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Overview

The subject of youth and how best to meet their educational, physical, moral, spiritual, social, and health needs never seems to go out of vogue in this country (Wyn & White, 1997). This subject, as a result, has led to the development of a tremendous number of strategies and paradigms that are youth centered, such as youth-led initiatives (Delgado & Staples, 2005). The development of youth-led educational and social interventions necessitates the acquisition of an in-depth understanding of youth and their context, aspirations, assets, needs, concerns, and current and projected social profiles. It also entails adults assuming roles that are nonauthoritative in nature.

If social interventions are to be successful in both the long- and the short-run, then it is necessary for research to be undertaken that systematically and comprehensively answers critical questions about youth's well-being and perceptions of the world around them. This research, however, must address the perspective of youth themselves and actively seek to minimize adult bias throughout the entire process, if the results of the research are to be meaningful to youth (Schensul & Berg, 2004). This type of research, in addition, must not only answer key questions but also serve to create momentum toward achieving some form of social change. Youth-focused research, as a result, cannot be thought of as just "another" form of research. A shift in paradigms,

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controversial as it may be, is in order. This shift places youth in positions of power, as researchers instead of research subjects.

The subject of youth needs and well-being in the United States has rightly received increase attention in the past two decades. Unfortunately, much of this attention has focused on viewing youth as either problems or potential problems for the nation and on the social and economic costs resulting from their irresponsible behavior. Anyone undertaking a project to assess the economic costs of school dropouts, juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and sexual acting out can readily find numerous studies, reports, and statistics on these and other subjects related to risk-taking behaviors of youth (Lakes, 1996; Males, 1996, 1999; Watkins & Iverson, 1998; Ungar, 2002, 2003). A deficit perspective, in essence, has characterized this approach and has helped shape much of the national attention and debate on youth and how best to direct interventions.

Rarely does a week go by without some major news announcement of how youth are "not measuring up" to what we, as adults, expect of them. The pervasiveness of this perspective has cast this nation's youth into a "problem" category, effectively casting a dark cloud over their potential to be productive adult citizens (Lerner, 1995). This deep hole, so to speak, has made it arduous for youth to view themselves in other than a deficit perspective.

Nevertheless, despite this gloomy perspective, there has been increased national and international attention to the search for social paradigms that can best capture youth talents and ensure their importance to the nation's future well-being (Hein, 2003; Lorion & Sokoloff, 2003). This search has resulted in a tremendous amount of excitement and energy for the field of youth services (Fraser & Galinsky, 1997). These paradigms share much in common, and one strong prevailing theme is that they all thrust youth into decision-making roles as either collaborators with adults or as leaders in their own right in the search for a more productive life and a recognition of their capabilities in the process of doing so.

Adults in general, but particularly those in schools and community-based organizations, have historically viewed youth from two primary perspectives as ***objects*** that need to be controlled because youth are incapable of knowing what is best for them, and as ***recipients***, as they are really "adults in waiting" and in need of being socialized and educated accordingly. A third perspective, and one embraced by this book, sees youth as partners with adults. Youth are capable of making

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significant and lasting contributions now and only need opportunities and requisite support to do so. This partnership, as a result, is predicated on mutual respect (Klindera & Menderwald, 2001). Youth-led, youth participation, and youth development, for example, best capture the goals of engaging youth in initiatives that effectively transform not only them but also their community in the process (Chan, Carlson, Trickett, & Earls, 2003; Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003; YouthAction, 1998).

A plethora of youth-led initiatives, as a result, have emerged over the past decade or so to provide a vehicle for youth to excise decision-making powers in crafting initiatives that target their well-being (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002). Any form of community development or capacity enhancement without meaningful engagement of youth is nothing more than the use of smoke and mirrors to bring about significant social change and personal growth (Gamble & Hoff, 2004; Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2004; Midgley & Livermore, 2004). A "business as usual" approach cannot be taken if significant changes are to occur in how we, as a nation, view youth and seek their involvement in crafting solutions to many of their concerns and needs, providing them with opportunities to develop competencies for life in the twenty-first century (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2003; Huber, Frommeyer, Weisenbach, & Sazama, 2003; Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002).

Lakes's (1996) comments capture the hope and positive perspective of current-day youth and set the stage for a youth development paradigm:

> Our precious youth are the next generation to inherit the legacy of economic deindustrializations and community disinvestments begun in the latter decades of the twentieth century. We must start to encourage and facilitate partnerships of young people in sustainable, capacity-building approaches to revitalization of our inner cities. We desperately need their youthful energy and tireless strength, their boundless assets and valuable skills, their special qualifications and talented gifts for the important work ahead. (p. 18)

The emergence of a youth development paradigm is a case in point providing the youth-led movement with a powerful conceptual foundation for designing community- and institutional-based programs.

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This paradigm has certainly caught the attention and imagination of practitioners, social policy makers, and academics, across the country and internationally. More specifically, the last five years have witnessed an unprecedented amount of research and professional literature on this paradigm and the multitude of ways it can be used in youth-focused programs in a wide range of settings (Benson & Pittman, 2001; Delgado, 2002; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Taylor, & Von Eye, 2002; Noam & Miller, 2003; Rauner, 2000; Rhodes, 2002; Villarruel, Perkins, & Keith, 2003).

The field of community practice, too, has witnessed a tremendous surge of attention, further lending itself to incorporate youth development and youth-led research and programmatic efforts (Gambone & Connell, 2004; KIDS Consortium, 2001; MacNair, 1996; Weil, 2004.) Community practice sets the stage for inclusion of numerous intervention paradigms stressing indigenous capacities, participation, and empowerment (Delgado, 1999; Fisher, 2004; P. W. Murphy & Cunningham, 2003).

