

“We just want to play”: Adolescents Speak about Their Access to Public Parks

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Abstract

The discussion of play typically focuses on the activities of and benefits for young children while the perspectives and positive implications of play for adolescents are overlooked. During the participatory action research project, Youth Voices for Change, young people noted that, other than when they were participating in a team activity, they felt unwelcome in their neighborhood parks. Their attempts to use the swing set were denounced by parents and sitting around talking with friends drew suspicion from neighbors. The teenagers also lamented their ability to “just be a kid.” This paper discusses these views and what the youth did to impact change in local park design and citywide recreation policies. A public policy brief, in the form of a comic book, was developed and shared with city officials. This activism led to the youth being invited to participate in a park redesign and the city’s recreation master plan update.

Keywords: participatory action research, youth development, affordances, public policy, recreation

The importance of play for healthy child development is well established in the literature, but limited attention has been given to the role of play in the development of adolescents. For many adolescents, opportunities to participate in unstructured and unsupervised play are slim and are frequently discouraged. Contrary to recognizing a need for adolescent play, high school students "goofing around" after school are perceived as being unproductive or even destructive (Owens, 2002). The value of interacting with friends, challenging themselves to new ideas and new skills, and managing their own time is typically overlooked, and misunderstood, by adults. A few writers have highlighted this oversight (Conklin, 2015; Mehta, 2014) and this paper seeks to contribute to that discussion.

The research discussed here, Youth Voices for Change (YVC), was part of the multi-disciplinary, multi-year project, Healthy Youth Healthy Regions and was funded by the Sierra Health Foundation and the California Wellness Foundation. The overarching goal of Healthy Youth Healthy Regions was to examine the connections between improvements in youth well-being and regional prosperity (University of California Center for Regional Change, 2017). The YVC component of the research, the subject of this paper, focused on how the physical environment and activities can either support or hinder healthy adolescent development (Owens, LaRochelle, Nelson, & Montgomery-Block, 2011). We sought to: 1) gather, document and address youth perspectives on the conditions of their lives; 2) engage youth in creating and sharing their own knowledge about these conditions; 3) promote youth involvement in civic discussions and decisions throughout the region; and 4) experiment with and promote the use of digital media in order to strengthen social media capital among the participating youth. This paper examines our findings as they relate to the existing opportunities for youth to play, their desire to play, and actions undertaken to increase those opportunities.

Youth Voices for Change

Our Approach

As defined by MacDonald (2012), we utilized participatory action research (PAR) in order to allow the youth an opportunity to examine their collective situation so that it could be changed or improved. We embraced the principles described by others (e.g., Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2008; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007) to conduct research that would share the power with our research partners, benefit the community, and connect the participants to wider social and environmental changes. This approach also creates a foundation for the participants for future civic engagement and illustrates to others the benefits of comprehensive involvement of youth.

Our Partners

Youth Partners

To access and uplift diverse voices, the PAR team specifically sought to include youth who are often marginalized. We also looked for an established youth-serving organization that had the interest and capacity to engage with the project for an extended period of time. The investment in finding this existing organization came

with multiple benefits including built-in recruitment, willing and skilled community leaders, community knowledge, and an avenue to building trust with the youth.

Our youth partners were the Sactown Heroes, a group formed as part of the West Sacramento Youth Resource Coalition (WSYRC). Seventeen Heroes participated in the project, 15 of whom were male, and they ranged in age from 11 to 19 years old. The youth self-identified with multiple ethnic and cultural groups: seven African-American, seven white, six Native American, three Latino, two Portuguese, one Chicano, and one Pacific Islander.

Community Youth Leader

Our key adult community partner was a young African-American woman who was a member of WSYRC. She was also employed by CommuniCare, a federally qualified health center, located in the community. She recruited youth to participate in the WSYRC and YVC through her contacts at CommuniCare. Often these were children of adults obtaining services at the health center. She had a prior relationship with many of the parents/guardians, and therefore they had a high level of comfort with their children participating in the project.

University Partners

A landscape architecture faculty member with experience in community engagement processes and youth environments headed the PAR team. University partners also included a faculty affiliate with expertise in participatory documentary projects and media production, and two graduate students.

The Context and the Community

This project was based in West Sacramento, California. West Sacramento was incorporated as a city in 1987 and has a population of approximately 55,000. It is a fast-growing community with new residential, commercial, and recreational areas as well as long-established neighborhoods. The community has a history of cultural diversity. The current population is over 30 percent Hispanic and 11 percent Asian. The current median household income is approximately \$57,000, which is comparable to nearby communities.

