Sharing Power: Participatory Public Health Research with California Teens

Michael Schwab

Introduction

W E ALL WANT THE POWER TO DETERMINE EVENTS THAT AFFECT OUR LIVES. IT is a basic human right and an important determinant of health. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognizes everyone's right to freedom of opinion, expression, association, and the right to take part in government (United Nations, 1958); there is a large eclectic body of scientific research showing the connections between self-determination and health (e.g., Syme, 1990; Kerasek et al., 1981). In reality, of course, power is unevenly distributed, with children — especially children from poor communities, and girls in particular — at the bottom of the heap. Despite rhetoric to the contrary and a slowly emerging awareness of children's rights as laid down in the 1989 *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989),[1] our young people seldom have the opportunity to participate in making decisions that deeply effect their lives. It was therefore something most welcome and unusual when the California Wellness Foundation decided that children should participate in developing its new statewide public health initiative on children and the environment.

Community participation is not the normal business of public health. Decisions about research and program planning are almost invariably laid down by experts (researchers, planners, policy analysts), using the reductive, technocratic processes of science; this usually results in an extremely narrow definition of problems and solutions. Epidemiology, for example, which is charged with defining the causes of disease, focuses on relationships between specific "risk factors" (e.g., toxic exposures or bad diet) and specific disease outcomes (e.g., cancer), while public health programs — known by the medico-military term "interventions" — are designed to reduce the prevalence of these risk factors. It is a matter of increasing concern that interventions based on this paradigm have often not been successful (Schwab and Syme, 1997).

An alternative approach is offered by practitioners of the "new public health," which rejects the reductive paradigm of what Kuhn (1962) calls "normal science," in

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favor of an ecological and participatory paradigm that acknowledges a web of determinants of health — personal, social, and political — and calls for the involvement of community members in defining and advancing research and action. This paradigm was endorsed by member states at the famous WHO/UNICEF Conference on Primary Health Care in Alma Ata (1978), and again at the WHO Conference on Health Promotion in Ottawa (1986). Since the 1980s, hundreds of community-based projects, in virtually every country in the world, have tried some variation of community participation — in water-supply projects, forest protection, AIDS prevention, lead abatement, and alcohol and drug programs. Though evaluation is still embryonic, evidence is growing that these programs, defined and planned with members of the community, tend to be better informed, more appropriate, better received, and thus more effective (e.g., Tonon, 1980; Martin, 1983; Eng et al., 1990; Green and Kreuter, 1991; Wallerstein and Berstein, 1988).

The situation is complicated by the many kinds and degrees of participation that can take place. Sherry Arnstein (1969) developed a typology for citizen participation in the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity in the 1960s, based on a scale from low participation "passive acceptance" through "tokenism" to "control," and Roger Hart (1992) has adapted this scale for children's participation. He reports (Hart, 1997) that much of what passes as children's participation in public affairs is tokenistic, i.e., controlled by adults and limited to elites. All kinds of children, he argues, need to participate and their contributions — whether in identifying and researching problems that affect them, or working for social or political change — need to be grounded in their own experience:

> We need fewer trite examples of children speaking and singing out of how they are the future, and how they alone best understand global environmental problems, and more models which genuinely recognize the untapped competencies of children to play a significant role in community-based sustainable development (Hart, 1997).

This article describes the work of a multicultural, transdisciplinary research and planning group of adults and young people in developing a model for young people's participation in the California Wellness Foundation's initiative. Our methods drew on four principal sources, all of which require an ecological and participatory approach: participatory action research, self-directed problem-based learning, environmental education, and community organizing.

Participatory action research is an empowering form of communal inquiry often associated with the work of the late Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire. Led by a community "promoter," it validates local knowledge rather than imported expert knowledge and is consciously directed toward community action to improve local conditions (Freire, 1974). It involves elements of research, community organizing, planning, and advocacy. Practitioners claim that it can, under certain circumstances, help make individuals more aware and equip them to cope with and change their

world (Rahnema, 1990), and that it produces serious and trustworthy knowledge that can open the way for new forms of creative collaboration and alternatives to authoritarian structures and traditional patterns of exploitation (Fals-Borda, 1994).

Our second source was self-directed learning, also called "creative," "student-centered," and "problem-based," in which students explore "in the field," starting with and building on what they know (Barrows and Tamblyn, 1980; Hungerford et al., 1990). These methods have been effectively used with students and children of all ages in the classroom. The role of the teacher is to stimulate awareness, teach research skills, and encourage critical thinking and problem solving. Students involved in these participatory forms of learning tend to be more highly motivated and self-directed than those learning by rote, and they transfer concepts to new problems more effectively (Norman and Schmidt, 1992). Parents and other adults from the community are sometimes drawn into the process, especially in those schools committed to community links.

