



## **A Phenomenological Examination of Context on Adolescent Ownership and Engagement Rationale**

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*Youth ownership and engagement are foundational pieces of the service-learning cycle. Youth voice is posited as a promising practice for building engagement and ownership. As community programs search for proven methods of sustaining youth participation, research that examines the links between practice and outcomes is essential. This study is a phenomenological examination of how adolescents in a non-formal youth development program make meaning of having a voice and its contributions to their ownership and engagement of the program. Findings indicate that an autonomy-supportive environment is a prerequisite for engagement and ownership to develop. Keywords: Youth Voice, Ownership, Engagement, Autonomy-Supportive Environment, Phenomenology*

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Recent research has focused on the importance of retaining youth in high-quality programs as a means of achieving civic engagement outcomes, yet many out-of-school time programs suffer a high turnover rate of youth in their programs. It is becoming increasingly important for researchers to understand the characteristics of successful programs so that they may determine what factors contribute to retention (Little & Lauver, 2005). Why are some programs very successful at engaging youth while others seem to operate a “revolving door” program? While many factors may contribute to successful engagement, youth voice has received increasing scrutiny (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Hart, 1992; Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004; O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

### **Research Problem**

The purpose of this study is to explore the contextual factors surrounding how youth voice is supported in nonformal service-learning youth programs and how its presence or absence affects the ownership and engagement experienced by youth. Witt (2005) broadly defined youth voice as “the perception that one’s opinions are heard and respected by others – particularly adults.”

### **Significance of the Study**

Recent research has focused on the impact of service-learning in the lives of youth. Outcomes range from increased civic engagement (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Morgan & Streb, 2001) to development of life skills (Camino, 2005). While Americans are increasingly disengaged from the democratic process upon which the country was founded, researchers and practitioners alike have worked diligently to turn the tide of apathy by providing youth with the necessary resources for civic engagement (Putnam, 2005; Snell, 2010; Youniss & Hart, 2005). The achievement of the distal outcome of civic engagement points to a need to better understand the proximal outcomes that lead to civic engagement. Two of the proximal outcomes which drive civic engagement are the acquisition of and positive use of voice. This study, while situated in a localized context examining how voice develops through the interaction of youth and adults, has global implications for guiding

adults in both paid and volunteer capacities working with youth in service-learning programs to more effectively support youth voice as a structure for achieving civic engagement. These results would be of use to both the adults working in non-formal youth development settings and to trainers and curriculum developers who support these workers.

### **Youth Voice**

One of the cornerstones of building ownership in service-learning has been youth voice which has become synonymous with the idea of giving youth decision-making power. Witt (personal communication, March 5, 2008) broadly defines youth voice as “the perception that one’s opinions are heard and respected by others – particularly adults.” Mantooth and Hamilton (2004) place the definition of youth voice more explicitly within the realm of service-learning defining it as “listening to and engaging young people throughout the service learning process” (p. 4).

From a psychological theoretical perspective, youth voice is grounded within the need for autonomy, one of three basic needs described by cognitive evaluation theory, a sub-theory of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Cognitive evaluation theory describes social and environmental factors that lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. In its simplest form, intrinsic motivation is conceptualized as a drive to learn because of the joy and challenge that is engendered in the individual, whereas extrinsic motivation involves external forces motivating a person to perform or engage for some external reward or outcome.

The need for autonomy is closely intertwined with the psychological needs for competence (feeling proficient) and relatedness (feeling connected) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy is linked to internal locus of causality, which describes a person’s belief that their actions originate within themselves (deCharms, 1968).

### **Ownership and Engagement**

Youth ownership is often viewed as a cornerstone of the service-learning cycle. Many programs struggle with building youth ownership. This issue is deeply rooted in understanding the meaning of “ownership.” Youth ownership is often described as feeling responsible for or caring about the outcome of something (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Bartko, 2005; Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009).

Autonomy-supportive environments are often seen as a mediator of ownership. They are characterized by high levels of trust and a balance of decision-making power between youth and adults and provide youth the opportunity to choose and to experience higher levels of engagement as they begin to realize that their choices have a positive effect on the future (Anderson-Butcher, 2005; Chirkov, 2009; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Kellett, Forest, Dent, & Ward, 2004; Kirshner et al., 2005; O’Neill & Barton, 2005; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001; Royce, 2004; Valaitis, 2002). Autonomy-supportive adults act as facilitators, providing youth opportunities to determine their own goals and agendas while seeking to support intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 1998; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). The development of an internal locus of causality points to the connection between the proximal development of ownership and the distal outcome of civic engagement.