What We Did

YVC took place over a 10-month period during 2009 and 2010 and included three distinct components. The first activity was a series of weekly research workshops, the second was a week-long Spring Fling (which occurred after the third weekly workshop), and the third included production-focused work sessions. Some activities, such as photography and video projects, were conducted throughout the project.

Weekly Workshops

We conducted a series of 12 workshops. Nine of these workshops typically lasted 1.5 hours and were held immediately after school at the local teen center. Three of the workshops lasted three hours each and were held at the City Hall community room. Prior to the workshops the university partners developed the meeting activities with the intention of spurring youth ideas and ownership of the meeting

agendas. The first meetings included exercises to help everyone get to know one another as well as to build foundational agreements and a shared understanding of the research. Later meetings focused on identifying and collecting individual stories through media. Youth were encouraged to take photographs between workshops and were each given a digital camera for that purpose. The last meetings focused on creating ways to share their stories.

Spring Fling

The Spring Fling was held during the youth partners' school spring break. The team met from 9am to 3pm for four days. Days 1 and 3 were held in the community and days 2 and 4 were held at the university campus. The youth and their parents saw the Spring Fling as a positive way to spend their spring break. The main objectives for the week were to gather photographic and video data while learning more about the technology and the art of photography. In addition, this was an opportunity to introduce the youth to the university campus environment.

During the community-based days, the team conducted fieldwork. The youth partners identified places for the team to visit, developed narration for their tours, and then led the site visits. Afterwards, the team wrote about their experiences and shared what they had learned. Later one youth partner commented that his "favorite part of the project was probably during spring break when we did the picture taking around the whole city."

The university-based days were focused on uploading the photographs and videos taken the previous days to a shared online storage site. The team viewed each other's images, selected some for discussion, and tagged the images based on themes the youth had identified. The community youth leader noted, "It was helpful that youth were put into pairs and had a laptop to work with. Accessibility to equipment was key. It gave youth an opportunity to be hands on, take ownership and begin to tie what was on their camera to the project." In addition, each of these days included visits to other places on campus.

Production Sessions

Along with the weekly workshops and the Spring Fling, we held several other task-specific production sessions. We held multiple sessions to focus on developing a web-based map, a project exhibit and idea exchange, and a comic book. The map documented the places that youth partners identified as their favorite, least favorite, and places they would like to see changed. Photos and videos were linked on the map to their actual locations (Youth Voices for Change, n.d.). The project exhibit and idea exchange was held at the conclusion of the weekly workshops. The youth determined what information they wanted to share with others and with whom they wanted to share it. The production session also included planning and testing the logistics of the meeting. Lastly, several sessions were held to produce the comic book. Much like the web-based map, this publication presented the places the youth had photographed, but it also included their recommendations. Each of these products is described and discussed in more detail in the actions taken section below.

What We Learned

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on three findings that relate to the role of parks and play in the lives of these young people. Our conclusions are drawn from photographs and videos produced by the youth, discussions about these images, and youth-led visits to these places.

Feelings of Exclusion

Our youth partners repeatedly commented that they did not feel like they were welcome in the local parks. They offered stories about being questioned by adults about why they were in the park and what they were doing—even during daytime hours, after school, and when they were just sitting on a bench. The youth said that they felt like they had to be part of an organized sports team in order to be perceived by others as a legitimate park user.

In addition, the youth noted that the local parks did not have facilities that were designed for their age group. They perceived that the design of the parks excluded them. They commented that every park has playgrounds for younger children and benches for adults, but that their activities were confined to the ball fields used by the organized teams. Some youth pointed out that a limited number of adolescents, particularly boys, did use the basketball courts and the local skatepark, but that these facilities only served a small portion of their age group.

Just Want to Be a Kid

During one of our youth-led tours, we visited one of the larger community parks. This park matched the description the youth had provided of expansive grass areas for sports and a children's playground. While standing around the play structure, the youth began to talk about how they still liked to swing and to climb on the equipment, but that when they try to do that, they are asked by adults to leave. They expressed their frustration and stated that sometimes they "just wanted to be a kid and play."

The attempts by the youth to use the equipment not designed for them increased the negativity toward them by adults. The youth would squeeze into swings designed for toddlers or develop creative uses for other components of the structure (Figure 1). These uses were all interpreted as a misuse of the equipment by adults and seen as another reason the adolescents should not be at the park.

