Given the emerging interest among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in youth participation, it is important to examine and assess carefully the promise and challenges of youth engagement.

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Introduction: Moving youth participation forward

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FIVE YOUTH from the San Francisco Bay Area recently joined twenty-five other young people and over one hundred adults at an international conference on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. "It was the most un-youth-friendly place," explained one young woman. "Every day we woke up early and spent hours listening to adults lecture about the experiences of youth. There was no time for us to talk to anyone, no time to move around, and when we tried to tell them about our feelings, they didn't really listen. Nothing really changed—until the last day when *we* finally got to do *our* presentation. One of the adults tried to come up and facilitate our question-and-answer period, and we just said, 'No, thank you. We're prepared to do this for ourselves. Sit down please.' I don't think the adults really got it until then."[1]

The concept of youth participation, whether under the name of youth voice, decision making, empowerment, engagement, or participation, has become a hot topic. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most widely ratified treaty in history, made participation a fundamental right of all young people.[2] Advocates and researchers of youth development point to the developmental benefits of youth involvement in decision

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making and public engagement.[3] Youth participation has been linked to greater organizational sustainability and effectiveness[4] and, on a macrolevel, national democratic, social, and economic development.[5] Not surprisingly, then, the idea of youth participation has garnered broad support across a range of disciplines and practices. However, the frustrations experienced by the young people cited at the start of this chapter point to a central issue within this growing field: even adults and youth with the best intentions struggle with just what youth participation means. What does it look like? How does it happen?

Participation is a broad term, encompassing several dimensions. The CRC defines youth participation as freedom of expression on issues affecting young people.[6] Participation can also be organized around three general themes: access to social, political, and economic spheres; decision making within organizations that influence one's life; and planning and involvement in public action.[7] For the purposes of this chapter, we understand youth participation as *a constellation of activities that empower adolescents to take part in and influence decision making that affects their lives and to take action on issues they care about.*

This introductory chapter provides a sketch of the state of the field of youth participation, reviewing what is known about what participation looks like, how it functions, and where it takes place.[8] As a developing field, the answer to many of these questions is "not enough." This lack of evidence and understanding can potentially fuel myths around youth participation. We address four of these myths, pointing to some of the important questions to think about in achieving meaningful youth engagement.

Where we are: Youth participation in research and practice

Youth development researchers have noted a shift in youth work in the past two decades from prevention (programs designed to treat and prevent the problems of "at-risk" youth) to preparation (build-

ing skills and supporting broader development for all youth) to participation and power sharing (actively engaging young people as partners in organizational and public decision making).[9] These shifts represent a broadening of focus from looking solely at individual-level outcomes to also examining the organizational and community-level impacts of youth participation.

With this expanding focus, efforts to take youth participation seriously have extended beyond traditional youth development activities to embrace youth involvement in other areas. For example, as Chapter Six of this volume illustrates, researchers, policymakers, and program evaluators are beginning to involve young people as research partners, working to understand better the lives of youth and the institutions that influence them.[10] Internationally, young people have been central to grassroots social, environmental, and economic change movements,[11] a pattern that, as discussed in Chapters Two and Four, is beginning to show up in the United States as well. Moreover, many nonprofit and youth organizations have come to embrace the notion that youth voices should be part of organizational decision making,[12] and young people have begun to be engaged in school reform efforts.[13]

Most observers agree, however, that the corresponding research on youth participation—its prerequisites, organizational features, current scope, and impacts—remains in the early stages. In part, this reflects a lack of consensus on conceptual frameworks and definitions,[14] especially ones that take into account the influence of local contexts. Effective approaches to youth participation in Brazil, for example, have been shown to be less successful when implemented in the United States because of differing policy and organizational contexts.[15] Broad and meaningful participation seems to require a larger policy context in which the voices of youth are listened to and taken seriously, and we still have much to learn about the multiple ways in which context influences local efforts.

Similarly, little consensus exists on where youth participation most appropriately or effectively occurs. The majority of work around youth engagement has tended to focus on the experiences

of young people in community-based or nongovernmental organizations.[16] These organizations often do not face the same sets of constraints as public institutions, and as a result, they may offer young people the type of alternative spaces that they need to reflect critically and build capacity for action. Youth organizing efforts are also typically based in community, whether in formal organizations or less-formal grassroots movements, and often work outside the system or act in opposition to public institutions. While acknowledging the strength and importance of such efforts, researchers and practitioners have begun to point to the need to bring youth participation to public institutions as well, working to create change from within. Many consider youth participation in schools, for example, critical to creating sustainable and significant change.[17] As Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez notes in Chapter Six, greater youth participation in public institutions can lead to substantive improvements in government effectiveness.

