

Youth Engagement in the Community: The ethics of inclusion and exclusion

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Article abstract

This study focuses on the engagement of children and youth in their communities and the ways they are included in and excluded from community life. Using a content analysis of a small town United States newspaper over a one-year period, examples of engagement were identified and classified into 12 categories: programs, clubs and special events; fundraising and community service; business and community support; participation in community events; school events; athletic and other performances; employment; involvement in local planning and decision making; serving as a community representative; visibility and recognition; criminal activity and accidents; and use of public space. Examples of community exclusion were identified as well. Young people were engaged primarily through activities that were adult-directed or supervised, or organized through schools, churches, and youth clubs. There was little involvement in local planning, decision making, or activism. Some evidence existed of peer teaching, leadership, and self-initiated activities, as well as intentional efforts by adults to give youth a greater voice in community activities. Implications include several ethical issues regarding the role of young people in community life, particularly young children, and the need for greater awareness on the part of communities of the contributions young people can make.



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY: THE ETHICS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the engagement of children and youth in their communities and the ways they are included in and excluded from community life. Using a content analysis of a small town United States newspaper over a one-year period, examples of engagement were identified and classified into 12 categories: programs, clubs and special events; fundraising and community service; business and community support; participation in community events; school events; athletic and other performances; employment; involvement in local planning and decision making; serving as a community representative; visibility and recognition; criminal activity and accidents; and use of public space. Examples of community exclusion were identified as well. Young people were engaged primarily through activities that were adult-directed or supervised, or organized through schools, churches, and youth clubs. There was little involvement in local planning, decision making, or activism. Some evidence existed of peer teaching, leadership, and self-initiated activities, as well as intentional efforts by adults to give youth a greater voice in community activities. Implications include several ethical issues regarding the role of young people in community life, particularly young children, and the need for greater awareness on the part of communities of the contributions young people can make.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article porte sur l'implication, l'inclusion et l'exclusion des jeunes et enfants au sein de leurs communautés. À travers l'analyse du contenu du journal d'un village étasunien (une année), des exemples d'engagement ont été identifiés et classés selon 12 catégories : programmes, clubs et événements spéciaux; levée de fonds et service communautaire; support communautaire et des entreprises; participation aux événements communautaires; événements scolaires; performances athlétiques ou d'autre type; emploi; implication dans l'aménagement et la prise de décisions; représentation communautaire; visibilité et reconnaissance; criminalité et accidents; utilisation de l'espace publique. Des exemples d'exclusion ont été aussi identifiés. Les jeunes ont été engagés notamment dans des activités dirigées ou supervisées par des adultes ou organisées au sein des écoles, des églises et des maisons des jeunes. Il y aurait peu d'implication des jeunes dans l'aménagement, la prise de décisions et l'activisme. Certains cas de formation par des pairs, leadership et activités initiées par les jeunes ont été rapportés, tout comme des efforts pour donner une place plus importante aux jeunes dans les activités communautaires chez les adultes. Des problèmes éthiques concernant le rôle des jeunes dans la communauté sont soulevés, tout comme le besoin d'une sensibilisation au sujet des contributions potentielles des jeunes.

Communities, in the geographical sense, are places of social interaction, commerce, education, leisure, and residence. For children and youth, involvement in the community can provide opportunities to practice skills and increase capabilities as citizens, develop a sense of belonging and place, and have contact with a wide range of individuals, businesses, and organizations.¹ Possibilities range from out-of-school clubs, service projects, festivals, recreation, sports, special classes and youth-led initiatives in local planning and policymaking, community organizing, and activism.² Furthermore, young people have opportunities to spend unstructured time in community meeting places, common areas, green spaces, and shopping centers, or may be working in paid employment.³

In any given community, what is one likely to see? Concern exists that young people are not fully engaged as citizens. Perceptions of youth are often negative; they are seen as threatening to the social order, vulnerable, inexperienced, incompetent, and disinterested.⁴ They have been increasingly placed in age-segregated activities, with limited opportunities to be involved in meaningful forms of community participation. They are not viewed as active contributors to their communities, nor given adequate opportunities to be involved in important decision-making processes in schools, neighborhoods and communities.⁵

Yet, some examples to the contrary have been identified, suggesting changing practices and new roles and responsibilities for young people. Increasing numbers of young people participate in community service activities, serve on committees and boards, and address community issues through youth groups.⁶ To what extent are these activities happening, or are children and youth limited to more limited forms of participation?

