

# Growing Up with Expectations. Better Understanding the Expectations of Community Partners in Participatory Action Research Projects

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## Article abstract

This paper challenges the assumption that youth and youth agencies are in a condition of equality when entering a participatory action research (PAR). By asserting that it is not a state of equality that practitioners nor youth should assume nor be immediately striving for, but a consistently equitable process, this article draws from and reflects on the relationship between young people and researchers who have used a PAR methodology in action oriented projects. Using the UNESCO Growing up in Cities Canada project as a case example, this review extrapolates from and reflects on challenges faced by the project as a whole. Using semi-structured interviews to explore the roles of adults and youth, a number of strategies are highlighted as the techniques used to overcome these challenges. The discussion concludes with further reflection on the complexities of equality and equity, recommending a number of actions that have the potential to create an equitable environment in PAR projects similar to the one examined.



GROWING UP WITH EXPECTATIONS.  
BETTER UNDERSTANDING THE  
EXPECTATIONS OF COMMUNITY  
PARTNERS IN PARTICIPATORY  
ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper challenges the assumption that youth and youth agencies are in a condition of equality when entering a participatory action research (PAR). By asserting that it is not a state of equality that practitioners nor youth should assume nor be immediately striving for, but a consistently equitable process, this article draws from and reflects on the relationship between young people and researchers who have used a PAR methodology in action oriented projects. Using the UNESCO Growing up in Cities Canada project as a case example, this review extrapolates from and reflects on challenges faced by the project as a whole. Using semi-structured interviews to explore the roles of adults and youth, a number of strategies are highlighted as the techniques used to overcome these challenges. The discussion concludes with further reflection on the complexities of equality and equity, recommending a number of actions that have the potential to create an equitable environment in PAR projects similar to the one examined.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article examine la condition supposée d'égalité des jeunes et des agences de jeunes engagés dans des projets participatifs de recherche-action. L'article se base sur la relation entre des jeunes et des chercheurs dans le cadre de démarches de recherche-action participative pour affirmer que ce n'est pas une condition d'égalité que les praticiens et les jeunes devraient assumer ou rechercher en premier lieu, mais plutôt des processus équitables. Le cas d'étude utilisé est le projet Grandir en Ville Canada, de l'UNESCO. À partir d'entrevues semi-dirigées visant à explorer les rôles des adultes et des jeunes, plusieurs stratégies employées pour surmonter les défis soulevés par le projet sont soulignées. L'article termine avec une réflexion sur les complexités de l'égalité et de l'équité, et propose plusieurs actions ayant le potentiel de créer un environnement d'équité lors des démarches participatives similaires de recherche-action.

*One of the most important jobs that a person could hold was that of Story Gatherer. Story Gatherers came from all different parts of life – young, old, male, female. The People believed that each person had a story to tell, and that no one was an “expert” in story telling or gathering. Thus, a story that was told by a child would be just as important as a story told by adults, as would a story told by a woman be as important as a story told by a man.*

### *Tale of the Story Gatherers*

UNEP International Children’s Conference  
Victoria, British Columbia  
May 2001

## 1. BACKGROUND

The *Tale of the Story Gatherers* was given to the children and their adult chaperones attending an international children’s conference on the environment held in Canada in 2002.<sup>1</sup> The conference was designed with a Participatory Action Research (PAR) component that focused on documenting stories of the children’s actions to protect their environment<sup>2</sup>, with those stories becoming the basis of a presentation by Children to the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa later that year.<sup>3</sup> The *Story Gatherers* tells of a mythical people who revere those who gather stories and the struggles when they encounter those who do not. The story goes through the conflict between these two peoples, and ends with a renewed commitment from both to recognize the Story Gatherers wisdom, acting as a call to action to the children to become Story Gatherers in regards to the environment.

The *Story Gatherers* was written to better explain the role of children as researchers in the conference, as well as highlight the need for the adults to respect and take seriously the children<sup>4</sup> who were to take on that role. The story was written within the context of the many researchers who have studied the challenges adults face in working with young people and how adult perceptions or prejudices against young people can negatively affect their involvement<sup>5</sup>.