A third source, which provided many practical techniques for our project, was environmental psychology and education. In many countries, children have taken part in environmental design and city planning using surveys, mapping, model-making, art, media, and other techniques to explore problems and solutions (seminal works include Lynch, 1960; Moore, 1974; and Hart, 1977). This work is supported by a body of research in developmental and environmental psychology on the benefits to children of working and playing in these ways, including greater awareness of themselves and their environment, self-esteem, and respect for people and nature.[2]

Finally, we drew on and were inspired by the theory and practice of community organizing, advocacy and action, with their roots in movements for social justice over the last century — in particular the labor, women's, civil rights, and disability movements. All have succeeded though grass-roots self-determination, rather than relying on others to advance their course, and it may be that this will be the case for children, who traditionally have always had to rely on adults to represent them. Child advocates, the example, rarely connect their concerns for children with grass-roots activities, though the need for a grass-roots constituency for children's policy is now gradually being recognized (Szerlag, 1996). Indeed, there is an incipient international children's movement, which positions itself as adults standing with children speaking for themselves, rather than as adults speaking on behalf of children.[3]

At the same time, we remain sober in our expectations. The history of participatory research and action as a way to reduce inequities of power, especially between government agencies and their "target populations" (another military term that reifies the power imbalance), is not encouraging. People with little power, especially children, cannot easily resist when traditional authorities insist. "Participation" is easily rendered tokenistic and used to hold oppressed communities responsible for their own conditions (Merzel, 1991). This has sometimes, perhaps often, been the case in public health projects purporting to involve communities (Steckler et al., 1981; Grace, 1991). In Third World development projects, community participation has

often met a similar fate (Fals-Borda and Rahmann, 1991; Escobar, 1984). As Majid Rahnema (1990) writes:

> It was a powerful instrument in reviving old ideals of a livelihood based on love, conviviality, and simplicity, but the participatory ideal ended up being co-opted by those who had always yielded power, and used to legitimize that power.

Recognizing the real possibility of children's participation becoming tokenistic in a long-term Wellness Foundation initiative, we nevertheless set out to place young people at the center of our research in this planning project. The vast literature on children's health, development, education, and environments is notable for its lack of attention to children's points of view (Kalins et al., 1992). Patience is rarely taken to help them formulate their own thoughts and develop their own reflected, informed responses to important social questions. At the same time, they are routinely stereotyped in the mass media in ways that belie their intelligence, creativity, and diversity (e.g., Giroux, 1996). We set out to make children not the object of our research, but equal co-investigators.

Children in California

The young people in this study came from different backgrounds, but most were from low-income families, a population that has grown dramatically in California over the last 15 years. Since the early 1980s — ironically, a time of rapid growth for the state's economy — the percentage of children living in poverty has grown from 15.2% in 1980 to 24.4% in 1993 (CDF, 1994). By the year 2000, over 30% are expected to be living in poverty and periodic hunger (Neuhauser et al., 1995). The children behind these statistics are at multiple risk — of poor housing, dangerous streets, social injustice, unemployment, cuts in social services and schools, and a loss of safe common spaces and community institutions. They are the children most likely to develop respiratory diseases, which are increasing dramatically in the cities (Weiss, 1992; CDC, 1995); they are the most likely to be suffering from the trauma and uncertainties of being children of incarcerated parents;[4] they are the first to suffer in the current political climate, which is increasingly hostile to children; and they are predominantly children of color.

Teenagers are in particular trouble. California's education system, once a model for the nation, has declined in all measures of quality. High school drop out rates, per pupil spending, and class size are either last or near last among the 50 states (NEA, 1994). Since the late 1980s, jobs have grown scarcer and youth unemployment has doubled, from 13.9% in 1989 to 26.5% in 1993 (CEDD, 1994). In the face of such figures, children are entitled to be fearful, not only for their own future, but also because they have become the objects of fear, manifested in tougher sentencing and incarceration of youth, amplification of policing and curfews, and the building of

more prisons at the direct expense of our public education system. California has the highest rate of juvenile incarceration in the U.S., double the national average (USDJ, 1993). As part of this punitive approach to youth, the mass media are awash with inauthentic and negative images of teens, especially Black and Latino males (Giroux, 1996). For California, with its wonderfully diverse population and rapidly changing immigration patterns, combating racism and learning to bridge cultural differences are especially vital.

Four Pilot Projects

Funding was allocated for four pilot projects in which teenagers from poor urban neighborhoods would be brought together daily for six to eight weeks during the 1995 summer vacation. Each project was to undertake some form of participatory action research, with the young people selecting an issue or problem in their environment that was important to them, researching it, and presenting their findings to their communities. A small number of adults were to take part, assisting and guiding as needed, and documenting the process, but not directing. All the projects were encouraged to use a variety of research and media tools and to explore policy directions in which to advance their findings. All participants, adults and young people, were to be paid for their work.

