

FieldNotes

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Promoting Youth-Adult Collaboration

Partnerships between youth and adults are increasingly viewed as a valuable strategy for promoting positive youth development. Such collaborations provide young people with practical experiences that reinforce their role as active citizens and contributing members of society. Adults, too, learn how to look at old problems in new ways, gaining renewed energy and insights through youth perspectives.

Working with adults also builds life skills among youth who can strengthen their ability to cooperate, communicate, make decisions, and solve problems. The development of positive relationships with adults, particularly among disadvantaged youth, helps combat feelings of social alienation and exclusion, while building young people's resiliency to negative influences (e.g., substance abuse).

Communities, too, benefit from the active engagement of young people and the strengthening of intergenerational ties. Partnerships between youth and adults build social capital – the essential fabric of community life credited with increasing civic participation and strengthening democracy. Such collaborations help mitigate negative stereotypes of youth as unmotivated, immature, trouble making, or pleasure seeking.

Profiled here are examples of youth-adult collaborations in Chile, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Poland, and Thailand. Each is part of a global youth development initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia. Each demonstrates the mutual benefits of adults and young people working together.

BENEFITS OF YOUTH-ADULT COLLABORATION

- **Developing life skills** – Through collaborating with adults in the community, young people develop and strengthen life skills such as confidence, effective communication, goal setting, decision-making, and cooperation.
- **Strengthening community ties** – Program experiences that engage the wider community prepare youth for the ‘real world’ and strengthen the commitment of community members to young people’s positive development and wellbeing.
- **Promoting positive perceptions of youth** – Adults and the community as a whole benefit from the energy, ideas, and perspectives of youth. Through active engagement in the community, young people are better understood and increasingly valued for their contributions.
- **Building workplace and career skills** – Practical experiences of working with adults (e.g., government officials, business representatives, journalists) help prepare young people for the world of work and build career skills.
- **Addressing community needs** – Young people play valuable roles in addressing community needs through volunteer projects. Working in partnership with adults strengthens that role.
- **Enhancing an organization’s profile** – Programs/ organizations that promote youth-adult collaborations often benefit from a higher profile in the community. Youth serve as positive spokespeople and ambassadors.
- **Improving staff morale** – Organizations that provide employees with opportunities to engage and/or mentor young people benefit from improved staff morale and commitment to the company/organization as a whole.

Youth and Adults in Service to Communities

Volunteering in the community offers young people a range of opportunities to establish positive relationships with adults. In Poland, the Make a Connection program provides the young volunteers it supports with training in how to work with community members, municipal authorities, and other organizations to achieve their goals. Since 2001, the program has supported more than 360 youth-led volunteer projects, involving 10,000 young people and benefiting more than 100,000 community members. Each youth group receives a small grant and technical assistance to carry out its project.

“As part of the training they receive, we show young people how to cooperate and how to find adults who can help them,” says Bartosz Sulek, Program Manager of the Polish Children and Youth Foundation (PCYF), which is implementing the program. PCYF estimates that participating youth groups are able to double the amount of support they receive through the program as a result of financial and/or in-kind contributions they generate in the community.

In the town of Garnek, for example, a youth group set out to create a pottery studio where their peers and younger children could engage in a productive leisure activity. Lacking a space in which to work, they approached a local priest who donated a barn for their use. The father of one group member then offered to provide the electrical wiring needed. Such collaborations benefit the community and set an example of goodwill between youth and adults.



■ In Janderov in the Czech Republic, public officials and a school administrator thank young volunteers in the *Připoj Se* program for their donated stone sculptures.





Several of the youth-led projects in Poland have collaborated with local government authorities. In Makow, for example, a youth group gained a positive reputation by painting dilapidated walls with upbeat graffiti. Based on the group's success, the local government asked members to collaborate with them on the refurbishment of a public square. Another group in Olszyn received assistance from municipal authorities to build a bike path. Such experiences reinforce the notion of youth as contributing members of society and valuable allies in achieving public sector goals.

“ In the past when you talked about life skills training, it was about students and teachers, not parents and community leaders. We connect the whole cycle... We show that life skills are part of a happy and productive life. You use them to connect with others. ”

— Srisak Thaiarry, Executive Director, National Council for Children and Youth Development, Thailand

■ In Poland, a veteran potter collaborates with young volunteers in the Make a Connection program.

In the Czech Republic, the Make a Connection *Připoj Se* program also supports young people in carrying out volunteer projects in their communities and has set a goal of at least 60 percent of its youth-led projects cooperating with local authorities, NGOs, schools, and/or businesses.

In 2006-07, the program exceeded this goal with 92 percent of youth project teams collaborating with NGOs (27%), schools, (21%), businesses (15%), the media (12%), government authorities (11%), and other (14%). Among the benefits of cooperating with adults cited by *Připoj se* participants were obtaining advice, contacts, and material resources for their projects.

