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# Youth participation in public policy at the municipal level

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## Abstract

Young people should participate in public policy at the municipal level. But because mass media, social science, and professional practice tend to emphasize the deficiencies and disengagement of young people, there is need for more knowledge of their resources and roles as active participants in the policy process. This paper examines the San Francisco Youth Commission as an example of youth participation, including its origins, objectives, activities, facilitating and limiting forces, multilevel effects, and lessons learned from empirically-based practice. The authors—a university professor, commission director, and youth leader—argue that more knowledge of youth participation as a subject of study will contribute to its growth as a field of practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Young people should participate in public policy at the municipal level. They should identify policy issues that concern them, organize for political action, and build support for program implementation. They should know about “democracy” as a process in which

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they can engage; “policy” as a way to achieve their goals; and the “municipality” as a vehicle for their action.

They should participate because it draws upon their expertise and improves institutional decisions of municipalities of which they are members. It increases their community involvement at a time when its levels are uneven, and strengthens democratic society based upon the “rule of the people.” It prepares them for their roles as citizens, and enables them to exercise their rights in accordance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

There is need for more knowledge of youth participation in public policy, but the literature about young people tends to emphasize their deficiencies and disengagement rather than their resources and roles as citizens. If there were more knowledge of youth participation in public policy as a subject of study—including empirically-based case studies—it would contribute to its growth as a field of practice.

This paper describes the San Francisco Youth Commission as an example of youth participation in public policy at the municipal level. In a city with a tradition of activism, seventeen youth commissioners formulate policy and participate in politics. Their efforts are noteworthy, and a great deal can be learned from them.

## **2. Perspectives on participation**

Youth participation in public policy is a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes efforts by young people to take initiative and organize around policy issues that concern them, by adults to involve them in policy proceedings of public agencies, and by youth and adults to work together in intergenerational policy partnerships (Checkoway, 1998).

As expressions of participation, young people have mobilized for civil rights at the national level; for educational reform and youth services at the state level; and for affordable housing and environmental justice at the local level (Branch, 1998; Moses & Cobb, 2001; Ross & Coleman, 2000). In our evaluation of *Lifting New Voices*, for example, we document exemplary efforts of young people in low-income communities of color to organize groups for political action on a wide range of issues, with special emphasis on schools and school conditions (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Checkoway, & Richards-Schuster, et al., 2003).

Studies show that such efforts can affect the social development of young people by strengthening their knowledge, practical skills, social values, civic competencies. They can prepare youth for their roles as citizens and engage them in the renewal of civil society, which is especially important at a time when some measures of civic participation are decreasing (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001; Hart, 1997; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Johnson, Ivan-Smith, Gordon, Primmer, & Scott, 1998; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Quinn, 1995; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Such efforts express the view of “youth as resources,” which contrasts with news media portrayals of youth as “victims of poverty” and “problems in society;” social science studies of youth as “alienated from community” and “withdrawn from participation;” and professionals’ focus on youth deficiencies and services. When adults view young people

as “troubled and troubling,” and youth accept these adult conceptions, this weakens rather than strengthens the roles of young people (Finn, 2001; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Irby, 1999; Kurth-Schai, 1988; Pittman & Fleming, 1991). When adults allocate resources to policies that focus on deficits rather than assets of young people, it further institutionalizes this view into programs that perpetuate the phenomena that young people have potential to change (Dryfoos, 1990; Dryfoos & Dryfoos, 1998; Nixon, 1997).

Municipalities are strategically situated as units of practice for youth participation in public policy. Like other institutional units, they provide mechanisms for policy analysis, goal setting, decision making, organizational development, and program implementation. In addition, they offer geographic proximity and other characteristics which are especially relevant for young people because of their age.

Municipalities which promote youth participation have received relatively little attention as a subject of study, although this is starting to change. The *National League of Cities* (2002) makes the case for participation and describes approaches to youth service, youth mapping, youth summits, and youth councils and American cities. Mullahey, Susskind, and Checkoway (1999) provide brief examples of youth participation in community planning, including San Francisco, Seattle and Salt Lake City.