Youth participation, then, occurs in multiple settings and across multiple levels, from local to national and global. The common denominator across these levels is that if participation is to be effective, it must become embedded in institutions and processes that influence young people's everyday lives.

Research on outcomes for youth and organizations has provided broad evidence of the benefits of youth participation. Some promising evidence about youth outcomes stems from research on student motivation in classrooms, in which participation in decision making has been correlated with greater effort, intrinsic interest, and more effective learning strategies.[18] Youth development practitioners also have found that participation is an effective strategy for engaging youth, especially older high school students, who typically avoid youth organizations that do not give them a voice in decision making or planning.[19] Such engagement has been found to have an impact on the host organizations, which report that youth participation in decision making leads to changes in the organizational climate and a deeper commitment by adults to youth development principles.[20] Finally, meaningful participation is said to foster democratic habits in youth, such as tolerance, healthy dis-

agreement, self-expression, and cooperation.[21] Recent work studying community impact, although challenging to measure, has begun to document the ways in which youth participation has led to meaningful community change as well.[22]

Despite these emerging empirical examples, the field is still developing. It will be important in the coming years to build on these lines of research to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the necessary conditions that support youth participation and the benefits that can accrue to participants and the wider community. We know little, for example, about the kinds of roles that adults play to support effective youth engagement. In addition, there exists little understanding of the organizational features of spaces that encourage youth participation. And while research efforts are beginning to focus on developmental outcomes for youth, still needed is a richer base of evidence demonstrating the impact of participation on both young people and the communities of which they are a part.

Myths of youth participation

Although youth participation is an international phenomenon, it is also closely linked to local context. As such, we focus our lens here on the current policy climate in North America, which is often divided between defenders of more adult-controlled policies and practices for youth, on one hand, and adherents of youth participation, on the other. The first group tends to see youth as problems to be fixed or dependents to be taken care of. Its proponents rarely view youth as resources to be engaged in creating social and community change.

In the United States, these youth participation naysayers play a powerful role in shaping discussions of youth and youth policy. For example, in 2000, California voters passed Proposition 21, a controversial juvenile crime ballot initiative that increases the penalties for juvenile offenses and the range of cases that can be tried in adult courts.[23] Policies such as this reflect and reinforce perceptions of young people as dangerous and disengaged. Studies showing the

intractability of these negative constructions of youth in the minds of adults demonstrate the challenge of creating a broad movement of youth participation in the United States.[24]

In contrast, there are many who have wholeheartedly embraced the notion of youth participation, sometimes promoting an overly romantic notion of youth involvement. We refer to this often sentimental position as one held by the "true believer." Themes of voice and participation echo rich traditions in progressive education that value the autonomy of the child and the importance of appealing to his or her passions and interests. Yet in the struggle to convince others of the rights and abilities of young people to engage in organizational or public decision making and action, careful and critical understanding of youth participation is required.

As the idea of youth participation gains steam, the field is at a critical juncture. It is more important than ever before to identify and uncover the myths surrounding youth participation in order to build a convincing, evidence-rich case for its merits. We outline four such myths and discuss key issues facing supporters of youth participation.

Myth 1: Youth participation is accomplished by placing one youth on a board or committee

Many school boards, city councils, and boards of directors of nonprofit organization have begun to create space for youth representatives. Although this marks a potentially important first step in opening the door to youth voice and participation, it also may limit the involvement of young people. Such a conception carries with it two related problems: tokenism and exclusivity.

Inserting one or a few youth into an adult-created and adult–driven process runs the risk of involving youth as tokens or "decorations,"[25] precluding any opportunity for meaningful participation or substantive influence. An authentic process is not one that is determined solely by adults. Rather, youth need multiple spaces for engagement. In this way, youth participation efforts can tap into the interests, passions, and skills of young people. Alternative points of entry can also open the space for youth to redesign and recreate the institutions that influence their lives.