Our central Planning Group in Berkeley selected the project sites using various community health and youth networks. Criteria included ethnic, gender, and geographical variation, organizational capacity, and a willingness to engage in an intense exploratory partnership involving ecological thinking, participatory research, and youth empowerment. Two sites were selected in Richmond (one Asian and one Latino), one in Oakland (multicultural), and one in East Los Angeles (Latino). Forty-eight young people took part.

Each project consisted of 10 to 15 teens and three adults. Two of the adults were coordinators with youth experience and either research or community organizing skills. They were responsible for day-to-day activities, the meeting place, administration, meals, and sometimes transportation. The third adult at each site acted as a monitor, maintaining an ethnographic narrative account of events as they occurred, largely through participant observation, and a tally of specific behaviors (Moore et al., 1996). The adults also conducted daily debriefings, weekly reviews with the young people, and post-project interviews with all participants, including parents (Fong and Reed, 1996). Other adults (e.g., a researcher, videographer, artist, environmental specialist, and computer specialist) provided technical assistance as needed. Finally, each project was assigned an Associate from the Planning Group, to provide ongoing liaison, technical assistance, and consultation at each site and to help develop the overall model for the Foundation.

Our principle research question was: How can adults engage young people in community-based public health research and action to improve their environments? Specific questions included: What is the appropriate role of adults? What help (if any)

do adults or children need in this kind or work? What kinds of problems do young people select to work on? What kinds of solutions do they propose? And what benefits to children, their communities, and their environments might be expected from this kind of work?

Four fundamental objectives guiding these projects were: to respect children's subjective experiences, to increase children's awareness of themselves in their environments, to help the children and their communities with competence and hopefulness in making positive change, and to foster respect for cultural diversity.

Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Richmond

The Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN), a national organization that addresses environmental issues affecting Asian-Pacific Islander communities, worked with a group of Laotian girls, aged 13 to 14, whose families have emigrated to the United States. The girls live in the Richmond area of western Contra Costa County, which contains over 350 industrial facilities, including waste incinerators, oil refineries, and pesticide, fertilizer, and other chemical manufacturers, many of which are associated with federally designated toxic sites (Belliveau et al., 1989). There is a growing body of literature pointing to the links between exposure to toxicants and breast cancer (Epstein, 1994), and APEN is especially concerned about the rates of breast cancer among Laotian-American women. Many of the Laotian newcomers who have concentrated in Richmond in the past 15 years are extremely poor.

The girls' work took two principal approaches. One was an exploration of their own identity as Laotian-Americans and girls, through discussion, collages, and journals, and exercises designed to open perception and cultivate their awareness of themselves and their culture. The second was their environmental research: through field trips and the development of maps and charts, they began to define the environment in which they lived, learned, and played. Both approaches enabled the girls to gain a better understanding of the complex relationship between themselves and their surroundings, as well as a more ecological perspective on their lives. As one participant noted: "I learned about keeping myself safe, my body and what's around me."

The APEN girls focused on toxic sites close to their homes. During one local tour, the girls became upset about its highly toxic state. "How can they dump toxic chemicals into the bay?" asked one. "It gets into the fish and we get sick because we eat fish." For some, this fostered a strong interest in understanding the situation and taking some form of action. One young woman said:

> I learned that it is hard to clean oil spills and toxic air up, and why refineries are here in Richmond. I also learned that not only white adults can change the environment, but Asian girls can do it also.

Suzanne Arms

As they became more self-confident and began to find their voices, they spoke freely about issues relating to their identity as Asian Americans. Although they came from different Laotian groups, they found they shared a great deal. Said one:

> I've learned that I'm not the only one that feels pressure from my culture or background.... It's easy to act American, but you can't forget your roots...and I've learned that being a woman doesn't mean that I'm weak.

The girls surveyed 100 young people and interviewed local residents to determine what were the "safe" and "unsafe" places in their community. Fear of violence in their community and the death of young people surfaced as critical issues. In subsequent discussions, the girls felt that this would be helped by having more gathering places in the community.

As their awareness grew and their horizons extended, the girls showed increasing interest in broader environmental issues. When they were invited to attend the U.N. Environmental Youth Forum, which was taking place in California, most attended and were tremendously impressed by the gathering. They made a presentation on safe spaces, in which they recommended that there be more youth centers and more public toilets, that railroad tracks be fenced off to protect young children who play there, and

that environmental education include urban concerns and environmental racism, not just conservation and preservation issues.

For their community presentation, the girls planned and organized a rich program. They displayed maps of their community, showing polluted waterways, and they warned their Laotian community and family members against fishing there. As is often the case with immigrant children, these Laotian girls were taking the lead in teaching their families about their new environment. After the summer project ended, many of the girls maintained their involvement in APEN, recruited new girls for next summer's program, and held public speaking engagements in the local high school to inform other teenage girls about the threats to their reproductive health posed by the chemicalized environment in the Richmond area and about the need for greater environmental justice throughout California.