Figure 1. A youth research partner demonstrating an adaptive use of a toddler swing



Important Places and Activities

Although the feeling of exclusion was common, our youth partners identified many things that they do for fun. They described three main types of recreational pursuits: 1) participating in youth-focused programs and classes, 2) visiting commercial locations, and 3) using outdoor facilities.

Along with participating in youth-serving programs such as the Sactown Heroes, many of the youth participated in programs such as dancing that were clearly aligned with their recreational interests. In addition, the youth valued the community youth center for its indoor recreation opportunities. This facility is centrally located, has a supportive adult staff, and provides excellent and plentiful snacks. It was the site for our weekly workshops.

Our youth research partners, like many others, found recreational opportunities in commercial settings. These ranged from obvious and common activities such as spending time with their friends at fast food restaurants and coffee shops to more creative use of businesses such as playing hide-and-seek at the local Ikea or Target stores. The youth talked about the important role of the adults in their use of these

places. They were more likely to spend time at those businesses where the owners or managers were more welcoming.

Although our youth partners often felt unwelcome at parks, these places were still important to them. They looked to these places as locations to meet with their friends, to relax, to have fun, and to spend time with family. In particular, the local river was a place the young people would spend time with their siblings and other family members. The youth did not always agree on which places they liked or did not. For example, some youth liked to spend time at the local skateboard park while others were concerned about drug use at the park and their safety.

Actions Taken by Youth Voices for Change

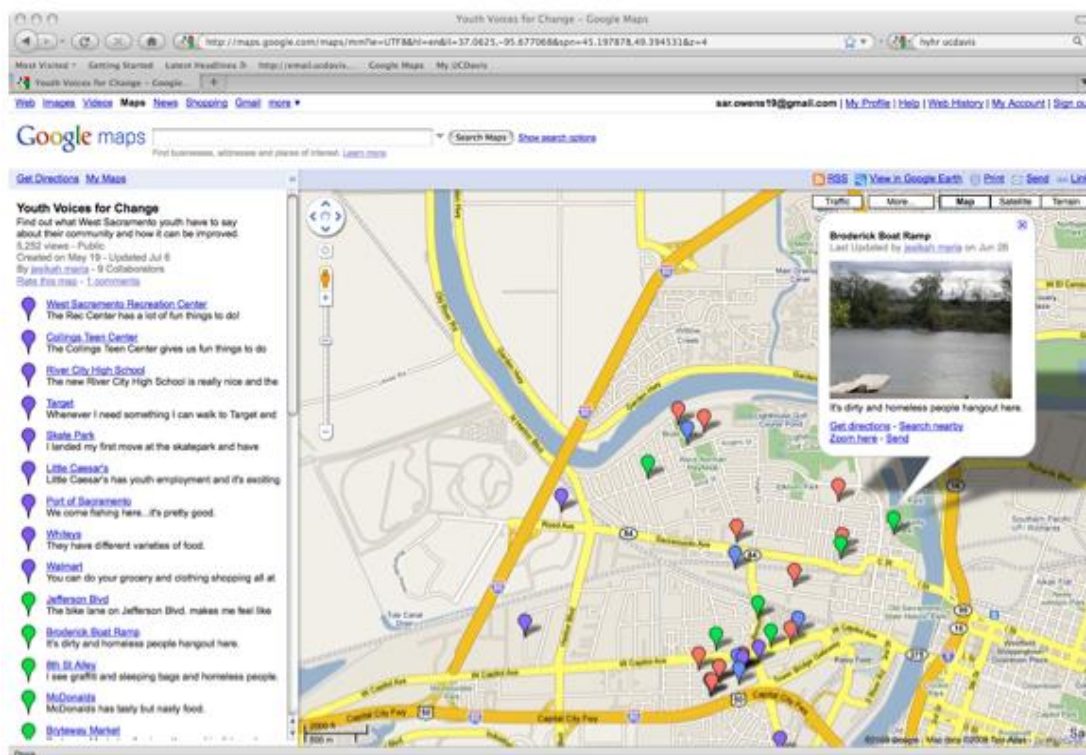
The Youth Voices for Change effort focused on actions that would advance the stories of the youth and influence changes in their community. As noted previously, several products of this effort were developed with these intentions. A web-based public map, a public exhibit and idea exchange, and a comic book all contributed to sharing the young people's impressions, knowledge, and desires. Those activities as well as the implications of this project on youth development more generally are discussed in the following sections.

