

Youth Stakeholders in Neighbourhood Revitalization: A Case Example

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ABSTRACT

Most studies describing youth engagement, focus on the positive aspects for youth development and the individual benefits associated with participation in youth engagement activities. Receiving less attention within the literature is research investigating the benefit of youth engagement for the wider community. This paper describes and analyses the process of developing and implementing a participatory action arts based research project in one community in Calgary, Canada with adolescent youth. Our findings suggest that utilizing a participatory research process for youth engagement can help support a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of youth participation beyond individual measures of youth development. Discussion of challenges and outcomes is provided for replicability of the study design and process in other settings

1.0 Introduction

When creating conditions for social change, the literature has tended to emphasize the importance of improving community capacity and increasing stakeholder awareness and knowledge of community related issues (Connell, Gambone, & Smith, 2000). While youth are a key stakeholder in their communities, it has been noted that priority is seldom given to their opinions (Calvert, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002; Erbstein, 2013). However, not involving youth in these processes of community change may further hinder the development of conditions that aid in addressing important emerging community issues (Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, & Huebner, 2010; Gant et al., 2009; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001).

Contrary to actual practice, where youth and adolescents as a stakeholder group are largely ignored when it comes to community decision making and social change efforts, within the academic literature it is generally believed that youth engagement can positively impact a community and insights have been provided about ways to involve youth in community development or neighborhood change efforts (Checkoway, 1998; Christen & Dolan, 2010; Finn, 1998; Fogel, 2004; Morrison, Alcorn, & Nelums, 1997). For instance, Erbstein (2013) indicated key characteristics of adults who are involved with engaging youth program participants, such as commitment and level of support provided to the youth. Similarly, Richards-Schuster and Dobbie (2011) have described ways in which organizations can better promote youth involvement in civic action. In their research they describe the role of organizations as facilitators to youth engagement by offering gathering space as well as being mediators to youth engagement by linking youth within communities to other organizations and resources. Furthermore, Scheve, Perkins and Mincemoyer (2006) prescribe the need to include youth participants in meaningful tasks and to create a youth friendly environment, one in which youth are able to learn and apply new skills. Fundamental within all this scholarship is the notion of youth and adult partnerships. In efforts to promote youth engagement, key interpersonal dynamics between youth and adults, such as shared decision making and reciprocity, must be present in the relationship to adequately engage youth in community change efforts (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013)

In addition, within the academic literature specific examples of youth engagement (Bozlak & Kelley, 2009; Chawla & Driskell, 2006; Ross & Coleman, 2000; Twiss & Cooper, 2000) and projects involving youth in community revitalization initiatives (Calvert et al., 2002; Pittman, Diversi, & Ferber, 2002; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003; Zeldin, 2004a/b) across North America have been presented. These case analyses have been particularly useful in identifying the benefits for youth participants and the processes

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involved that support the successful engagement of youth. However, missing from most of this research is an assessment of the outcomes towards community change that the youth program participants achieve.

A lack of focus within the present scholarship on the outcomes young adults achieve beyond their own psycho-social benefits acts to placate them as recipients of the benefits of engagement, but not active agents in creating change. In fact, within most of the academic literature on the subject, the efforts undertaken by adults and the youth participants is primarily viewed as an exercise in youth and adolescent development and not an exercise to create and contribute to community change. Recently, however, some scholarship has begun to investigate the benefits of engaging youth in community based participatory research projects with emphasis on their role as in creating change through the development of knowledge (Adler, Chung-Do, & Ongalibang, 2008; Christiansen, 2008; Findholt, Michael, & Davis, 2010; Horn et al., 2008; see Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013 for a review). However, the central action related component of much of this research is to engage youth in changing their own behavior. Essentially, the research seeks to use community based participatory research techniques to generate knowledge on a particular negative behavior perceived of youth, such as supporting smoking cessation efforts or addressing issues related to obesity (Findholt, Michael, & Davis, 2010; Horn et al., 2008). As a result, the central focus of much of this previous research is not on the contributions that youth can make to change their community, but instead just on their contributions to changing their own behavior.

As a corrective, the following research provides a case study analysis involving participatory action research (PAR) techniques that sought to engage youth in an effort to support (or create) community change. PAR is a method for conducting research, and it combines aspects of research subject participation in the research study design process (from question formulation to dissemination, much the same way as that which is done in community based participatory research) (Notley & Tacchi, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010) with principles of action research (Blum, Heinonen, & Wright, 2010; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Lewin, 1946); all with the intention of creating some outcome of social change (Fals-Borda, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2006; Lind 2007, 2008). As an influential scholar in the development of PAR, Orlando Fals-Borda (1987) has described the methods of PAR in relation to his experiences with this process within Latin America and other parts of the world, concluding, in part, that radical change requires a combination of three factors: scientific research, adult education, and political action (Cendales, Torres, & Torres, 2005).