In a global sense, engagement may be defined as participation in a meaningful service-learning experience (Kirshner et al., 2005). Engagement in formal education has long been defined in terms of behavioral engagement: observable behaviors such as time on task, effort, persistence, and seeking assistance when faced with learning obstacles (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). In the youth development field, and by default in service-learning programs, engagement has the same meaning in that we strive to keep youth behaviorally engaged.

However, the nature of non-formal service-learning programming is that youth choose to participate rather than being mandated to do so. The power to choose supports the idea that engagement encompasses much more than simply the behavioral. Instead, the term “meaningful,” as used in the definition of engagement, alludes to the idea that there is a psychological component to engagement.

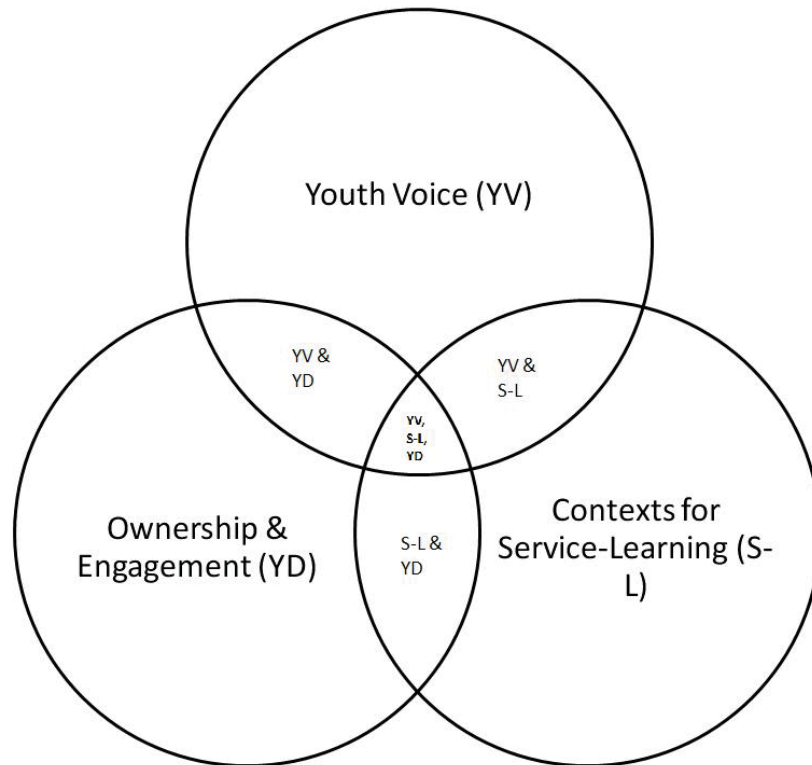
### **The Impact of Environment on Service-Learning Outcomes**

In non-formal settings, students are provided an opportunity from the very beginning of the service-learning process to determine what interests them and what is needed in the community. The center of decision-making power is shifted from adult control to a more even balance of control among adult program leaders, youth participants, and community partners (Cater, Machtmes, & Fox, 2008). Ryan and Deci (2000) observed that providing social contexts that enhance an individual’s feelings of personal endorsement and choice led to more internalization and higher levels of engagement. Essentially, within the particular place of interaction youth who were internally motivated were more engaged.

This focus on context is an important distinction within service-learning research. Much of the service-learning research published to date is comprised of studies of college-age participants while studies of middle and high school age students are set within the classroom in the formal school system. There are few studies of the impact of youth voice in service-learning in non-formal settings. Because so many of the studies are situated within a formal classroom setting, the dynamics of youth voice are different from that of a non-formal setting because of the restraints imposed by the very nature of the academic focus. These restrictions, while not explicitly noted as a limiting factor, are implicitly implied within the literature when the authors detail the parameters for choosing a project. The following example more clearly illustrates these boundaries:

The students can choose to learn the course material by traditional methods (research paper, group presentation, or oral report), or they can choose to give a set amount of out-of-class hours to a chosen community agency. The work that the student performs is always tied in with the academic learning of the course. For example, a student who is taking biology may choose to serve 15 hours during the course of a semester at the City Wetlands Project. The student may be doing water analysis and writing a paper on the learning experience instead of writing a library-based research paper on the topic of water analysis. (Prentice & Garcia, 2000, p. 20)