Also, Johnson et al. (1998) provide microscale studies of methods in the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Central and North America. Chawla (2002) and Driskell (2002) examine how to increase involvement in “growing up in cities” of Argentina, Australia, India, Italy, Norway, Poland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Despite growing interest in this subject, however, the literature remains small in comparison to studies of “troubled and troubling” youth.

More knowledge of youth participation in municipal policy as a subject of study will contribute to its quality as a field of practice. We surmise that municipalities employ a variety of strategies, that participation has effects at multiple levels, and that outcomes are influenced by forces that facilitate or limit them. However, we are unaware of any systematic research, and believe that more knowledge of participation will strengthen its practice.

### **3. Establishing the commission**

San Francisco has a diverse population and strong tradition of community activism and youth advocacy. Young people participate actively and employ diverse strategies to take initiative and accomplish their goals. Advocacy groups such as Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth—which campaigned for the landmark Children’s Amendment which assures funding for children in the municipal budget—is only one of many groups (Coleman Advocates, 2001; Harder & Community Research, 2000).

The San Francisco Bay Area has the densest concentration of community-based youth initiatives in the nation. Young people and adult allies participate in numerous activities, fueled by funding from sympathetic public agencies and private foundations. Such support has given rise to part- and full-time staff who make youth participation their careers, and to information networks and intermediary organizations that build capacity (Cervone, 2002; Martinez, 2000).

The San Francisco Youth Commission was conceived when youth advocates approached elected officials with the idea, and mounted a community campaign. Specifically, a group led by Coleman Advocates worked with a member of the Board of Supervisors to introduce legislation, which was initially voted down by the supervisors. Advocates, in partnership with the elected officials, then proposed a ballot initiative which won support from the electorate (Brodkin, 1995; Lewis, 1997).

The Charter established the Youth Commission under the jurisdiction of the Board of Supervisors “to advise the Mayor and Board of Supervisors on issues relating to children and youth.” It specifies that the commissioners advise “on the effects of legislative policies, needs, assessments, priorities, programs, and budgets concerning children and youth.” Before the supervisors take final action on relevant matters, they consult with the commission (City of San Francisco, 1995).

Seventeen commissioners between the ages of 12 and 23 years serve for at least 1 year. Each supervisor appoints one commissioner, and the mayor appoints one commissioner and five additional commissioners to assure representation of ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Commissioners select a chairperson who facilitates meetings, government affairs officer who handles legislation, operations officer who oversees administration, community affairs officer who coordinates community outreach, and media and public relations officer who works with the media. They form committees which focus on youth justice, public health, recreation, housing and homelessness, and education (San Francisco Youth Commission, 2001a,b).

Commissioners meet in formal City Hall chambers where they operate according to preconceived agendas and rules of order. However, they also might start by going around and reporting on their weekend activities, and take occasional breaks for pizza or birthday cake before returning to work.

Three full-time staff members manage operations of the commission from an office in City Hall. They manage recruitment, selection, orientation, and training, with sessions on city government, political power analysis, and community mobilization. They have formulated a mission statement which expresses their purpose:

We work to ensure active youth participation in city government; develop the leadership skills of young people; build a stronger youth movement through collaborating with community members and organizations; create a safe space in which supportive, honest, and respectful relationships among commissioners and staff thrive; and share insight and history in order to provide the best possible commissioner experience in the present and in the future (San Francisco Youth Commission, 2001a,b).

#### **4. Policy-making activities**

Youth commissioners react to matters that are referred to them by the mayor, supervisors, and department heads. For example, they respond to the mayor and supervisors about proposals for juvenile justice, crime prevention, and recreational activities. The commission

also can play a proactive role by advising on issues which are not addressed by policy-makers. For example, they have advised the mayor to appoint a youth representative to the Health Commission, pushed the Board of Supervisors to expand transitional housing for foster youth, and requested that traffic officials add crosswalk lights in front of a local high school (San Francisco Youth Commission, 1998, 2002).

Although the commissioners' initial role was largely reactive, it was not long before they took initiative and identified issues through youth-led public forums and town hall meetings. In 2001, for example, they conducted the city's first youth-led forum on youth homelessness, and produced a report with policy recommendations on transitional housing; domestic violence; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth services (Valdez, 2001). They conducted a forum on education issues, and prepared a report on ineffective curricula, inadequate materials, and unsafe facilities (San Francisco Youth Commission, 2001a,b). They conducted youth budget hearings for young people to testify on service needs and funding allocations.