PAR projects have become increasingly popular when engaging with oppressed or marginalized groups. The primary intention of most of this research is to utilize the lived experiences of affected members of an oppressed segment of the population to inform or advocate for reform an existing social welfare policy (see for example: Chilton et al., 2009; Sakamoto et al., 2008) However, there is limited discussion about community change efforts in the form of tangible community projects involving participant researchers, versus simply promoting awareness/advocacy about a social or community issue. This point is important. Many studies, including the one presented in this article, address the quality related issues associated with action research – such as being aimed in the real world of practice and lived experiences of participants, by promoting participation in all stages of the research design, and aiming to generate some specific capacities among participant researchers. However, we think it is equally important to be critical of these limited facets that narrowly define the action related component of ‘action research’. Without supporting researcher participants in a tangible community related action effort the research is not addressing some key aspects of the PAR process—such as creating a new, collective body of knowledge or collectively disseminating the research. Further research is necessary that describes PAR processes that effectively engage participant researchers in creating community change.

2.0 Methods

To address these limitations in the literature, this article provides a case study of a PAR Photovoice project with youth in Calgary, Canada. As described previously (Walsh, Hewson, Shier, & Morales, 2008), the aims were twofold. First, we aimed to engage with youth in this one community to support their active participation in community change, rather than simply view them as passive recipients of mentorship and support in an effort to enhance their own development. Second, we wanted to take the action component of ‘action research’ further than simply providing policy recommendations based on participant researcher opinion. We found that youth and adolescents in this community (as is the case in many communities) were not at the table in the ongoing discussions of neighbourhood revitalization, although researchers from the University of Calgary, business owners, and City of Calgary employees were being consulted. Beyond these two points, nothing else was pre-determined prior to beginning the engagement process with the youth

research participants in this project. However, even deciding these two facets of the project greatly limited the extent that the project could be considered fully participatory. The following provides a description and critical appraisal of the engagement process we utilized, along with the curriculum that was developed and the project for community change that was identified.

The study protocol received ethics certification from the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board. Parents signed consent forms and the youth provided assent to participate in the community development project and its evaluation. All 11 youth who were enrolled in the existing program participated in the project. Participants ranged from 13 to 17 years of age. Two participants were female and nine were male. Six of the participants lived within the target community; the remainder lived in adjacent communities that were part of the catchment area for the youth organization. All participants were White except for one who described himself as Cree and White. Initially, two other minority youth (one Aboriginal and one Vietnamese) were involved in the project but their attendance was irregular and they did not participate in some key aspects of the process.

2.1 Engagement Process

After conducting an environmental scan of youth groups in the community to recruit a partner organization, the researchers partnered with a local youth serving agency, who offered an evening recreational and leadership program for youth in the target community. Rather than creating a new program, it was decided that the community development project would capitalize on the existing program, which was identified as extremely suitable in terms of logistics (how often they met, age range, available space) and consistent curriculum (focus on leadership, citizenship, skill development). It was decided among the university researchers and community agency that approximately half of each session would be devoted to the community development project. The community development project at this stage had not yet been determined. However, the focus of the project was intended to align to the University researchers' goals of developing insight and perspective from youth participants about neighbourhood revitalization issues. This demonstrates an inherent challenge when developing PAR projects and undertaking PAR processes when there are multiple stakeholders involved. Prior to beginning our engagement with the youth researcher participants we had already needed to make decisions about who would be targeted to participate, what participants would be recruited, and what the focus of the engagement would be about.

One of the reasons for partnering with an existing youth group offered by a social service agency was to assist with the recruitment of 'at risk' youth. While this strategy was effective in recruiting 11 youth, they were not representative of the multicultural community within which they reside and they may have been more privileged than the youth the project was designed to target. Effort to attract diverse participants were largely unsuccessful reinforcing the idea that "attracting ... hard-to-reach youths is difficult" (Zeldin, 2004b, p. 635), especially those who don't typically attend these programs because they might face "racism, discrimination, fear of other participants, travel safety, language barriers and [other] cultural reasons" (Downie, 2004, p. 25). Offering the program during critical after school hours within a school setting may be a more effective strategy for recruiting a more diverse group of youth who are more vulnerable. While the project facilitators were Hispanic, Asian and White, only the latter was involved directly in recruitment. The drop-in nature of the group made it more challenging to engage the youth and maintain momentum of the project and reduced the possibility of sustainability with a core group of youth. In the future, it may be more effective to recruit youth specifically for a community development project and meet the diversity needs of that project rather than simply joining a pre-established group. Upon critical reflection of this process we begin to see how full participation among the youth began to be minimized as a result of these types of decision and this had consequences for the longevity of the project and the level of engagement among participating youth.