Web-Based Public Map

The mechanism the team used to share their stories with the community and to allow other youth to contribute their own stories was a web-based map (Youth Voices for Change, n.d.). After months of photographing places, producing videos, and discussing how their community supported or hindered their healthy development, the team posted their stories to the Youth Voices for Change map (see Figure 2). In an effort to inform the community and other youth about this map, the map was unveiled at a public event, it was included on the UC Davis Art of Regional Change website (http://artofregionalchange.ucdavis.edu/?page_id=38), and a Sacramento region youth media event was held to encourage other youth to document their stories.

While efforts to get other youth to contribute to the map were less successful, the media event had very positive results. The initial Regional Youth Media Forum was held in May 2010 in collaboration with multiple community partners. These partners included local news organizations that have since taken over the ownership of this annual event. The original goals of the event were to showcase and support a regional effort for youth-led community change through social media, to establish a regional network of youth and adults to create this advocacy tool, and to connect youth-identified issues to regional equity research (Owens et al., 2011). These goals are still evident in what has become an annual event (e.g., AccessLocalTV, 2016; 2018). The impacts of the online mapping activity on increasing the opportunities of youth for engaging in play are indirect. Instead, the mapping effort has led to a more comprehensive opportunity for youth throughout the region to examine and express their opinions about a wide range of issues.

Figure 2. The Youth Voices for Change web-based map



Project Exhibit and Idea Exchange

The culmination of the first six months of this effort was a "Project Exhibit and Idea Exchange" (Figure 3). This event was held in the local city hall, was widely advertised, and well attended. Attendees included the mayor, city council members, police officers, school board members, and, of course, parents. The event was designed and hosted by the youth partners and included stations to view their photographs, videos, and maps, as well as a video-recording area for attendees to tell their stories.

Figure 3. Project Exhibit and Idea Exchange



While attendees accepted the majority of the information shared by the youth as insightful and valid, some adults were concerned that certain youth perceptions were unflattering and inaccurate. For example, images showing that a local community garden was unkempt and youth concerns about this lack of care were met with resistance by those adults involved in the garden. However, this opposition actually resulted in a building of support for the youth and their opinions. Other adults noted that the youth opinions were valid and reflected what some others in the community also thought.

This event had the impact of raising the visibility of this research effort, and in particular the youth voice, in the community. The public officials in attendance witnessed first-hand the time, thought, and positive actions in which the young people were engaged. The event elevated the involvement and influence the youth had on local discussions. For example, a city youth commission had been in discussion, but this event and the associated activities contributed to the creation of this commission.

Comic Book

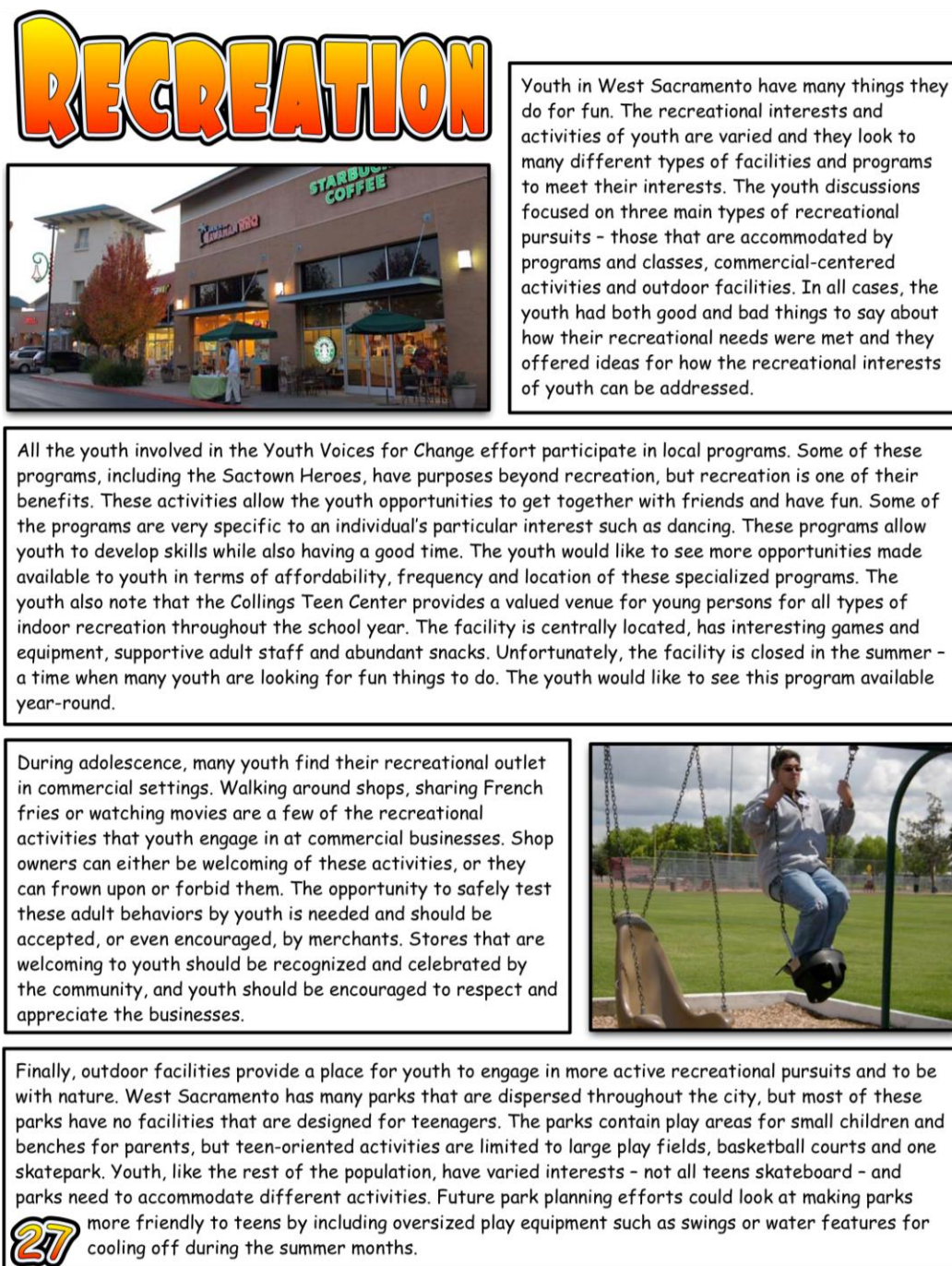
Our team sought to memorialize our findings and recommendations in a written document that would summarize and capture the spirit of the work. The resulting *Youth Voices for Change* comic book is organized into four main sections: favorites, challenges, adjustments, and recommendations (Owens, 2010). This book was

