would be necessary to alter the community context in which planning operates.

■ ROLES FOR PLANNERS

What could planners do to promote youth participation in community planning? The following are a few suggestions.

First is to help develop the capacity of young people as participants in community planning. People cannot be expected to participate effectively if they lack knowledge, skills, and attitudes conducive to the task. According to their Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (Wachs 1985), planners have a responsibility to promote participation.

New initiatives are needed for education and training to enable planners—and the young citizens they serve—to develop knowledge of skills to assess community conditions, to set priorities and make decisions, to develop action plans, and to formulate strategies to implement programs. These skills are basic to planning and there is no *a priori* reason why citizens should not have them. Lessons could include techniques to consult with young people and develop their confidence, a phase of planning which is particularly important when working with people who experience oppression. There is evidence that training can alter the quality of community participation and that some people desire such training and benefit from it (Checkoway et al. 1992).

Leadership development could be a central focus of education and training for young people. In addition to the basic knowledge of planning, they would learn about the political economy of the current planning system, the ideologies of the principal actors, the distribution of community power, and the special problems of young people. Special lessons would include ways to recognize adult discrimination, counteract oppression, and organize youth to have an impact on the community. The aim is to help young people serve as competent participants and community leaders (Stoneman 1988).

This is not to suggest that planners themselves should manage the training of young people. On the contrary, training programs controlled by professionals can be used to socialize laypersons toward professional perspectives rather

than strengthen indigenous viewpoints, and to engender citizen support for programs rather than promote participation in the process. But if planners do not take responsibility, then who will?

Curricula also are needed to train adult planners to work with young people. Adults play key roles in encouraging young leaders, but there is a shortage of adults who are able to work effectively with youth. Lessons could focus on the skills needed to communicate effectively with young people, to encourage their participation, and to provide assistance when needed. All of the characteristics of adults whom young people perceive as their allies, also apply to planners.

Second is to increase the participation of young people in the planning process. Knowledge of participation technology is readily available. Agency catalogues describe dozens of current or emergent methods; analyze selected methods according to function; and rationalize the design, implementation, and evaluation of practice. Various techniques to involve young people are available, including public information programs to demonstrate how community planning affects them, community forums to educate them on planning issues, and community hearings to allow them to step forward and express their views. Planning boards could include representatives of youth groups, and technical assistance could help youth plan programs of their own.

New initiatives are needed to increase public awareness of the importance of youth participation. Awareness building can take various forms about which there is information relevant to planning. For example, Gordon (1978) formulates strategies for using newspapers, radio, and television for social change. Brawley (1983) presents ways in which agencies can use mass media to communicate their message. Lauffer (1984) analyzes marketing methods for social agencies that produce popular publications for mass distribution. Some planning agencies conduct extensive programs to reach the public through radio, television, and newspapers. These agencies are not typical and none of them targets youth, but they offer lessons nonetheless.

■ CONCLUSION

Youth participation in community planning can increase involvement of individuals, contribute to organizational development, and create community change. It can represent an important yet ignored constituency, promote their participation in decision making, and make the process more responsive to their interests.

Despite the benefits of youth participation, planners have an uneven record of performance. Some planners work with young people, to be sure, but most of them have done nothing to promote youth participation in community planning. Nonetheless, planners do have responsibility—and are strategically situated—for such efforts. If only a few planners were to take initiative for increasing the involvement of

young people, they could alter the scope and development of planning and the communities of which it is a part.

Authors' Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, Columbus, Ohio, October 1992. Part of the work on which this paper is based was made possible by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

Barry Checkoway, Kameshwari Pothukuchi, and Janet Finn

Barry Checkoway is Professor of Social Work and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1285 USA.

Kameshwari Pothukuchi is a Ph.D. student in Urban, Technological, and Environmental Planning at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1285 USA.

Janet Finn is Assistant Professor of Social Work at University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812-1046 USA.

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