The respect for the perspectives and participation of young people embodied in the *Story Gatherers* is reflected in the Growing up in Cities (GUIC) program founded in the 70s by Kevin Lynch and revitalized again in the 1990s under UNESCO by David Driskell and Louise Chawla.<sup>6</sup> These research practitioners created a program model that embedded participation within GUIC and made it key to both recognizing and realizing young people’s rights as they relate to the communities in which they live. At the same time as GUIC was being revived, globally the right of young people’s participation was being championed through the signing of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1987. In Article 12 of the Convention the rights of young people to participate in decisions that influence them were codified, validating the work of researchers and practitioners such as Lynch, Driskell and Chawla.

The focus of this paper is to reflect on the relationship between young people and researchers who have used PAR in action orientated projects. To do this we have undertaken a research evaluation of the Growing up in Cities Canada project run from 2003 – 2005. We have chosen this project because of its strong focus on children and youth participation through the use of PAR.

This research is being done as well within the larger context of the challenges faced by youth PAR projects in regards to the high expectations youth have for PAR, and how those expectations are challenging to meet, especially in regards to participation and action<sup>7</sup>. In researching GUIC Canada we have found that there were considerable challenges in operationalizing PAR with young people due to the perceived roles and capacities of youth within the project and, linked to this, the role of adults in supporting and advancing the development of youth within the project. In looking at the question of roles in the GUIC Canada projects we found that there were two questions that came to the fore in regards to the roles and status of youth and adults:

- 1 Are young people *equal* to adults, or should we be striving for something else, such as an *equitable* process?

2 If PAR practitioners, both youth and adults, are striving for the positive development of young people, what roles do they and should they play to achieve this?

First, in regards to the issues of equity and equality, we will demonstrate that it is not the state of **equality** that practitioners nor youth should assume nor be immediately striving for, but a consistently **equitable** process<sup>8</sup>, which in time, may lead to equality. What differentiates a state of equality with an equitable process is that an equitable process takes into account current inequalities, such as youth's lesser experience to adults, or their lack of access to networks and resources, and to ensure fairness compensates for these historical and social disadvantages. On the other hand, a state of equality pre-supposes a current condition of equality, and does not emphasize the need to make compensations to address any inequalities.

This paper is written with the assumption that PAR as a methodology is inherently equitable as it is a process that engages all parties in the active examination of disadvantages, with the goal of negating them, thus arriving at, ideally, a state of equality.<sup>9</sup> It stands to reason then that the GUIC project, which utilizes PAR, should strive for an equitable process in all aspects of the project.

Second, we will demonstrate that adult roles need to be practiced in a more nuanced way than is commonly recognized or done. Many discussions on young people's participation use constructs such as the *ladder of participation* metaphor made popular by Roger Hart and UNICEF.<sup>10</sup> Though a strong metaphor, even Hart himself is having second thoughts because of the broad and imprecise interpretation that has been given to the ladder's stages, and especially the "child led" top rung of the ladder<sup>11</sup>. We will look at research that demonstrates more nuanced roles that adults can play when working with youth, roles that are more descriptive and give more direction for adults and youth to follow.

## GROWING UP IN CITIES CANADA

GUIC Canada was created by 4 youth agencies – Redwire Native Youth Media (British Columbia), Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA) (British Columbia), Heartwood (Nova Scotia), and the City of Gatineau (Quebec) and two research institutions, the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

These agencies sought and received funding from the Government of Canada to create projects utilizing PAR methodologies that focused on researching the social inclusion of young people in cities. The IICRD was the lead agency for the project.

The following research evaluation looks at the initial design and implementation of the GUIC Canada project in terms of how it incorporated PAR methods, reflecting on the challenges faced by the project as a whole in treating each partner equitably. This was done through semi-structured interviews with key adults and youth from three of the four youth projects. From these interviews we explore some of the common challenges brought up in regards to the roles of adults and youth, and posit some strategies and concepts that we believe were utilized to overcome those challenges: the Zone of Proximal Development, peer-to-peer training and guided participation strategies. The discussion will conclude with further reflection on the issues of equality versus equity in light of the findings, ultimately making the argument that it is better and more realistic to strive for an equitable process, utilizing the methods outlined, versus assuming an idealized state of equality.