Of particular note, according to Mikuláš Pštroš, a university student conducting research on the program, was the percentage of projects that cooperated with government institutions. Given the nation's communist past, such a level of comfort in working with the public sector sends a positive message to Czech civil society

THE CONTINUUM OF ADULT-YOUTH PARTNERSHIPS

The extent of youth-adult partnerships can vary considerably depending on a program's goals and needs, and how young people are perceived within a given cultural context. Below are various levels of collaboration among youth and adults.

- **Adult-centered leadership** – Programs are conceived of and driven by adults.
- **Adult-led collaboration** – Adults provide some guidance for youth; youth have impact in decision-making.
- **Youth-adult partnership** – Youth and adults equally

share in decision-making, and can independently carry out tasks. Emphasis is on shared learning.

- **Youth-led collaboration** – Youth primarily develop ideas and make decisions, while adults offer assistance.
- **Youth-centered leadership** – Programs are exclusively led by youth with little involvement by adults.

that public institutions can be partners, as opposed to enemies, says Pštroš.

Still, not all adult partnerships were considered successful. Barriers, according to the youth, included disinterest on behalf of some adults, miscommunication, and interference.

Involving Parents

For young people to truly integrate life skills into their daily lives, they need to use them in their everyday interactions with parents and community members, emphasizes Srisak Thaiarry, Executive Director of the National Council for Child and Youth Development in Thailand (NCYD). In 2003, NCYD launched the Make a Connection program with the goal of equipping more than 1,800 young people with improved life skills (e.g., confidence, communication, decision-making, respect for others, and leadership).

While life skills were not a new concept in Thailand, NCYD approached the issue in a new way. “In the past when you talked about life skills training, it was about students and teachers, and not about parents and community leaders,” says Thaiarry. “We connect the whole cycle.”

In doing so, NCYD designed the program to include a training module for parents and community members, who then support participating youth in carrying out their service projects. At the end of each program cycle, NCYD hosts intergenerational forums with youth, parents, and community leaders to celebrate successes.

“We show that life skills are part of having a happy and productive life,” says Thaiarry. “You use them to connect with other people.”

Parental involvement in life skills programs can range from informal offers to assist youth participants to more formal training and engagement. In Poland, for example, parents of youth engaged in the Make a Connection program have frequently offered advice to youth or provided facilities or tools for them to carry out their service projects.



■ In the Netherlands, Youth Press Agency participants engage regularly with adults while reporting on local issues and events.

Placing a Premium on Youth Perspectives

In the Netherlands, young participants in the Youth Press Agency (YPA) interact regularly with adults in the community in the process of researching and reporting stories. They also work

closely with professional journalists and media organizations in producing newspaper articles and TV segments. Both sides benefit. Media outlets and their audiences gain youth perspectives on current issues and trends, while youth benefit from hands-

on experience and exposure to the inner workings of a media organization.

In the city of Leeuwarden, for example, the program cooperates with a TV station. Station staff train the youth in interviewing and production skills. Participants then use these skills in producing a 20-minute TV magazine. One of their stories featured an interview with the city's Mayor.

Through researching stories and interviewing community members, young people develop greater self-confidence. “The fact that a regular citizen or a mayor is willing to talk to them and listen to what they have to say is a real eye opener for most participants,” says Malou Durve, Project Manager at Jantje Beton, the national NGO implementing the program. Since 2005, YPA

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— Malou Durve, Project Manager, Jantje Beton, Netherlands

PROMOTING YOUTH-ADULT COLLABORATION: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In exploring ways to strengthen collaboration between youth program participants and the greater community, consider the following:

- *Have you articulated your philosophy and/or guidelines for youth-adult collaboration within your program? Have you clarified the values you seek to promote (e.g., respect for youth perspectives, open and honest communication, and shared decision-making)?*
- *Have you assessed the training needs of youth so they are fully aware of how adults might support their activities and the benefits of such support? Have participants received training in how to communicate effectively with adults and resolve conflicts if necessary?*
- *Depending on the nature and extent of community involvement in program activities, have you assessed the training needs of adults and how they can best support participants? Don't take for granted that an adult understands the right way to engage with a young person. It's not uncommon for adults to behave in a way that is counterproductive to supporting young people and working with them to develop their potential.*
- *How might you effectively engage parents in program activities (e.g., supporting/advising youth carrying out volunteer projects)?*
- *Have you looked at the relevance of your work to local government? How might program participants collaborate with government officials in addressing local needs?*
- *If your program receives corporate support, have you looked at ways of involving company employees? IYF partners have engaged corporate employees in a variety of ways from informal advisors who meet with young people for a day to mentors who develop close relationships with individual program participants.*
- *Have you set up a system for measuring the extent and impact of youth-adult collaborations with your program?*

“ The Nokia staff are not only mentors, but role models. Most come from struggling families themselves and have had to work hard to get to where they are. The commitment they have shown to the program and the students is incredible. ”

— Francis Valverde, Executive Coordinator,
Asociación Chilena Pro Naciones Unidas, Chile

has equipped more than 300 young people with training in journalism and life skills such as effective communication, planning, responsibility, goal setting, and teamwork.

