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Young people as partners in creating leisure environments

Could we imagine young people in any neighborhood researching, holding meetings among themselves, consulting the kids and parents on their block, inspecting leisure time facilities and presenting their own and their peers' ideas to professionals and local government officials? Could it be feasible to have young people themselves participate as serious partners in evaluating, enhancing and even designing appropriate leisure time spaces and facilities in our neighborhoods? Experiences with the use of one possible method – Youth Inspections – in the Netherlands suggests we can.

Purpose and conditions

When applied appropriately – for the purposes it is designed for and under the right conditions – Youth Inspections not only contribute to enhancement of leisure space and facilities. They will also enable local communities to realize participation of their youth. This potential of Youth Inspections needs some preliminary clarification before going into the specifics for using the method itself.

Developing participation skills

To begin with, we are dealing with a method which is primarily designed to support participation of young people, even the highest possible level of participation. This claim may seem exaggerated, but proves to be justified by experienced youth inspectors in Amsterdam (Netherlands) and is evidenced by the effectiveness of 'inspections' in integrating and building upon previous levels of participation. In the preceding levels of participation young people are invited, motivated and supported to inform (level 1), reflect (level 2) and advise (level 3) from their own perspective on matters, wishes and concerns related to their living and leisure environment. As we approach the design of leisure time space and facilities from the perspective of young people, the most basic level on which they participate, is by contributing information on their factual perceptions and uses of the available leisure time space and activities. On the next level (reflecting) young people are invited and coached to interpret the information they have given, and judge the quality and appropriateness of the space and facilities in which they are supposed to spend their leisure time or enjoy the activities that are being offered. This is

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followed (on the third level) by young people giving advise and suggestions as to how they would envision their ideal leisure time environment and facilities: how these should look like and feel like, and what purposes and functions should be served by those facilities. Finally we reach the fourth level, the level of inspecting, which brings the involvement of young people one step further. This level enables them actively to first prepare their own framework of criteria on which they then test the usefulness and appropriateness of the leisure time space, and even the friendliness of environmental conditions for their and their peers' leisure time space and facilities.

Creating friendly local conditions

It is obvious that aiming at this high level of participation requires a lot of care and attention for guiding, coaching and supporting all the ones concerned in the local community who are somehow to be involved in Youth Inspections. This care and attention applies to young people themselves, naturally, but equally to local youth professionals and government officials. Youth professionals and local government officials are both in the position to create the necessary technical, social and political conditions for young people to make Youth Inspections possible. Furthermore, the usefulness of engaging young people in Youth Inspections depends heavily on the ability and willingness of professionals and officials to regard young people as co-creators in designing leisure time space and facilities. As a consequence Youth Inspections prove to be a method for citizens' dialogue and democratic development as well.

The method

With these underpinnings for making effective use of Youth Inspections, let us turn to the method itself. The method is quite straightforward.

Identify the area or neighborhood – The local government, possibly after consulting local youth professionals, identifies and decides on the area or local environment in which leisure time space and activities are to be developed, designed or evaluated.

Consult local young people – We approach a diversity of young people from this local environment and hold a group conversation / panel discussion with them. The conversation with one or several groups of local youth is meant to gain more

insight in what young people themselves know on the topic of leisure time space and how they appreciate it (like about it, miss in it)

Select and prepare Youth Inspectors – From the group conversation(s) we invite participants to form a Youth Inspection Team. This team is trained and coached to formulate their own questions concerning the most important topics related to leisure time space and facilities; questions that from the perspective of young people would be valuable to ask their peers and neighbors. Adding a basic training in interviewing skills and agreeing upon the number of interviews to be held, the preparation is concluded with having the Youth Inspectors identify the most important criteria on which they want to test leisure time space and facilities.

Support and coaching during research period – Equipped with questionnaires and checklists the Youth Inspectors do their research, interviewing peers and neighbors and inquiring into different locations and facilities in their neighborhood. During this period their coaches offer the necessary support and guidance for concluding their research tasks.

Collecting and presenting the findings – After concluding the research activities the Youth Inspection Team collects all data, insights and requirements and prepares a report and presentation. The Youth Inspectors themselves present their findings and recommendations to their peers, neighbors, youth professionals and local government officials.

Ensuing dialogue – The presentation itself is immediately followed by a dialogue between the participants at the meeting – this ensuing dialogue results in very matter-of-fact ideas for designing leisure time space and facilities.

Merits of research by Youth Inspectors

Now one could very well argue that the research done by Youth Inspectors would be better off in the hands of professional and ‘objective’ researchers. In response to this perspective it suffices for now to mention that the quality of this kind of research can be sufficiently guarded by involving a professional researcher in coaching Youth Inspectors. In addition it makes sense to highlight the merits of involving young people as researchers and advisors in matters of their own lives, as is the case with Youth Inspections.

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One merit is to be found in the fact that young people recognize their own wishes and concerns in the questions, findings and recommendations by their peers. Together with finding a mutual arena in which there is room to consider their wishes and concerns seriously, young people are more involved in the outcomes of this kind of research than would generally be the case were the research conducted by professional and objective researchers. It is no surprise then, that Youth Inspections also enable young people to learn finding a balance between different interests involved. The information, data and perspectives Youth Inspections generate may therefore justifiably be considered to be honest. Not in the sense that it is the most objective information possible, but because it is the best subjective information possible that leads to a nearness to the results. The possibility to experience a comfortable nearness to the results of research by young people, furthermore adds a sense of pride, self-reliance and accomplishment. Youth Inspections then become a reminder and advocate for the potential and feasibility of involving young people in decision making processes and in creating their present and future living environment.