Nevertheless, there has been at least one significant area that has generally been overlooked in using a youth development paradigm as the basis for including youth in critical community and organizational positions, namely, the field of social research (Kelly, 1993; Matysik, 2000). Well over twenty years ago, I lamented the absence of youth in research roles, and only recently has this movement for inclusion been taken seriously:

> The use of adolescents has too long been neglected in the human service field and must be seriously considered in the future. Participation in needs assessments research exposes youngsters to a broad view of community needs that extend past their immediate circle of contacts, and enables them to develop skills that may benefit them and their community in future years. (Delgado, 1981, p. 613)

The importance of this form of involvement cannot be easily dismissed as anecdotal. Rennekamp (2001), for example, raises the need for involvement of youth in research as a moral imperative for the field and the need for us to advise, strongly suggest, and ultimately insist, that they play influential roles within the research process; the nature and importance of this role is determined by negotiation between the researcher, organization, and community. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster's (2002) observations on the state of youth-led research

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reinforce the need for a book specifically devoted to this subject and signify how the field has significantly progressed in the past several years: "At present, however, youth participation in community evaluation research remains relatively underdeveloped as a field of practice and subject of study. There are increasing initiatives, but they operate in isolation from one another" (p. 27).

The significance of the field is underscored by the increased number of scholarly publications on the topic and the number of presentations at professional conferences (Schensul & Berg, 2004). The importance was so great than an entire 3-day conference on the subject was sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation (Wingspread Symposium on Youth Participation in Community Research, 2002), an entire special issue of a well-respected journal in the field of youth development was devoted to this content (Checkoway & Goodyear, 2003), and a book focused on youth participation and evaluation (Sabo, 2003a, 2003b).

A 1997 conference titled "First Annual Community YouthMapping Conference" typifies what is meant by this upsurge in attention (Community Connections, 1997a). This conference involved youth and adults from sixteen mapping sites throughout the United States. Through the use of panel presentations, small breakout sessions, and informal opportunities for dialogue, participants were able to share success stories and identify common challenges and rewards. The following list of breakout sessions illustrates the potential subject topics for research conferences on youth-led research: Public/Private Governance; Maintenance and Updating Data; Access and dissemination; Curriculum for Schools and Community-Based Organizations; Research Implications and Baseline Data; National and Local Funding Streams; Youth Advisory Network. Youth-led research touches on a wide range of arenas and can serve as a mechanism for empowering youth.

The practice of social research has historically been reserved for the nation's formally educated elite social scientists; this exclusivity is coming under increasing criticism within and outside of academia (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Stoecker, 1997; Tandon, 1988). In quoting Gibbons et al. (1994), Oliver (1995) argues for the democratization of knowledge as a rationale for youth-led research initiatives:

> The transformation of knowledge production is one of the central processes characterising the societies of the advanced, industrialized world. Knowledge production is less and less a self-contained

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> activity. It is neither the science of the universities, or the technology of industry, to use an older classification for illustrative purposes. Knowledge production, not only in its theories and models but also in its methods and techniques, has spread from academia into all those institutions that seek social legitimization through recognisable competence and beyond. . . . The question of who owns knowledge and more specifically, who has the "right" to generate knowledge, has served to democratize information. This perspective has expanded the pool of those who are legitimized to be knowledge creators. (qtd. in Oliver, p. 2)

Information and knowledge is to postindustrial society what labor and capital were to industrial society (Bell, 1974). Consequently, it is not out of the question to consider monopoly of information to be closely related to monopoly of capital. Ultimately, who has the "right" to create knowledge? It has historically been the sole prerogative of professional elite (Comstock & Fox, 1993; Gaventa, 1993). There is tremendous power in being able to control the production of knowledge and information (Merrifield, 1993). Boyer (1990) criticizes the prevailing narrowness of the definition of scholarship as research with the primary goal of creating new knowledge. This form of scholarship effectively dismisses the value of other forms of scholarship such as teaching, application, and integration.

Sohng (1995), in turn, issues a call for the reconceptualization of knowledge production (research) from a detached discovery and empirical verification of generalizable patterns to one of uncovering resistance and struggle, thus creating a social-cultural context for research and the results emanating from this activity. Sohng notes:

> Knowledge exists in our everyday lives. We live our knowledge and constantly transform it through what we do. Knowing is part of our life; it informs our actions. This knowledge does not derive from analysis of data about other human beings but from sharing a life-world together—speaking with one another and exchanging actions against the background of common experience, tradition, history, and culture. . . . It is this engagement and its impact on ways of looking and developing knowledge which is crucial rather than the articulation of a set of techniques that can be mimicked. (p. 6)

Contextualizing knowledge creation outside of customary institutions such as universities serves to empower communities, particularly

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those that have historically been the focus of research that is deficit oriented.

Universities and research institutes have traditionally been the staging grounds, or monopoly, in the preparation of this nation's and other nation's social researchers (Fai-Borda & Rahman, 1991; L. T. Smith, 1999). Learned societies and professional organizations, in turn, have been the places where researchers gather to exchange information and further develop their competencies. Brydon-Miller (1993) recommends that the term *researcher* refer to community and workplace persons as well as those with specialized training. Unlike conventional research approaches, youth-led research stresses the need for research of everyday life and the accounting of reality produced by the actors (subjects), with researchers participating in the everyday life of the subjects of the research (Puuronen, 1993).

Adults have historically and exclusively populated "learned" arenas. Although adults have and will, no doubt, continue to dominate the field of research, youth-focused or otherwise, youth must be incorporated as partners in these endeavors with the ultimate goal of having them assume leadership roles in all facets of this endeavor. Their contributions will bring a perspective that cannot continue to be overlooked by adults and the institutions they control. Having adults give up control over the research process may well represent the ultimate barrier youth will encounter in youth-led research projects or any other youth-led initiative.