They collaborated with the mayor to co-sponsor conferences for discussions of drugs, alcohol abuse, HIV/AIDS, juvenile justice, and other issues; and emphasize youth-initiated projects, youth on boards, and neighborhood-based youth councils, and other approaches for the mayor's youth plan (Moore, 1997; Sullivan, 1999). One co-sponsored conference attracted more than 1300 youth and adults and provided direct input into the mayor's five-year plan for children and youth.

Commissioners have formed task forces that address issues and propose recommendations. After they joined the Human Rights Commission in holding a hearing and preparing a report, for example, the Board of Supervisors created the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Queer Youth Task Force. Task force members helped establish shelters for homeless youth and queer youth, and produced legislation requiring that city employees receive sensitivity training to create a safer environment for the youth (Dang, 1997; Lewis, 1999; Tuller, 1996).

The commissioners advocate policy positions through face-to-face meetings with elected officials and agency administrators, and also through large gatherings and public demonstrations. In San Francisco, they have co-sponsored an annual day for youth and adult advocates to meet with city officials. In Sacramento, they have sponsored an annual day to lobby on issues such as gun violence and affordable housing.

The commissioners encourage young people to vote in elections, and conduct elections of their own as a way to influence policy. For example, they have co-sponsored Youth Vote, whose survey of high schoolers informs their positions on issues. In 2001, more than 8000 students from 17 high schools voted on their policy priorities, and this helped set the commission's policy goals for the subsequent year.

## **5. Policy issues**

The San Francisco Charter states that the youth commission will "examine existing social, economic, educational, and recreational programs for children and youth," but does not limit the issues they can choose. As a result, commissioners sometimes ask "what relates to children and youth?" or "what can we as commissioners discuss?" and, when

they do, they are asking fundamental questions about their roles as youth in the policy process or as citizens in a democratic society. There is no one role for young people in public policy, and no single answer to questions like these. However, one approach to an answer is by identifying some of the actual issues they have addressed already.

### *5.1. Phoenix high school*

When youth commissioners discovered that Phoenix High School, a county–community high school of the San Francisco Unified School District, was housed in trailers and holding half-day sessions, they conducted a Town Hall meeting with students and teachers which publicized the problem. In response, school officials held their own sessions to which commissioners were invited.

Youth commissioners investigated various alternatives, and identified an available building for a new school site. By taking direct action, they increased public awareness and gained substantial support, but school officials were slow to respond with action. Nonetheless, they politicized a problem and turned this into a policy issue which remains unresolved, but became public because of them.

### *5.2. Police in schools*

When the Board of Supervisors were considering reauthorization of a grant to place police in schools and police patrols around buildings, many students expressed concern about police presence on school grounds. In response to their concern, youth commissioners held a public hearing at City Hall to hear from the community.

Coincidentally, shortly before the hearing, a fight between students at a local high school resulted in a police riot in which several students were attacked by police and taken to the hospital. This occurrence provided a visible example of what police presence might cause in the schools.

The commission hearing attracted an overflow crowd and produced testimony for and against police presence. Commissioners reacted to a controversial issue whose constituencies were divided and whose change was opposed by school and police officials. Young people voiced their opinions, but police presence in schools remains. While the issue is unresolved at this writing, youth commissioners continue to play an important role in helping to shape policies related to police presence. For example, youth commissioners recently were asked by the San Francisco Police Commission to provide input on a new agreement between police and school officials.

### *5.3. Skate boarding task force*

Young skateboarders approached youth commissioners about the lack of accessible skateboard facilities and the city's punitive skateboarding laws. In response, commissioners scheduled a public hearing on the issue. Skateboarders gathered in force and expressed their positions. Commissioners invited agency administrators to the hearing, questioned the adult authorities, and gave youth participants a sense that they might have real influence.

Following the hearing, youth commissioners passed a resolution urging the Board of Supervisors to create a Skate Boarding Task Force to take action on the issue, and today the facility is included in city development plans. In so doing, commissioners responded to a community need, increased public participation, and influenced institutional decisions.