Despite numerous examples, no studies have been identified that examine overall community engagement of young people in a systematic or comprehensive manner. Using a content analysis of a small-town United States newspaper over a one-year period, this study is an effort to document the ways in which children and youth are engaged with their communities. Are they engaged in a full range of

activities and roles? What patterns and trends can be observed? Are there activities and roles they are noticeably absent from?

The ways in which young people are included or excluded from active community life raise a number of ethical questions for community residents, community leaders, educators, and youth workers. Although the examples of youth engagement examined in the study were limited to those presented by the local media, it is the intention of this paper to provide a greater understanding of the youth-community relationship than what currently exists, and to facilitate further thinking and discussion on this topic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

From early childhood through adulthood, communities provide opportunities and resources for healthy physical and social development. As children grow in age and competency, they move beyond the home and family into the neighborhood, and then into the wider community, interacting with a broad range of individuals beyond family and close friends.⁷

A good neighborhood, or community, can provide places for young people to play safely, access the outdoors, walk to school, run errands, socialize with others, and be welcomed in the public sphere.⁸ Furthermore, supportive communities provide caring neighbors, an encouraging school environment, useful roles in the community, positive peer influences and adult role models, and community service opportunities. Participation in youth programs and creative activities such as music and theater can be beneficial to young people as well.⁹

However, concern exists that young people are not as fully engaged as they could be. They participate in community life with restrictions, under adult control, and in limited roles.¹⁰ Autonomous mobility around the community has decreased over recent decades, as more young people are kept inside and protected from perceived dangers of the streets and public space.¹¹ Leisure activities such as sports or music frequently take place within some kind of organized and regulated setting under the supervision of adults.¹² Young people

have been segregated by age from adults and others not of their same age, resulting in isolation from adults, marginalization, few meaningful roles in the community, and low expectations of participation.¹³ Cockburn suggested that while some evidence exists that young people's roles are starting to increase, their voices may be "squeezed out of meaningful and participative forms of citizenship in the public sphere . . . places where we interact with others and where decisions are made about individuals, communities, or markets."¹⁴

Furthermore, strong negative perceptions of youth exist throughout the media and among adults. Young people are seen as threats to law and order, vulnerable and in need of protection, politically apathetic, disinterested, and lacking in knowledge, experience, and capacity to develop worthwhile ideas, address community issues, or handle major decision-making responsibilities.¹⁵ Young people remain passive recipients of services rather than active participants in community change.¹⁶

In a community, organizations and activities for children and youth are common, and include local chapters of national organizations such as Scouts, independent local groups, religious groups, afterschool programs, and other programs focused on youth development. In addition, activities can be sponsored by local organizations such as libraries, museums, youth centers, sports organizations, parks, and recreation departments. Dance, music, and other lessons are widely available also, beginning at a very young age.

The various organizations and activities exist with a wide range of objectives—learning, skill development, leadership, recreation, social interaction, and community service.

They can involve interactions with a range of other youth and adults at the community level and leadership development.