Youth-led research, in essence, represents a commitment not only to identify how best to address a particular phenomenon, but also how best to carry out action to address it (M. K. Smith, 2002). If knowledge is considered socially constructed, then youth participation becomes essential in development of a better understanding of youth's perspectives, opinions, needs, and assets (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003). Discovering the underlying causes of a social problem firsthand represents a critical understanding of how best to address its manifestations within a local context and taking into account cultural norms. Youth can use their own terms to help frame the dissemination of the research findings to other youth (M. Weiss, 2003): "Conducting their own research and developing their own analysis not only equipped the young people to support their concerns, but gave them the credibility to come up with solutions" (p. 63).

Research on youth has and will, no doubt, continue to be a legitimate area for scientific inquiry. However, the idea of youth as researchers has only recently been advocated for, and not surprisingly,

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has raised a few eyebrows in the "scientific" community in the process. Inquiry, according to Rappoport (2002), is the engine that drives discovery, growth, and improvement to self and community. Thoughtful and systematic research, in turn, is the universal method that is used to direct purposeful action toward actualizing goals. Youth-led research, as a result, can increase knowledge and achieve positive social goals in the process. Youth has become a vehicle for developing a better understanding of the nature of the goal and the target of this change.

However, as one adult participant in youth-led research commented, organizations that sponsor these types of projects face a series of challenges, adult bias being one that may be deeply rooted and arduous to overcome (Horsch, Little, Smith, Goodyear, & Harris, 2002):

> At the organizational level, they've bought into it . . . just the fact that the young people are coming up with these little tangible suggestions gives it credibility. But the place we run into challenges is funders and more policy-level people who are coming in with [an] academic bias. . . . It's like being admitted to a club, in a way, and to believe that other people [like youth] can do that, when you've gone through ten years of various training might be hard, I think. (p. 6)

Social research in its various manifestations is within the reach of anyone seeking answers to important social questions, including youth. Thus, it is what I consider to be a new frontier in social research since we are only now willing to seriously explore its potential reach within the field. The consequences of these activities, however, go far beyond the confines of a classroom, human service organization, or an academic program.

Having youth play influential decision-making roles in designing and conducting research is democratic and empowering (Fetterman, 2003; Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2001, 2004). An activity that historically has been denied to youth has suddenly and quite dramatically been opened up to them for the first time in a meaningful manner. Youth have a vital stake in the nature of the programs and services that have been established to serve them. Thus, what better way to ensure that these resources have tapped the voices of youth themselves than by having youth seek out, record, and analyze these voices and recommend changes as a result?

Although specifically referring to empowerment evaluation, Fetterman's (2002) comment nevertheless applies also to youth-led

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research: "Empowerment evaluation is fundamentally a democratic process. The entire group—not a single individual, not the external evaluator or an internal manager—is responsible for conducting the evaluation" (p. 2). Youth-led research represents an important conceptual leap in the broadening of a youth development paradigm among other social paradigms in the early part of the twenty-first century. Youth-led research can be expected to continue to increase in significance in the near future, and its evolution will no doubt influence other forms of youth development and youth-led projects.

❖ BOOK GOALS

The five goals for this book are simple in nature but have profound implications for youth, providers, policy makers, and academics:

1. Ground youth-led research within the broader youth development/youth-led movement within the United States and internationally.
2. Provide an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the potential of this type of research for the field of youth development/youth-led.
3. Assist the reader in developing a better understanding of how youth-led research can lead to important organizational and community changes.
4. Explore how service learning as a construct can play a bridging role between schools, community-based organizations, and communities; and explore the role youth-led research can play in achieving this goal.
5. Inspire students at all educational levels to become better-informed consumers of research or even become researchers themselves.

There is no denying that the subject of research, or "having" to take a research course at any level of education, is rarely embraced with enthusiasm by most students, regardless of their age. This lack of positive reaction is probably due to myths about the worth of research in this society and how "boring" or "difficult" research activities can be. They have not learned, unfortunately, that research in its various

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manifestations is very often the first step in achieving significant social change, or that the process of research can be empowering for both the researcher and the community participating in this venture.

All professions are in desperate need of a cadre of researchers who embrace the potential power this method has for informing and transforming society. Research must actively seek to inform change, and such change necessitates the use of many different types of research methods and approaches to answer the questions youth, in our case, believe to be significant in their lives and in the life of their communities. Exposing youth to the benefits and power of research may represent an initial significant step in providing the field of social research with a cadre of well-motivated and informed youth who wish to pursue careers in this field. These youth will be eager learners and will influence not only classroom discussions on the subject but also the scholarly outcomes that follow. Increasing the relevance of research brings with it a higher likelihood of positive social changes.

❖ BOOK OUTLINE

This book consists of four major parts and twelve chapters: Part I: Setting the Context. This part consists of two chapters; Part II: Youth as Researchers: Approaches and Considerations comprises seven chapters; Part III: Field Examples consists of one major chapter highlighting four distinctive youth-led research undertakings; and Part IV: Challenges and Implications for Practice consists of two chapters, one of which is an epilogue.

Part I explains why youth-led research is part of a broader youth-led movement, and why youth are a population group worthy of such a movement. Part II exposes the reader to the theoretical underpinnings of youth-led movements in a variety of spheres and presents ways this subject content can be grounded within practice. Part III outlines for the reader a variety of perspectives, considerations, and steps that must be accomplished to conduct youth-led research. This part makes extensive use of case examples and illustrations. Finally, Part IV exposes the reader to the many rewards, challenges, and questions practitioners and academics will have to face in being part of a youth-led movement.

