



Youth-led social change: Topics, engagement types, organizational types, strategies, and impacts



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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a framework for evaluating youth-led social change. The framework considers: seven topics (e.g., environment, human health and safety, and education); nine engagement types (e.g., volunteerism, research and innovation, and political engagement); six organizational types (e.g., advisory body, social enterprise, and individual); three strategies (socialization, influence, and power); and three scales of impacts (individual, community/inter-organizational, and national/international). Using this framework, empirical research provides evidence of how youth – defined as young people 15–24 years of age – have been agents of change in Canada over the 35 years from 1978 to 2012. A media content analysis of 264 articles, combined with frequency and chi-square tests, were completed to study the factors and the relationships among them. The results show a strong relationship between the impact and the strategy, topic, engagement type, and organizational type. The results also show a strong relationship between the strategy and the impact, engagement type and organizational type. The findings have implications for youth leaders and those who advocate for, work with, support, and educate them, and for those interested in evaluating social change efforts.

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1. Introduction

In modern futures studies, the perspectives and experiences of different generations are relevant (Gáspár & Laurén, 2013). Youth have been responsible for prompting a variety of social changes that include influencing debates of national importance (Seidman, 2012), leading important health sciences research (Coyne, 2010), and increasing access to post-secondary education (Seguin, 2012). However, despite their input, youth are increasingly disenfranchised from the decision-making process (Apathy is Boring, 2004; DreamNow, n.d.). When youth are engaged, particularly when empowerment and development opportunities are provided, there are multiple benefits for society (Maconachie, 2014; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). For example, knowledge is generated that is accessible to youth, and therefore to society in general (Powers & Tiffany, 2006); and as a result, youth emerge more skilled, better connected and ready to become active, productive members of society

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(Wilson, 2000). While there is a body of literature that considers the impacts of youth leadership/entrepreneurship on young people's development, there is a lack of literature that discusses and evaluates the impact of youth-led social change initiatives on society. What topics, engagement types, organization types, and strategies do young people most often employ? Which approaches are the most effective for achieving a higher scale of impact?

This paper synthesizes the extant literature to develop a framework for evaluating the impact of youth-led social change initiatives on Canadian society. Using this framework, the research identifies how youth – defined as young people 15–24 years of age – have been agents of change in Canada over a 35-year period. By understanding the relationships between topics, engagement types, organization types, strategies and impacts, the empirical research not only validates the utility of the theoretical framework, but also has practical lessons for youth leaders, youth advocates and evaluators. The findings suggest the most effective route youth may take toward achieving their social goals, based on what has been effective in the past, and confirm the impact youth have had.

1.1. *Understanding youth-led engagement*

Defined primarily by the age of young people, there is very little consensus regarding the precise age range of individuals that fall into the category of 'youth'. Suggested ages found scattered throughout the literature range from 10 to 29, and the main factors which appear to determine the age bracket are the context of the society and the domain under which the study occurs. This research study defines the demographic as young people aged 15–24 years, as has been done by others (UNESCO, 2012; Weinstock, Berman, & Cates Jr., 2004).

The concept of youth-led engagement – which can be understood as youth taking responsibility for creating benefits for society and the world – encompasses attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills of individuals and organizations by engaging youth in a specifically directed course of actions, which may occur in any number of types or topics (Lenzi et al., 2012). The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement defines youth engagement as “the meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity, with a focus outside of him or herself” (Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, n.d., p. 1). Youth engagement often occurs when non-youth invite youth to participate in decisions that affect or will affect them directly (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2008). They are involved in exploring solutions, and sometimes can even influence decision making or planning processes (Helferty & Clarke, 2009). This kind of engagement, where youth are invited to participate, is known as youth organizing (Ilkiw, 2010). Youth organizing and youth-led organizing are two separate concepts (Ilkiw, 2010). Youth organizing involves specific strategies that bring youth together for social justice purposes. Alternatively, youth-led organizing (or engagement) is set up by youth and is typically centered on grassroots activities (Ilkiw, 2010). This study is interested in youth-led engagement in Canada.

1.2. *Topics, organization types, and engagement types*

There is no study that specifically discusses the topics youth address, although researchers have presented examples/case studies that demonstrate youth-led engagement in various topics. In summary, topics (with example literature) include: environment (Christensen, Krogman, & Parlee, 2010), human health and safety (Weinstock et al., 2004), human rights and democracy (Jahromi, Crocetti, & Buchanan, 2012), equity, empowerment and social justice (Wilson, 2000), education (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994), science, business, technology and development (Bach, 2009), and culture and religion (Ary, Duncan, & Hops, 1999).

The types of organizations that youth use to engage in social change initiatives include a wide range of options. Youth create informal groups (Helferty, Clarke, & Kouri, 2009), non-profit organizations (Clarke & Dougherty, 2010), for-profit organizations, and social enterprises (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004); and they work through advisory bodies, such as the youth wings of political parties or youth councils (Llewellyn, Cook, & Molina, 2010). In addition, many young people work as an individual instead of creating or joining a group (Helferty & Clarke, 2009).

Youth-led engagement leading to social change can occur in many different ways, and there may be multiple engagement types that address a single topic (Alvord et al., 2004; Ilkiw, 2010; Wilson, 2000). While there is no one list of engagement types, synthesizing the existing literature, the following categories can be created: philanthropy (Canada25, 2005), volunteerism (Wilson, 2000), political engagement (Jenkins, Andonlina, Keeter, & Zakin, 2003), public policy (Gauthier, 2003), economic activity (Alvord et al., 2004), arts (Wilson, 2000), and research and innovation (Sen, 2007).

1.3. *Strategies and impacts*

Gauthier (2003) offers a typology of a young person's degree of involvement that ranges from socialization to influence to power through partnerships. Helferty and Clarke (2009) adapted that typology into a means of considering types of social change tactics led by students. Clarke and Dougherty (2010) consider these same types of social change tactics as strategies that youth in Canada employ. The socialization category is, for the purpose of classifying events in this research, synonymous with awareness-raising, and may include such activities as educational campaigns, promoting the acknowledgment of issues through various means including artistic expression, and other such activities. Influence describes activities in which youth indirectly affect social change, while power classifies activities in which youth directly affect social change themselves (Clarke & Dougherty, 2010).

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