



DAVID P. WEIKART

CENTER FOR YOUTH
PROGRAM QUALITY

youth voice



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT





DAVID P. WEIKART

CENTER FOR YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY

The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality,

a division of the Forum for Youth Investment, is dedicated to empowering education and human service leaders to adapt, implement, and scale best-in-class, research-validated quality improvement systems to advance child and youth development. The Weikart Center encourages managers to prioritize program quality. We offer training, technical assistance, and research services that all come together in the Youth Program Quality Intervention, a comprehensive system for improving the quality of youth programs.

Bringing together over fifty years of experience and the latest research,

the Youth Work Methods are proven strategies for working with youth. Whether you believe that the purpose of an out-of-school time program is to improve academics, to build life skills, or just to provide a place where kids can hang out and be kids, the approach presented in the Youth Work Methods series provides a foundation for building safe and productive places for youth.

To learn more, please visit www.cypq.org.



youth voice

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Produced by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, a division of The Forum for Youth Investment.

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Acknowledgments

The youth development approach described in these pages was originally developed and tested at the HighScope Summer Workshop for Teens (founded in 1963), later called the Institute for IDEAS. In the late 1990s, HighScope's Youth Development Group took the learning approach developed at the Institute for IDEAS and delivered training for youth workers. These workshops, grounded in HighScope's direct experience, were extended by the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality through research in positive youth development and evolved into what is currently our Youth Work Methods series.

The current training framework rests on a foundation developed by many, including David P. Weikart, Nicole Yohalem, John Weiss, Becky Prior, Kiku Johnson, Aaron Wilson-Ahlstrom, Laenne Thompson, Tom Akiva, Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, David Martineau, Linda Horne, Mary Hohmann, Charles Hohmann, Charles Smith, Monica Jones, and many others.

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why support youth voice?

Build youth motivation

Promote learning and self-direction

Improve programs and communities

What's the best way to help young people make good decisions, now and as they grow older? Is it by restricting their choices and running your youth program like a drill sergeant? No! As one educational writer puts it, "Youth learn how to make good choices by making choices, not by following directions."* Organized activities for youth—whether in an after-school program, a community center, or somewhere else—can provide wonderful contexts for youth to experience voice, control, and to practice decision-making.

This does not mean you should relinquish all control to youth. Rather, for youth voice to work you must maintain a delicate balance: A balance between helping youth feel power and control, while still providing youth with safety, structure and support. Supporting youth voice may include simply asking youth for input about the program, providing meaningful opportunities for choice, and ultimately, true adult-youth partnerships in programs. The method is backed up by research (see review on pages 40-44) and time-tested.

*Kohn, Alfie. (2001). *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Let's break down what the youth voice method can do...

Build youth motivation

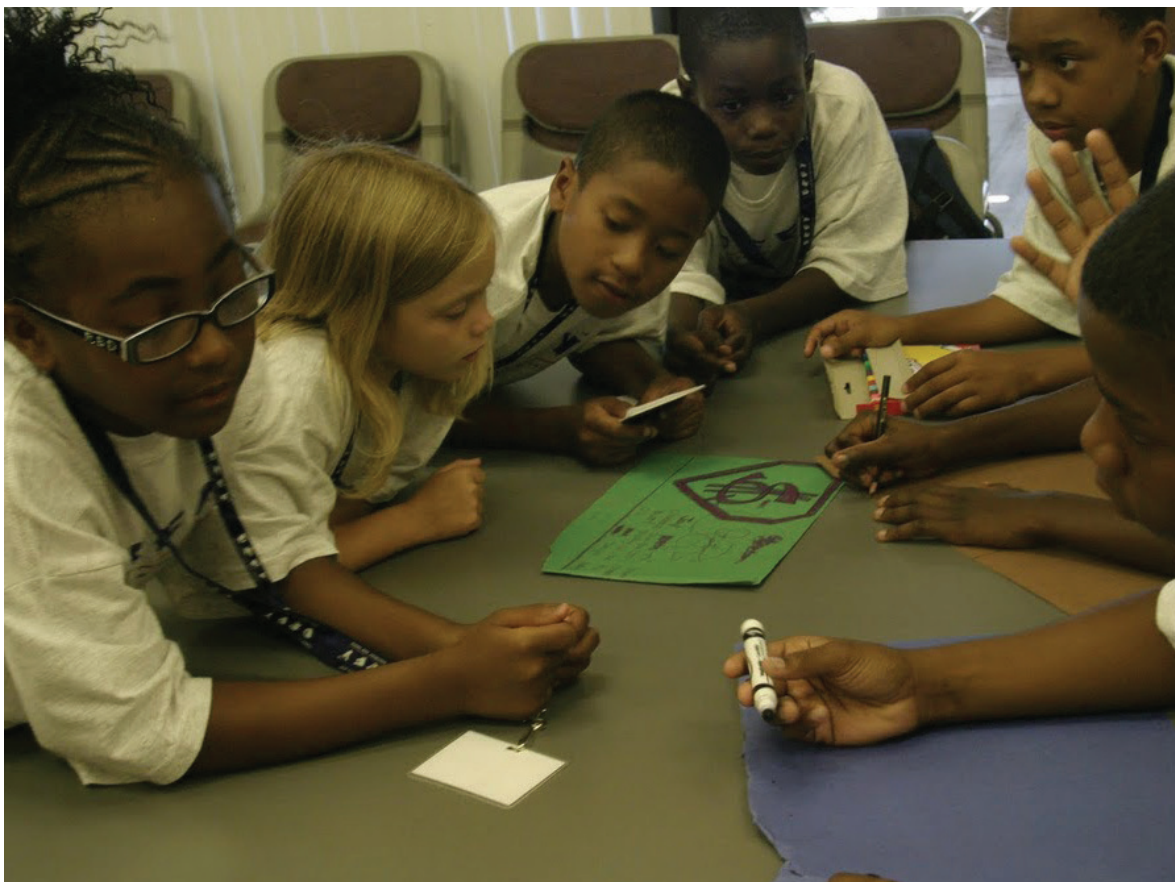
Supporting youth voice can produce great benefits for motivation. When youth are given true decision-making opportunities in the program, they are likely to feel a sense of 'ownership' of that program, engage fully in the program, and come back for more in the future.