Center for Third World Organizing, Oakland

The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) is a well-established community organizer training institute in Oakland. Through its various community campaigns, CTWO has demonstrated that people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds can effectively come together to address threats to their health and to that of their community. Their project, which involved 11 teenagers (12 to 19 years), was focused on youth empowerment and leadership development. The young people came from African, Asian, European, Latin, and Native American backgrounds; most brought with them some degree of community or leadership experience and skills in media arts.

Their project began with a three-day orientation, where the group used story telling, mask-making, and other group processes to explore their own identity, team-building, community organizing, and environmental themes. Having identified a range of critical issues in their communities, the young people chose as their primary focus "safe places that support youth participation and development." They then split into three groups to do action research, to make a video, and to prepare silk-screen images of their findings.

The three groups worked in tandem, visiting various youth recreation centers throughout the city and analyzing the services they did, or did not, offer. Said one female participant:

> What I learned is that there is nothing to do here in the flats, but up in the hills they got every little thing. They just reach their hands out and they got it. Around here, you have to look for it — dig holes and you can't find it. There's nothing to do around the community and if there is...people don't know about it. Period.

The adults in the project gave the young people space to express their resentment and to explore solutions for change. This involved interviewing public officials,

including members of the city council. Said one about the exercise: "Goin' out there and being in the real world.... You're talking to important people.... That was real and it was an important experience."
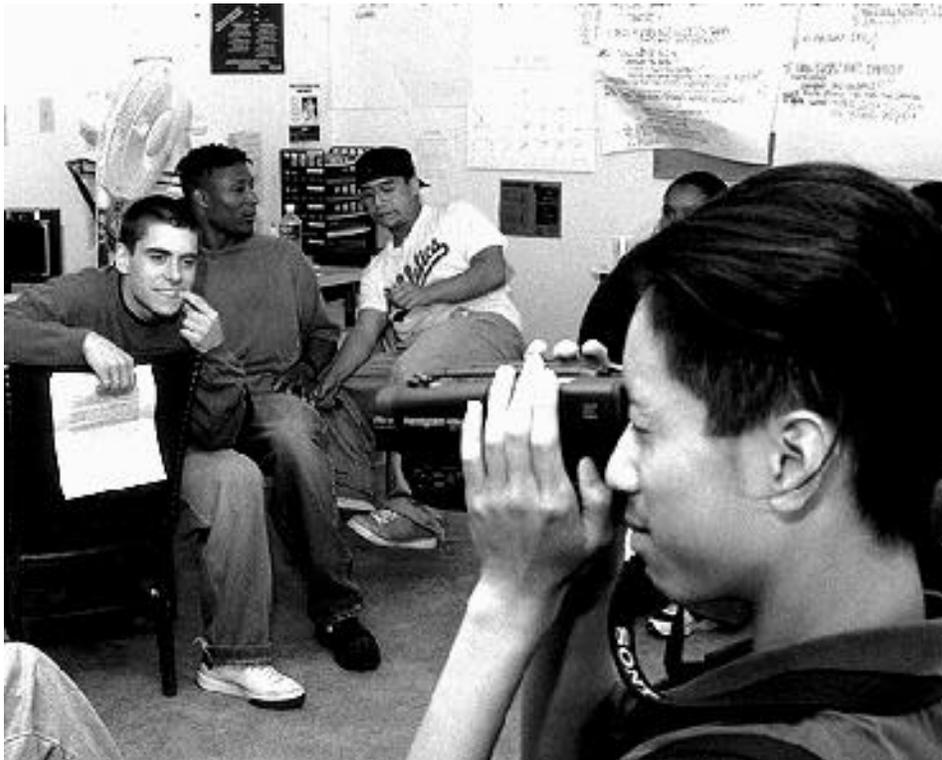
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The evolution of the young people's confidence was documented by the monitor. Within a month, she noted: "A sense of responsibility has already been instilled in every youth participant. They prepared their own questions and took on the role of questioning other youth and officials at Parks and Recreation, often spontaneously." The parents noted this, too; one mother said about her daughter: "She became most responsible and confident, talking and speaking with others.... She grew up."

Again, media provided critical tools for research, collaborative self-expression, and community action. The young people developed charts and graphics, a written report, a video exposé, and silk-screened T-shirts to demonstrate their findings. Local dissemination of these kinds of products is part of CTWO's ongoing public education, community action, and advocacy for positive social change. A showcase event on the theme of youth recreation centers, produced by the youth, attracted more than 150 people, including two television and two radio stations. It also raised more than $500 for the group through T-shirt and food sales and contributions. A final statement, prepared by the young people, contained recommendations for teen centers and young people's participation in the city of Oakland's decision-making processes.[5]

After the project ended, the youth were invited to sit on three different city task forces, and joined a coalition to obtain new funding for teen programs. Their efforts led to the formulation of Measure K, an allocation of 2.5% of the city budget to youth activities and services, which was passed by voters in the 1996 elections. In this way, the project enabled the young people to become a significant force in local political decision-making. As one young man concluded: "If we come together and pick one goal.... There's nothing that can stop us."