The choice that is implied in an educational setting is whether the student learns specified academic content by traditional, classroom-centered means or by non-traditional, service-learning participation. This classroom choice differs from the parameters of choice available in a non-formal setting where youth have the opportunity to assess the needs of the community and choose a project, and thus their own content, that is meaningful to both them and the community. Learning objectives are chosen based on the needs of the students and the project rather than having the academic content drive the project parameters. The lack of research on youth voice in a non-formal youth development setting was the determining factor for focusing this research on voice in that environmental context and how the context impacts youth ownership and engagement in the program (see Figure 1). This dearth of studies led to the questions explored in the present study.



*Figure 1.* A model of the intersection of youth voice, ownership and engagement in a youth development context, and service-learning as a context for development.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the role of youth voice in the development of ownership and engagement of youth participating in a service-learning program conducted in a nonformal youth development program. Phenomenology, a research genre that seeks to understand the lived experience of a group of people, provided the lens for understanding youth experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

### **Population and Sample**

Six youth were purposefully selected for the interview process based upon their participation in the meetings and upon their long-term connection with the program. Member participation in the meetings was defined as high intensity involvement, actively taking part in the meetings, freely voicing their thoughts and opinions, and frequently leading discussions in the meeting; medium intensity involvement, speaking up occasionally or offering thoughts and opinions but not leading discussions; and low intensity involvement, not speaking during meetings and seemingly only an observer of the group rather than a participant. Defining the intensity of participation allowed selection of individuals along the continuum of participation from non-participation to active, youth-led participation. This ensured that a wide range of perceptions would be represented in the interviews. Participants were recruited by verbal invitation from the primary researcher.

Another factor in the selection of participants was their long-term connection to the program. This connection was defined by youths' participation in the broader 4-H program beyond the local club. Youth who only attended the club meeting were described as having an overall low level of involvement, while youth who attended club meetings and three or fewer

out-of club 4-H events or activities had a medium level of involvement. Attending club meetings and either participating in three or more out-of-club events or in the parish junior leader club equated to a high level of involvement. This diversity of perspectives based on both breadth and intensity of experience was essential to understanding youths' experiences. Five out of the six interview participants were Caucasian with the remaining participant being African American. Five out of the six participants were female. The solitary male was the only high school senior who was interviewed. Four of the five females were high school juniors with the remaining female being a high school sophomore.

## **Setting**

A northeast Louisiana teen 4-H club was intentionally selected for the study because of their active use of youth voice within the program. The club members chose service-learning as their core purpose because they wanted to do something that would benefit their community.

## **Guiding Interview Questions**

The guiding interview questions were as follows:

- What do you think of 4-H this year?

Probes: How's it going? Are you enjoying yourself? Do you think your attendance is important for your understanding? Why or why not?

- How involved are you in 4-H this year?

Probes: Are you more involved than you were last year? Why or why not? Has anything changed about 4-H this year? What has made this year different? How does this make you feel? How does this make you feel about your club? Do you like it more, less?

- Tell me about the things you are doing in your club this year.

Probes: Who's deciding what you do? Are the club members making decisions or helping to make decisions? Tell me about how this is working? What about the adults, do you think they make too many of the decisions? Do you think the members want to make decisions? How could the adults make it easier for club members to get to make the decisions?

- So do you think that the adults are listening to what you have to say?

Probes: What is it that adults do that let you know that they are listening? Do you think the adults respect your opinions? Other than listening to you, what are other ways that adults show that they respect your opinions? How do you feel about the adults that are part of the 4-H program? How do you think those adults feel about you?

- Do you think the work your club is doing is important? How?

Probes: Do you think the club members want the work of the club to be important? Why or why not? How could you see yourself making this club into one that does important things for your community or just yourselves?

### **Data Collection**

An assent/consent form was signed by both the youth and a parent or legal guardian prior to the youth interviews. At the beginning of each interview, the youth was informed that his or her participation in the interview was not mandatory and that the interview could be terminated at any time during the process. The names of the youth interviewees, as well as youth and adult program participants, were changed to protect their privacy.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed and reviewed by researchers. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a general inductive approach. Using the modified van Kaam method described in Moustakas (1994), relevant expressions from each youth's experience were initially listed.

