

**Enhancing an organization's capacity to engage youth in decision-making and governance: A case study of Girls Unlimited and the Toronto Youth Cabinet**

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Abstract 288**

There is growing interest in research identifying the implications and providing evaluations for practices, policies and social actions that work to improve youth access to physical activity programs, facilities and opportunities (Sallis et al., 2000; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995; Sylvia & Baldwin, 2003; Sallis et al., 1996). Toronto has more barriers to physical activity than other cities in Canada due to the multicultural diversity within its large population and the marginalization of groups who are low-income, recent immigrants, homeless, or who speak languages other than English (City of Toronto, 2003). Youth only represent 9% of those registered in Toronto Parks and Recreation programs, which is a significant drop from the 64% of registered participants for children under the age of 12 (City of Toronto, 2004b). By the time these children reach the age of 13, they will most likely drop out of recreational programming (City of Toronto, 2004b).

In recent years Municipal and Provincial government departments, as well as non-government recreation service providers have released reports for youth service organizations on the methods and benefits of engaging youth in decision-making. These reports include the City of Toronto's two editions of *Involve Youth* ("*Involve Youth: A Guide to Involving Youth in Decision-making*" and "*Involve youth 2: A Guide to Meaningful Youth Engagement*") (City of Toronto, 2004a; City of Toronto, 2006), the Parks and Recreation Ontario's (1999) "*Together With Youth*", and the Laidlaw Foundation's (2000) "*Youth as Decision Makers*". However, much of the literature on youth engagement has focused on community-based environmental planning and management, or urban regeneration (Hart, 1997; Hart, 1992; De Winter, 1997; Mullahey et al., 1999; Driskell, 2002; Mathews, 2001a). Research on investigating youth engagement in physical activity service organizations is limited. Fitzpatrick et al. (1998) conducted 12 case studies on youth engagement in urban regeneration initiatives, which included generating new facilities, employment, housing, or leisure activities. The Laidlaw Foundation (2000) published a research report called "*Youth as Decision Makers*". They looked at four different physical activity service organizations to explore the current practices in youth engagement and to understand methods and benefits of youth engagement (Laidlaw Foundation, 2000).

Unfortunately, research has shown that some projects that claim to promote youth participation may in fact be adult-controlled projects (Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1997). Organizations that cater to children and youth recreation rarely use democratic participatory principles in the organization's management and democracy has been found to be more of an exception than a rule (Hart, 1997). Current literature does not critically examine each organization's structure and youth engagement processes to identify how they facilitate or inhibit youth engagement. The literature also does not expand on which groups are under-represented in youth engagement nor does it separate the barriers and recommendations to youth engagement (outreach) and meaningful youth engagement (genuine participation). However, the literature does reflect that if youth engagement is successful, the youth, organization, and community can all benefit (Driskell, 2002; Laidlaw Foundation, 2000; Davies & Markham, 2000; Mullahey et al., 1999; Fitzpatrick et al., 1998).

The purpose of this research presentation is to explore how an organization's capacity can be designed to enhance youth engagement. To facilitate this, findings from the critical case study analysis conducted on Girls Unlimited (GU) and the Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC) will be discussed. GU was selected because it is a relatively new initiative that engages female youth (Girls Unlimited Real Leaders) from across Toronto in decision-making to increase their physical activity opportunities. The TYC was chosen because it has approximately 150 Toronto youth members (Toronto Youth Cabinet, 2004b) and is one of the most recognized youth engagement organizations in Canada. In addition, the literature suggests that both of these organizations use different methods to engage youth and provide high levels of youth participation.

The research design involved three sub-problems: documenting the history of GU and the TYC (expanding on the history of Toronto's youth engagement initiatives and identifying each organization's structure); identifying the different methods and levels of youth engagement (including outreach and the decision-making processes); and, identifying each organization's strengths, barriers, and recommendations for youth engagement. A focus group was conducted with the TYC members to incorporate a youth perspective on the levels and methods of youth engagement frameworks generated from existing literature. The refined frameworks were then used to identify the methods and levels of each organization. Analysis of existing literature, individual interviews, participant observations and documents from both organizations provided the foundation for creating a recommended protocol for improving each of the organization's capacity to engage youth in governance.

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The results of this research expanded on the literature on the methods and levels of youth engagement by incorporating a youth perspective. In addition, the investigator was able to separate the factors (youth, organizational, or intergenerational) that acted as barriers and/or recommendations to outreach from the barriers and/or recommendations to providing a meaningful youth engagement experience. This study can be a catalyst for other researchers to start evaluating the methods and level of participation organizations are engaging youth at and to critically assess how the organization's structures facilitate or inhibit youth engagement. Researchers can make the recommendations and practitioners can implement them to improve the level of youth participation in decision-making and governance.