## 2. GUIC CANADA – THE CHALLENGE OF EQUALITY

GUIC Canada came about through a relationship between the IICRD, an international research agency, and the EYA, a non-profit youth organization that began with the United Nations Environment Program International Children's conference in 2002. It was at this conference that both agencies discovered a common interest in engag-

ing young people through participatory research practices.<sup>12</sup> With an opportunity for funding towards a 3-year participatory youth project that would research social inclusion, both agencies came together to submit a grant, under the auspices of IICRD, to the Canadian government.<sup>13</sup> Four groups were chosen from the IICRD and EYA networks to participate in the project.

These groups were chosen primarily on the basis of being youth led or youth focused, and geographically and culturally diverse. One group, Redwire, was wholly youth run while two, EYA and Heartwood, were run with adult/youth partnerships, and one, Ville de Gatineau, was an adult run youth project. Two of the groups, Heartwood and Redwire, had worked closely with the EYA before, though none of the groups had worked with IICRD. PAR was chosen as the key research methodology for the GUIC Canada project as a whole, with the predominant methods of collecting research information including youth asset mapping, photo framing and storytelling through videography.

The Canadian partners came together for an initial project-scoping meeting in 2003. From this meeting, it was determined that youth researchers from each agency would undertake research with adult support from within the agencies, and support from IICRD. Findings from interviews with the youth and adult representatives of the agencies involved suggest that there was good will amongst the project partners when they first came together, though some initial confusion existed about the research methods being incorporated as part of the project. All groups agreed that PAR was the best method to use to ensure that age, cultural and social inclusivity were maintained, yet some conflict arose because of the focus of the project on answering pre-determined questions on social inclusion, rather than allowing these questions to be determined by the youth themselves<sup>14</sup>.

The research should be done by the children and youth. I think to be honest and up front we weren't clear who was leading the research. That question was vague. We thought that the youth were leading the research, but it

became clear that it was GUIC Canada that was leading. A few points early on it almost stalled. (Interview with Youth Researcher)

It seemed to be more research/lead organization driven than youth driven – which is what PAR and the original goals seemed to speak to more. Who was leading the partnership? We wanted clarity from them before we engaged with the young people. We had some youth in Shelburne all excited to go and then had to shelve it because of not having clarity on the questions. (Interview with Adult Coordinator)

The research partner as well expressed concern about the different interpretations of PAR:

A challenge in implementing GUIC through organizations in Canada stems from the basic premise of action research: actions cannot be predetermined, for they flow from the research. The front-line organizations were eager to act, but they came with their own organizational priorities. Before starting, some organizations had identified the action research project in their work plan. Asked how this was possible, they responded that they already knew young people's experiences from previous work. In other cases, the organizations saw themselves as able to speak on behalf of young people.<sup>15</sup>

It is clear from the interviews that from the outset the youth agencies had concerns about what the roles of youth and their agencies were in the project. This issue came up consistently throughout the project and set the tone for the relationship between the research and youth agencies. This challenge can best be understood by reflecting on the overall structure of the project and how that impacted the research processes.

## PROJECT STRUCTURE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY – WALKING THE TALK?

The GUIC Canada project was funded by the Canadian Government to research social inclusion through case studies that represented different geographic, linguistic and cultural realities of Canada.<sup>16</sup> These studies were meant to find different models of social inclusion of children and youth, and for these models to inform government policy in this area. Though there was a general understanding that children and youth should participate in the research through PAR or other participatory methods, this was not a mandatory component of the grant. Thus, when the GUIC Canada partners came together in their initial meeting, a set of questions that had to be answered on social inclusion had already been determined, and though there were concerns expressed about the process and how it possibly could clash with the other commitment to using PAR, the group accepted the conditions of the grant, and immediately began working on what methods would be used to answer those questions.

The group decided for the first phase of the project each partner would hold at least one focus group on social inclusion, and the findings from this research would be written up to reflect a common finding of the GUIC Canada project. This decision ended up becoming very challenging to implement for the youth groups and the research agency. The youth groups had few resources to implement the focus groups, and found this traditional research didn't fit the mandates of their agencies, nor did it advance the larger communities they worked with.

