

# Youth Engagement Literature Review



## Definition of Youth Engagement

There is no single agreed upon definition of the term engagement in the literature (CEYE, 2003). Increasingly, the definition developed and tested by the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's (CEYE) is being widely used and referenced in the Canadian context. The CEYE defines youth engagement as the sustained and meaningful involvement of a young person in an activity with a focus outside of the self (Pancer et al., 2002). A focus outside of the self, or in other words, a focus on connecting or contributing to others and the larger community, is a fundamental element of successful development (Lerner et al., 2005).

Full engagement consists of a cognitive component (for example, learning new things), an affective component (for example, deriving pleasure from participating), and a behavioural component (such as spending time doing the activity) (Pancer et al., 2002). These three elements can also be considered the head, heart and feet of engagement. To these, the CEYE's definition adds a fourth element describing the connection or contribution outside of the self or spirit element. Participation is the simple act of showing up; engagement occurs when head, heart, feet and spirit are involved.

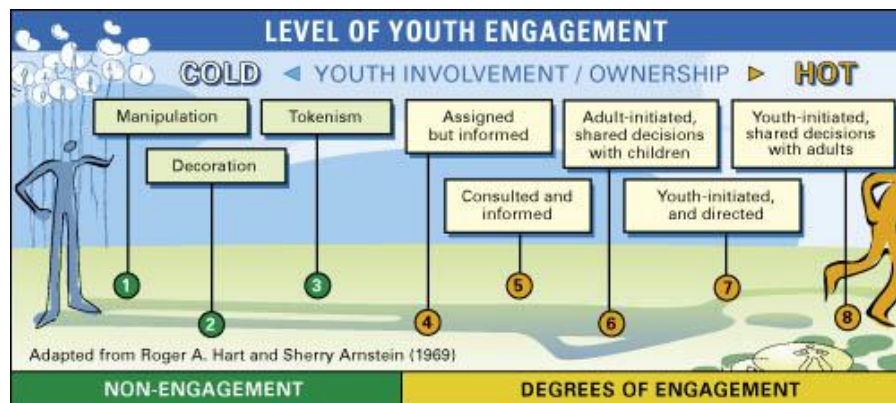
Regardless of the specific wording, there are some common components of most definitions of youth engagement. First and foremost, participation must be meaningful to the involved young person in order for them to be engaged and to experience positive developmental impacts. However, most of the academic literature focuses only on the feet element, such as how long and how often youth participate (Rose-Krasnor, 2008). What is more, engagement usually involves young people having opportunities to take responsibility and leadership while working in partnership with caring adults who value, respect, and share power with them. Key features also include a link to the outside world, sustained involvement, and structured activities that have a purpose in mind (Mahoney et al., 2002; Nakamura, 2001).

These key definitional components highlight that how engagement is done is important: process matters. In other words, "[e]ngagement is a process, not a particular program – and most importantly, it is reciprocal, dynamic, and interactive" (McCart & Clark, 2005, p. 3).

## Levels of Youth Engagement

The spectrum of youth engagement is a useful way to identify where your organization/agency is starting from and where you want to be. In planning, it is

