

Youth as Active Agents of Social Change

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More often than not youth are simply consulted through focus groups, interviews, and surveys as a means to establish programs to reduce youth violence. In some cases, academics base their violence reduction programs on theory, past research, and so-called best practices. Both approaches suffer from what is best described as adult-centric. In contrast, three traditions of youthwork derive their power and validity by shifting the role of adults to collaborators and the role of youth from passive recipients to active leaders. What will be argued here is that without the active participation of youth and families in the development, operation, and ownership of programs designed to create prosocial and peaceful climates, social change efforts will devolve toward the paternalistic and fail to create the kind of transformative functions social change programs are meant to create. Brief stories will illustrate how each of the three complementary traditions dramatically embrace the power of youth as agents of social change.

First, the ever expanding and influential movement of positive youth development will be highlighted. This approach represents an important paradigm shift from the provision of services to the creation of opportunities, to a focus on strengths and interests rather than remediation as a means to address deficits, and a shift from a problem-focused approach to problem solving approach.

Second, the practical implications of a human rights informed approach, based largely on the articles enumerated and elaborated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, will be highlighted. Two principles in particular will be discussed: the best interests of the child and the requirement that youth actively participate in their education.

Finally, principles and practices derived from multiple traditions of community organizing will be discussed in terms of the role youth can play in organizing their peers and communities to create communities of respect and dignity.