I think that if you are going to deliver a participatory action based research program where the sole focus of it is to increase the capacity of the youth agency, then you have to go to the young people and the agencies and allow them to do that and support that process. I know that if you have a different type of agenda and approach that's fine [but] I find this happens in aboriginal communities a lot, there is a non-native agency or mechanism that has a certain agenda and they will engage with

an aboriginal organization or community and sort of lead them down a road that achieves their agenda but not necessarily the agenda of the aboriginal organization. Yet that organization is working in a climate of poverty, inequitable services, lack of housing, the social/economic climate is inequitable. (Interview with Youth Coordinator)

What is clear from this interview is that not only did the youth agency lack resources, but as well it was felt that the process that was meant to engage and enhance the capacity of their community was possibly doing the exact opposite. In the end, due to the limited resources and concern over the process, the focus groups ended up being poorly done, so much so that it was impossible to use the data for its intended purpose of answering common research questions on social inclusion for the GUIC Canada project as a whole.

Following the focus groups, the project moved into the PAR phase. As mentioned earlier, there were differing expectations and understandings of PAR between the research and youth agencies. The research agency believed that the “actions cannot be predetermined, for they flow from the research“ and that “inadvertently, organizations' eagerness to organize young people's perspectives and provide solutions took precedence over young people's own inquisitiveness”.<sup>17</sup> This perspective clashed with 3 of the youth agencies who considered that their internal processes and programs gave them the legitimacy to advocate on behalf of the young people they work with – in some cases because they actually were those youth – and that the role of the research was to validate and amplify the perspectives of the young people involved, not generate it. This issue strikes at the heart of the issue of legitimacy, and thus the issue of equality between the youth and research agencies. Who and/or what best determine a legitimate young people's voice – a research process or a youth agency? Can youth agencies presume to speak on behalf of young people?

To best understand the expectations of the youth groups we have created a table that outlines the projects which the youth agencies wished PAR to enhance<sup>18</sup>:

**Table 1. Youth Agency Activities**

Agency	Project	Inquiry
EYA	Community Gardening with Children (Year 1)	Empowering children to make healthy food choices
	Youth community asset mapping initiative (Year 2)	Identifying resources available to help queer and immigrant youth.
Redwire	Aboriginal youth representation in media	Researching impact of media images of Native people on developing cultural identity, and the 'urbanization' of indigenous youth
Heartwood	Skateboarding	Engaging youth in municipal planning, policy work on youth access to public space with a particular focus on skateboarding
Youth Commission, Ville de Gatineau	Young people's views on their current city and dreamed city.	Organizing <i>World Café consultations</i> that allow youth to be identified by young people during GUICC consultation activities.

Each of the youth organizations involved had programs in which they were currently engaging young people and which they wanted to use PAR to enhance. Many of the interview comments suggest that the organizations were looking to the GUIC program to enable their agency to further engage the young people in their programs in research leading to action. The interviews also reflected the frustration in having to answer already pre-determined research questions, which drew away the focus and resources of the agencies from their core work, to work that served the needs of the larger project and the funders.

What became clear in the interviews is that there seemed to be a lack of an articulated understanding, both by research and the youth agencies, of what the strengths and weaknesses were of the youth agencies, and from this understanding, what roles these agencies could and should play.

The table below outlines the assets of the youth and research agencies as they relate to the project.

**Table 2. Partner Assets**

	Youth	Youth Agencies	Research Agency
Research skills	No	Yes, limited	Yes
Localized Community Knowledge	Yes	Yes	No
Localized youth programs	Yes	Yes	No
Community relationships	Yes	Yes	No
Funding	No	Yes, limited	Yes

What we can see in Table 2 is that the youth and youth agencies have strength in the communities, and the research agency has strength in research and in funding<sup>19</sup>. These assets framed within the conflict over the participatory nature of the research, suggest that the degree of importance given to the assets of the youth and youth agencies was less than that given to the assets of the research agency. Though PAR is meant to both empower those who traditionally do not have a voice in the system and value local knowledge, what is evident from the interviews was that the weight was given to the researchers who arguably had more power within the project due to their skills in research and as the lead administrative agency within the project.

