



QUALITY MATTERS TOOLKIT

Voice and Engagement

Quality Matters Toolkit

YPQA ITEMS: ENGAGEMENT

University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development delivers education, training, and professional development for adults who work with and on behalf of young people. Since 2000, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the latest youth development research and taught youth workers throughout Minnesota how to apply it in their work. The Extension Center for Youth Development is committed to expanding the knowledge and strengthening the practices of staff and volunteers who are committed to high quality youth development experiences for young people.

ATTACHMENTS AND RESOURCES

In addition to the staff meeting/training activities included in the Youth Voice and Engagement Toolkit, the Extension Center for Youth Development has provided the following attachments and resources:

- “Strategies for Voice Development,” and “Levels of Youth Participation”- excerpts from High/Scope’s Youth Work Methods Series by Tom Akiva and Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship by R. Hart.
- Why Youth Action? Youth Community Connections, Andrea Jasken Baker

Credit and Thanks:

The activities included were based these sources:

The Youth Voice and Engagement Toolkit was edited and adapted by Pam McBride, Deborah Moore and Andrea Jasken Baker as a part of the resources available through the Quality Matters project.

Giving Voice to the Leader Within. (2006). Donna Gillen, Marlys Johnson, Jackie Sinykin.

Voice and Choice. (2007). High/Scope Youth Work Methods Series. Tom Akiva.

Focused conversation. MN Technology of Participation. Linda Alton.

Quality Matters is a technical assistance and training project of the Extension Center for Youth Development focused on improving youth program quality. Our thanks to the QM coach/consultants and youth programs who participated in Quality Matters. In very important ways, the development of all related Quality Matters toolkits were based on spoken needs and wise advice learned in practice and training. Our thanks as well to the McKnight Foundation and the Minnesota Department of Education for continued financial support.

For more information on the Extension Center for Youth Development go to:

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/youth/>

For more information on High Scope go to:

www.youth.highscope.org

Staff Meeting and Training Activities

YPQA Items: Engagement

Research tells us that one of the best ways to engage young people in programs is to provide multiple opportunities for them to have a voice and choice in decisions that matter — in their communities, their overall programs and their daily activities.

Organizations that effectively engage youth voice....

- ...honor, ask for and engage youth wisdom.
- ...provide ample opportunities for young people and adults to share control and decision making on multiple levels.
- ...understand Youth Voice is a way of operating, an organizational culture and philosophy that goes beyond one “leadership program offering.”
- ...go beyond “just listening” and build real action around youth voice.
- ...identify opportunities for voice and choice within each daily activity, across sessions, throughout programs, and organization-wide.
- ...create space, commit resources, provide support, and promote opportunities for youth voice.
- ...understand the positive outcomes of partnership for young people, adults, organizations, and communities.

Youth voice can happen at many levels within activities, at the organizational level, and beyond the organization. Many exciting opportunities exist which involve youth in government or in communities.

Young people:

- Can lead and mentor other young people.
- Share control and decision making with staff
- Have many chances to make choices about what they do and how they do it.

4 KEYS to Youth Engagement and Giving VOICE:

- Support
- Opportunities
- Space
- Resources

Principles of Youth Voice

RESPECT — You give it, you receive it! Ask challenging questions, listen, avoid age stereotypes.

COMMUNICATION — Listen up! Young people are best heard when adults step back...adults are best heard when they are straightforward and explain where they are coming from.

INVESTMENT—It takes time! Investing in the future is accepting young people as leaders today.

MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT — Count us in! Involving young people from the beginning — of an activity, session, program — builds ownership.

Washington Youth Voice Handbook, 2007.

Session Set-Up and Materials

Set-Up

Tables for small group work and conversation are set up with an open area towards the front of the room.

The workshop title and agenda are posted with the facilitator name on an easel pad.

Posters are taped on the wall with the bottom taped up so you can't read them.

Agenda includes:

- Welcome and Intro Activity
- The Current Reality Activity
- Poetry In Motion
- Individual Commitments
- Tools/Resources/Handouts

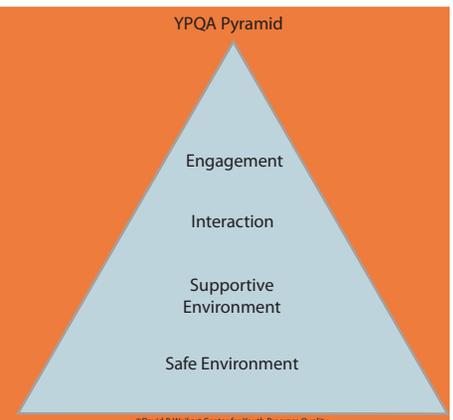
YPQA Related Indicator: Engagement

All youth have multiple opportunities to practice group-process skills (e.g. actively listen, contributes ideas or actions to group, do a task with others, take responsibility for a part.