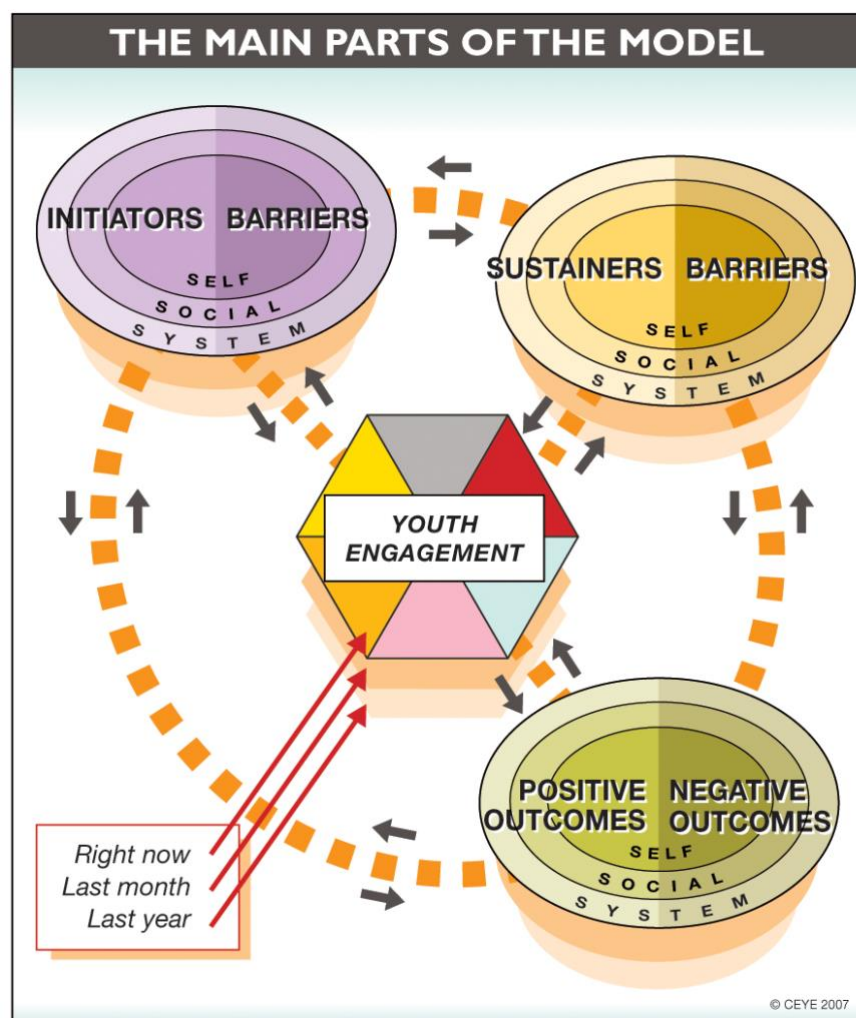
useful to come to a shared understanding of where your event will be positioned. The spectrum distinguishes between non-engagement and engagement. It also illustrates that there is always potential for moving towards stronger and more genuine levels of youth engagement, increasing young people's involvement and ownership. In turn, moving towards higher levels of youth engagement leads to increased benefits and outcomes for youth and adult allies.



## Centre of Excellence Youth Engagement Framework

The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's Youth Engagement Framework (Rose-Krasnor et al., 2007) provides a way to conceptualize youth engagement in a variety of youth activities (see Figure below). To date, most of the research related to youth engagement has been focused on the "act" of being engaged in activities, such as the type of activity, number and frequency of involvement over time. However, youth engagement is more than just doing certain kinds of activities: process matters. This framework depicts the complexity of qualities and factors that lead to and support meaningful youth engagement and positive outcomes. As with youth engagement, Health Promoting Schools initiatives are more effective if they are complex and multifactorial (Stewart-Brown, 2006).

The framework is designed to take into account the three levels in which engagement happens: 1) Individual, 2) Social, and 3) Systems. These levels are illustrated by the three layers of each bubble.



The Youth Engagement framework underscores key common approaches of Health Promoting Schools that have been demonstrated to be effective:

- Engagement at the individual, social and system levels, involving the whole school, parents and wider community (Stewart-Brown, 2006);
- Attention to qualities of engagement such as deliberate changes to the school's psychosocial environment, intensity and breadth (Durlak et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2007; Stewart-Brown, 2006);
- Focus on sustainers for implementation over a long period of time (Stewart-Brown, 2006); and
- Outcomes such as personal skill development (Murray et al., 2007; Stewart-Brown, 2006).

The Model for Youth Engagement as an approach for Health Promoting Schools is presented in the following section using this framework to structure, describe and

monitor the process, before and after the youth engagement activity. The components are:

- the initiating factors and activities,
- the youth engagement activity and its qualities in the centre of the framework,
- the sustaining factors and activities,
- and the outcomes.