distributed to local and regional government agencies, school boards, and other decision-making authorities. Along with featuring recreation opportunities in the "favorites" section and the shortcomings of existing recreation in the "challenges" section, the comic book offers suggestions for improvements in the "adjustments" and "recommendations" sections. Along with recommendations related to recreation, this section also addresses transportation, community pride, and education.

The recreation recommendations suggest that more recreational opportunities be made available to youth. This increase in access would include addressing affordability, frequency, and location of specialized programs. Also noted is the use of commercial settings for recreation and the need to make these more welcoming for young people. The youth recommend that merchants who welcome youth should be "recognized and celebrated by the community" (Owens, 2010, p. 27). In turn, the youth partners recognized that young people should respect local businesses. Lastly, this section identified the importance of outdoor park facilities in providing young people with a place to both engage in recreation and with nature. They specifically recommend that the city provide facilities for adolescents in the local parks and that these go beyond token gestures of skateparks.

As noted previously, the comic book was distributed widely. In addition, the recreation recommendations page was shared with the director of the City's parks and recreation department (Figure 4). As a result, the director invited our youth partners to participate in focus groups to update the City's recreation plan and to serve as co-facilitators in an upcoming park master planning process. These immediate and impactful results were unanticipated, but very positive for youth and the community. The youth experienced the power of their stories and their work, and the community benefited from a broader understanding of the role of their local parks in the lives of young people.

Figure 4. Recreation recommendations from the *Youth Voices for Change* comic book



Healthy Youth Development

Our YVC project illustrates the importance of authentic inclusion of youth (Hart, 1997) as well as the value of youth-generated data, findings, and recommendations. The process, as well as the products, has significant implications for the healthy development of young people. Specifically, youth developmental tasks such as

developing social relationships, social responsibility, and the capacity to manage their free time were identified and addressed by this effort (Owens, 2017).

Based on our observations and discussions with our youth research partners, we offer that the opportunity to be heard bolsters the young person's self esteem. In addition, having adults hear their stories provides them with a sense of social responsibility and continuing motivation to seek involvement in civic matters. Community understanding, support, and accommodation of youth spending unstructured time with other young people is needed as are places where they can go to get away from daily pressures. Lastly, youth involvement has the capacity to improve the final products. As shown by their involvement in the community's recreation master plan, issues and ideas that would have otherwise been overlooked are explored and embraced. The fact that adolescents, who are often viewed by adults as just looking to cause trouble, sometimes "just want to be a kid and have fun" is a powerful insight that can influence the recreation opportunities available to them. In turn, this change can have direct implications on how the physical environment supports adolescent development.

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