In addition to the risk of tokenism, involving a few youth as representatives of larger groups may result in exclusivity, whereby only the most privileged or skilled youth are chosen to participate. Theorists of public participation have raised important questions to consider in thinking about authentic youth involvement.[26] Central among these are questions about who participates that point to the need to work intentionally for broad and inclusive participation. This means building structures, practices, and cultures that support the participation of youth who may not come from privileged backgrounds or who may not yet have the skills to participate effectively. Creating inclusive participation also means overcoming the idea of representativeness. Although youth participation implies that youth share common interests, it is important to remember how multiple and diverse their backgrounds and experiences are. Young people engage with the public world as individuals, not as representatives of all youth, African American youth, or gay youth, for example.

Myth 2: Youth participation means that adults surrender their roles as guides and educators

Whereas the problem with myth 1 lies in its limited assumptions about the involvement of youth, the challenge with myth 2 lies in limited assumptions about the involvement of adults. Too often, discussions of youth participation are silent about the roles that adults must play as supporters and educators. The field will benefit from thoughtful attention to these roles because they are unlike those typically played by adults who work with youth and a necessary feature of successful youth participation efforts.

Youth participation projects are often one of the few arenas in which adults socialize youth into practices and habits of the professional world. For example, in Chapter Six, Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez points out her role as a sympathetic critic of the members of Youth IMPACT, a youth-led evaluation program in San Francisco. If youth made a presentation and the audience did not understand what they were saying or if young people did not take

their professional obligations seriously, she gave them feedback to help them improve. In other words, supporters of youth participation must be open to the unique voices and contributions of youth, but they also must help youth learn how to recognize the norms of the public arena or the specific practices of the field in which they hope to participate. This is not so that youth will merely adopt these norms, but so that they can be effective in shaping broader arenas.

Adults also often play roles as critical guides, especially in projects that are oriented toward civic participation or political activism. What if there were a youth empowerment project where students decided to exclude someone because of that person's ethnicity or sexual orientation? Or, in a more likely scenario, what if youth wished to make an impact on their community but lacked knowledge of political processes or a critical consciousness about deep-seated public problems? Most would agree that such projects would be flawed efforts at youth participation. Adults play critical roles in providing guidance and connecting youth with needed information and resources.

Myth 3: Adults are ready for youth participation

An assumption of adult readiness brings some of the most intractable problems to youth participation efforts. As seen in the episode that opened this chapter, even the best-intentioned adults may not yet understand what youth participation means. Adults need to adapt to youth participation as much as (if not more than) youth do. This requires ongoing training and development of adults in how best to support youth and fulfill their roles as adult allies. Successful youth-adult partnerships recognize the importance of supporting adult learning and change to nurture effective youth participation.[27]

A greater challenge, however, may come from the need for adults to change their frames, that is, their understandings of youth and how to work with them. Even in institutions created to develop and serve youth, young people often face ambivalence from adults about their ability to participate in real-world decision making and action.[28] As one young person put it, adults do not see youth as "actual people" able to effect change in the world. True participa-

tion, then, means changing deeply held beliefs of adults—not just about age but also constructions around race, ethnicity, and class. At its most basic level, it requires a "willingness to be changed."[29]

Myth 4: Youth are ready to participate; they just need the opportunity

Just as adults need support and training, authentic youth engagement requires that young people be given the time and space to develop the skills they need to participate effectively. This does not mean that youth need to learn now and participate later, but rather that they have ongoing training and support during the participation process. This training includes domain-specific skills. Projects that involve youth in program evaluation, for example, need to train youth in research methods, such as interviewing or data analysis, which typically are not part of a regular school curriculum. Youth preparation also includes the development of broader skills. To engage meaningfully in decision making, youth (like adults) may need workshops and practice in facilitation, public speaking, and collaborative processes. Finally, youth too may need experiences that alter their frames about what is possible for young people. Involvement with real-world issues and projects where they can see the larger community or public impact may be the best way for youth to learn what they are capable of.

Moving forward

The myths articulated here represent key barriers to meaningful youth participation. They highlight the need for honest discussion and analysis around issues of power. Are adults prepared to involve youth in meaningful ways? Are they prepared to look critically at patterns of privilege and exclusion that cut across age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability? How will they build structures and processes that work to overcome these? Are they ready to change, taking on roles as allies and partners rather than just directors or instructors? Equally important, are youth

prepared to take on their roles as decision makers and public actors? Do they have access to the necessary knowledge and skills? Answering these questions will be crucial to understanding and strengthening youth participation efforts.