Young people may meet with business leaders, elected officials, clergy, police, employers, and youth organization staff, and be involved in service activities that address local needs.¹⁷

Furthermore, young people participate in community gatherings such as festivals, fairs, and block parties. They may have part-time employment. They may also have unstructured time to spend in the community, at parks or other common spaces or at shopping centers.¹⁸

Over recent years, new perspectives on youth have been emerging, typically within the existing structures of youth organizations. Youth are seen as community builders or partners. Instead of current stereotypes, young people are viewed as competent and engaged citizens who should have a voice in matters that affect them. They can affect community change and solve challenging community problems when they work together with others, including adults.¹⁹ Camino and Zelden identified five pathways of civic engagement that have increased: 1) public policy consultation to public leaders and policy governance groups; 2) community coalition involvement to address local needs; 3) involvement in organizational decision-making; 4) youth organizing and activism, and 5) school-based service learning.²⁰

Typically done through organized youth programs, some examples of these types of youth engagement have been identified. These include developing action plans for community change or development; serving on boards; attending and presenting at public hearings and community meetings; organizing and mobilizing other youth; influencing local and state legislation; and participating in rallies, marches, and protests.²¹

In summary, many possibilities exist for youth engagement in their communities. Using a broad definition, this study identified types of engagement for children and youth living in a rural region in the United States. Patterns and trends also were identified.

METHOD

A content analysis of news stories, photos, advertisements, editorials, and public announcements in a community newspaper over a one-year period (52 issues) in 2005-2006 was used to identify different

types of community engagement opportunities for children and youth from early childhood through age 18. The newspaper was based out of a village of 1500 residents in the state of New York, USA.

The newspaper covered the village, as well as the surrounding countryside (5000 residents), and two nearby villages (3500 residents). In addition, it occasionally included events from a university community 10 miles away (30,000 residents) and the county within which the village was located (100,000 residents). The paper was selected for its practice of incorporating children and youth in their coverage, including front page headlines; numerous columnists who report on local happenings in addition to those covered by reporters; and a columnist who has had some training on youth participation and engagement.

A broad definition of engagement was used to capture a wide range of possibilities. To be included in the analysis, each example identified needed to be defined as: 1) engagement with businesses, government, organizations, and people in the community; 2) engagement with the public space of the community; or 3) engagement with the events in the community. Excluded were private family events or activities for parents. The examples were then placed into more specific categories that emerged through the sorting and refinement process. Consistency of categories was established with the assistance of a second coder.

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FINDINGS

Over 300 different examples of engagement were identified in the newspapers. These were placed in 12 categories:

- *Programs, clubs, and special events for children and youth.* This was the most common type of engagement with the community, particularly organized programs designed specifically for children and youth. Programs were sponsored by community organizations, churches, and athletic associations and involved children and youth typically attending over an exten-

ded period of time. They covered a wide range of interests: organized sports and recreation, religious programs, employment, arts and music, theater, writing workshops, and other types of education. In addition, established clubs such as 4-H, Girl and Boy Scouts were also active in the community. A few examples of school-based clubs of national associations such as Amnesty International or the United Nations were also identified. Examples of special events included essay contests and career exploration activities.

- *Fundraising and community service by children and youth.* These activities were typically carried out by youth clubs, school groups, or church youth groups and involved raising money for or assisting with a wide range of charitable causes. These included food drives, disaster relief, cancer research, diabetes, AIDS, and a church mission trip to Guatemala. Community service activities involved helping with community festivals, planting flowers, repairing buildings, and restoring trails in a nearby state park. In a few cases, the fundraising was initiated or led by an individual or small group of youth, such as a benefit concert organized by a high-school aged musician, clothing drive organized by two middle school students, and Habitat for Humanity building project done as an Eagle Scout project. In other instances, youth groups raised money for extracurricular school activities, trips, or their own organizations that benefited them directly.
- *Business and community support for children and youth.* These consisted of fundraising efforts or other support on behalf of children and youth by service organizations, local professionals, businesses, sports teams, churches, and community residents. Examples include sponsoring admissions to museums; providing eyeglasses to needy children; financial contributions for youth organizations, camps, and events for

youth; ads sponsored by businesses congratulating graduating seniors, and scholarships.