Ideally, the framework is applied over time and the impact is measured over time at all three levels.

## Initiating factors

Youth engagement injects youth as a stakeholder and actor into decision-making in schools and/or communities. Scholars have identified three common rationales or initiating factors to engage youth in decision-making (Zeldin et al., 2003). The first is concerned with ensuring social justice and youth representation – a rights-based approach systemically upheld by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC outlines in articles 12, 13 and 14, the right of children under 18 years of age to fully participate in decisions that affect them, to be able to express their ideas and concerns in any way that is appropriate for them, and to have access to full information about situations that affect them. Article 17 identifies the responsibility of adults to provide children with access to information. This perspective on youth involvement in decision-making is enacted mainly through consultation with young people, but does not address power imbalances very well. At the systemic level, three key conditions need to be in place for children and youth to participate in decision-making (Treseder & Crowley, 2001):

- 1) Cultural attitudes must encourage youth participation;
- 2) Political, legal and administrative structures to ensure rights to participation; and
- 3) Economic and social conditions that enable people to exercise their rights.

The second rationale is rooted in promoting youth development – that involving youth in decision-making is a way for young people to actively participate in their own learning and therefore, a pathway for a young person's healthy development. This outcome for youth is good and demonstrated by research; however, sometimes this focus on individual development may reduce the outcomes for organizational, community, and/or ministerial development. This happens if initiatives that engage youth view the activity as 'practicing' organizational or community decision-making *until* youth are perceived to be adequately prepared to do so and/or until they are adults. This may devalue the input of youth in the present moment in the eyes of adult stakeholders and youth themselves. This perspective builds upon the notion of graduated opportunities, wherein once youth are successful in one decision-making function, they successively participate in new roles that require higher-order skills

or responsibilities (Zeldin et al., 2003). As such, in order to provide a good fit, a variety of options and opportunities for involvement should be available to young people so that they can each find a good fit (Zeldin et al., 2000).

The third rationale or initiating factor for organizations and ministries to involve youth in decision-making is based in building civil society or balancing individual rights with responsibilities to contribute to the common good. In general, this rationale is based upon the notion that communities work better with diverse stakeholders that bring various valuable perspectives and competencies. This perspective emphasizes partnership models typically involving youth in adult-created institutional structures and working together in more equitable power dynamics to influence decisions and outcomes (Zeldin et al., 2003).

As seen above, these factors each have limits and/or may overlap and strengthen one another. Developing a common vision for youth involvement and understanding how one's organization/ministry is positioned within and/or across these rationales is a crucial step to initiating and sustaining youth involvement in decision-making.

## Lessons from others

The Youth Leadership Initiative identifies several lessons from their work (Libby et al., 2005):

Prior to youth and adults working together, they recommend that three components be met:

1. Institutional commitment to youth involvement in decision-making: reflected in policies, goals, and in resource allocation.
2. Training/orientation for both youth and adults: training sessions that generally involve self-reflection as well as leadership skills (facilitation, decision-making, etc.).
3. Established mechanism for ongoing support: for example, informal check ins, and/or a subcommittee to ensure that concerns can be raised easily.

These conditions are echoed in a study by Zeldin (2004) that looked in depth at eight organizations with at least five youth in key decision-making roles and at least 1 year of experience with youth involvement in organizational decision-making. Young people identified four main areas at the individual, social and systems levels that motivated them to engage in decision-making:

1. *Demonstration of respect for youth voice and competency by the organizations:* Specifically, this involves listening to young people; a belief that young people bring valuable expertise/perspectives; avoiding tokenism; walking the talk (e.g. visibility of how youth are already part of the organization); and seeking to facilitate more opportunities for youth voice.

2. *Balance of power and relationships with adults:* Young people identified that they were motivated by high expectations, support, encouragement and guidance.
3. *Feelings of belonging and importance to the organization:* These feelings are supported by the ways in which adults welcome youth to new roles, provide orientation, and highlight the importance of their introductions to adults in the organization.
4. *Importance of youth contributing on their own terms:* Youth reported being initially interested in organizational decision-making due to the focus outside of themselves to contribute to something larger than themselves and give back to their communities.