Promote learning and self-direction

Increased motivation can lead to increased learning. Giving young people opportunities to make decisions that matter encourages them to explore their interests, participate as group members and leaders, and ultimately become stronger decision-makers in life outside the program. Support for youth voice can promote learning in many areas such as strategic thinking, self regulated learning, and communication skills.

Improve programs and communities

Finally, the benefits of supporting youth voice aren't limited to youth—adults, programs and communities can benefit as well! When programs involve youth in decision-making, adults' views of youth can change to be more positive, adults' commitment and energy levels can increase, adults can feel more competent as program leaders, and programs can become more connected to youth.



overview

Supporting youth voice can occur in many ways. The ladder below shows this in context of a spectrum from low to high--from no voice at the bottom all the way to full blown adult-youth partnership in running programs at the top!*

SHARED LEADERSHIP	Youth experience shared leadership of program with adults. Leadership opportunities for ALL youth; not just presumed “leaders”. Youth take active roles managing their own time and learning; youth have real opportunities to shape program. Adults provide support and safety for youth decisions and leadership roles.
CHOICE	Youth have real, relevant choices about how they spend their time, processes, offerings, etc. This step may have the biggest range... from simple, closed-ended choices between activity options to important open-ended questions about how to run things.
INPUT	Youth provide feedback and input to adults. This can be structured (surveys, focus groups) or informal (asking youth what they think).
NO VOICE	No voice or false voice. This includes: tokenism, having one or two youth in leadership roles to give the appearance of youth voice; decoration, using youth to indirectly help support a cause (e.g., a media photograph that makes it look like youth are leading); and manipulation, youth are used to support a cause and adults pretend that the cause is inspired by youth.

*This ladder is a variation of the “ladder of youth participation” promoted by Hart (1992).



The Method

We divide our recommended strategies into *opportunities* and *support*. The Voice strategies correspond with the rungs of the ladder; the support strategies apply across all rungs. Please note that these categories are not entirely separate. In fact, providing opportunities without supports are not likely to be successful. But meaningful opportunities for voice coupled with strong support can result in benefits for youth, programs, and communities. These strategies are explained in the next few pages.

Opportunities for youth voice

- INPUT: Provide opportunities for youth to provide input and feedback to adults
- CHOICE: Provide opportunities to make relevant and meaningful choices
- SHARED LEADERSHIP: Provide opportunities for leadership and responsibility

Support for youth voice

- Provide scaffolding (and sometimes get out of the way)
- Increase challenges, roles, and responsibilities over time



Youth Voice at the Activity Level

The next few pages contain worksheets and forms specifically geared to help you consider youth voice at the activity level. This is in contrast to youth voice at the organizational level which is addressed on page 32.

Specifically, the next few pages contain:

Building the Rungs of the Youth Voice Ladder 27

Use this form to examine the youth voice in your program or activities and plan for increasing youth voice in your setting

Leadership Opportunities for All 28

This worksheet is designed to help you consider the challenge of supporting leadership development for ALL youth; not just the natural leaders.

Youth Voice Activity Planning Form 29

This form is designed for planning activities or projects to do with youth. This is not a comprehensive planning form, but rather focuses on including opportunities for youth voice.

Youth Feedback Forms 30

Two forms are provided – one with multiple choice questions and one with open-ended questions. You can make copies of these and use them to collect feedback from your youth.