East Los Angeles Project

East LA is a community composed predominantly of Mexican-Americans and Latino and Mexican immigrants. The pilot project here was organized by two community leaders working collaboratively with several local organizations. The 13 young people taking part were recruited through a local Health Education Center and through Father Gregory Boyle's Mission Dolores Project for gang-involved teens (see Fremon, 1994).

In the initial two weeks, the group met every day for three to four hours, during which exercises were led by the adults to explore the young people's identities and to help the young participants realize their common ground. Though they shared geographical proximity and were mostly Latinos and Latinas, all had different life and cultural experiences. Ecological thinking exercises were also held, such as "map your environment," where the children drew and later explained their individual "map." This led to a brain-storming to identify the issues the teens wish to address. Some 20 issues and problems were raised, including poverty, pollution, crime, and teen pregnancy. The next step, which was the most difficult for them at this initial stage, was to prioritize and select issues.

The youth chose two issues and separated into two groups to address them. One group, mostly older teens, chose to research the city's plans to close local public libraries, which they identified as safe, quiet spaces to study, do homework, and read magazines they couldn't afford to buy. Said one participant: "Libraries are important to me.... I go there to pick out books and also to read up for my reports." The other group worked on the widespread availability and use of drugs and alcohol in their community. A typical comment from one young man, who had come to see his environment differently, was this: "On every corner there's, like, a bar...and that doesn't make me feel good, because it's my community."

At this stage, the adults asked their Associate from the Berkeley Planning Group to help them develop a framework for investigating the selected issues. He suggested problem-based learning and conducted a workshop to introduce it, initially to the adults and then to the teens. They welcomed this framework, recognizing its usefulness, and began to apply it to their exploration. Over the next five weeks they met three times a week for periods of two to three hours, using libraries and community experts contacted by the adults to refine their knowledge.

Hanna Elias

The library closure group started by mapping out the location of libraries and their hours and days of operation, and discovered the shrinking number of hours that libraries in East L.A. are open. They went on to explore the siting and zoning of libraries and discovered that libraries are located in response to petitions signed by the people in a neighborhood. They interviewed city council members and other elected officials about the budget to learn more about the recent trends toward cuts in health and education and expansions to law enforcement and correctional facilities. They noticed that library cutbacks occurred even when the city budget was not in deficit, which led them to investigate California's Proposition 13, which lowered property taxes, starting a domino effect in public service cuts. With help from an outside researcher, they also learned how similar cuts in the Merced County budget, and the subsequent closure of all the public libraries, had led to community resistance. This prompted them to develop a petition in their community, which they did with the help of a local legal advocacy group. In the last week of the project, the children and other supporters successfully gathered 1,100 signatures, which they presented to the city council.

The drug and alcohol group started by critically researching the definition of different drugs, illegal and legal, the effects of different drugs on the body, the reasons people use them, and different kinds of dependence. Interviewing youth and adults about their drug use, they went on to discover that alcohol use and abuse is the major

drug problem affecting their community. They went on to map the location of liquor stores in their community and compared it to a more affluent neighborhood in terms of number and hours of operation. From this they concluded that the number of stores selling alcohol is higher in their neighborhoods and that they remain open much later. They visited a drug rehab and treatment facility in their neighborhood and asked staff and clients about the adequacy and accessibility of these services, and whether they operate in culturally sensitive manner for the population of the neighborhood. They soon realized that "peer pressure" is found not only among young people, but also among adults, that alcohol use by parents affects children through its effect on family dynamics, and that parental use stimulates use by their children. This led them to design a "parent education curriculum" that children could use to educate their own parents about the dangers of alcohol use, both to themselves and to their children.

Again, the youth used media to do their work — drawing, photography, and journal writing. With strong support and technical advice from a local filmmaker, they also made a video, which they showed at their final presentation. Parents, community leaders, and two TV cameramen listened, sometimes incredulously, to the sophisticated reflections of the young people, whom many were used to seeing as part of the problem rather than a source of inspiration for solutions. The young people were tremendously enthused. One young woman commented: "After this, I'm not willing to just sit there and let everything go. I'd like to end my life with a good battle. That's it."

Sangre Latina, Richmond

Our fourth project was conducted by Sangre Latina, a small theatrical company whose mission is to help young people from a very low-income and troubled neighborhood to find better lives through the theater arts. The members of this company explore the external conditions of their lives, identify their feelings about those conditions, and work to find a satisfying expression of them. Group discussion and improvisation provide the young people with important opportunities for telling often painful personal experiences and having their stories heard and acknowledged, and these stories are used to construct their scripts for dramatic performances.