- *Participation in community events.* Young people participated in community events, along with residents of all ages, such as festivals, parades, a local fair, art and car shows, church events, peace vigils, and other special events. For some of these events, reduced admission prices were available for children under a certain age, or special activities were designed for children. Some involved adults and children participating in organized activities together such as a charity race and a dog show. Several examples involved peer teaching with younger children or other aspects of leadership. One school group hosted an event, a movie screening and talk, in which the public was invited to attend.
- *School events and activities.* In some cases, school activities and classes involved the community, other communities, or larger society in some way. For example, students went on trips, teachers invited guest speakers such as university professors or elected officials to speak to students, homecoming parades were held on Main Street, and students conducted an election exit poll as part of a government class.
- *Athletic and other performances.* High school sports were highly publicized in each issue of the newspaper. The public was invited to athletic games, as well as to other types of performances such as band concerts and school theater productions. School bands and colorguards performed at parades and community events as well. Several examples of independent youth bands or musicians were identified in which they performed at local festivals, musical events, or at restaurants and nightclubs.

- *Employment.* A local grocery store hired older adolescents and featured selected youth employees in their weekly advertisements. A few additional examples were identified in which youth were described working in a family business or had internship opportunities.
- *Involvement in local planning and decision-making.* In one of the villages covered by the newspaper, a skateboard park was under discussion, led by a village board official who was also the local youth commissioner. A number of local youth participated in planning activities, worked with the village board official, and attended government and public meetings on the park. A special program for middle school aged youth provided a sum of money (\$23,000) for the youth to assess community needs and provide grants to community organizations for services. Children and youth were asked to complete surveys on several occasions to aid in the development of programs and transportation services. In one instance, youth developed a survey which was distributed at school, with the goal of using the results to make the school safer and more comfortable. A church youth group had a special meeting, led by several adults, to talk about community needs and to develop an action plan for change.
- *Representing the community.* Several examples were identified in which youth were selected to represent the community or a community organization in some way, such as a dairy princess or student ambassador to another country.
- *Visibility and recognition of youth.* The newspapers included numerous articles and pictures recognizing youth. These included academic and athletic achievements, awards and honors, children's drawings, high school graduation photos, and scholarship awards. Articles of several young people who died in traffic accidents were included as well.

- *Criminal activity and accidents.* Police and traffic reports included examples of deviant behavior and traffic violations. These included arson, drug possession, check forgery, disorderly conduct, weapons possession, high school senior pranks, runaways, accidents, and traffic offenses.
- *Use of public space.* One of the villages was undergoing the construction of new sidewalks, which would allow easier access from all parts of the village to the school. The location of the skateboard park was under discussion, as well as vocal opposition to it.

In addition, some examples of adult efforts to restrict activities of youth were identified. For example, village residents complained of skateboarders on Main Street; a ban on skateboards and rollerblades on streets and sidewalks was discussed at a village board meeting. In other examples, age restrictions prevented youth from participating in certain activities that presented safety concerns.

DISCUSSION

A critical limitation to this study was the bias inherent in examining published newspaper stories that may exclude important events and perspectives. Nevertheless, the study did provide some understanding of youth engagement and some insights can be gained.

Young people's activities received a considerable amount of coverage in the newspaper. It was clear that the young people were appreciated and valued in these communities, and that they were recognized for their skills, talents, and accomplishments. The communities also provided a wide range of special activities for children and youth—programs, clubs, activities, and special events. Businesses, organizations, and community residents were highly supportive. Opportunities to participate in community events and interaction with others were prevalent as well. Youth were heavily involved in fundraising—either for community or social causes or for their own organizations and purposes.

The organized and structured activities appeared to be adult directed and/or supervised, with little indication of youth's roles within these activities. It was unknown to what extent the young people who benefitted from these programs had a role in their planning and implementation, or deciding whether they should even exist in the first place. It also was unknown to what extent the adults supported a youth voice within the organizations or encouraged active youth participation in the community. Adults can play a critical role by teaching skills, mentoring, coaching, and linking youth with resources and community leaders.²² Some examples of peer teaching and leadership existed, in which older adolescents would provide instruction or mentoring to younger children.

Most of the fundraising and community service activities occurred within the structure of school, youth, or church youth organizations. However, some examples of self-initiated activities also existed. Several instances were noted in which a young person, or group of young people, took the lead in planning an event or deciding on a cause to support. Several adolescents had organized bands independent of school and played in concerts in community settings.

