

Getting to Go: Building Organizational Capacity to Engage in Youth-led Research, Evaluation, and Planning

Kristen Zimmerman, Jonathan London, Ph.D.
Youth In Focus

Youth-led research, planning, and evaluation. Sounds good, but what does it take? Done well, these activities add vitality and unique perspectives to community and organizational development processes. They engage young people and adults in transformative and empowering intergenerational practices. Done poorly, they can be counterproductive, discouraging people of all ages from future youth leadership initiatives. Many enthusiastic organizations jump into youth leadership projects—including youth-led research, evaluation, and planning—before their constituencies, their staff, and their communities are ready for the hard work it takes. In particular, while youth-serving organizations tend to consider youth capacity, they do not always consider the adult and organizational capacity needed to create successful youth-led projects.

Drawing on the work of Youth In Focus, this article will help youth development practitioners and leaders to assess and build the capacity of their organizations to engage in youth-led research, evaluation, and planning in ways that promote positive youth development and organizational improvement.

Youth In Focus and Youth-led Research, Evaluation, and Planning

Over the past 13 years, Youth In Focus has helped dozens of community organizations develop the capacity to integrate youth-led research, evaluation, and planning (Youth REP) into their programs, organizations, and community initiatives (London 2001; London and Zimmerman, forthcoming; Youth In Focus 2002, Zimmerman and Erbstein 1999). As a non-profit consulting and training organization, Youth In Focus promotes Youth REP as a means for youth empowerment, organizational learning, and community change. As an intermediary, Youth In Focus seeks to multiply its efforts by working towards implementing systems in arenas such as adolescent health, public school improvement, and community development.

Youth In Focus’s Youth REP initiative is based on a set of principles designed to keep “youth in focus.” When youth are in focus they are actively engaged in decision making about the institutions and systems that affect their lives. The authors believe that having youth in focus is a crucial step in fostering youth development and well-being, effective and innovative programs and organizations, and just and sustainable communities. Getting youth in focus requires that youth develop the capacities to serve as organizational and community leaders, that adults learn to partner with youth in organizational and community development, and that institutions are structured to sustain effective youth leadership.

Youth In Focus helps organizations develop this capacity by working on three levels:

- Training *youth leaders* within youth-serving organizations to design and conduct research, planning, and evaluation projects
- Providing curricula, training, and coaching for adult *facilitators* and youth leaders on planning and facilitating Youth REP processes
- Consulting to *organization leaders* and adult evaluators on integrating youth leadership, research, and evaluation into the structure and culture of organizations

The following sections illustrate how Youth In Focus helps organizations and networks of organizations use Youth REP to promote both internal organizational development and broader community development.

Serving Our Youth and Communities (SOYAC). Youth In Focus partnered with SOYAC to support the first youth-led community needs assessment of San Francisco’s South of Market (SOMA) district—a neighborhood facing gentrification, which rarely reflects the needs and aspirations of local youth. Staff from Oasis, a non-profit dedicated to empowerment of girls and young women served as the project facilitators.¹ After researching SOMA youth needs and existing resources through surveys they designed, administered, and analyzed,

¹ For information on Oasis, see www.sfoasis.org.

the youth researchers produced a written report, video, and web site to communicate their findings. The analysis section of their report (SOYAC Youth Collective 2002) contains pointed and data-based recommendations for the City:

One of the major issues identified during the 1992 assessment was the lack of a large neighborhood park. This need still has not been fulfilled by the City. [Our data show] that out of the 194 youth surveyed, 100 stated that they would like to see a new park . . . The need for a neighborhood park is essential in the South of Market neighborhood since 53 percent of the youth stated that their housing lacks a play area. . . .South of Market youth and families are forced to travel outside the neighborhood to find a space for outdoor family functions. It is essential that there be a green or open space for the well being of the neighborhood.

In presentations to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Redevelopment Authority, and Planning Department, as well as community advocates and activists, the youth team called on the City to address issues of drugs, violence, unemployment, inadequate housing, and health care that threaten their peers and their neighborhood.