#### *5.4. Turning point academy*

The San Francisco Charter specifies that 12 days before a Board of Supervisors vote on legislation affecting children or youth, commissioners will receive notice and submit recommendations. In 2000, however, commissioners received a resolution from supervisors only a few days before they would vote on whether to send youth to a new state bootcamp proposed by the Governor.

Youth commissioners took immediate action. In an overnight session, they investigated the proposal, and found that the facility would lack drug treatment, family counseling, and other rehabilitation services. The state's legislative analyst argued against support of the proposal partly because of its high costs and low chances of success.

The commissioners contacted the media and campaigned against the proposal. The supervisors gave it further study, concurred with the commissioners, and became the only municipality in the state to reject the idea. Commissioners continued to campaign against the bootcamp, which soon was closed for good (Allison, 2003).

#### *5.5. Budget advocacy*

The San Francisco Charter specifies that the youth commission will advise the Mayor and Board of Supervisors on the impacts of legislative budgets on children and youth, but does not proscribe a specific structure for this role.

Initially, the commissioners asked city departments to present their budgets in ways which would enable them to study the numbers, consult with the community, and respond in a timely manner. Supervisors would then "add back" amounts for favored projects, and enable commissioners to propose additional amounts for youth-related programs.

Over time, the commissioners have become more proactive in the budgetary process. They have learned to evaluate programs in terms of their effectiveness, and discuss alternatives for improvement and change. Their role has grown to where they have time at supervisors meeting to present their own priorities, supervisors view commissioners as policy players, and treat their input with respect.

The roles of the youth commissioners are changing. From an initial role in reaction to the mayor and supervisors, they are becoming more proactive. They have campaigned against a gubernatorial proposal and convinced the supervisors to see it their way. They have taken a constituency concern, involved stakeholders in identifying alternatives, and sought funds for program implementation. They have become a presence in the budgetary process, where they may influence the allocation of funds for needed services. They have been successful in some efforts and



unsuccessful in others, but are increasing in their involvement in the policy process, and the institutionalization of their role affords an opportunity to address issues over time.

## **6. Effects on commissioners**

The San Francisco Charter established the youth commission to participate in public policy at the municipal level. However, because this is a new role for young people, there is reason to expect that the experience would affect its primary participants themselves. We observe the following effects on selected commissioners:

- Marlene was a homeless youth from an abusive family who came to San Francisco on her own. She joined the commission with special concern for domestic violence and homelessness, and served as an officer and eventually as chair. After three terms, she participated in a mayoral campaign, completed college, and went to graduate school in public policy at an Ivy League institution in the East. The commission strengthened her personal development, engaged her in politics, and caused her “to dedicate my life to public service.”
- Henry was failing the eighth grade but searching for a way to excel and express himself politically when he joined the commission. In 5 years as a commissioner, he has developed in-depth knowledge of issues, argued his points with public officials, and become a familiar face in city politics. He has literally grown up in City Hall, but finds it difficult to balance politics with school work and social life, both of which have been affected by his roles. He describes himself as “intellectually better but mentally worse” as a result of his experience.
- Angelo was raised in a working-class Latino household making bad grades in high school when he joined the commission and served two terms, eventually as chairperson. He focused on youth homelessness as a policy issue, improved his grades in school, and became the first in his family to attend college, where he also works in national politics. The commission enabled him to gain in self-confidence and commit himself to a public service career.
- Lorraine had a poor attendance record in a high school in a low-income neighborhood where her teachers encouraged her to participate in the commission. At first she was quiet and reserved, and then became more outspoken and opinionated on issues, including foreign policy in Latin America.
- Tanya was a neighborhood activist who combined community organizing and neighborhood advocacy on the commission. During three terms, she identified issues responsive to her neighborhood, reached out to constituency groups, and built a political base for a future run for elective office.
- Maureen lived in an upper-class suburb, but attended private school in the city and wanted to work with marginalized groups in a socially and culturally diverse city. Her experience enabled her to develop new personal relationships and strengthen her social justice commitments, before leaving California to enroll in an Ivy League university in the East.