This book was written with a specific reader in mind: This reader embraces the principles and power of youth participation in decision

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making and recognizes that significant individual change is invariably tied to significant social change. In essence, youth can play important roles in changing their lives and the lives of others. Clearly, the reader who does not embrace this stance will find little value in the material covered in this book. The book should appeal to a wide audience, including those studying and working in fields such as youth development, community psychology, education, and social work. Although I am a social worker by education and experience, I have endeavored to broaden this book's appeal beyond social work. However, the reader will no doubt see social work's influence.

Unlike most conventional books on research methods and data analysis, which invariably find a home in research courses, youth-led research can also be viewed as a method of intervention. Thus, it can be used in research as well as direct intervention classes. Numerous national and international field-based examples have been selected to illustrate the potential of youth-led research across disciplines and geographical boundaries. The book has been conceptualized to supplement a basic graduate-level and upper-level undergraduate textbook specific to children and youth, social research methods, and planning/community development. In addition, I believe the book will be of interest to practitioners and organizations focused on youth services.

❖ OVERVIEW OF YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS

The world's population of youth has steadily increased over the past decade and is projected to continue increasing into the near future, making it a subject of immense importance for all nations, including our own. More specifically, the percentage of youth living in urban areas surpassed 50 percent at the turn of the twenty-first century (Tienda & Wilson, 2000a). National and international demographic changes and trends, as a result, must influence how organizations, foundations, and government view the need for data to develop policies and make program recommendations, considering the potential role youth will play in generating these data. Youth, as a result of rapid social and institutional changes, must increasingly rely on their initiative, creativity, and ability to slowly navigate a "multidimensional labyrinth of choices and demands" (Mortimer & Larson, 2002, pp. 2–3).

Demographics profiles and trends historically have played important roles in helping policy makers, practitioners, and educators

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develop a more thoughtful agenda for research and interventions. The mere mention of demographics, however, generally gets an immediate and adverse reaction from most practitioners/educators, not to mention the general public. However, the mention of youth demographic profiles and trends gets an opposite reaction from this nation's corporations dependent on youth consumers. Why?

The subject of youth as a market for consumer goods is well understood in this country's business sector. The case of mobile telephones illustrates this point. It has been estimated that in the year 2004, there were over 36 million mobile phone users aged 5 to 24 years old in the United States; in 2001, only 32 percent of youths in this age range owned cell phones (W2 Forum, 2002). The subject of youth profiles and demographic trends warrants a brief overview because of its implications for any form of intervention focused on youth in this nation.

Hine's (2000) observations on this demographic trend stresses the profound implications that this society will feel as this age group works its way through all sectors of the country:

> During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States will have the largest number of teenagers in its history, more even than when the baby boomers bought their first blue jeans. The early years of this new century will, in large part, be shaped by this new generation, the largest infusion of youth in the U.S. population in more than four decades. (p. 296)

Fussell (2002) in raising questions about what happens to youth when situated within aging societies, in our case the United States, advocates for an intergenerational contract, one whereby adults invest in youth and youth, in turn, support adults as they age.

A note specifically devoted to painting a sociodemographic profile of youth in the United States helps contextualize the numerical, social, and economic importance of youth in this country. Having an in-depth understanding of who youth are (e.g., knowing their ethnicity, race, age, residence, and economic power, and knowing about projected demographic trends) can help better prepare the reader for the importance of using youth as researchers currently and in the near future (Castex, 1997). Fortunately, recent U.S. Bureau Census data are readily available for use by communities across the United States.

In 1990, there were almost 27 million Americans aged 18 to 24 years old; after a dip in 1995, the young adult population rebounded to

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28.3 million in 2000 and is expected to increase to 30.1 million in 2010 (Kerckhoff, 2002). A study focused on youth (18 years of age and younger) found that in 2000 approximately 70.4 million (26 percent) of the U.S. population was under the age of eighteen (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2002). By 2005, there is expected to be nearly 73 million youth under the age of 18 in this country (Mullahay, Susskind, & Checkoway, 1999). In 2000, youth aged 17 and under numbered 72.4 million, making this cohort rival the size of the baby boomer generation (77.6 million adults) aged 36 to 54 years old (Lopez, 2002). By 2020, it is projected that youth under the age of 17 will account for almost one-quarter of the total population in this country.

The ethnic and racial composition of U.S. youth has also undergone dramatic change during this period. In 1990, 26.1 percent were African American and Latino. In 2000, that proportion increased to 29.7 percent and is projected to represent 33.7 percent in 2010. Thus, if projections are realized, the year 2010 will have the largest cohort of youth of color in the nation's history; this situation carries profound social, economic, and political implications for the nation as a whole, and some states in particular (Cullen & Wright, 2002; Kerckhoff, 2002; Ozer, Macdonald & Irwin, 2002; Youniss & Ruth, 2002).

Special attention, however, has to be paid to how the racial and ethnic composition of youth, particularly those living in urban America, has changed over the past two decades and how it can be expected to change in the near future (D. E. Murphy, 2003). For example, in 2001 over 50 percent of all new births in California were Latino. These Latino babies will constitute the majority of California children entering first grade in 2009 and the majority of those entering high school in 2017 (Jablon, 2003).

❖ YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

A contextual grounding of any phenomenon is usually the first step toward a better understanding and appreciation of that phenomenon and its prominence in community, professional, and academic circles. An understanding of the context that led to the rise of a construct plays an influential role in practice. How can we understand the present and prepare for the future without a solid grasp of the history behind an idea? What is the history of youth-led research and evaluation in the

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United States? Tracing the genesis of any construct or concept is always arduous to determine with any great deal of certainty. Generally, its appearance in the professional literature marks the time when it is officially recognized in professional/academic circles.