Ly Nguyen, executive director of Oasis and facilitator of the SOYAC project, affirmed the value of Youth REP:

It can make a huge impact on an entire community. For us, the process impacted SOYAC and our members along with the community. One of the community impacts is that it gives a reason for organizations to lend their resources to a youth-led process. In a sense, it is safe to say that the Youth REP process can be completed not only by an organization but also by a neighborhood network.

Youth IMPACT. A program of the San Francisco Department of Children Youth and Their Families (DCYF), Youth IMPACT, was formed to implement youth-led evaluation of community-based organizations (CBOs) funded by the Department. Youth In Focus worked with Youth IMPACT staff to train and support 12 high-school aged evaluators to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of 40 CBOs. Their final report (Youth IMPACT 2001) serves as a basis for funding, program development, and technical assistance activities by DCYF, and, in the words of former DCYF director Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez as a precedent for “*the way the City does business.*” Based on her experience with Youth IMPACT,

Alvarez-Rodriguez stated that *“It is imperative that any organization with a primary mission of serving youth have youth-led evaluation as a cornerstone of their work.”*

DCYF now distributes the Youth IMPACT book to bidders for Department contracts as an example of the Department’s youth development criteria. Youth from Youth IMPACT have also become involved in the City’s ongoing needs assessment and allocation process of youth funding.

The voices of some of the youth team members speak to the power of the project.

The things I learned will be beneficial in life because they will help me further my skills as a person and as a worker doing evaluations in the future.

I like doing the evaluation. It made me more aware and more interested in politics and things that go [on] in the city so it can help me in the future.

I believe this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for youth to genuinely improve the programs of San Francisco.²

• ,

Assessing Organizational Readiness for Youth REP

Youth REP is a method of building and sharing power in organizations and communities. Those considering engaging in Youth REP, or other youth leadership activities, often believe that achieving the youth commitment or capacity is the biggest challenge to be faced. However, issues related to *organizational readiness* and *adult commitment* almost always present greater challenges. It is difficult for many youth workers to truly share power with youth and fully acknowledge their perspectives, especially when these “truths” are divergent from their own. Claudia Jasin, co-director of the Jamestown Community Center in San Francisco’s Mission district, reflected on her organization’s adaptation of the Youth REP process and what is demanded for success:

² The youth evaluators’ report is available by contacting DCYF [(415) 554-8990; or see also www.dcyf.org].

Leadership needs to take a hard and realistic look at resources, both in terms of finances and in terms of time that [the staff has] to devote to such a project . . . It's important that we value this work equally with other evaluations and planning processes that the organization is doing.

Youth In Focus has developed the following questions and indicators to help practitioners assess their organization's readiness to undertake a Youth REP project.

Youth skills and capacity. While young people involved in Youth REP projects don't need to have prior experience with research, planning, or evaluation, every project will have criteria for their youth team. Start by considering the goals, timeline, and complexity of the project. How many hours per week will team members need to complete this project? We recommend a minimum of 2 hours per week for smaller projects such as SOYAC's and up to 8 hours a week for larger projects such as Youth IMPACT. Are there youth available with the time, skills, commitment, and reliability needed to participate in the project? (Watch out for overcommitting or overcommitted youth!) At a minimum team members need to be excited about the goals of the project, be able to work in teams, and be able to plan and follow through on projects. The team as a whole should be reflective of the organization or community associated with the project.

Staff skills and capacity. Every Youth REP project needs a project facilitator: a staff member who is responsible for designing and facilitating the process. Start by assessing the goals, timeline, and complexity of the project. How much time does the staff facilitator need to support the project? We suggest a minimum of 4 hours a week, allowing for at least a 2:1 ratio of preparation time to contact time. Consider the youth development and technical skills that this person needs to successfully guide the team through their project (e.g., working with youth leadership development, group facilitation, and lesson planning, research methods and). Consider also the other staff roles needed to support the project

such as members of senior management to authorize the project. Questions to resolve include:

- Do you have staff with these expertise in-house or can you hire or contract for them?
- Do you have other staff people, volunteers, or board members who could provide the team with additional support?
- What are the attitudes of the staff and leadership about youth leadership in general and youth-led research, planning, and evaluation in particular?
- What do staff need to be supportive of the process such as information, training, other resources?
- Do you need to adjust the project plans based on staff capacity?