With these challenges in place, it would make sense that the project as a whole not be successful, yet this does seem to be the case. In interviewing the youth who were involved, it was clear that there were some positive outcomes to the project.<sup>20</sup>

It [GUIC Canada] put a spotlight on the great work Skateboarders are doing and helped us find a forum to support that work. Our youth researcher was able to put focused intent into serving them with Heartwood's program tools and processes. (Adult interview, 2008)

I was always excited about showing my video [completed by the project]. I remember someone mentioned that they had seen my video at a local university as part of their course. I had done a similar play during school but I got feedback that the video really told my experience and story well. It also created an opportunity for

me to lead other projects- I wouldn't have my current position had it not been for the skills I attained through making that video. (Youth coordinator interview, 2008)

These statements demonstrate that some of the groups had a positive experience, and this was especially seen around the production of the video.<sup>21</sup> Yet still, some of the groups felt that though there was success, it was not due to the larger group processes.

I wouldn't do it again unless I had certain needs met ... I think we have captured the voices of 12 young people on our GUIC video and we have workshopped that from here to Nairobi and around the world. So, in saying that I have to pay respect to the voices of young people that were in that video, and that came through the project. I have a certain commitment toward that. But I think that is something that we did differently than what was designed in the contract. (Youth Coordinator interview, 2008)

So, if there were inequalities within the project, how were positive outcomes attained? Were the successful outcomes of the projects achieved despite the inequalities? One possible answer is that the youth development processes utilized by the youth agencies positively influenced these larger systemic inequalities and contributed to making GUIC Canada as well as the youth a "head taller". The following section reviews the youth development processes of the youth agencies project and their effects on GUIC Canada.

### 3. A YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO PAR

Personally I was pushed to new areas, being familiar with municipal governance and policy, but not so much with PAR. Support from the GUIC team helped greatly on this area. (Youth interview, 2008)

One of the key focuses of GUIC Canada was to "engage young people and adults in processes of critical inquiry to bring about change in a timely and inclusive manner" while "empowering participants by building on their strengths."<sup>22</sup> Though a tall order, for some, GUIC Canada was successful in engaging youth and giving them the supportive space to empower and advance themselves and their community's development. This was achieved through the youth agencies both creating a safe and enabling space while challenging the youth they were working with to extend themselves into roles and developmental tasks that they may not have undertaken before. The creation of a safe enabling environment and the extension of youth into new roles combines three constructs which are helpful in understand the work of the GUIC partners:

- 1 Zone of Proximal Development
- 2 Peer-to-peer models of training
- 3 Guided Participation strategies.

The following section of the paper will give a brief description of these constructs and outline how they led to the success of the GUIC.

#### A. THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Les Vygotsky posits that adolescent development is a process that occurs between a young person's actual development and a young person's potential development – the difference between the two being the *Zone of Proximal Development*. ZPD is defined as "those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state".<sup>23</sup> These embryonic not yet fully achieved functions he metaphorically calls the *buds and flowers* of a child's development, versus those functions that have already developed which he terms the *fruits*.

In keeping with this metaphor, we assert that the role of adult is not to solely harvest the fruits of youth's development but as well tend the buds and flowers. What we have found through our interviews is that the youth identified that the activities of the project

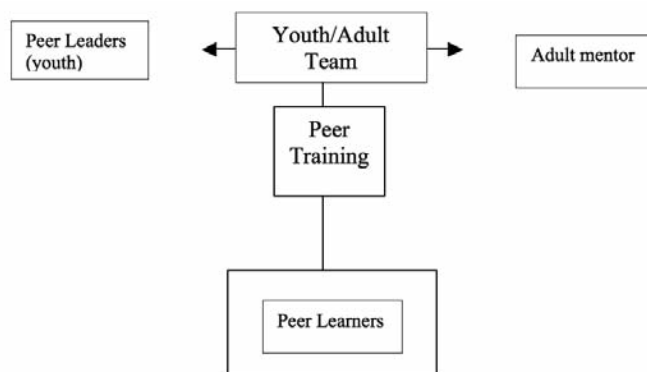


were challenging and that the support and mentorship of adults was key to the success for the youth. Vygotsky calls the challenges that youth face in taking on new roles as “performing a head taller”.<sup>24</sup> The quote from the youth at the start of this section exemplifies this with the comment of being “personally pushed into new areas”. Combined with the high rating and praise given in regards to the skills training within the program, it demonstrates a supportive adult environment did exist.