We had hoped to work with youth from a variety of ethnic backgrounds given the ethnic diversity of this community. Research assistants and staff from the partner agency gave presentations at local schools to recruit a more culturally diverse youth group; however, these efforts were unsuccessful. Furthermore, when the project was originally conceptualized, we intended to focus on 'at risk' youth. However, it was difficult to determine the extent to which the youth participants were in fact 'at risk'. One could speculate that youth who had the resources and ability to attend a weekly evening recreational/social program, in some regards, may be more privileged than other youth residing in the community who had familial and economic responsibilities which may have precluded their participation. This raises several critical concerns about involving people that are marginalized. Are the participants members of the oppressed group in which the

PAR project is intended? While the youth who participated may not have been the most vulnerable, they may still be considered at risk given the nature of the program offered and the community in which they were living, which was fraught with social issues such as poverty and crime.

2.2 Curriculum

To engage the youth participants in issues pertaining to their community or neighbourhood (and revitalization in particular) we utilized a curriculum based approach as our method of interaction. Following social science theories about the intersection between people and physical places (Schriver, 2004), the project team designed a curriculum incorporating both social and environmental design topics and issues. For example, youth used mapping techniques to identify design/infrastructure features specific to the community, while identifying strengths and areas for design enhancement in their neighborhood they also discussed social issues of concern in their community such as crime, poverty, safety, and gangs. Youth then reflected on the intersection between design features and social impacts.

The engagement process we used encouraged youth participants to identify enhancement areas within their community, determine projects that they could undertake to augment their community, identify available community-based resources, implement a project of their choice, and provide a means of disseminating their awareness to the wider community about the issues of concern to them. Youth had the greatest involvement in the identification of the enhancement project; the implementation of that project, and the presentation of project outcomes to community members and stakeholders.

While the youth were involved in key stages of the project, true engagement would have involved them more deeply in all stages. This was not possible due to time constraints created by a delayed project start, fixed funding deadlines, limited meeting times, and interruptions due to holidays. If more time had been available the youth would have been able to organize community action event, create other dissemination tools, and be more involved in evaluating the project and identifying future projects and enhanced methods of engagement. To facilitate the engagement process more time needs to be allocated to such a project with consideration given to the impact that school holidays have on maintaining the momentum of the engagement process.

2.3 Project Identification

In consultation with the youth participants who were informed of various multimedia techniques that could be utilized, they decided that they would use Photovoice as a tool for community project identification. Photovoice is a process where community members are given photographic cameras to identify, highlight and encourage possible change within their communities (Wang & Burris 1997). It is a visual way to give a voice to the concerns of the community and has been used successfully in different settings with youth (Brazg, Bekemeier, Spigner, & Huebner, 2010; Findholt, Michael, & Davis, 2010; Gant et al., 2009; Johansen & Le, 2012; Strack, Magill, & McDonagh 2004), adults and youth (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk 2004), ethno-racial groups (Allen, 2012; Streng et al., 2004; Wang 2006) and for identifying community perceptions of the built and social environment (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos, & Nieuwendyk, 2011). Photovoice was chosen as a way to identify and share community development issues that were meaningful to the youth and as an innovative way to present the project to the community.

The project team discussed social-built community challenges with the youth to assist them with identifying such areas in their community. One youth questioned the agenda of his neighbourhood needing to be 'fixed' and identified that while commonly held perceptions of the community were negative, other communities had similar problems and it was stigmatizing to single out his community. He expressed the importance of showing both areas for change and strengths of the community to counter the stereotype. As a result, the focus of the project shifted resulting in the youth taking pictures of what they considered to be the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhood in terms of infrastructure, environment and social issues; reflecting on both dimensions and community aspects; and sharing all of these with the community during the images exhibit (a typical outcome of this type of PAR project).

A Photovoice instruction session was provided by a local professional who was involved in a Photovoice project with youth concerning health issues. Following this, the participants were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take photographs of the positive (community strengths) and negative (areas for change) aspects of the social-built environments in their community. Each youth shared the images with the rest of the group and subsequently chose one which showed an area for change and one which depicted community strength, for reflection and further discussion.

Youth in our study were more comfortable and articulate talking about their images rather than writing their thoughts. As a result, the facilitators interviewed the youth about their pictures and transcribed their responses. The written descriptions were presented back to the youth for verification and modifications as required until youth signed that they approved the caption.