Intergenerational relationships within the organization. Youth REP projects depend on respectful youth–adult partnerships. Youth *and* adults take risks when they commit to youth-led research, evaluation, and planning processes. Organizations undertaking Youth REP must have both the structures and the cultures to support healthy intergenerational relationships and partnerships. When assessing intergenerational relationships in your organization, consider the following:

- How well are adults able to listen to and work with youth as partners?
- How well are youth able to talk to and work with adults?
- What are the precedents for mutually respectful intergenerational partnerships in the organization?
- What issues might get in the way of adults and youth working as partners in the organization, and how might these issues be addressed?
- What processes can help strengthen youth-adult partnerships in the organization?

Availability of program resources: funds, staff time, and space. To identify the resources you will need for the project, start by considering your project goals. What materials, facilities and funds will the team need to meet the project's

learning goals? Every project needs staff time, a regular meeting space, and materials. More complex projects may also need equipment (e.g., video camera, tapes, software), funds for production (e.g., printing and distribution), compensation for youth team members, and special trainers. Susie Kocher, a Youth REP facilitator from a rural forest community, comments on the value of paying the youth researchers:

Paying youth [evaluators and researchers] helps show them respect, it's actually treating them more like adults. In an area with high poverty like ours, paying youth can focus their attention on the importance of the skills they are learning and help them develop their career potential.

Consider whether you already have these program resources in-house, and, if you don't, what you will need to secure them. Do you need to adjust the goals or methods of the project in light of your resources?

Organizational experience with evaluation/adaptive management. Youth REP is an organizational learning and adaptive management process. Based on cycles of planning, action, reflection, and response, organizations use evaluation to strengthen and improve their work. Before starting a project consider how well your organization uses and incorporates evaluation and feedback. For example:

- How well does your organization incorporate different voices into planning and implementation?
- What it would take for such an adaptive process to be successful in your organization?

Acceptance of institutional change and youth leadership. One of the most exciting aspects of Youth REP is its ability to inform and drive institutional change. However, change can also be challenging and not every organization or community is ready for this challenge. Before you start a project, consider how ready your organization's leadership is for youth-driven institutional change:

- How has the adult leaders demonstrated their commitment to youth leadership in the past?
- What structures are set up to support such a planning and change process?
- What is needed to integrate youth leadership into this process?
- What will it take for the organization to be ready to receive, reflect on, and act upon youth recommendations for change?

Preparing for Common Obstacles

Like any substantive youth empowerment program, each Youth REP project presents a unique set of challenges. The following sections highlight common obstacles to successfully implementing Youth REP programs, and provides several examples of how Youth In Focus projects have managed to address these challenges.

Securing funding, resources, and in-kind support. As illustrated above, Youth REP projects take resources, whether in-kind or financial. Often, the support is available, but it requires time to secure it. When making the case to funders, emphasize the multiple outcomes of such a project: youth development (e.g., skill and leadership development), organizational development (e.g., appropriate evaluation and program and organizational improvement), and community development (e.g., civic participation in addressing community needs).

Allocating staff time. Without the appropriate staff commitment, Youth REP projects cannot succeed. Of course, few if any non-profit organizations have “extra” staff available to take on additional duties. Organizations have addressed the issue of providing Youth REP facilitators by assigning a current staff member to the project, either instead of or integrated into their current projects, employing a new staff person, securing a highly dedicated volunteer, and employing a highly skilled young leader from their organization.

Gaining support from board members. Board members play a critical role in organizational change and development and it therefore crucial that board members support Youth REP processes. Often, gaining this support just requires

training, information, and communication. Consider providing include training on youth development, Youth REP, and the benefits of youth participation in the organization for board members; Explore ways to ensure productive communication between board members and the youth team, with opportunities for board members to learn about and provide input into the project.