What is also interesting and applicable to this discussion is that ZPD is not an independent function of the development of the child or youth, but it is “the level of potential development *as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers*”.<sup>25</sup> This speaks to the peer-to-peer and adult-to-youth education that seems to be at the core of the GUIC Canada process. For example, in three of the sites there was as a clear “youth led” peer-to-peer training process. These peer-to-peer processes were common practice amongst the partner groups yet not extensively documented. The following outlines one of those emergent peer-to-peer processes.

## B. PEER-TO-PEER TRAINING

The following is a diagram of a youth led peer-to-peer training methodology developed by the Environmental Youth Alliance for the UN HABITAT Global Partnership Initiative for Urban Youth Development.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 1.**  
Peer-to-peer training methodology

This methodology was inspired in part by the work done through the GUIC program. The methodology supposes that adult mentors and peer leaders (youth) work together as a team to develop and deliver a training program. This in turn transfers knowledge and skills to peer learners, eventually encouraging and empowering them to become leaders who will further develop and exchange their training to other peers. The EYA and UN HABITAT first tested this model in delivering entrepreneurship programs in youth centres in East Africa.<sup>27</sup> An evaluation of this program found that over 90% of the youth participants agreed that having a peer and an adult instructor involved in their training was beneficial. One participant stated that: “the older adults bring vast experience and knowledge. The younger (youth) bring enthusiasm and sense of belonging”.<sup>28</sup> This methodology not only applies to training, but as well to organizational management<sup>29</sup>. Organizations such as Peacechild International have developed “co-management” models that utilize youth/adult structures.<sup>30</sup> This methodology lends itself well to ZPD, as the youth/adult relationship facilitates youth’s involvement in roles that are new, and pushes them beyond their current development.

Another possible strategy utilized by the youth agencies in GUIC was that of Adult Guided Participation.<sup>31</sup>

## C. GUIDED PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH ACTIVISM

Forms of adult guided participation such as *facilitation*, *apprenticeship* and *joint work* are concepts developed by researcher Ben Kirshner on youth activist agencies. Kirshner sought to better understand how adults and youth managed the tensions between meaningfully engaging youth in a program while at the same time delivering sometimes complex outputs. The concept of guided participation is important to the understanding of the role of adults/older youth leaders in the GUIC Canada process.

**Figure 2.** Differences between Facilitation, Apprenticeship, and Joint Work

		Youth-centered Learning environment	
		More	Less
Adult participation in the campaign	More	Apprenticeship	Joint work
	Less	Facilitation	

The above table demonstrates the strategies that adults can utilize to manage youth’s participation. In the context of GUIC, this matrix can be understood along two dimensions: 1) the extent to which adults participated in the local project and 2) the extent to which activities were structured for youth’s interest and skill levels.<sup>32</sup> Three GUIC Canada agencies could be classified as activist groups under Kirshner’s definition<sup>33</sup>.

These agencies each utilized the apprenticeship strategy. The following is a brief description on how each of the organizations utilized this strategy.

### **EYA**

The role of the adult partner in the EYA was one of a coach, where the adult stepped in when there was either a crisis, or when the sharing of knowledge or networks was deemed necessary. EYA as well used “scaffolding” where support was given and slowly taken

away as the youth develops skills and networks. Scaffolding is a key aspect of the ZPD, representing the way adults support youth in new roles, until those roles become the norm for the youth and they can continue onto a new developmental task. The youth researcher took on many new, complex and challenging roles within the project ranging from designing the research to the creation of a video to reporting to the funder.

### **Redwire**

In Redwire the adults were indirectly involved in the GUIC Canada project, so it could be said that Redwire utilized a modified apprenticeship strategy. An older, more experienced youth took on the role of coordinator/researcher, a role that was played by both an adult and a youth in other GUIC Canada projects. This dual role was in part due to the youth led focus of the group, but as well was out of necessity due to lack of funding. Support for the youth coordinator/researcher was in the form of internal youth staff support through an older youth who was managing the organization. The youth coordinator/researcher had the most responsibility of any of the youth coordinators, being responsible for the most of the administrative tasks as well as the research and programmatic components of the program.