The literature also suggests that social activities (Treseder & Crowley, 2001) as well as money incentives and remuneration are compelling initiating factors for young people, especially those who require personal income because of their life circumstances (Borisova, 2005). In addition, personal contact and a personal invitation are crucial (Treseder & Crowley, 2001). Opportunities to travel, meet other youth, stay in hotels, function as incentives for youth of all economic brackets, provided that parents/youth are assured that psychological safety issues will be addressed.

## **System and Organizational Readiness Conditions**

### *Readiness and Change*

A number of findings and models exist for enhancing youth engagement. For example, Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, and Sinclair (2003) have described four stages in promoting youth participation.

1. *Unfreezing* involves recognizing the need to change and unblocking existing attitudes and styles of working, challenging both existing beliefs and practices and external pressures from government and funders.
2. *Catalyzing* knowledge into action can be helped by establishing “champions” within organizations. Catalyzing needs to be supported by senior management/administration and involve youth early in the process, as the vision for youth engagement is set against current culture and politics in the organization/ministry.
3. *Internalizing* change involves building staff capacity with time and resources for recruitment, training, practice, and evaluation, so that engagement becomes sustainable within organizations/ministries.
4. *Institutionalizing* youth engagement into policy and standards is necessary for it to become mainstream practice. As could be expected, these stages are complex and non-linear.



## Benefits and Outcomes of Youth Engagement

The youth engagement framework suggests that true engagement of youth requires a balance between positive outcomes for youth at the individual level (e.g., personal skills, healthy choices, sense of identity), their relationships and interactions at the social level (e.g., stronger connections with friends and adults, a larger support network), and system level outcomes (e.g., greater civic engagement, policies and programs responsive to the needs of young people, new and creative ways to govern) in terms of changes at the school health level and/or in communities.

There are few studies that specifically address health effects of student participation in school decision-making, but there is strong evidence for positive health effects from student engagement. For example, in Mager & Nowak's (2011) systematic review of 32 empirical studies, moderate effects of student participation include increased life skills, self-esteem and social status, democratic skills and citizenship, improved student-adult relationships and school ethos. Different types of student participation (e.g. student councils, student involvement class/school decision-making, temporary working groups) were associated with different effects. Generally, benefits were experienced only by students that were directly involved in decision-making. Negative effects resulted from token involvement and disappointment when student involvement in decision-making does not have the desired effect (Mager & Nowak, 2011). If students are not taken seriously and their participation has no impact on their lives, positive effects are unlikely (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Wilson, 2009).

To complement these studies, there are several large studies (e.g. Catalano et al., 2004) that identify health outcomes of youth activity involvement with a focus on decision-making and youth voice, within and outside school contexts. This body of literature is described below. It is important to note that these outcomes are often not the result of single-issue programs, for example, youth may reduce their use of substances as a result of being engaged in a leadership program that does not address substance use in particular. This is a key finding for Health Promoting Schools approaches, which suggest that a broader focus on student voice, connectedness and school climate may be equally if not more effective than single issue program in addressing health and risk behaviours (Bond et al., 2004).

Although there is a significant body of literature pertaining to outcomes for young people, there is considerably less in the area of impacts on adult allies and on organizations themselves. It is hoped that the uptake of this model may be systematically documented to help address this gap.