During activities, all youth have one or more opportunities to mentor an individual or lead a group (e.g. Teach or coach another)

Staff share control of most activities with youth, providing guidance and facilitation while retaining overall responsibility.

All youth have an opportunity to make at least on open-ended process choice (youth decide roles, and activities).



Introduction Activity—30 minutes

Make four signs and hang one in each corner of the room: Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

Read the following statements and have participants go to the corner based on what they think about the statement.

In corners, ask them to discuss their answer with the group around them. Ask for brief summaries of conversations in large group.

Open it up to the large group for discussion and hit each key learning as noted after each statement.

Statement One: The best way to give youth choice and hear their voice is to have a weekly service learning program.

Large Group Discussion: What are other ways of engaging youth voice and choice?

Key Learning: Youth voice and choice should be built in to every aspect of operations.

Statement Two: The best time to focus on youth voice is when there are problems to deal with.

Large Group Discussion: When is the best time to focus on youth voice?

Key Learning: Building youth voice and choice into the ongoing culture of the organization is proactive and can actually prevent many problems. When problems do arise youth are already empowered to be part of the solution.

Statement Three: Giving youth voice and choice is too hard when I can just do the work and make the decisions myself.

Large Group Discussion: What are the challenges of youth voice and choice? What are the benefits?

Key Learning: Youth voice does consume resources — time, support, opportunities. The payoff is worth the investment (see attached Youth Action & Voice for benefits.)

Statement Four: Young people have the same rights as adults to make their hopes, fears, dreams and realities known to society.

Large Group Discussion: What do we do to help young people share their hopes, fears, dreams and realities?

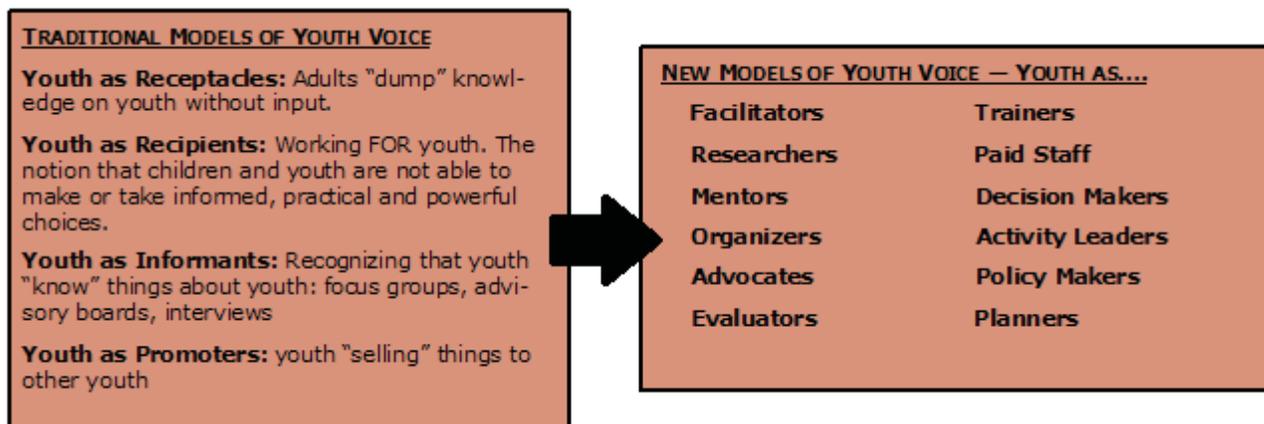
Statement Five: I am intentional about engaging youth voice and choice into my daily routines.

Large Group Discussion: What are you doing? What new roles could we consider for young people?

Key Learning: Have Traditional Models of Youth Voice and New Models (see below) on a flip chart. After people are done brainstorming, go over possibilities.

“By offering youth experiences to live their values, we contribute to their growth as leaders.”

-Giving Voice to the Leader within.-Gillen, Johnson Sinykin



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The Current Reality — 15 minutes

Mapping Youth Voice in Decision Making

Directions: Name all the places where decisions are made that affect your youth program. Then use colored dots to note which decisions are currently youth directed, adult directed, or youth-adult shared.

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Daily Activities</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> | <p>Through the whole program @ _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> |
| <p>Across an entire session/class</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> | <p>Organization wide</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> <p> _____</p> |

Additional Ideas...post on your office wall!