The questions the youth were asked were based on the acronym "PHOTO" (as cited by Pies & Parthasarathy 2007), a modified version of the "SHOWED" acronym used by Wang et al. (2004). "PHOTO" has five questions each of which are intended to encourage reflection: (1) Describe your Picture; (2) What is Happening in your picture?; (3) Why did you take a picture Of this?; (4) What does this picture Tell us about life in your community?; and (5) How does this picture provide Opportunities for us to improve life in your community? An example of the method is illustrated by the description offered by a youth who took a photo of an area for change:

This is a picture of a smashed fence. The city's fence was smashed and it is not well-kept. I thought it was bad because people are going around vandalizing the community. People aren't being respectful of the city. This fence makes the community look bad because no one is fixing it. It has been there for a long time already and it is still there. My message with this picture is stop vandalism, do things to encourage good actions. The community could fix this fence so people feel safer in the neighborhood. Broken stuff makes the community look dangerous.

Another participant reflected on the image identified as a community strength:

This place looks clean, tidy and nice. It is healthy for animals. The owners take very good care of it. This is good for the environment. Being clean makes it better for people. I took a picture of this because it is so tidy. I feel better being in clean and tidy places. Some parts of my community are clean and tidy; this makes me happy. It is important to take care of places even if people don't look. People should take pride in their belongings. People should follow this example.

After sharing their photographs with each other, the youth were facilitated through a project identification process assisted by the program coordinator from a local organization which promoted community development through creative arts. Using a group decision-making process consistent with a PAR approach, the youth identified littering and graffiti as their primary enhancement concerns.

Through their own intuition and inductive capabilities of analyzing their environment and experience, the youth participants decided to take action and raise awareness about these issues through their images as well as painting new garbage cans using graffiti images, which would then be placed in their neighbourhood to increase recognition of the issues of graffiti and littering and potentially enhance their community. A community development artist, art students from the University, and the project facilitators assisted six youth in designing and painting garbage cans which were purchased specifically for this project. Images included scenes of polluted/unpolluted environments and animals/characters devouring garbage.

A challenge we faced throughout engaging with the youth participants was trying to avoid running a program "that 'cream[ed]' or select[ed] the youth most likely to perform" (Starr, 2003, p. 930). This was sometimes difficult to avoid since often the same youth volunteered for certain tasks. For example, during the garbage can painting day the same two individuals volunteered to field all media interviews. Although we wanted to give as many of the participants a chance to voice their opinions as possible, some of them did not wish to do so in a public realm. As a result, one youth participated in four and another in three media interviews. Further, if we were aware at the beginning of the project that there would be such extensive media coverage, youth could have been provided with opportunities to develop communication skills related to engaging with the media including articulation, thought processing, and confidence.

Furthermore, one aspect of PAR we outlined previously is that it seeks to create a form of collective knowledge and to share and learn from participants. Partnering with a community agency provided an incredible opportunity for knowledge exchange and mobilization. Agency representatives were able to learn from the research team about different techniques for engaging youth such as Photovoice and community development through art. The research team, in turn, had an opportunity to learn more about social work in community practice and to enhance their skills related to service delivery, community development, youth engagement, and PAR. Both university and community stakeholders were able to co-create

knowledge about how to engage in collaborative programming. These insights were fundamental to informing curriculum design, student experiences, research, and program delivery. However, missing from this exchange of knowledge were the youth program participants. Instead, the project focused on sharing their knowledge with the wider community and having that inform community members and stakeholders' opinions about their perspective on issues within their neighbourhood. This is indicative of that fact that the level of participation in design and implementation among the youth was more limited in the beginning phases of the study.

What we found was that in order to enhance the action related component of the research we sacrificed on the level of participatory engagement with youth participants in designing and carrying out the PAR project. However, youth were engaged in all action related aspects of the project – from defining the focus of and carrying out all aspects of the photovoice project and the community action component that resulted from that engagement.

2.4 Community Outcomes

This project was designed to benefit youth and provide an opportunity for them to demonstrate their strengths and abilities to contribute to community development. As a community development project, the intention was also to make a contribution to community.

Outcomes for youth were the focus of the formal assessment in the study and indicators for community enhancement were not developed or assessed. Community outcomes are therefore derived from the actions of the youth and perceptions of the research team.