### **Youth engagement impacts on young people (individual and social level outcomes):**

- Personal growth, self-esteem and identity development (Dworkin et al., 2003; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Mager & Nowak, 2011; Pancer et al., 2002)
- Skill, knowledge and capacity building (Finn and Checkoway, 1998; Cargo et al., 2003; Catalano et al., 2004; Checkoway, 1998; Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Mager & Nowak, 2011; Matysik, 2000; Roker et al., 1998)
- Positive health benefits including a reduction of negative risk behaviors (e.g. Catalano et al., 2004) such as decreased alcohol use (Komro et al., 1996), decreased marijuana and hard drug use (Jenkins, 1996; Youniss et al., 1999; Barber et al., 2001), lower rates of unplanned pregnancy (Allen et al., 1997), lower rates of depression (Mahoney et al., 2002), lower rates of anti-social and criminal behaviours (Agnew & Peterson, 1989; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000)
- Positive academic outcomes (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney et al., 2003; Mitra, 2009), and re-engagement in the school community (Mitra, 2009). A sense of connectedness in school communities is associated with improved health effects (Rowe et al., 2007, Mager & Nowak, 2011)
- Lower rates of school failure and drop-out (Janosz et al., 1997; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997)
- Increased civic engagement and efficacy (Catalano et al., 2004; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2009)
- Higher quality relationships, interpersonal skills and broadened social networks (Catalano et al.; Dworkin et al., 2003; Mahoney et al., 2003; McGee et al., 2006). Strong social networks in school communities have been shown to have a positive impact on the health of youth (Rowe et al., 2007, Mager & Nowak, 2011)
- Networking and learning from adults about their communities and accessing resources (Dworkin et al., 2003; Jarrett et al., 2005)

### **Impacts on adult allies (individual and social level outcomes):**

- Overcoming stereotypes about youth and greater recognition of youth diversity and strengths (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2000)
- More energy, passion, optimism in decision-making activities (Zeldin, 2004)
- Enhanced sense of personal efficacy and belonging (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2000)
- Enhanced sense of collective purpose and feelings of commitment to the organization/institution (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2000)
- New perspectives in decision-making (Zeldin, 2004)
- Increased feelings for connectedness to others within the organization/institution (Zeldin et al., 2000)



**Impacts on programs/services:**

- Improved responsiveness to changing needs of youth (Kirby et al., 2003; Sloper & Lightfoot, 2003)
- Improved program, curriculum and assessment development (Kirby et al., 2003; Mitra, 2009)
- Improved classroom practice through engagement of students in curriculum development and implementation (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2009)
- Increased use of services/programs (Kirby et al., 2003; Sloper & Lightfoot, 2003)
- Increased participatory practice (Kirby et al., 2003)
- Improved staff abilities to meet young people's needs (Kirby et al., 2003)
- Increased program evaluation (Treseder & Crowley, 2001)
- Better information sharing with young people and formalized processes for youth input (Sloper & Lightfoot, 2003; Treseder & Crowley, 2001)

**Impacts on the organization:**

- Improved accuracy and relevancy of decisions and the likelihood that they are implemented (Sinclair, 2004)
- Increased overall efficiency (Zeldin, 2004)
- A culture of inclusion (Treseder & Crowley, 2001)
- Accurate identification of detrimental policies, detrimental school conditions and systemic inequities (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Fine et al., 2007; Mitra 2001)
- Increased influence on policy-makers outside the organization (Treseder & Crowley, 2001)
- Strengthened connections between organizational decision-making and programming (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2000)
- More entrepreneurial, innovative decision-making and organizational openness to change and debate (Zeldin, 2004)
- More focus on diversity, representation, and better outreach and advocacy due to broader insights into youth needs (Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2000)
- Embedded youth involvement principles in the organizational culture (Zeldin et al., 2000)
- Institutionalizing youth input into decision-making processes (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Mitra, 2009)
- Greater clarity in and focus on organizational mission and vision (Zeldin et al., 2000)
- Increased credibility and appeal to funders (Zeldin et al., 2000)
- Enhance whole-school reform design and implementation (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2009)

## Youth engagement activities

In the centre of our framework is the youth engagement activity. Different types of activities are associated with different outcomes (Eccles et al., 2003; Fauth et al., 2007; Larson et al., 2006; Mager & Nowak, 2011; McGuire & Gamble, 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009). Therefore this review focuses on the key qualities that are important across activity types. These qualities are important parts of the picture of engagement and are also related to positive engagement outcomes.