TIPS FOR ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE AND DISCOVERING THEIR VOICE

1. Give freely of your time and have fun.
2. Actively listen to what young people are saying.
3. Engage in meaningful conversations.
4. Allow time and space for expression of ideas, opinions, and feelings.
5. Provide experiences that broaden perspectives and critical thinking.
6. Earn trust by doing what you say.
7. Engage youth in establishing and agreeing to guidelines for leadership activities.
8. Offer opportunities for reflection and sharing.
9. Leadership is a two-way street: let young people inspire you.
10. Achieving a leadership voice is a process, not an event.

Poetry in Motion Activity and Discussion—45 minutes

Tell the participants they are going to do a “word scramble” to help them organize the concepts that they have been discussing into a statement reflecting their ideas.

STEP ONE

Divide participants into small groups of three or four participants. Give each group a set of Poetry in Motion cards (See side panel).

STEP TWO

On the wall, post the following statement:

“Effective youth voice and choice...”

Ask each group to arrange their word cards to complete the sentence using all the cards. Give each group 5 to 10 minutes to complete the task. When all the groups are finished, ask a representative from each group to present the group’s sentence. The Poetry in Motion sentences can be posted on a wall.

STEP THREE

In the large group, ask the group the following questions:

- What common themes do you see?
- What insights have you had that you want to be mindful of as you work together?

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| | Where can you provide opportunities and support youth voice and choice? |
| In the daily activities I lead: | |
| Across sessions: | |
| Throughout the program: | |
| Organization wide: | |

GET GROUP COMMITMENT

Ask the group, “As you move forward in partnerships to engage youth, what are you committed to? Get a few statements from the group, and write them on the flip chart. When all the participants are together, ask the group whether everyone agrees with those commitments.

Record the commitment in a posted area to remind the group of its work together.

GET INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT

Ask individuals to fill out chart below and share with one other person.

Before the session

Create three or four sets of Poetry in Motion cards. Each set should have 30 cards (one word or symbol per card).

Use brightly colored paper cut into shapes. (e.g. Circles, triangles, or squares), and write the words in large, bold letters with a marker.

The 30 cards are as follows:

A adult and Are bigger in
 Include of the creativity
 healthy program talent ! Youth
 together expanding of partnership
 to harnessing organization voice
 choice opportunities new Ideas
 energy ways different

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Additional Ideas...

REINFORCE AND CHECK THE MICROPHONE!

In the hurried nature of the youth work field, we often forget to check in, take a pulse and adjust the volume of the microphone in our organization. We should regularly ask:

Do we hear the youth voice loud and clear?

Are they engaged?

How do we know?

Here are few ways to take your “program pulse”:

1. At a staff meeting or individual staff check-in ask:

“How many new ways to engage voice/choice have you tried with youth?”

At a quarterly staff meeting involve staff in a discussion about youth voice strategies. Include the words: support, opportunities, shared space and resources with their descriptors on easel paper to get started:

—How have you SUPPORTED their efforts?

—Have you created new projects or designed new systems for increasing OPPORTUNITIES for youth?

—What kind of SPACE did you create for youth voice or choice?

—How did you find RESOURCES like bus tokens, transportation, or snacks. They might seem little but mean a lot—especially to a young person.

Process: Share, reflect and record these for staff to use in their own groups in the future. Find ways to celebrate your success and steps taken to create voice and engage youth!

All it takes is one person to say “you can do this” to bring out the leader and the VOICE in all of us!

ONE more pulse check...

Do you have a youth advisory council? You know how to have a focused conversation, so you know the questions to ask to gauge interest of those participating. You know what they will be excited about and frustrated about, and you even know what they feel they would learn from the experience? NOW WHAT? Go recruit an advisory council!!!

Ask youth to help recruit other youth, and turn up your microphone and get the youth voice heard!

Mic check? Mic check? Testing, 1, 2, 3...

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FACILITATING FOCUSED CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUTH

An easy framework to provide daily opportunities for youth voice

Focused Conversations provide an opportunity for a meaningful conversation; get every youth participating, not just the usual suspects; can help get clear ideas and conclusions while broadening the group’s perspective.

What? Gets facts, sensory impressions and information, easy questions and we all can participate.

What words do you remember?

What did you see?

Who was there?

What did we just do?

Gut? These are personal reactions, associations, emotions and images.

What concerns you?

What is clear or unclear?

What is exciting/ boring?

What is inspiring?

What seems most critical?

So What? This identifies meaning, values, significance, purpose, learning, and implications.

What is the importance of this?