Although many young people had part-time employment in the village, or participated in special youth employment programs, this was a topic rarely covered in the paper. The main exception was the use of their photos in weekly advertisements by the employer.

Also noticeably absent in the newspaper were examples of youth involvement in public planning and decision-making. The primary exception was involvement in the development of a skateboard park, an issue of direct interest to many youth in the community. Youth attended planning meetings, learned what would be involved in creating the park, fundraising, and met with public officials. Their involvement was encouraged and facilitated by a local government official who was personally committed to increasing youth involvement in the planning process. It was unclear, however, to what extent the youth would have initiated the development of the park on their own or taken independent action to see it to fruition. No letters to the editor written by children or youth were identified.

Other efforts were made on the part of adults to increase youth voice and participation in community affairs, such as by conducting surveys and establishing a youth philanthropy program in which middle school age youth could assess community needs and make funding decisions. However, no examples of local planning and decision-making by younger children were identified.

Little to no activism was noted, such as organizing, petitioning, protesting, or questioning authority. During the year of this analysis, one school district faced a serious budget shortfall and cut numerous extracurricular programs such as sports and music. While school board reports indicated that parents attended meetings and expressed concerns, it did not appear that the youth themselves challenged the school in their decisions. Youth were involved in fundraising for these activities, but parents also had a major role in this and sponsored, initiated, or assisted with these events.

Finally, as discussion of the skateboard park moved ahead, resistance on the part of some community members became apparent. They openly voiced dissatisfaction with the possible use of taxpayer funds and selection of the site. Was this resistance due to the increasing visibility and voice of youth and their needs?

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ETHICAL ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

From the findings, a number of ethical considerations can be raised. First, what are societally acceptable and unacceptable roles for young people? What is appropriate for a young child vs. an older adolescent? What makes a role, such as fundraising, acceptable, and others unacceptable? Are youth not involved in certain activities because they are not interested, they do not know what to do, do not see these things as appropriate for them to do, or they were not invited to be involved? Does active involvement, such as taking on community issues or promoting the skateboard park, involve certain risks? Perhaps they did not participate in certain types of activities like local planning because they felt satisfied with their communities and did not see a need for major change.

What role should young people have in programs designed for them? How can children and youth take a greater role in organizing and planning the programs and activities they would like for themselves or other young people? Are adults supportive of these efforts?

Who is not engaged in the community and why? It is unclear from the analysis what proportion of the children and youth were engaged in the various aspects of community life. However, it can be assumed that there are some people who are not engaged. Why is this the case? What efforts should be made to engage these young people?

Much of the participation occurred within organized settings such as youth groups. Must participation always be within the context of adult supervised and directed settings? Should there be more ways for young people to participate independently through self-organization? When is this most appropriate? How can adults best serve as resources and mentors?

Are there negative aspects to participation? For example, young people may witness inappropriate behavior such as drinking on the part of adults at community festivals, or conflict among government officials at town meetings. How can young people best learn from these situations?

It is unknown if the communities in this analysis are typical of American communities, or communities in other places. Should communities conduct self-assessments to see how well they fare with certain types of youth engagement, and then take appropriate action to correct any shortcomings?

Finally, how do communities adjust to active youth engagement? In the case of the skateboard park, vocal opposition was raised. If young people become more active in taking on community issues, devising action plans, voicing their opinion, and participating in governmental meetings, would this cause tension and discomfort among adults? How can this be handled so that all can adjust to new roles and responsibilities? What happens when traditional roles are challenged?

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Further research on additional communities is needed, as well as diverse methodologies to determine how young people are engaged. Specific types of engagement, such as fundraising, should be studied as well to gain a greater understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of youth and adults. The findings of this study indicate broad participation but some areas in need of improvement. Nevertheless, there is evidence of at least some attention to youth voice and contribution, interest on the part of youth to contribute, and commitment on the part of adults to assist them.

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