Eight young people, ages 10 to 17, some of them former gang members, were selected to participate in this project. They made local excursions, finding conditions ranging from neglect of public spaces to violence and pollution, then returned to the theater for improvisation sessions based on what they had encountered. The neighborhood excursions left a big impression on at least one participant: "I learned that my environment is much worse than how I looked at it before." They examined relationships between the community and environmental pollution, and between different ethnic groups on pollution issues. Gradually they realized a sense of their own ability to make things better. One notable group decision was to clean up a neighborhood park. Said one participant, a newcomer to California:

> When I came to this country the park on First Street was OK. You know, basketball hoops, playground, you know, clean. Now it's dirty and it's been that way for four years. When our group formed a posse and cleaned the park...it looked better.

This task included obtaining permission and cleaning equipment from the city, choosing paint, doing the job, and contacting local media to cover the event. It was impressive that these young people, who are generally stereotyped in the most negative ways, found the confidence to interact with government and media officials so positively.

As in the other projects, the group itself was a safe place for these teenagers to share their problems and opinions, to become more aware of themselves in the world, and to find support when they were in difficult situations. In the words of one young man:

> You know, you don't talk much about problems to your parents or family. You don't want to...because they'll probably scream at you or hit you or something.... That's why we come to this group to talk to Luz (the coordinator) and them (others in the group).... They help us out. They can understand us.

Like the APEN girls, the Sangre kids attended the U.N. Environmental Youth Forum in Berkeley, where they met young people from all over the world. "Things can change if you get more people involved," said one 15-year-old girl afterwards. "If people want to change, it's got to be people in the community to make that change."

They concluded their project with a production of their play "Mantel on the Table," a political satire about cultural identity and local environmental politics, which they performed at a major community cultural center.[6] Judging by their comments afterwards, audience members clearly found the performance to be a moving testimony to the deep reflections of these young people living in difficult circumstances. Sangre Latina went on to write another dramatic piece as part of a series on a local Youth Radio station.

Post-Project Assessments

The young people commented on their experience at weekly debriefings throughout the projects and after the summer. The quality and extent of their self-reflection became increasingly impressive and revealing. By the end of their projects, some appeared deeply changed by their experience, and expressed satisfaction at having had a voice in important issues. Central to this was their experience of having shared power. Said one: "When you tell your story, you grow!" Many reported feeling more respected and accepted, validated by the feedback of family and friends, and prouder of their culture and community. Most acknowledged the respectful, attentive coordination by the adults. Of the very few negative comments, one that recurred was a

feeling of being rushed; another was the intensity of doing the work *and* cooperating with the ongoing evaluation monitoring. Without exception, they wanted to continue that kind of work, and most expressed interest in being funded under the Foundation initiative if it went forward.

At a three-month follow-up workshop, the young people showed us how these projects had led them to see the relationship between self-esteem, social awareness, and social responsibility. They talked about their sense of powerlessness in the face of racism, police brutality, lack of jobs, and environmental degradation, and how they felt encouraged to work together for positive change. The issues they spoke most strongly about were power and discrimination. Adults working within powerful institutions — schools, churches, police, the media — tend to forget the role of their own power in shaping their relationships with children and youth. Teens, by contrast, seem to be very aware of power relations and of how they need to be addressed and changed, if open communication is to be established.

These young people also alerted us to the importance of a number of critical practical needs for this kind of work: a stable, safe space that they could in some way own; some form of payment, which many needed to supplement the family income; their need for sufficient time for discussion; and the availability of adults, including parents, to help with financial issues, networking, media, and policy skills. The regular participation of older youth, who could act as mentors, was an especially popular recommendation.

Parents' views were surveyed by telephone interviews. Twenty parents were asked about their involvement in the projects, what changes they saw in their children, and how children's viewpoints should be considered. All reported positive changes in the young people, including significant personal growth, new skills, and increased knowledge about their environments. One parent noted of her son: "I hoped it would give him a chance to interact with different types of people and give him a sense of self-worth, find meaning, and begin to develop himself as a young person...and it did!" Another said of her son: "Before the summer he was shy about going up to the group, he was afraid to talk. At the end he opened up so much. Our communication is better. He is more confident and open with me."

Some parents said they would have liked to be more involved themselves, having only had the chance to play a limited role — transporting kids, attending special events, and providing food. Others said they were too busy. Some emphasized that parental involvement should be "secondary" to the youth: they wanted the young people to lead; they did not want to interfere in their space, or with their decision-making process. As one parent noted after her daughter's community presentation: "The responsibility and talent is there.... I didn't know when I came in here this morning that I was going to leave with so much hope...." Several volunteered that they had never realized how much children could contribute to solving community problems. Said one: "Many times the kids are right, they have the answers we the adults have forgotten!"