Our observation is that membership on the commission has powerful personal effects. It enabled a homeless youth to address homelessness and commit to a public service career. It provided marginal students with new knowledge and skills, and motivated them to attend college. It provided organizational and community experiences that are unavailable in the school curriculum. It offered opportunities for youth to develop new relationships and collaborate across class and cultural boundaries.

Membership also causes difficulties for a few commissioners who struggle with conflicted roles in policy and those in their school and social life. There have been commissioners who were so engaged that they lacked time for their school classmates and so politicized that they were distanced from both peers and adults, despite substantial support given by staff members.

## **7. Lessons learned**

One case is insufficient to draw general conclusions, but it is possible to make the following observations nonetheless.

### *7.1. Young people can participate in public policy*

Young commissioners can participate in public policy. They can identify issues that concern them, advise public officials on legislative policies, and propose new ones of their own. Their participation is not token, but real “public work” in which they can have influence. In contrast with media images of youth as disengaged from democracy, youth commissioners are active participants at the municipal level.

There is nothing particularly profound about this observation, for young people have participated in policy for years, although not normally in directive roles or at the municipal level. At a time when their participation is uneven, or when they are characterized as problems by the media and professionals. It is not insignificant to find that there are youth who are competent citizens and community builders, and the present study is based on the belief that their documentation can contribute to their practice.

### *7.2. Youth leaders are instrumental to youth participation*

The youth commission works partly because young people step forward and play leadership roles. Commission leaders are diverse in their income and educational levels, their social and cultural characteristics, and their personal and political orientations. Together they share commitment to the purpose, and demonstrate a wide range of leadership abilities. Staff members and adult allies assist them, but cannot substitute for what youth leaders themselves bring to their roles.

However, youth leadership also can change over time. Indeed, leadership can run high in new initiatives created by intense community campaigns, then weaken (or strengthen) when its leaders move on. In youth groups, young leaders can “age out” and become replaced by others whose spirit differs from their predecessors. Thus, sustainability of leadership is an ongoing organizational challenge, especially in groups like these.

### *7.3. Adult allies support youth commissioners in their efforts*

Youth commissioners are not alone in their involvement, but have adults as allies. These include adult advocates who launched the commission and remain committed to its purposes; public officials who appoint them to their positions and allocate funds for their operations; and agency administrators who provide needed information and address the issues they raise.

In addition, there are parents and teachers who assist in various ways, from driving them to meetings and excusing them from class to offering career guidance and writing college recommendations. Most commissioners can name at least one older person who serves as a strong source of support.

### *7.4. Staff members provide formal and informal support*

The San Francisco Charter specifies that the youth commission will have permanent staff, and the supervisors allocate funds for this purpose. The belief is that youth participation in public policy is a municipal priority that requires paid professional staff, who are among the first of their kind.

Staff members manage the operations of the commission and support its ongoing projects. Together they play “formal roles,” such as orientation and training, assisting committees and task groups; and “informal roles,” such as providing them with reassurance and helping them to express their own power. They play roles in “identifying, nurturing, educating, encouraging, counseling, advising, and inspiring young leaders,” and give them something they are searching for but unable to find elsewhere (Stoneman, 1988, p. 21).

### *7.5. Youth advocates and youth commissioners have mutually beneficial relationships*

Youth advocates and advocacy groups conceived the youth commission, approached elected officials with the idea, and campaigned for a permanent presence in City Hall. They understood that their efforts to represent youth would benefit from having an institutional mechanism “inside the system,” and that efforts by youth commissioners would benefit from having advocacy groups “outside the system.” Youth commissioners and advocacy groups thus play mutually reinforcing roles which contribute to their common cause.

Too often “youth advocacy” is constructed as a process in which adults represent the interests of youth without any mechanisms of accountability by young people themselves. In the present case, advocacy groups are community-based, and collaborate with youth commissioners who are accountable for their actions at the municipal level.