Horizons were achieved by documenting and listing each expression of information received from each participant (Moustakas, 1994). This horizontalization gave equal value to each phenomenon. Some statements contained multiple insights. Upon further examination, new horizons were revealed each time the data were viewed (Lee & Koro-Ljungberg, 2007). Data were then reduced and eliminated by examining them within the parameters of determining if they were critical to understanding the experience and whether or not it was possible to "abstract and label" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121) the experience. Those which did not meet these conditions were eliminated. The remaining horizons represented the invariant constituents. The next step was to develop clusters and themes among these invariant constituents. The authors worked together to develop a coding frame that was used by the first author to code the transcripts. Similar phenomena were clustered together and a descriptive label was assigned to the group of experiences. Transcripts were read and reread as new themes emerged. These labels, or themes, were confirmed by checking them against the interviewee transcripts and by triangulating with the data analysis of the second and third authors. Individual textural-structural descriptions were developed for each youth interviewee. The structural description provided a vibrant depiction of the fundamental dynamics of the experience drawn within individual textural-structural accounts. Through reflection and rigorous analysis, the overall experiences drawn from the population were developed for the entire group of participants as a whole, including the incorporation of individual textural-structural descriptions into a creation of meanings and themes that account for the feelings and thoughts surrounding the experiences within the study (Lee & Koro-Ljungberg, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). From these individual textural-structural descriptions, the researcher developed a composite textural-structural description of the meanings representing the essences of the phenomenon for the group.

QSR Nvivo software was used during analysis to assist with coding and to connect themes within and across interviews. Rigor and trustworthiness of findings was addressed by the lead researcher transcribing the data immediately following the interviews, through the use of member checks, and by triangulating findings with the researcher observational journal that was kept throughout the research project.

## **Primary Researcher Role and Background**

The lead researcher's role was program facilitator, formal interviewer and participant observer. A list of guiding questions was used to guide participant conversations surrounding their sense of ownership and engagement in the program and to elucidate the development of their relationship with adults in the program.

The lead researcher's background both as a youth educator and a certified classroom teacher contributed to her understanding of adolescent development of voice. One particularly significant experience that shaped her thinking was faced during undergraduate school when she worked at a children's home as a youth mentor/trainer. Her interactions with youth who either did not have family or were no longer living within a birth family environment exposed her to a group of adolescents who expressed feelings of powerlessness and voicelessness. Her later work as a teacher's assistant in adult continuing education computer classes showed her a different type of voicelessness as adults struggled to master concepts that felt completely foreign to them. She obtained teacher certification through a non-traditional educator training program while working as a classroom teacher and taught in a formal school setting for six and one-half years. She worked for more than 10 years as a 4-H youth development educator in a non-formal setting and has for the last 4 years provided leadership to evaluations of the state 4-H youth development program. This researcher acknowledges that these experiences have shaped her thoughts about the abilities of youth to create and implement projects and have impacted her thoughts on the roles that adults traditionally assign to youth.

Two strategies were fundamental to preventing researcher bias in this study. First, the researcher is a member of a youth development research community of practice with whom the study was discussed. This group of colleagues plays a critical role in aiding members both in the design and analysis stages of research by providing a space for discussion and feedback and for surfacing potential biases. The second strategy used by the primary researcher to prevent bias was having reviewers who did not share the same youth development background as the researcher as part of the research team.

## **IRB Procedures**

Research projects which include human subjects are required to undergo review by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board. This group reviews the purpose and procedures for the research proposal to ascertain that participants are not subjected to harm and that measures are taken to protect the participants and their privacy. This study was approved for implementation (#3330) by the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Protection.

## **Ethical Dilemmas**

As a result of the interviews, sensitive information could be revealed to the interviewer. Depending on the nature of the information revealed, the researcher had various courses of action that could be considered. Because the interviewees were youth, there was the possibility that information could be revealed that was pertinent to a child's welfare. In such a case, as a mandatory reporter the researcher was required to report the information to child protection officials in the home parish of the subject and child. In other cases, the interviewee may have revealed information of a personal or embarrassing nature. As per the Statement of Informed Consent, the researcher protected the participant's right to privacy and did not disclose information of an embarrassing or personally damaging nature nor did the researcher use such information when compiling the data for analysis and interpretation. The

responsibility of keeping the interview on-topic rested with the interviewer. It was the researcher's responsibility to direct the interview in such a manner that the person felt comfortable enough to answer the questions but not pressured to reveal information that was not relevant to the purpose of the study.