The engagement activity in the framework consists of various objective qualities such as structure, content, intensity and breadth. Involvement in activities that span more than one domain (e.g. curriculum, school environment, community) or breadth of activity and intensity of involvement are associated with more effective Health Promoting Schools initiatives (Stewart-Brown, 2006). This echoes the youth engagement literature, in which intensity and breadth of activity involvement predict successful development (Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2009; Busseri et al., 2006).

These qualities also include how young people experience the engagement activity: enjoyment, meaningfulness, stress, learning, how challenging it is, how good they are at the activity, and diversity of perspectives and experiences (Bourgeois et al., 2009; Lawford et al., 2012; Pancer et al., 2002).

In particular, the literature has identified the importance of youth's perceptions of how much control they have on the activity, and their involvement in decision-making. In a 3-year study conducted by the CEYE and the YMCA about the YMCA Exchanges program, the perception of young people's involvement and influence in planning and decision-making was associated with their experience of the Exchange program (Lawford et al., 2012). In other words, when young people are engaged in activities where they are meaningfully involved in planning and developing the activities, they are more likely to report positive outcomes. In relation to Health Promoting Schools approaches, involvement in decision-making is related strongly to liking school, which in turn are correlated strongly to health behaviours, health perceptions and quality of life (de Roiste et al., 2012; Samdal et al., 1999; Samdal et al., 1998).

An extensive summary of the literature describes the importance of a youth-friendly atmosphere for any youth engaging activities and the key features of positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002):

- *Physical and psychological safety*, including holding programming in locations that are free from violence and unsafe health conditions, and taking the necessary steps to employ practices that reduce the probability of unforeseen threats. This also includes employing practices that encourage and increase healthy and safe interactions and decrease unsafe or confrontational interactions among youth.
- *Caring and supportive environment*, which includes encouragement, having someone believe in you, and demonstrations of caring relationships.

- *Positive Social Norms, with respectful atmosphere and practices*, such as being non-judgmental and inclusive, and having inviting atmosphere and practices. Include high expectations of youth, (and, we might add, adults as well) particularly in terms of expectations and rules of behavior, ways of doing things, and values and morals, based on an expectation that each individual will exhibit their strengths and best efforts most of the time in the right atmosphere.
- *Appropriate structure*, which includes ensuring there are boundaries, expectations, consistency, adult support and oversight as required.
- *Opportunities for skill building and learning*, developing increased competencies, social skills, confidence, self-esteem and fuelling interest and curiosity.
- *Opportunities for belonging and meaningful inclusion* for youth of all sexual orientations, genders, ethnicities, abilities, and peer crowds. This also includes providing young people with opportunities for social inclusion, social engagement, and integration. Moreover, this involves encouraging cultural competence and opportunities for sociocultural identity formation. A sense of connectedness and belonging has also been acknowledged as a critical protective factor in both mental health and school achievement (Blum & Libbey, 2004).
- *Support for efficacy and mattering* including engagement and empowerment practices that encourage young people to be autonomous and make a difference in their communities—to contribute outside of themselves. Further, this involves employing practices that are challenging and require youth to take on responsibilities, as well as those that focus on growth and improvement.
- *Integration of efforts*, which create and draw upon community synergy and provide connection to community and various stakeholders, broadening the breadth of the experience and exposure for the young person and the depth of the program and opportunity.

## Youth engagement in research

Youth are often excluded from the means of knowledge production in similar ways that they are excluded from decision-making, policy development, program development and delivery, etc. Often research is done *on* youth rather than *with* youth. The shift to *with* means engaging youth as researchers, recognizing them as contributors and experts (Fine et al., 2007). As experts of their own experiences, they often have critical knowledge of the systems, contexts and programs they navigate, and are well-positioned to use research to develop successful actions or interventions (Fine et al., 2007; Rosen-Reynoso et al., 2010). Young people, particularly those who are underserved, are vulnerable and are frequently exposed

to systemic injustice, so youth research projects typically focus on studying and addressing issues of intimate or structural violence (Fine et al., 2007).