One community outcome goal was to promote awareness among existing neighbourhood revitalization stakeholders of the perspective of youth within the community around issues pertaining to the physical environment of the neighbourhood. Such an effort provided an opportunity for youth in the community to identify what is troubling to them about their neighbourhood and offer suggestions to address these specific issues. When the youth painted the garbage cans, the event was attended by television, radio and print media representatives who conducted interviews with the youth who were able to share their ideas with the broader community. Youth also had an opportunity to talk about the project and showcase their garbage cans on the local morning news show. These provided opportunities for the community at large to witness the positive contributions of youth, particularly from a community often associated primarily with crime and safety issues.

Another community outcome that arose from the project was creating awareness of the problem of littering in the community for which the youth participants provided a practical solution by contributing more garbage cans to the neighbourhood. A government official for the community attended the painting event along with the representative from the local business organization and the youth had an opportunity to speak to them about their community concern and how they depicted it in their garbage can art. These individuals ensured that each garbage can would be 'adopted' by local businesses/agencies and placed throughout the community. Before the garbage cans were distributed, the youth saw them in use and shared their community development project at a community breakfast attended by hundreds of local community residents, business owners, city officials, and agency representatives. Posters with photos of strengths and enhancement areas, reflections, and photos of the engagement process were displayed. The youth were able to talk to community residents and other stakeholders about their experiences.

One limitation in assessing the impact the youth had in creating longstanding community change is that the evaluation of outcomes we undertook did not assess the long term impacts of the project, so it is not possible to determine whether the presence of six garbage cans could make a difference in the community. Those who adopted the garbage cans planned to display them for public use. While this project was small and may not have impacted littering on a large scale, the garbage cans were created and distributed for public use in the community and it is likely that they were used for garbage collection rather than an art display at their adopted locations. Like all PAR efforts, the action component is required to be ongoing, as change takes time.

3.0 Conclusion

The overall focus of this PAR project was to promote community development through improved leadership capacity of youth residing within one community in Calgary, Canada. Upon critical reflection we found that the project design was less participatory than the project implementation phases that aimed to create a community level action among youth participants. However, research comprised a large part of the project including explorations and discussions about the intersection between design and social impacts, youth decision making about which photos to take, group decision making about key concerns in their community, and evaluating outcomes of the project, all processes of knowledge development that utilized youth program participant experiential knowledge. Action took the form of promoting awareness about the issues of graffiti and littering through taking photos of the community, creating an action plan to address key concerns, painting garbage cans to further articulate these concerns, holding a community photo and garbage can display, and selling the garbage cans to local businesses to be displayed and used in their community.

Like other engagement projects (Scheve et al., 2006) we found that respect and communication were essential to the success of this collaboration between youth, the university, the community, and the funder. Listening to the youth, valuing their opinions, and modifying original project plans facilitated engagement, motivation, and building trusting relationships with them. This was evidenced by the shift in focus for the photos and displays to ensure that they represented both strengths and areas for change in the community. Effective communication between the partner agency, parents and the research team was particularly important given that the project piggybacked on an existing youth engagement program and required shared resources, parent/guardian and youth agreement for a combined project, and additional consent requirements.

Furthermore, the focus of this project was on facilitating a community enhancement project, and the formal assessment concerned youth impacts rather than community outcomes. It would have been helpful to have assessed residents and business owners who attended the dissemination events and those who adopted the garbage cans to determine if there was an enhanced level of awareness about littering and the role of youth in promoting community change around this particular issue. Additional research could have also included a follow-up to determine short and long term community impacts.

While we previously commented about the reciprocal knowledge exchange between the university researchers and the staff at the partnering organizations, the youth did create new knowledge for the community through this PAR project. For instance, the university researchers and other community stakeholders within the greater Calgary community entered this particular neighborhood with a perception of it being 'at-risk' socially and economically, we found that the perception of youth participants differed. Engaging with these youth created an awareness of an immediate problem within the community that is linked to other problems (the problem of dilapidated infrastructure and garbage littering the streets). Consistent with the principles of PAR, the knowledge that these youth had of their community and their day to day experiences was mobilized to create action and some level of community change.

In spite of the challenges faced with recruitment, scheduling, maintaining momentum, and assessment, this type of project provided an innovative way for youth to identify community strengths and areas for change, a forum for sharing their thoughts with other youth and the broader community, and a process for enabling them to take action. Additionally, this project contributed to community cohesion by connecting a diverse group of stakeholders and showing them how their support enabled this small group of youth to take action to make a difference in their community. Overall this case example demonstrates the contributions of youth involvement for the benefit of the community. Utilizing a method of youth engagement that supports youth involvement allows for this realization that youth engagement is more than youth development, and the overall psycho-social impact of youth engagement for youth participants is just one facet of youth engagement. Outcomes also need to measure the impact on community as a result of these engagement initiatives.

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