## **Results**

Following data analysis, three themes emerged from examination of the interviews. These themes included youth's understanding of the autonomy-supportiveness the adults in the program, the meaning they made of their engagement in and ownership of the program, and their perceptions of self and others as advocates, networkers within the program who helped others' voices to be heard. Inter-rater reliability analysis was established by the second and third authors and was at 95%.

### **a. Awareness of Autonomy-Supportiveness of Adults**

A common thread throughout each of the interviews was that youth felt they were respected and that their ideas had taken center stage. Youth supported their understanding of feeling respected by citing that adults listened to their opinions. Jenny reported feeling “. . . like more voices are being heard, you know. And it just . . . it makes me feel more accepted and just that I'm of more importance than just somebody sitting on the seat.”

This sense of being respected was contrasted with previous experiences in the club where youth felt as if their role was passive and their function in the club meeting was to participate in educational programs, not create the programs. Karen said “It's different. We rarely did anything last year because they didn't like really hear our opinions.”

Youth described the leaders' interactions with them as encouraging because they were always challenging them to consider new and different possibilities. One participant noted that the adults' role had noticeably changed: “Y'all really act like a guide or a leader. I mean y'all don't . . . you're not a dictator.”

All of the youth attested to feeling as if they were being heard, both by the adults and their peers. When asked how they knew they were being heard, all of the youth reported that every idea was written down. As one individual noted that “Every idea that we had we wrote down whether it could or could not be done. We didn't evaluate that. We took their [other club members] ideas and then we evaluated them.”

One youth even noted that she read her peers' body language as a sign that they were listening to her, “. . . when I see people's body language, like they're turned towards me. . . Or maybe they disagree with me and then they make “ooh” noises and stuff like that. I feel like I'm getting a response from them.”

Another important indicator that youth felt supported in being autonomous was their descriptions of the adults' role in facilitating their democratic process. One youth described the adults efforts to keep them focused, yet “. . . they're not making the decisions. We did, we took a vote on if they [the members] were satisfied with the events that we're working for. If they weren't then we discussed them.”

Through these accounts youth describe specific observable behaviors, from both adult leaders and peers, which let them know they were respected, their voice was heard, and they held decision-making power.



## **b. Perceptions of Ownership and Engagement**

A feeling of trust in others seemed to undergird youth engagement. One youth shared that members of the club were unsure about making decisions at the beginning of the year. Members were simply following the crowd rather than voicing their own opinions. Yet as the year progressed, he noticed that “more and more people . . . are stepping out of their comfort zones and actually voicing their true opinion rather than following others.”

Youth also spoke of their pride in the work they were doing and the feeling that they were creating something of value to others:

We’re actually doing stuff. We’re not just going to meetings and sitting there reading our little flyer. We’re starting something. We’re getting involved. This is what 4-H does. You know this is our hands part of 4-H. . . Younger children who are in 4-H . . . look up and say “Wow!” This is what 4-H did. It makes them want to get more involved.

Youth also described the importance of being an active participant in the club:

I’m a quiet person. I really didn’t understand why I spoke up. But I do now, because I am passionate about it. And I feel that my role is to make sure that it goes through and to do whatever I can just to see that everything goes through smoothly.

Attendance at the meetings was particularly important. “If you don’t [attend meetings] you miss out on what we did and it may not be enough people there to vote on stuff.” Youth understood that not only their own attendance, but the attendance of their peers, was essential to the functioning of the club: “Without attending the meetings, they [the members] have no clue what’s going on. Without being at the meetings they can’t have their say or their word or their two cents put in to what’s going on in the club. There’s no use to be in 4-H.”

Youth expressed feeling that their work would make a difference to others. “I’m helping change things for the better and stuff. And being more involved in it. It makes me feel like I am somebody. That I can do something. I can really make a change.” Another youth said, “The work that you’re doing actually makes you feel like you can make your world a better place. You can make a change.”

Youth also described feelings of influence in the program. As one female participant stated, “Usually the under-classmen will listen . . . they look up to you [the older students].”