However, this "birthday" invariably overlooks the countless number of years when a construct has been in existence but no one bothered to write about it or publish anything about it in scholarly journals. Youth involvement in community research and program evaluation is no exception to this phenomenon. Few students in this country have not participated in some form of school-based research project that has entailed their going out into the community to learn about a specific issue, perspective, or problem (Egan-Robertson & Bloome, 1998; Egan-Robertson & Willett, 1998; Mercado, 1998). Consequently, research efforts of various kinds and in various institutional and community settings have been going on for quite a considerable period without a specific "field" being created to organize and capture these activities.

Sabo (2003a) traces the emergence of youth involvement in evaluation to the convergence of community development, action research, participatory evaluation, and positive youth development. As it has in most international movements, the United Nations has played an influential role in this surge in popularity, with the passage of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This convention served to highlight the importance of children and youth throughout the world and led to an understanding of the common challenges nations face in better preparing this population for eventual roles as contributing adults.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed dramatic developments and advances involving youth in research capacities within this country. The emergence and wide acceptance of a youth development paradigm has played an influential part in this upsurge (Bumbarger & Greenberg, 2002; Roth, 2004). Thus, the popularity of this paradigm bodes well for the future of youth-specific programming. Advocates for youth involvement in research even go so far as to see this movement as an effective means of involving older youth in the youth development field, and developing powerful collaborative partnerships between youth and adults. Keeping older youth actively involved in programming activities has been a perennial challenge for the field, and there have been relatively few ways to accomplish this other than to hire them as staff (Schilling & Martinek, 2000).

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It is not surprising that youth involvement in research and program evaluation has appeared in the field under a variety of labels, such as students-as-researchers, voiced research, peer research, youth-run research, participatory research, participatory action research, empowerment research, emancipatory research, participatory evaluation, collaborative evaluation, discovery research, voiced research, constituency-oriented research and dissemination, action-research (Bowes, 1996; Broad & Saunders, 1998; Hall, 1992; Krogh, 2001; Oliver, 1995; Pennell, Noponen, & Weil, 2004; Smyth, 1999; Stoecker, 1997). All of these labels stress the importance of participation, decision making, and action to one degree or another, regardless of setting (institution or community). Participatory evaluation, for example, is no longer considered out of the mainstream of the evaluation field, with youth participatory evaluation assuming a more central role within the field (Fetterman, 2003).

With notable exceptions, the move toward participatory forms of research has largely been led and influenced by non-university-affiliated sources. This, in large part, is the result of tensions between traditional researchers and the needs of the community (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Whereas those affiliated with the university environment use a more conventional definition of what constitutes "knowledge," those not affiliated with the university tend to emphasize practical outcomes and tie these outcomes directly to the priorities of the community.

These forms of research can be classified as "the specific collection of information that is designed to bring about social change" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 223). Although Bogdan and Biken's definition specifically addresses action research, it nonetheless captures well the primary social intent of any form of research that stresses participation, empowerment, and social change. This form of research does not exist exclusively within an age-specific providence. All of these efforts, however, can be conceptualized as "increasing participation."

However, I believe it is best to consider these efforts as representing a shift in paradigms, blurring the distinction between "researcher" and "research subjects" (Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research, 2003). Research that places participation as a central theme in the process of knowledge generation does not separate research from action and education (Altpeter, Schopler, Galinsky, & Pennell, 1999; Alvarez & Guterriez, 2001). The social change or education that emanates from participatory research results in a "more

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equitable and democratic society" (Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research, 2003).

L. D. Brown and Tandon (1983) advance the stance that social research must focus on how best to serve the lower socioeconomic classes in their struggles against various forms of oppression. Horsch (2002), in a meta-analysis of youth-involved or youth-led research projects, reinforces Brown and Tandon's conclusions:

> The most common motivator for involvement in research and evaluation is the ability to use research and evaluation as a vehicle for change. Some youth are not satisfied with a report to a funder that sits on a shelf; they need to see the results of their work in tangible, immediate, and important ways. This can be either through program changes or the fact that others were willing to listen and consider what youth have to say. (p. 4)

Stringer (1999) specifically addresses four dimensions pertaining to action research within a community context, with equal applicability to youth-led research projects:

1. Participation of all people in the research is one way of ensuring that it is a democratic process.
2. All participants are of equal worth.
3. The experience is liberating by providing freedom from oppressive and debilitating conditions.
4. It enhances the life of participants and enables the expression of an individual's full human potential. (pp. 9–10)

Thus, terms such as *democratic*, *liberating*, *equitable*, and *enhancement* capture Stringer's set of guiding principles for action research and effectively tie the act of research with the act of social change.

Torres's (1998) description of all of the elements addressed in a sixth-grade "celebrations" and "letters home" projects also applies to any adult-led research undertaking:

> The students-as-researchers program was intended to give students authentic writing and learning experiences, a real question to explore, a topic important to their lives, and a real audience to address—an audience invested both in the students and in the student's research. (p. 67)

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It is difficult to imagine any adult researcher who would not love to have a positive experience undertaking research, a burning question to answer that has importance to a wide range of people, and a vested audience that will anxiously await the results of the research.

Any community-based organization or school setting that articulates a vision of reaching youth will benefit from youth-led research and evaluation, regardless of its location and specific mission as an organization. Whether program evaluation and research involving youth-led teams are simple or complex in design depends on goals, funding, setting, and time considerations. This flexibility is one of the many appeals of this form of research. Regardless of study design, data will prove to be rich in results and experiences for both researchers and participants of the research (Alawy, 2001). The greatest compliment that one can give a research project is that the results were meaningful and the experience was meaningful for all of those who participated.