What difference will it make?

What options are open to us?

What questions did this raise?

Now What? This is the resolution, action, future, direction and next steps.

What have we just decided?

What did you learn?

What will you do differently?

Why Involve Young People?

When an organization is intentional and strategic about providing quality experiences around youth action and youth voice, there are positive benefits to youth and adults.

- IT IS GOOD YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:** In the last 20 years, discussions about what youth need and can do have moved from problem prevention to preparation; from preparation to participation; and from participation to power sharing:

...Even preparation and development are not sufficient goals. Young people need to be fully engaged—in their own development, in organizations and in their communities.
(*Youth Action*, 4+)
- IT PROMOTES LEARNING AND LONG-TERM GROWTH:** Youth provide a new generation of leadership; opportunities for youth voice builds their capacity for critical thinking, leadership and organizational skills, while promoting practical civic education. These experiences provide young people with the tools they need to be current and continued active members of their communities.
- ADULTS IMPROVE & ORGANIZATIONS IMPROVE:** Recent research found that some adults unknowingly buy into stereotypes about youth. However, through firsthand experience with competent youth they begin to perceive young people differently and also experience a stronger sense of community. Organizations that support youth voice find that young people help clarify and bring focus to the mission, while building credibility within the youth development field.
- YOUNG PEOPLE CAN DIAGNOSE PROBLEMS AND PROVIDE REALITY CHECKS:** With firsthand knowledge about their environments, they are the experts. They can enhance existing pools of data that inform policy decisions, and provide an “inside perspective” on problem-solving.
- YOUNG PEOPLE WIDEN THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE:** Young people have a great deal of influence on their extended families. They can speak “their truth” to media and decision makers in a different way than paid professionals.
- YOUNG PEOPLE BRING ENERGY AND CREATIVITY:** Authentically engaging youth in partnerships with adults can bring fresh perspectives, tenacity, and sometimes much needed creativity to the work. Research shows that working with youth enhances the commitment and energy of adults.

(*Partially adapted and/or excerpted from Youth Activism.org and At the Table: Making the Case for Youth in Decision-Making)

Prepared for Youth Community Connections

Andrea Jasken Baker, March 2006

Principles for Supporting Youth Voice

Youth programs can provide a range of opportunities for youth voice. However, emerging voice requires the tangible support of adult partners. Several principles for supporting youth voice are listed below. These principles can be used as a gauge to determine the success or failure of voice experiences.

Visibility: Young people have opportunities to take the lead in decisions and actions. This may involve facilitating discussions, facilitating operation of a group, serving as spokespersons, presenting issues to key decision makers, or serving in a point-person role. Adults support visibility by coaching and mentoring young people as they gain a range of skills to fulfill these roles with confidence and competence.

A Safety Net: Adults and peers scaffold various voice opportunities for young people by mentoring and coaching. Adults allow young people to step out of a leadership role when it becomes overwhelming or uncomfortable. This is followed up with reflection and jointly derived strategies for future success. This safety net helps create a psychologically safe space in which young people feel comfortable trying on new ideas and challenging one another and adult facilitators.

Goals: Young people are encouraged to focus on clear goals and tasks. This supports their emerging leadership skills and encourages reasonable expectations of success. Concrete products, information, and activities lead to solid accomplishments that young people can feel proud of and build on for future actions. In contrast, abstraction and ambiguity make learning the ropes of leadership extremely difficult.

Structure: Just as impromptu theater provides actors with key props and an opening scene, adults provide an overall structure within which young people can define roles and tasks. Structure comes in a variety of forms: providing information, conducting skill-building training, creating group ground rules, or asking critical questions.

Support: To take risks and act on opportunities, young people should feel enthusiastic support from adult partners. This is particularly true in cases where youth voice might be questioned or where adults are not accustomed to sharing control with young people. They need access to the skills, knowledge, resources, and relationships that adults possess, as well as opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in a supportive environment. Young people should not be set up for failure because of a lack of tangible support.

Preparation: Young people are as prepared as their adult counterparts in conducting activities and tasks associated with their leadership role. Opportunity without preparation can lead to frustration and diminished feeling of success. Young people want to feel and be seen as competent. This principle is key in avoiding the extremes of adults taking over to save young people or young people being left out on a limb. Coaching, training, opportunities for practice, and feedback are all valuable resources for young people preparing for leadership roles.

Strategies for Voice Development

Use groups as “laboratories” for voice development. Youth voice does not emerge in a vacuum or as a result of being introduced to abstract concepts in an academic way. Intentionally use existing groups within your setting to provide multiple opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills. Some ways young people can experiment with voice are figuring out a productive role for themselves, gaining awareness of the needs of the whole group, moving in and out of various roles, and being responsible for both process and outcomes.