Overall Findings

This study was designed to learn if and how teenagers could be engaged as equal co-investigators in public health research and action, not just the brightest young people from safe communities, but those who are often marginalized in our society. The young people were invited and helped to select the issues to explore and to direct the course of their research and action. Our overall findings, summarized below, were extremely positive.

1. *Young people are eager and competent to participate in solving problems*: Young people, including those from troubled homes and deprived communities, are eager and competent to engage in activities that hold the promise of improving their environments and creating social justice. All four projects revealed the enormous capacity of teenagers for thoughtful, systematic research and creative solutions to problems they encountered. Participatory action research and similar problem-based research strategies, combined with community organizing, proved to be an excellent framework for them.

2. *Adults need training in how to share power with children*: The skills and sensibilities of adults involved in this kind of work are critical. In our projects, adults were intended not to have "directed" the process in each group; they were to be helpers, guides, teachers-learners. This is not the same as adults running programs for young people, even if the distinction is not always easy to discern. In these projects, the adults strongly influenced the course of events, especially with the younger teens, and especially in the early weeks. However, the teens played an increasingly powerful role as they gained comfort and competence in contending for power on their own behalf. With a little training, we believe that many adults who work with and like young people can adapt to this kind of child– or youth-driven approach. Much can be adapted from the training of street workers and adventure playground leaders, as described by Hart (1997). Training should include exposure to the many techniques developed for environmental education, problem-based learning, community organization, and small group dynamics.

3. *The age of the young people limits the responsibility they can take*: The four projects were very different, depending on many factors, including the age and background of the teenagers, the personality, skills, and experience of the adults, the environment involved, and the cultural and political agenda of the organization concerned. For example, APEN, with 13– and 14-year-old girls from a newcomer community, and a strong interest in reproductive health and environmental justice, took a very different course from CTWO, with its older teenagers from a more established community, and its extensive experience of community organizing. However, age seems to have been a critical factor in determining equality of power. Both organizations were committed to youth decision-making in their process, and both provided a great deal of education along the way, but the older children at CTWO set their agenda for environmental improvements in the first week of the project, and

they consistently organized for local policy change until they accomplished their aim; the younger girls at APEN needed more help determining their approach to community organizing and had to spend more time on issues related to their personal and family lives.

4. *Being heard is good for young people*: The public health literature is rich with evidence that being heard and validated, and having the opportunity to direct in some measure events that affect our lives, is essential for the mental health of individuals and communities. These projects confirmed this view, giving every appearance of engendering self-awareness, self-esteem, and positive attitudes toward their community among the teenagers, whatever their age. At least two sites addressed gender discrimination, with discussion of the ways that girls can be more assertive and boys more receptive. All spoke extensively about race and discrimination in ways that helped the young people deal with these issues more effectively. In addition, all showed the promise of young people and adults coming together in a spirit of respectful democratic practice, acting together for the good of their communities. Presentation of their work to their communities seemed especially effective in promoting recognition of the young people's views and the importance of including them in public life.

5. *Parents also have a role to play*: One of the projects, Sangre Latina, was led by a parent whose children also took part. This alerted us to the real possibility of parents initiating, or at least playing a larger role than was the case in these pilot projects, where parents were only involved in providing approval, transportation, and sometimes food. This was confirmed in subsequent interviews; several said they would have welcomed greater participation. Some said that this would be feasible for them if younger children were also welcomed; others felt it should be left to the kids to decide. While recognizing that children sometimes need a space of retreat from their family, we concluded that parents and other family members could play an important supportive role in this kind of work.

6. *It is helpful and fair to pay the teens if funds are available*: In our projects, the young people were paid, both because we felt it ethically correct to pay them for their work and to encourage them to take it seriously. All welcomed this, especially those who would otherwise have had to find some other paid employment. However, some felt that pay was not central, so long as the work was fun. We concluded that for some children pay is not essential; follow-up interviews confirmed that perceived self-interest can be a good incentive too.

7. *Media tools are invaluable for self-expression and advocacy*: In this study, all four projects made extensive use of arts and media, ranging from masks, journals, cartoons, silk-screening, and dramatic improvisation to explore the many aspects of their identities, to mapping and video production in their community research. The benefits of young people being equipped with these tools cannot be overemphasized. They include individual gains in self-understanding and confidence, the creation of information and images that truly represent young people's lives, and the use of this

material for public education, networking, and advocacy to advance policy change. Most of the teens felt that media work was especially important in helping to establish a positive presence for them in the community.

8. *Participatory research with teens can lead to environmental improvement*: The effects of these four projects on the young people's broader environment were modest in the greater scheme of things, but substantial after only 10 weeks. Two projects went on to have a substantial impact. In East L.A., the youth petition subsequently led the city council to increase library hours at times when the young people were out of school. CTWO joined with other advocacy groups to promote sustained city funding for youth activities and services; the fruit of their labor was a measure, approved by the voters at the November 1996 elections, to allocate five million dollars a year for youth mentoring, facilities, and services in Oakland over the next 12 years.