Regardless of the form used to capture this form of activity, having youth play influential and decision-making roles in a research enterprise is premised on the following five beliefs:

1. Youth have abilities that can be tapped in developing and implementing a research project.
2. Youth bring to a research project a unique perspective or voice that cannot but help the process of answering questions about youth.
3. Youth are vital stakeholders in the process and outcome of research.
4. The knowledge and skills youth acquire through active participation in research can transfer over to other aspects of their lives.
5. Youth-led research can help broaden and revitalize an activity that has a reputation as being boring, inconsequential, and of interest only to a small select group of adults.

Youth, however, are not the only constituency that has advocated for youth-involved research. The past few years have witnessed major national reports calling for a more comprehensive and participatory research, laying the conceptual and political foundation for youth-led research (Hatch, Moss, Saran, Presley-Cantrell, & Mallory, 1993; Schulz, Parker, Israel, Becker, & Maciak, 1998). The "Future of Public Health, Healthy People 2000" and "Health Professions Education for the Future:

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Schools in Service to the Nation" are two examples of this national move toward involvement of disenfranchised groups in helping to set priorities for interventions through active and meaningful participation in research (Israel, 2000).

It may surprise the reader to know that a "formalized" role for youth-led research in the professional literature is well over 25 years old. Early references to youth-led community research in the professional literature are Bloom and Padilla (1979), Padilla, Padilla, Morales, Olmedo, and Ramirez (1979), and Perez et al. (1980), all of which describe an innovative peer-interviewer model for conducting inhalant, marijuana, and alcohol abuse surveys among Mexican American youth in California. This research was premised on the belief that youth are in a propitious position to get other youth to answer questions that would not be answered if adults were asking them. Youth-led research, in essence, serves to break down significant social, psychological, economic, and cultural barriers between research respondents and researchers and thrusts youth into a position of power and influence over the outcomes resulting from their research findings.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I developed a series of community needs assessment projects focused on the Latino community of Worcester, Massachusetts (Delgado, 1979, 1981). Unlike the project by Bloom and Padilla (1979) and Perez et al. (1980), this study had Puerto Rican youth conducting surveys of adults in three geographical areas of the city over a three-year period, asking questions from a wide variety of categories such as migration patterns, demographic characteristics, service utilization patterns, perceptions of community needs and resources, sources and amounts of income, future plans to return to Puerto Rico, and language competencies in English and Spanish. During the first year of the project, youth roles were limited to that of interviewers. During the second and third years, however, their roles expanded to trainers, field supervisors, coders, analysts, and writers of the final reports.

Since the 1970s and early 1980s, there have been a number of youth-led research projects reported in professional circles. These efforts occurred across all sectors of the country: in rural and urban locations; in settings such as schools, community-based organizations, and nontraditional places; and among various sociodemographic groups. The movement toward youth-led research has spanned a broad arena that prominently grounds this form of research within a community change and social planning context. The Redwood City,

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California, initiative undertaken by community youth is such an example (Fernandez, 2002). As an after-school project, thirteen middle-school eighth graders conducted a series of need assessments for the purpose of achieving change in how city government provides programs and services for youth.

A number of prominent institutions such as universities and national professional organizations have readily embraced the concept of youth-led or youth-involved research, and this has spurred the movement forward during the early part of this millennium. Harvard University, through its Family Research Project, has undertaken an extensive analysis of fifteen youth programs throughout the country that have youth serving in research roles (Horsch et al., 2002). This analysis will no doubt play a significant role in shaping the field's better understanding of its emerging youth-led activity. Youth Action Research Group, based at the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service, Georgetown University, carries out research projects with youth designing, researching, and analyzing the challenges faced in their neighborhoods.

The San Francisco Department of Children, Youth and Families (2002), for example, on an annual basis recruits, trains, and employs twenty high school–aged youth in research methods for the purposes of evaluating the forty community-based organizations funded to provide youth services. Youth researchers conduct program evaluations and present their findings to professional audiences, conduct community needs assessments, and facilitate community forums to disseminate the results and obtain feedback on programming suggestions. There are also an increasing number of examples in the field where youth and adults serve in collaborative roles in conducting research (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2002; Krasny & Doyle, 2002).

Youth-led research initiatives have also found their way into need-specific and problem-specific arenas such as the disability field (Cook, Cook, Tran, & Tu, 1997; Hartman, DePoy, Francis, & Gilmer, 2000; Morris, 2000). Broad and Saunders (1998), for example, report on a study in Ireland involving youth leaving care (i.e., aging out of foster services) as peer researchers. Ward's (1997) report on a series of innovative strategies for involving children and youth with disabilities in research projects highlights the potential contribution of these youth in shaping strategies to address their needs and issues. Bryant et al. (2000) have used youth to undertake research on tobacco use among

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adolescents in Florida. Schensul, Wiley, Sydlo, and Brase (1999), in turn, have used youth researchers to study HIV/AIDS prevention. There appears to be no youth population subgroup that cannot benefit from youth-led research.

Adjustments will be required to take into account group characteristics and social circumstances. Nevertheless, the potential of youth-led research to better inform researchers, practitioners, and policy makers cannot be easily dismissed. Youth-led research may take on many different forms, goals, and budgets and is destined to continue to increase in prominence. The question is not whether or not youth-led research is applicable, but rather how this form of research can best be modified to take into account local circumstances and goals while including all types of youth.