Youth Voice at the Organization Level

Most of this guide is geared toward promoting voice, choice, and leadership within program offerings—i.e., within the activities that staff members offer at your program. However, this page and the next focus on supporting youth voice in the overall organization.

Opportunities to support youth voice at the organization level exist that are not available at the activity level (for example, involving youth in the hiring of new staff). Plus, thinking about opportunities and supports for youth voice at the organization level is a good way to make sure youth voice is consistently supported in activities. Similarly, support for voice at the organization level can impact staffs' abilities to support voice at the activity level.

How do you offer youth voice at the organizational level? There are many ways to provide opportunities for input, choice, and leadership in the daily operation of the program. We provide the inventory on the next page as a place to start.

Here's how you might use the inventory:

1. First, gather a group of youth – they can be leaders in the program or any group that you think would be a good fit for this exercise. You'll also need some adults; most likely, those that work with this group of youth.
2. Next, make two copies of the form on the next page. Have the youth complete one form as a group. Meanwhile the adult can complete a separate form.
3. Once the two groups are done, adults and youth can come together. Take a look at how the completed forms compare. Go line by line and discuss each item. Are there items where there's disagreement? Are there areas where the organization shines? Are there places where organizational support for youth voice may be improved? What questions or issues does this conversation bring up?
4. Ultimately, this conversation can lead to a plan for increasing youth voice in a few specific areas in the organization. You may end the meeting with action steps that youth and adults will take to improve the organization's support for youth voice.

Good luck and have fun!

Youth Voice: The Research

“[P]ositive development is not something that adults do to young people, but rather something that young people do for themselves with a lot of help from parents and others. They are the agents of their own development”
- Eccles & Gootman (2002), p. 103

As we aim to promote positive youth development, many youth workers grapple with the difficult task of helping young people act as the agents of their own development. Research suggests that to be effective we must master strategies to foster youth voice and support young people's autonomy. Fostering youth voice involves finding ways for young people to actively participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives (Kirshner, November 16, 2003; Mitra, 2004), while supporting young people's autonomy requires that adults help youth develop and realize their own goals, interests, and values (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005). Unfortunately, many adults, even those that work closely with young people everyday, are unfamiliar with these concepts. According to one group of scholars, most teachers report that autonomy is a foreign concept and generally use controlling motivational strategies more than autonomy supportive strategies (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Further, many adults don't have faith in young people's decision-making ability. For example, one survey of over 700 adults found that nearly half of all respondents were not confident that young people could represent their community to city council or serve as a voting member of a community association (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Given these realities, it is critical that youth workers learn to practice autonomy supportive behaviors and facilitate youth voice. Drawing on research conducted in schools, families, and out-of-school time programs, this research review describes the benefits of youth voice and autonomy support for young people of all ages.

It identifies best-practice strategies youth workers can use and highlights some important caveats all youth workers would do well to keep in mind.

Scholars agree that young people benefit when their teachers, families, and youth workers support their autonomy and allow them to exercise voice. In the classroom, studies have found that teacher autonomy support improves student engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Reeve et al., 2004) and connection to school (J.S. Eccles, Early, Fraser, Belansky, & McCarthy, 1997; J. S. Eccles & Gootman, 2002). It has also been positively associated with young people's grade point averages (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), intrinsic motivation (Reeve & Jang, 2006), academic competence (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), academic values (Roeser et al., 1998), perceptions of self-determination (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), positive feelings about schoolwork (Assor et al., 2002) and independent task completion (Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999). Family support for autonomy has been associated with a range of positive academic outcomes including: higher grade point averages (J.S. Eccles et al., 1997; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), increased accuracy and creativity (Grolinck, Gurland, DeCoursey, & Jacob, 2002), academic and social competence, perceptions of self-determination (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2005), and motivation (J. S. Eccles & Gootman, 2002). It has also been found to protect young people from academic alienation, depression, and problem behavior (J.S. Eccles et al., 1997). In out-of-school time programs, autonomy support has been positively associated with intrinsic motivation and persistence (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001), while youth voice has been associated with improvements in young people's strategic thinking (Larson & Hansen, 2005) as well as their sense of agency (Mitra, 2004), efficacy (Morgan & Streb, 2001), belonging (Mitra, 2004), competence (Mitra, 2004; Morgan & Streb, 2001), and political attentiveness (Morgan & Streb, 2001).

Ask-Listen-Encourage and the Active-Participatory Approach

Youth and adults learn best through hands-on experiences with people, materials, events, and ideas. The experiential learning model — validated by decades of research and rooted in our early work as part of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation — is the basis of our approach to teaching and learning.