Engaging youth as co-researchers has many benefits, some of which are listed here:

#### Individual

- Research and communication skills
- Development of critical consciousness (Fine et al., 2007)

#### Social

- Connect to hard-to-reach youth who often have critical knowledge and are most needed to inform the process (Fine et al., 2007; Flicker et al., 2008)
- Shift power dynamics between adults and youth (Cahill, 2007)

#### System

- Effective and relevant actions to address problems and resist injustice (Jacquez et al., 2012; Rosen-Reynoso et al., 2010)
- Creative peer dissemination strategies, increased accessibility and community credibility (Flicker et al., 2008)
- Improved analysis (Flicker et al., 2008)

Participatory methods of inquiry (e.g. Participatory Action Research, Action Research, Participatory Evaluation, Collaborative Inquiry, etc.) engage youth as co-researchers, identifying the issue to study, and collecting data and analyzing data, often with a focus on action or production. However, as with all engagement activities, these may occur along a spectrum of engagement, with youth involvement occurring at different stages or intensities. For example, youth may be involved in analyzing and interpreting existing datasets.

## Sustaining Factors

Sustaining is often more challenging than initiating youth engagement. The sustainers (blue bubble in Figure 1) are the reasons that youth stay involved. At the individual level, these may include reinforced motivators (e.g. beliefs about making a change) and personal characteristics (e.g. dedication). Social and systems level sustainers are critical to positive outcomes (e.g. supportive adult ally, institutional support and resources, etc.). Youth face many barriers to participating, and each young person may have a different barrier(s) that must be overcome to remain engaged.

The Health Promoting Schools approach is sustained and intensive: sustained and intensive school health programmes have been demonstrated to be more effective in changing young people's health or health-related behaviours than short, low intensity interventions (Stewart-Brown, 2006). Although it is the longer-term involvement of youth that is focused on transforming and improving organizations

and institutions (McLellan & Youniss, 2003; Morton, 1995), very few studies examine sustaining factors directly (e.g. Kirschner et al., 2003; Zeldin et al., 2000).

Together, the academic and organizational literature suggests that the following factors are important for sustaining young people's engagement:

Individual level sustaining factors:

- Challenge, a sense of competence (Zeldin, 2004)
- Active construction of knowledge (Zeldin, 2004)
- Salaries/compensation (Borisova, 2005)
- Building personal skills
- Recognition (Jarrett et al., 2005; National Service-Learning Clearing House, 2005; Pancer & Pratt, 1999)

Social level sustaining factors:

- A sense of community and a legitimate chance to change and shape their communities (Zeldin, 2004)
- Building relationships, social aspect, meeting new people (Treseder & Crowley, 2001)

System level sustaining factors:

- Having an impact, contributing to improving conditions for others, and seeing tangible outcomes/changes is key for sustaining engagement (Bell et al., 2008)
- Social and system level supports: e.g. accommodating schedules, meals, transportation, child care, clear vision, informal check-ins, etc.
- Organizational internalization of change through a shared vision of youth participation, opportunities to experiment, reflect and evaluate (Kirby et al., 2003)
- Institutionalization of youth participation (Kirby et al., 2003)

The Youth Leadership Institute has learned lessons about moderating intensity of involvement, and sustaining engagement by (Libby et al., 2005):

- Encouraging young people to be involved in decision-making structures for 2 years and/or long enough to build skills and confidence and see a shift of uneven power dynamics within the membership
- Adjusting timeframes – YLI reduced their grant-making cycles down to one a year in order for young people to engage in more of the program direction and goals
- Balancing training with action – this approach spreads the training throughout the process so that it is in context rather than overwhelming at the beginning

Sustaining youth involvement in organizational decision-making is key; youth involved in more established/sustained forums have more of an impact on policy/decision-makers than specific one-off consultations/initiatives, justifying a shift to sustainable mechanisms (Treseder & Crowley, 2001).



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