By no means is youth-led research just a U.S. movement; its significance is too great to be bounded by one nation's geographical borders. Highly industrialized and developing countries alike have undertaken youth-led research within urban and rural settings (Munoz-Laboy, Almeida, Nascimento, & Parker, 2004). For example, the Triumph and Success Peer Research Project in Sheffield, England, uses youth ages 15 to 21 years old as a team, with support from professionals, to conduct surveys of youth for the purposes of developing youth programming (France, 2002). The Centre for Research and Evaluation model involves youth and adults on community research teams and steering committees. The research projects developed a model for involving youth and adults on community research teams and steering committees. The research projects were multifaceted and multimethod and specifically led to program development. Finally, in an El Salvador youth-led (15–21 years old) research project on studying the health risks posed by heavy use of pesticides in a rural community, the young researchers designed questionnaires, conducted pilot tests and interviews, entered and analyzed data, and presented the results to their community (Kato, Zwahlen, & Hubbard, 2002).

These national and international grassroots efforts at developing models for youth-led research have been accomplished with minimal exposure in scholarly journals and books. In many ways, the field of practice has led in this movement, and academics are playing catch-up. Practitioners have a desperate need for one source that will provide them with information on youth-involved research, for example, a book that can both meet the needs of practitioners and also be used in the classroom to prepare future practitioners and researchers.

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❖ DEFINITION AND CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

The importance of a solid conceptual base that can serve as a guide in social interventions should be a welcomed addition to the field. A conceptualization that appeals to practitioners, academics, and—in the case of youth-led research—youth can be quite powerful and unique in the world of theory-driven initiatives. Youth-led research has a strong conceptual base, and practitioners as well as scholars can draw from a wide range of conceptual perspectives. As a result, youth-led research can be operationalized through a variety of avenues such as service learning or contextualized learning. This field also draws on many constructs such as participatory evaluation, empowerment, peer research, and consumer-driven research, to list but four. This propensity to draw on these and other constructs serves to enrich the field but can also prove confusing for academics and practitioners alike, not to mention youth.

London (2002) notes that youth-involved research effectively draws from two broad streams of theory and practice, namely, (1) youth development and (2) research and evaluation, and more specifically participatory dimensions. There are a variety of paradigms that can be used singularly or in combination to set a theoretical foundation for these types of research projects. Thus, academics and practitioners have many theoretical concepts and constructs on which to base their interventions, including ones that are comprehensible to consumers of interventions.

Participation as a central guiding value has achieved a broad base of support across research-driven professional disciplines both within the United States and internationally. Fetterman (2003), for example, popularized the concept of "empowerment evaluation" as a vehicle for using "concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination" (p. 88). Although this is a very simple definition, its implications for participatory processes can be quite profound. Cousins, Donohue, and Bloom (1996) advance the use of collaborative evaluation that stresses meaningful participation on the part of those who are recipients of services. This argument opens the door for youth involvement in research. Harley, Stebnicki, and Rollins (2000) draw a close association between participatory evaluation and community-asset mapping. Evaluation results create a process of self-discovery and competency enhancement in a community, such that both individuals and the entire community benefit.

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Berg, Owens, and Schensul (2002) developed the participatory action research" (PAR) model and defined it as

> an empowerment and inquiry model that teaches young people how to identify the components of a social problem that they and their peers experience, collect information about the problem using a variety of social and cognitive skills, and apply the results using both short- and long-term action plans. (p. 21)

PAR follows a long historical tradition of participatory initiatives and activities (e.g., participatory planning, management, and decision–making), which appeal to a broader audience than just researchers (Brase, Pacheco, & Berg, 2004; Schensul, Berg, Schensul, & Sydio, 2004). (This model is discussed further in Chapter 9.)

Interestingly, youth-led initiatives, too, are not a recent phenomenon. The literature on youth-led initiatives can be traced to 1970, when they were a response to various national movements pertaining to social and economic justice. Community as a context, target, and vehicle for youth-led initiatives, in turn, opens up avenues for youth to undertake projects that have great relevance to them and their communities. In circumstances where these initiatives are developed out of a school-based curriculum, the potential for inclusion of academic subjects is increased. When initiatives are community based, there is a tremendous amount of variability and they can easily encompass arenas such as media, environment, violence, and health.

As I explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, youth-led initiatives can take many different shapes and, as a result, can fall into a variety of categories such as advocacy, planning, program development, policy development, community organizing, social enterprises, civic and political interests, and research (Davidoff, 1965; Harte, 1997; Hester, 1984).

Knopf (1970), for example, in one of the earliest known references to youth-led initiatives, describes and analyzes youth community crime patrol as a youth-led planning project. In the early 1990s, a number of youth-led patrols by Nation of Islam youth received national attention and recognition ("Farrakhan Praises Gang Members," 1993; "Nation of Islam," 1991; "Prop-agandists or Saviors?" 1994). Fletcher (2002), in turn, focuses on school settings and describes students as planners, researchers, instructors, evaluators, and advocates. There really are no settings that cannot meaningfully involve youth.

However, regardless of youth-led initiative type, there are a number of significant similarities between projects:

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1. Youth are in decision-making roles.
2. Adults are present but their role is dictated by youth.
3. Goals are multifaceted.
4. Planning techniques are always stressed.
5. Projects either explicitly or implicitly embrace positive social change outcomes.
6. Learning is never lost sight of throughout the duration of a project.
7. Although projects address serious issues and concerns, having fun is still an integral part of the experience.

It should also be noted that youth-led initiatives can be of varying duration, for example, fixed or open-ended and ongoing.

Youth-led research initiatives are often founded on a fundamental premise that connects and empowers youth to identify issues, challenges, and common goals for purposeful change. This central purpose is well captured by the Youth Research Institute of San Diego State University (National Latino Research Center, 2002):

> The main premise underlying this program is that affected youth can be utilized to assess the barriers that keep them and their peers from completing school and that research can be a mechanism that can be utilized by youth to better assess their needs and concerns. (p. 1)

Planning within youth-led initiatives has generally been viewed as a multistage process that can consist of three to five stages, depending on which framework the practitioner uses. At a minimum, the process must consist of development, implementation, and evaluation of a plan. Youth have played more active and meaningful roles in the first two stages and unfortunately have generally been totally absent from the evaluation stage (Rennekamp, 2001).