9. *Young people need safe and accessible places*: A major theme reinforced by the teenagers was the importance of safe spaces where they can come together to speak openly and honestly about their lives, build their own culture, and join forces with others to chart a course for social and environmental action.[7] For the kinds of projects described in this article, the young people should have some ownership of the space. It needs to be a consistent space; in East L.A., the group had to move several times. Transportation can also be critical; many teens in our inner cities cannot safely walk through neighborhoods that lie between their home and school or a community center. Finally, food is an important ingredient! It brings people together, and helps them understand each other's cultures; for kids who do not get a healthy diet, it can also provide a helpful dietary supplement.

Conclusion

Research, policies, and practices about children and youth — in public health, social welfare, education, and throughout the social sciences — virtually never take account of the opinions and reflections of young people themselves. This study demonstrates that teenagers, including those living in very difficult circumstances, can make a strong contribution to research and action on their own behalf, if given the opportunity, respect, and support they need.

Allowing them to select and frame their own issues seems to be a crucial element. In our study, the issues they chose — pollution of a bay where their families fish, a lack of youth recreation places, library closures, alcoholism at home, and local environmental politics — all pointed to children's increasing lack of and need for "safe spaces." For them, the growing enclosure and contamination of our common spaces, and with it a dying communal spirit, is a self-evident critical problem. All four groups established safe spaces for themselves and went on to extend those spaces in their communities. Their actions were necessarily local, but all held the promise for broader effects. They showed, particularly in the Oakland project, that if energy and resources are directed toward networking and community organizing, public education, and advocacy, dramatic effects can be achieved.

However, young people alone cannot be expected to change the world. They need adult help, and of a particular kind. Adults doing this kind of work must be prepared to share decision-making in a meaningful way, with boys *and* girls, and hold themselves accountable to the young people, in some serious measure, for their decisions. This means respecting children in ways that run counter to the experience of many adults when they were children. Similarly, experts who are charged with children's well-being, in research and policy, for example, need to find a new willingness to learn about the experienced reality of the young people whose lives they are dealing with. This will require a reversal of powerful, longstanding prejudices. Within the confines of this planning project, it was impressive how far the teens were able to go in public advocacy without help from professional child advocates or child policy experts.

Participatory research requires power-sharing, but there is always a risk, when participatory work is funded, that those closest to the money end up with a disproportionate share of the power. History has shown that community participation among adults can easily become tokenistic, as in many projects funded by international development agencies. All the more is this a risk with children, who are easily co-opted into adults' agendas. There is, for example, an international network of "child-to-child" public health projects in which children work as educators and counselors; while the principles behind this approach recommend children's participation in exploring issues and developing messages based on their experience, in reality the kids often end up disseminating messages developed entirely by adults, the children having no say over what is to be taught or how (Hawes and Scotchmer, 1993). This kind of participation may carry some benefits to some children, but it relies on adult perceptions and priorities; nothing new, except children's participation in business as usual, can be expected from it. Our recommendations were accepted by the California Wellness Foundation as a basis for their new $20 million Children and Youth Community Health Initiative; we watch with interest to see the extent to which they are put into practice.

When people are directly involved in identifying problems in their own terms, they have a greater investment in seeking solutions: this is a fundamental tenet of community organizing. When communities take part in selecting and developing projects to improve their own conditions, those projects tend to be more successful: this is a tenet of "the new public health." We extend both to include children. When they engage in their own research and action, they themselves become invested. They willingly learn to think critically and trust their own capacities. Moreover, their research can add to serious and trustworthy knowledge and to creative solutions to problems that adults seem unable to solve. Popular participation has been the basis for social movements that have transformed public health policy on physical disability, lead abatement, AIDS, and women's health. We conclude that the same could happen for children. If given the chance, they can contribute to new forms of community capacity, new understandings of young people's needs, more effective

use of public funds to help satisfy those needs, and a long-term movement for children's rights and environmental justice.

Acknowledgments

NOTES

1. The *International Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), which defines a child as 18 years old or under, "assures to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child" (Article 1), and the right to freedom of expression, including "freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing, or in print, in the form of art, or through other media of the child's choice" (Article 2).

2. See "Developmental Theory and Children's Participation in Community Organization," by Roger Hart et al., in this volume.

3. See "Children's Rights and the Building of Democracy," by Roger Hart and Michael Schwab, in this volume.

4. See "Children of Incarcerated Parents," by Diane and Edward Reed, in this volume.

5. See "How Oakland Turns Its Back on Teens," by Jermaine Ashley et al., in this volume.

6. See "Mantel on the Table," by Sangre Latina, in this volume.

7. See "Safe Spaces: California Children Enter the Policy Debate," by Sandra Meucci and Jim Redmon, in this volume.

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