Notes

1. Anecdote taken from researcher field notes, Aug. 22, 2002.
2. To date, 191 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Only two countries have not: Somalia and the United States.
3. See, for example, Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence, Italy: UNICEF, International Child Development Centre; Hart, R., Daiute, C., & Iltus, S. (1997). Developmental theory and children's participation in community organizations. *Social Justice*, *24*(3), 33–63; Pittman, K., Ferber, T., & Irby, M. (2000). *Youth as effective citizens*. Takoma Park, MD: International Youth Foundation—US.
4. Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A. K., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study of the impacts of youth on adults and organizations*. Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council; Rajani, R. (2000). *The participation rights of adolescents: A strategic approach* (Working Paper). New York: United Nations Children's Fund.
5. Rajani (2000).
6. Hart (1992).
7. Tolman, J., & Pittman, K. (2001). *Youth acts, community impacts: Stories of youth engagement with real results*. Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation.
8. For a more complete review, see Hart (1992); Rajani (2000); Irby, M., Ferber, T., & Pittman, K. (2001). *Youth action: Youth contributing to communities, communities supporting youth*. Takoma Park, MD: Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation.
9. Pittman, Ferber, & Irby (2000).
10. See also Kirshner, B., O'Donoghue, J., & McLaughlin, M. (forthcoming). Youth-led research collaboration: Bringing youth voice to the research process. In J. Mahoney, J. Eccles, & R. Larson (Eds.), *After-school activities: Contexts of development*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
11. See, for example, Brandao, C. (1998). The landmark achievements of Brazil's social movement for children's rights. *New Designs for Youth Development*, *14*(3). Available at: www.cydjournal.org/newdesigns/ND_98fall; Espinosa, M. F., & Schwab, M. (1997). Working children in Ecuador mobilize for change. *Social Justice*, *24*(3), 64–70; Hart, R., & Schwab, M. (1997). Children's rights and the building of democracy: A dialogue on the international movement for children's participation. *Social Justice*, *24*(3), 177–191.
12. Zeldin et al. (2000).

13. Mitra, D. (2002). *Makin' it real: Involving youth in school reform.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University; Fielding, M. (2001). Students as radical agents of change. *Journal of Educational Change*, *2*(2), 123–141.

14. What evidence do we have that youth participation actually works? (2001, Spring). *International Insights on Youth and Communities*, *2*.

15. Brandao (1998).

16. Hart (1992); Hart et al. (1997); Ferber, T., & Pittman, K. (1999). *Finding common agendas: How young people are being engaged in community change efforts.* Takoma Park, MD: International Youth Foundation—US; Pittman et al. (2000); Tolman & Pittman (2001).

17. Hart and Schwab (1997); Rajani (2000).

18. Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *84*(3), 261–271; Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., & Schiefele, U. (1998). Motivation to succeed. In W. Damon (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol. 3: Social, emotional and personality development* (pp. 1017–1094).

19. Ashley, J., Samaniego, D., & Chuen, L. (1997). How Oakland turns its back on teens: A youth perspective. *Social Justice*, *24*, 170–177; McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). *Community counts: How youth organizations matter for youth development.* Washington, DC: Public Education Network.

20. Zeldin et al. (2000).

21. Hart (1992).

22. Tolman & Pittman (2001).

23. For more details, see the Web site of the California Legislative Analyst's Office: www.lao.ca.gov/initiatives/2000/21_03_2000.html.

24. Bales, S. (2000). *Reframing youth issues for public consideration and support.* Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

25. Hart (1992).

26. Anderson, G. L. (1998). Toward authentic participation: Deconstructing the discourses of participatory reforms in education. *American Educational Research Journal*, *35*(4), 571–603; Baksh-Soodeen, R. (2001). Lessons from the gender movement: Building a discipline to support practice. *CYD Journal*, *2*(2), 61–64.

27. The HOME Project, described in some detail in Chapter Four of this volume, for example, invests significant resources in the development of adult staff. Adults create learning plans for their own work with youth and meet in adult reflection sessions to discuss their own challenges and growth in supporting youth engagement.

28. See for example, Costello, J., Toles, M., Spielberger, J., & Wynn, J. (2000). *History, ideology and structure shape the organizations that shape youth, youth development: Issues, challenges and directions.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

29. The need for this "willingness to be changed," discussed by Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez in Chapter Six, has also been articulated by Leslie Medine, cofounder of the HOME Project.

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