Addressing challenging findings from youth evaluators. Part of the power of Youth REP projects is their ability to uncover significant information about youth experiences in the organization. Sometimes the findings and recommendations in the youth projects can be challenging or even negative. The art to working with this information is twofold.

First, work with the youth team to think through and strategize constructive way in which they can present their findings:

- What do they want to accomplish, and what is the best way to present the findings to their audiences so meet their objective?
- Is there positive information in the data as well as negative?
- How can youth focus on identifying and solving the issues as opposed to simply laying blame?
- How can the findings and recommendations be used to promote positive change in the organization?

Second, work with the organizational leadership and staff throughout the Youth REP process. Identify the organization's parameters on the youth team's decision-space on the project (e.g., limitations on required elements of the research design) at the start of the project to create clear expectations for youth and staff alike. Provide opportunities for the team and organizational leadersto dialogue about the methods and findings at multiple points in the process. Prepare the leadership to think in advance about how they might use the data from the youth project to inform and enhance program improvement in the organization.

Balancing positive youth development with rigorous research methods. Often times, people think that a youth-driven process and rigorous research methods are mutually exclusive. They are not. In order to support both, allocate the appropriate time and technical support to your project. Do not be afraid to set high expectation for the youth work. Youth In Focus has found that even youth with limited academic capacities can produce high quality work if given the appropriate support. Plan extra time to review, test, and provide feedback on the team's research questions, methods, analysis, writing, and presentations. Ensure that the team receives feedback and training from staff or consultants with the appropriate technical expertise in research design and implementation.

Ensuring authentic follow-through on youth analyses/recommendations. A major purpose of Youth REP is to inspire positive individual and organizational change. Ideally, this means that youth and adults will engage together to reflect on and take action on the project's recommendations Throughout the project, identify ways that the organization's leadership, staff, and other stakeholders can respond meaningfully to the to youth team's report.

Sustaining youth involvement and handling youth turnover. Empowerment and organizational change are long-term (or perhaps, more accurately, continuous) processes. Therefore, organizations must consider how they will engage with Youth REP in an ongoing fashion. This means providing long-term and support that responds to the capacities of the youth team members, and developing mechanisms to ensure the continuity of Youth REP processes as individuals enter and leave the program. Likewise, organizations must also plan for staff turnover.

Youth REP is a transformative, if challenging and resource intensive, processTo support this process and fully realize the goals of youth empowerment and program improvement, practitioners, organizational leaders, evaluators, and technical resource providers must develop new and innovative ways to build the capacity of organizations to engage in Youth REP and other youth leadership activities. By investing in capacity building, all organizations can rise to the

challenges of Youth REP, and ultimately create the organizations, partnerships with youth, and communities that they seek.

Kristen Zimmerman is a board member and former co-director and **Jonathan London**, Ph.D. is the executive director of Youth In Focus.

Please direct queries about Youth In Focus and Youth REP to Jonathan London.
1930 East 8th Street #300, Davis, CA 95616. 530-758-3688.

jonathan@youthinfocus.net. www.youthinfocus.net

References

- London, Jonathan, and Kristen Zimmerman. (forthcoming) Youth-led Research, Evaluation and Planning as Youth, Organizational and Community Development. Special Edition on Youth-led Evaluation. In *New Directions in Evaluation*.
- London, Jonathan. 2000. Youth-Led Research, Evaluation and Planning. The Experience of Youth In Focus. *Focal Point*. Summer 2000.
- SOYAC Youth Collective, 2002. *Youth-led Needs Assessment for the South of Market*. San Francisco, CA: SOYAC
- Youth IMPACT, 2001. *Youth Voices Inspiring Creative Change: Youth IMPACT Youth-led Evaluation 2001*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Department of Children, Youth, and their Families.
- Youth In Focus, 2002. *Youth REP Step by Step: An Introduction to Youth-led Research, _____ Evaluation and Planning*. Oakland CA: Youth In Focus.
- Zimmerman, Kristen and Nancy Erbstein. 1999. Promising Practices: Youth Empowerment Evaluation. *Harvard Family Research Project: Evaluation Exchange*. Vol V:1.