## **c. Recognition of Self and Others as Advocates**

The last theme to emerge was that of youth seeing either themselves or others helping club members’ voices to be heard. “You always have your quiet ones. Like Jana. Jana’s real quiet. I’m usually with her and whatever she says she . . . some people usually tell what they think to me because they know I’ll say it. I have class with Jenny and we’ve learned what some of the others think but they’re not as talkative or something as me. So we all talk about everything. We get to hear their opinions, too. So come next time [at the club meeting] we also mention what they think, too.” Essentially, someone acted as an advocate for another person or group of people. The reasons why youth perceived the need for an advocate varied. One youth observed that she spoke up for more timid members of the 4-H club.

Youth also reported knowing people who were known for speaking up for others in the group. “We have a few prominent people who usually present ideas. Or someone will tap them on the shoulder and say ‘well ask about this.’” This advocacy was important because youth recognized that these ideas would otherwise never be presented.

Their leader, Mrs. Abbot, was also recognized as someone with power who could help their voices to be heard by other members. “We present an idea to her and she uses her power . . . you know kind of takes our ideas and brings it out to the rest.”

Another youth spoke of his role in making sure all of the voices were heard. “There were a lot of times when it was just chaos. Everybody had an opinion . . . and [I would] stand up and just say it, ‘Hey, we know everybody has something different to say. Just take turns.’”

### **Discussion**

The successful integration of youth voice in any service-learning program is heavily dependent upon the climate of that program. Youth make meaning of autonomy support in a variety of ways; however, the youth in this study show much of their meaning-making via observable behavior cues. With regard to this study, the youth understood that they were respected because their opinions were solicited and adults listened. Youth knew that adults were listening because they wrote down their ideas and continued to ask them to share ideas. This highlights the importance of regular discussions between youth and adults which allow for reciprocated feedback, guidance, and opportunities for reflection. Discussion provides a way for both youth and adults to achieve clarity and to bring meaning to the experience. To promote treating youth as an equal partner, adults may require coaching and training to help them understand and appreciate what youth bring to the table (Cater, Machtmes, & Fox, 2008; Fox, Tarifa, & Machtmes, 2008).

An autonomy-supportive environment is a prerequisite for youth being able to have a voice and thus move to the stages of engagement and ownership. This finding is similar to that of youth in autonomy-supportive classrooms (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Trust undergirds this process, and the more trust that youth have in themselves, the adult leaders, and their peers the more willing they are engage in the decision-making process. As youth recognized the importance of their work, attendance and active participation in the program became much more important to them. Yet youth were not only engaged behaviorally. The psychological aspect of engagement came through clearly as they described the difference their work could make to others. The work became very meaningful to them. It is important to design meaningful service-learning experiences with the recipients of service as well as work alongside with service recipients to insure that the service is actually meeting their needs. With indirect service-learning experiences, non-formal educational organizations must pay special attention to helping youth recognize the difference they are making as a result of their service-learning project.

Cited as an important factor to engagement and ownership, youth serve out of a motivation to make a difference in the lives of others. This aligns with other volunteer motivation studies supporting the concept that volunteers donate their time to organizations and causes because of altruistic or humanitarian motives (Brudney, 1993; Clary & Snyder, 1991; Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003; Farrell, Johnston, & Twynam, 1998; Finkelstein, 2007; Penner & Finkelstein, 1998). Given the motive of humanistic value, non-formal educational organizations should promote service-learning projects as an avenue to make a difference in the lives of others.

Youth clearly see the power of adults and recognize that the power is also theirs to wield because the adult gives both voice and legitimacy to their ideas. The idea that youth

understand this power, as well as seeing themselves as people who can help others voices to be heard, raises an intriguing question. How does advocacy fit as a construct of youth voice?

Clearly, in this study youth voice is mediator of ownership and engagement and may most easily be generalized to other non-formal youth serving organizations, particularly in rural communities. As we strive to move our service-learning programs to the next level, weaving youth voice throughout the process, from inception to culmination, should not be just another box that we check. Instead, it should be given the same time, effort, and thoughtful inclusion as the more traditional aspects of the process.

One limitation of this study is the small, rural sample. Future research may seek to discern if differences exist between youth from rural places of residence versus urban residences. Additionally, maturation may serve as a mediator of ownership and engagement. Future studies should compare the responses of 13-15 year olds with 16-18 years to determine what role, if any, age bears among voice, engagement, and ownership.

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