### *7.6. Chartering the commission and making it permanent affects the scope and quality of participation*

The San Francisco Youth Commission is not a one-time event, but an established institution approved by the voters and written into the city’s charter. As approved by the

voters, the charter specifies its purpose, duties, membership, meetings, compensation, and staffing. Chartering the commission gives it authority which it might not have otherwise, and making it permanent enables participants to build institutional capacity over the long haul. If the commissioners are inconclusive on a controversial issue, they can take it up at a subsequent session.

#### *7.7. Youth commissioners are inseparable from their community context and external environment*

The youth commission operates in a community which has a strong tradition of youth advocacy and youth-led organizing. Public agencies and private foundations support a wide range of initiatives, and young people organize programs of their own choosing, with or without adult assistance. Intermediary organizations and support networks build capacity through training and technical assistance, with emphasis on communities of color.

Community leaders conceive of the area as a “youth movement” and strategize its future with this in mind. For example, [Taj James \(2002\)](#) of Movement Strategy Center has formulated a Bay Area Map which depicts an “organizational youth movement” with grassroots groups, community-based organizations, youth advocacy coalitions, and communications networks. The youth commission is a distinct group whose efforts emerge in a youth-friendly environment which contributes to the scope and quality of participation.

#### *7.8. Youth participation in public policy has effects at multiple levels*

Youth commissioners have increasing influence in public policy at the municipal level. They participate actively in public proceedings and persuade public officials to allocate resources for programs. They convene meetings with school officials and challenge them to remove police presence from schools. They participate in the municipal budgetary process and negotiate with agency heads for new facilities and services responsive to their constituencies.

These efforts contribute to their political development. Whereas most municipal policy are dominated by adults, youth commissioners review policies proposed by public officials, set priorities through town hall meetings, and advocate their interests through face-to-face meetings with public officials. Through actions like these, they learn how to organize for political action in an arena dominated by adults.

These efforts strengthen their social development. Youth commissioners gain substantive knowledge of the community, practical skills in political advocacy and community organizing, and civic competencies for civil society. These experiences affect their personal and interpersonal abilities, their connectedness with others, and their confidence in building support for what they deem important. These also affect their subsequent employment and education, including the case of a homeless youth and a privileged youth for whom the commission became a meeting point that might not have existed otherwise, and that became something of an equalizer after which these two different individuals both headed for Ivy League universities in the East ([Wagner, 1998](#)).

These effects are not evenly shared by all youth commissioners, but they are there nonetheless. As the commission's director concludes:

For many commissioners we become a second home with a social support system unlike at home or school. They develop relationships with people who are different from them in class, race, and age, and who they would never have known otherwise. They learn what it's like to be homeless from someone who is homeless and their same age. I have seen young people begin with little or no policy, advocacy, or government experience. Sometimes they start out intimidated and confused about their role in the commission and community. They want to "do something" and create change, but are uncertain of their ability. It's amazing to watch the transformation occur, especially when it happens over three or four years. We get to see them grow into their roles as active and engaged citizens. They gain knowledge, confidence, sense of control, and a feeling of power over their lives in the community.

## **8. Conclusion**

San Francisco's youth commissioners participate actively in public policy at the municipal level. They react to policies and propose ones of their own; advocate policy positions through face-to-face meetings and large-scale public gatherings; and organize for social and political action.

Their efforts have effects on the young people who participate, on the institutions and agencies with which they work, and on the community in which they are located. They are affected by youth leadership, staff support, adult advocates, the charter authority, and the community context and external environment. Their city has a tradition of activism, its youth commissioners join that tradition in new and emergent roles, and a great deal can be learned from them.

San Francisco is not a normal city, and one case is not enough to draw general conclusions about the phenomena of which it is part. On the contrary, we expect that most municipalities focus on the problems rather than on the resources of young people, consider them as passive recipients of services rather than active participants in public policy, and employ participation methods which permit their presence without empowering them.

However, we find no systematic research which substantiates these expectations in the aggregate, and recognize for studies which address even the most basic questions. Which participation methods do municipalities employ? What are their effects at multiple levels? What are the forces which facilitate or limit the scope and quality of practice? More knowledge of participation as a subject of study will contribute to its growth as a field of practice.

Young people should participate in public policy at the municipal level, and it is time to recognize them as competent citizens and community builders. We believe that studies like these can contribute to their efforts, and that democracy will be stronger as a result.

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