Young people are often uniquely qualified to educate the public about important issues that adult reporters may overlook or are unable to pursue. In Laren, for example, YPA participants sought to counteract negative stereotypes of youth in the community as being either lazy or disruptive. To explore the issue, the young reporters interviewed elderly residents, as well as the city's Mayor. As a result, they were able to communicate a more positive side of the story, and demonstrate — through their actions — young people's eagerness to embrace issues in their community.

Increasingly, adults are approaching Youth Press Agencies in order to tap youth perspectives on important issues. In Amsterdam, for example, Aedes, a national housing organization, asked YPA members to develop a film documenting how youth felt about their homes and living in the Netherlands overall. As a result, four YPA participants produced a film that was shown at an Aedes conference. The youth were invited to talk about their film, answer questions, and offer insights they felt businesses and policy makers should consider in addressing the nation's housing needs.

Engaging Adults as Mentors

In Chile, the *Conéctate* program engages Nokia employees as volunteers, who support young people as they navigate the job market and consider their future career path. Launched in 2005, *Conéctate* provides disadvantaged youth, ages 15 to 29, with life and job skills training, along with internships, mentoring, and job placement assistance. The mentoring initiative was designed by Asociación Chilena Pro Naciones Unidas (ACHNU), the national NGO carrying out the program.

To kick off the initiative, an announcement was sent to Nokia's 67 employees in Chile, inviting interested individuals to attend a brief-

ing session. A total of 12 employees representing a range of professional disciplines — from administrators to engineers to managers — signed up as mentors. Each agreed to mentor two program participants over a six-month period.

The program began with orientation sessions in which employees were introduced to the concept and expectations were clarified. Ground rules were also set stating that the goal of the program was to provide youth with support and encouragement and that mentors should refrain from promising young people jobs or offering them money.

“It has been a very rich experience,” says Nadia Lounis, a Nokia Marketing Assistant and the company’s *Conéctate* Project Coordinator. Lounis mentored two 20-year-old girls. “I gave, but I received a lot too,” she says. Lounis sees her contribution as encouraging the girls to be more realistic about their goals and the steps required to reach them. Both wanted to be photographers but have now reconsidered in favor of more mainstream jobs, while pursuing photography as a hobby.

A big part of what the youth gain is exposure to people outside their regular circle, who may be different, but who have faced similar challenges. Lounis shared with her mentees the challenges she faced in moving from France to Chile. “I asked them what they wanted in their lives and urged them to see the big picture,” she says. “My message is that you have to make an effort to get what you want.”

After her six month mentorship ends, Lounis expects to continue her relationship with the girls. “We’re occupying a space in their lives,” she says. “I can’t just say ‘bye’ at the end.”

Francis Valverde, Executive Coordinator of ACHNU, emphasizes that the Nokia volunteers, in many cases, have much in common with participating youth. “The Nokia staff are not only mentors, but role models,” she says. “Most come from struggling families themselves and have had to work hard to get where they are. The commitment they have shown to the program and the students is incredible.”

LESSONS LEARNED

IYF partners cite the following “lessons learned” in engaging adults and the wider community in life skills development programs for youth:

- *A tension can exist between a program’s desire to have young people undertake activities in the community and adults/parents who question young people’s abilities.* Part of what the Make a Connection program in Poland seeks to do, explains PCYF’s Sulek, is transform adults’ perceptions of what young people are capable of achieving. While the process takes time, it creates an environment where adults are more inclined to support, and collaborate, with youth.
- *Programs need to identify and address the training needs of adults before engaging them as partners in program activities.* Expectations also need to be set concerning what is required of adults who become actively involved in program activities.
- *If engaging company employees as volunteers, it’s important to clarify up front the time commitment required and to assess whether travel schedules and unpredictable work demands can be accommodated.* In Chile, for example, some Nokia mentors were not able to meet regularly with their mentees due to travel responsibilities. ACHNU and Nokia will be addressing this in the mentoring program’s next phase.

Additional Resources

Web Sites:

Advocates for Youth, www.advocatesforyouth.org
 Asociación Chilena Pro Naciones Unidas, <http://www.achnu.cl/en>
 Civil Society Development Foundation, <http://www.nros.cz>
 Jantje Beton, <http://www.jantjebeton.nl>
 Polish Children and Youth Foundation, www.pcyf.org.pl

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