The Youth Work Methods

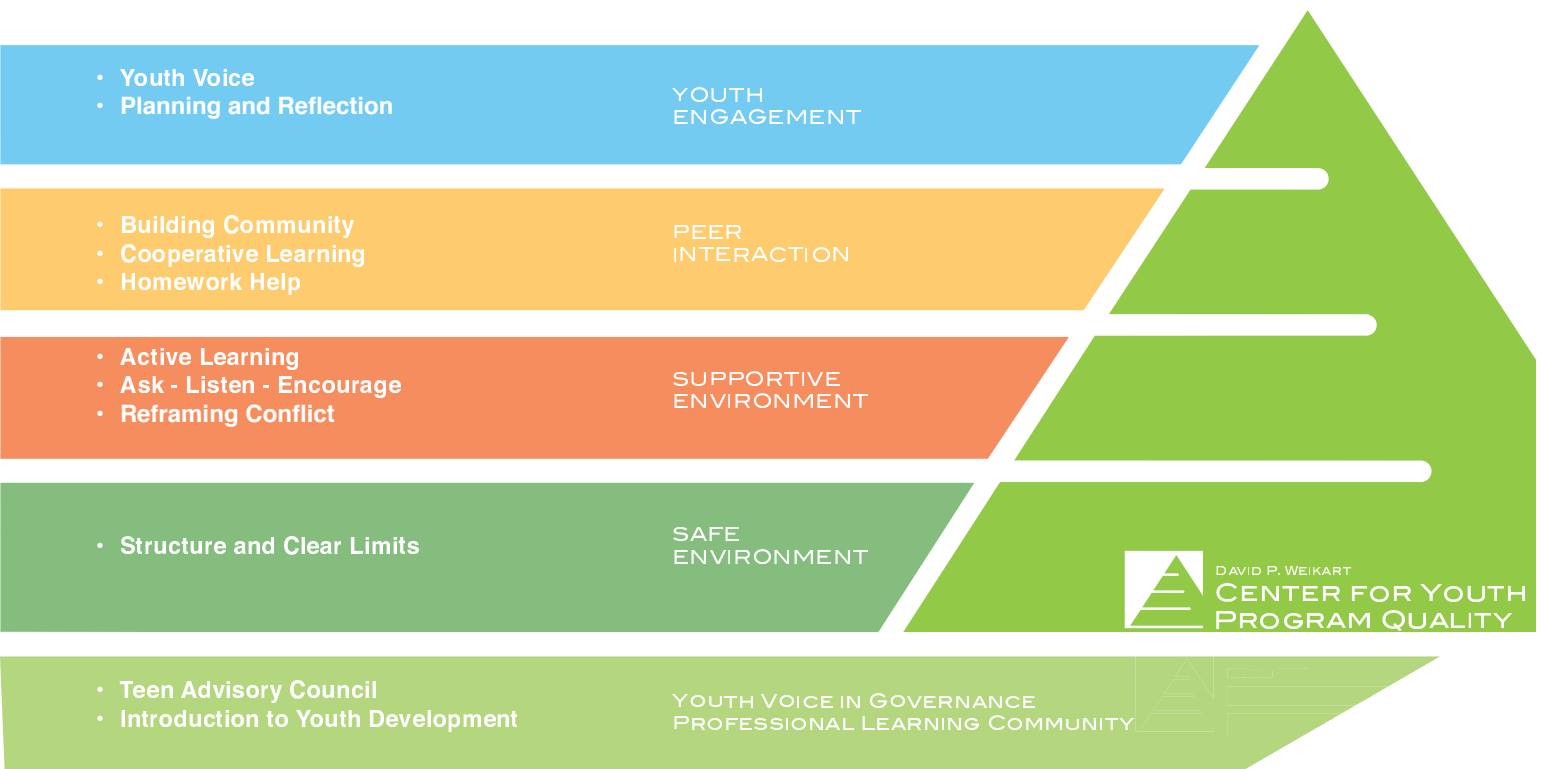
Youth voice is a foundational idea in the Active-Participatory Approach. As with all methods in this series, the strategies for building opportunities and supports for youth voice can be strengthened in parallel with other methods. By incorporating other Youth Work Methods, you will be better able to support youth to have positive youth voice experiences. Notably, the Planning and Reflection method—particularly the planning part, may be considered a subset of youth voice. That is, planning is ‘choice with intention’. See this guide for numerous tangible strategies for helping youth be intentional about the choices they make.

In addition, the ideas of youth voice can be strengthened from strategies presented in **Active Learning, Cooperative Learning, Building Community, and Ask-Listen-Encourage**



The Youth Work Methods Series

The Youth Work Methods are powerful strategies for working with young people, based on positive youth development. The Methods are a key part of the Youth Program Quality Intervention (YPQI), a comprehensive system for integrating assessment and training. Each Method is linked to assessment items and designed to help youth workers improve the areas they choose to focus on.



To learn more about these and other Weikart Center workshops, please visit www.cypq.org.