> Historically, adults have taken the lead in deciding what programs are needed and how they should be conducted. Recently, however, there has been a widespread infusion of youth representation onto various planning boards, councils, and committees. This infusion of young people has begun to result in programs which more

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> accurately respond to the needs of youth. But in many cases, the number of youth invited to be a part of these planning groups has been insufficient to affect the overall design of the resulting program. One or two young people serving on a council or board with a couple dozen adults often does more harm than good. (p. 1)

Phillips, Stacey, and Milner (2001) have defined the term *peer researcher* as a young person who has assumed the specific role of researcher in youth-related projects of significance to this age group. Practitioners and scholars may well argue that the evaluation stage of a plan has generally not been well regarded in the field of practice. One of the major reasons for this slight might have to do with the almost total absence of staff-consumer input into evaluation. Evaluation invariably represents a top-down effort with participation on the part of staff and consumers being relegated to answering questions rather than shaping the effort. Any effort to involve youth in evaluation will in all likelihood increase the relevance of this stage in the planning process. The lack of consumer-led evaluation in general, regardless of the age of the consumer, has effectively slowed progress of youth-led evaluation although efforts are prominently underway to rectify this situation.

Definitions of participation offered by Cousins et al. (1996), Fetterman (2001, 2002), and Berg et al. (2002) highlight the goals and processes of research as both a method of inquiry and a means for empowering and enhancing the competencies of youth. Berg et al. (2002) make specific reference to community-based research, while the other authors make reference to program evaluation.

Nevertheless, research has potential for transforming youth and communities far beyond the discovery of knowledge. It is an activity that can be effectively used for self-discovery and self-actualization, regardless of the sociodemographic characteristics of the persons undertaking the research. This presents a dramatic departure from the traditional view of research, which is that of a boring activity undertaken by individuals who typically are not the kind of people we normally encounter in our daily lives, and with virtually no, or minimal, relevance to those being studied. Research, in effect, is closely tied to social change, thus increasing its relevance for day-to-day life.

Youth-led research, however, is not an activity that can easily exist without a supportive organizational infrastructure, culture, and knowledge of community, and therefore it is no different than any

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other youth-led activity (Youth in Focus, 2002). In essence, organizations and institutions require a necessary infrastructure to support young people and the adults collaborating with them, facilitating engagement in meaningful and long-term partnerships that benefit youth and also providing youth with clear roles, opportunities, and paths for engagement with other members of the community.

Organizations and communities, as a result, must not conceptualize youth-led research as an activity or project that is a one-time effort and can be resurrected as needed at some future date without serious consequences to the endeavor. Youth-led research is arduous to establish and maintain under the best of circumstances. Consequently, youth-led research must be thought of as an ongoing organization and community activity, just like other important activities such as fundraising and grant development. Once conceptualized in this manner, appropriate attention and resources can be allocated to it, and staff can be hired, who have expertise in youth-led initiatives rather than just expertise in working with youth. Job descriptions, in turn, are developed and staff evaluated on items related to youth-led research.

❖ CONCLUSION

This introductory chapter provided the reader with an overview of the subject matter as well as a road map for the book. In addition to these goals, key concepts and terms were defined to ground the reader and facilitate the reading of this book. I hope that the reader is as excited about this book as I am. Youth have unlimited energy, imagination, talents and are major stakeholders in programs addressing their needs. However, the fields of youth development and youth services are in desperate need for a more in-depth book on the subject of youth-led research. I hope that this book will play an influential role in helping to shape this emerging area of practice; I hope the book will appeal to youth, practitioners, policy makers, and academics, alike. Innovations taking place in youth-led research have captured the attention of a wide audience and bode well for the future of social research.

Youth-led research represents an expansion of the youth-led movement within both nationally and internationally. Like any movement involving youth in responsible decision-making positions, there is no telling how far they can go in helping to shape the future of research, whether the research is focused on youth or adults. Research

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as an area of practice is extremely important, and the systematic involvement of youth in this endeavor will aid to further energize this field. Youth, however, cannot simply decide to undertake research without active and meaningful support from adults within institutions and the community. Adults, too, play influential roles in the youth-led movement overall but particularly in the realm of research.

The following chapters systematically ground youth-led research within a broader conceptualization of youth-led initiatives. In so doing, the reader will develop an understanding and appreciation of the complexity of any youth-led initiative and, in particular, one focusing on research. I hope that the reader develops an appreciation for how the world of youth has expanded and will continue to expand, touching on multitude arenas in the field of education and youth-focused services. No nation can expect to progress without investing in its youth. Youth are capital, and as capital, they can wield prodigious influence in how communities, institutions, and nations navigate their way through the uncertainties that the 21st century has in store for the world.

It is fitting to end this introductory chapter with a quote. Yourniss and Ruth (2002) have eloquently stated the charge before adults in this century, and I cannot think of any youth-led field where this statement is more applicable than in youth-led research:

> Each generation of youth has an obligation to inspect society and move forward as best it can given the historical conditions that arise. In this regard, youth must remake history every generation. It is our complementary obligation as the older generation, then, to provide youth the resources that they will need in this task. While we cannot predict the future, we surely know how to help youth meet and confront it successfully. That is our choice and opportunity. (p. 268)

Youth-led research is the approach that can be used to study society and move it forward in a progressive manner. Youth-led research also can serve as a methodological approach for bridging disciplines in search of comprehensive strategies for improving the lives of youth, particularly those who are marginalized in this society and find themselves without a "legitimate" voice in helping to shape their destinies.