Offer voice opportunities for many, not a few. Because groups can form around so many varied goals, provide plentiful opportunities for voice that call for varying degrees of skill and experience. When adults move from a dominant role to a facilitative role, multiple opportunities for leadership emerge.

Break down projects and actions into their component parts. This helps young people become more conscious of the process, the specific role and steps they can contribute to the process, and the emerging needs for leadership as the process moves forward. This is especially true for large-scale, open-ended, or abstract projects. Planning strategies, opening activities, and divergent questions become tools to increase awareness of the process and identify component parts.

View voice as “response”-ability. Encourage young people to consider and act on a response to the people and circumstances involved in the intentions, decisions, and actions they undertake and to subject those intentions, decisions, and actions to review. Through intentional activity, supported by adults, young people will discover new strengths in themselves and gain greater awareness of who they are becoming and the roles they will commit to.

Provide authentic choice. When young people feel they are free to define the ways they participate, they are more interested in participating. In addition, providing adolescents with real choices and opportunities to carry out their own plans enables them to take up leadership roles. These authentic leadership roles allow students to gain valuable skills as they engage in projects of their own design.

Engineer success. Facilitating success for young people at all levels of expertise encourages voice development. Engineering success is not the same as saving students from the natural consequences of poor decisions and actions, nor does it mean setting up false accomplishments. Engineering success is often linked to the assumptions adults make about success. Adults may need to rethink their own definitions of success and encourage young people to define it in unique and personal ways. For instance, success can be audience response to a performance or simply personal enjoyment. Success can be learning to make mistakes and trying something over and over until students get it the way they want it. Success can be learning to take risks, understanding how to solve a problem, or seeing that their contributions matter to the people around them.

Strategies for Voice Development (continued)

Establish a “mistakes allowed” environment. Being actively involved in a project requires students to feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. Voice opportunities are created when students make mistakes and apply the lessons learned to future situations. In the voice development model, mistakes are treated matter-of-factly, as a new problem to be solved. Individuals who view mistakes as new challenges rather than as reasons to give up are more likely to continue to participate and to guide others through the ups and downs of collaborative work.

Recognize student achievements. Recognition is an effective vehicle for keeping young people actively engaged in projects and activities. Provide opportunities for them to present their work to peers, family members, schools, and the community. Remember, however, that recognition should come in the form of encouragement, not empty praise.

Practice inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. Effective youth voice involves the ability to work with and value peers and their contributions. It is important to set up an environment in which all young people are valued and given voice opportunities. When one or a small select group of young people receives the majority of voice opportunities, rifts can develop and the overall goals of voice are diminished.

Levels of Youth Participation

Youth voice is a key component in offering a high quality youth program. The ultimate goal is to move toward the high-impact program feature of a youth advisory structure. A program that employs this will have youth centered policies and practices. Young people will have an influence on the setting, activities, structure and policy of the organization. While several attempts are often made to try to give young people a voice, the opportunities are seldom genuine. When providing opportunities for youth voice, the focus should be on giving youth ample content choices, getting feedback from youth, involving youth in deciding what to offer and setting up meaningful advisory structures.

Before setting out to accomplish these tasks it is important to understand the different levels of youth participation. While you may mean well, it is easy to employ youth voice in an inauthentic way where the young people end up being tokenized or manipulated as opposed to engaged in the process of true youth advisory.

Roger Hart² developed a framework that illustrates the degrees to which young people can participate in this process. He symbolizes the process with an image of a ladder. Each rung represents a level of youth participation. The top four rungs represent true youth voice and the bottom four represent a more adult-centered approach.

8. Youth-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Adults-Young people initiate projects and programs. Young people and adults share decision making.
7. Youth-Initiated and Directed-Young people initiate and direct projects and programs. Adults take on the role of support.
6. Adult-Initiated, Shared Decisions with Youth-Adults initiate and direct projects and programs but share decision making with young people.
5. Consulted and Informed-Adults design and direct. Young people act as consultants for projects and programs. Young people are informed about how their input is used.
4. Assigned and Informed-Young people are assigned roles and informed about their involvement.
3. Tokenism-The appearance is given that young people have a voice but they actually have little to no say in their participation.
2. Decoration-Young people are used to indirectly help support a cause. Adults DO NOT pretend the young people inspired the cause.
1. Manipulation-Young people are used to support a cause. Adults pretend that young people inspired the cause.

2 Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

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