### **Heartwood**

Heartwood fit similarly into the apprenticeship model, where an adult partnered with a youth to deliver the program, and provided support and coaching when needed. Heartwood differed from the other agencies in that it focused on smaller towns in Nova Scotia, and was at times challenged to maintain youth involvement due to the smaller populations of these towns (Youth interview). This meant that the role of the youth in engaging and recruiting was key to the success of the program.

In each of the above three agencies we find that the guided participation of the youth by adults or older youth was key to the success of the project, and as well supported a positive ZPD experience.

Without the youth's involvement, many aspects of the project would not have been successful. We find in all cases there was a strong youth centred learning environment, where adults or older youth would step in when needed to support both the youth learning, as well as the outputs, of the program.

### *Finding Nuanced Constructs of Youth and Adults Roles*

In the three examples given here – the zone of proximal development, peer-to-peer training and guided participation – we see more nuanced ways of understanding the roles of youth and adults within a program. We can see that it is important to give youth leadership roles, and allow them to be a “head taller”. ZPD recognizes that youth can work in roles that they are not accustomed to, and combined with peer-to-peer models and guided participation, gives adults a range of options on how they can work with youth. These constructs are based on an equitable process, where the strengths and weaknesses of adults and youth are recognized and concretely compensated for.

On a negative note, when youth were pressed beyond their abilities, where the tasks were not properly supported, they found it difficult to complete the tasks given to them and they became stressed and at times the projects were compromised. What this suggests is that a balance must be struck between supporting and sometimes pushing youth to take on new roles and activities, while at the same time being supportive when the need is there. For example, the creation of the videos by the GUIC Canada project was identified by all the groups as a very positive output of the project, yet it was also seen as a task that was very difficult to do, with few resources and little support. GUIC Canada embodied these challenges, and though they were significant, they were balanced by some significant successes.

## **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

I think that there was strong intention to create equality for young people ... but it wasn't necessarily creating conditions for individuals to realize their full human rights. It was

wanting to and trying to but I don't know that it succeeded in that. There were some young people who increased their self-esteem and were able to access, in our case, a skate park, and felt good about that and took leadership. It is not necessarily the fault of GUIC, but it is just the reality that equality doesn't happen in two years, it's a life long kinda thing. (Adult interview, 2008)

The purpose of this article has been to challenge the unspoken understanding that youth and youth agencies are in a condition of equality when entering a PAR project with research agencies. We posited that the goal of GUIC Canada as a youth PAR process should not be one of equality between the participants, but of equity, a process that encapsulates actions that compensate for current and past historical and social disadvantages. The disadvantages in the GUIC Canada project took the form of lack of funding, inability to effect the research questions and methodologies, and non-recognition of the assets of the youth and youth agencies. What we found was that an equitable process was created when these disadvantages were compensated for through the youth agencies creating a safe environment within their agencies that allowed the adults and older youth to take on roles that supported the youth to take on activities that were new to them, and move both their own development and the success of the project a “head taller”.

We propose three actions that can be taken that to create an equitable environment in PAR projects similar to GUIC Canada:

1. Recognition of the assets of youth and youth agencies involved;
2. A defined and transparent clarification of the roles of adults and youth;
3. Implementing PAR as both a youth development and an advocacy project.

The youth and youth agencies within the GUIC Canada project brought a broad range of experience both through projects and

programs they historically ran within their communities and as well as through skills such as the use and implementation of PAR. Explicit acknowledgement of what agencies bring is a fundamental way in which to establish where their contributions are valued.

The safe and supportive environment that was characteristic within GUIC Canada could be attributed to clarity associated with understanding roles and responsibilities. Knowing who and where to go for support successfully underpinned many successes, as did the understanding of what youth were to do in the process. This transparency can potentially give participants understanding and respect of each other's skills.

Adopting a PAR methodology in GUIC Canada provided creative and mixed opportunities of data collection for and by youth. This in itself is an enabling factor to promote learning, build life experience, organize, and empower for those involved. When the opportunities for youth to champion and report back are created it can close the loop in advocating for and by those who are subject to the research itself.

What we found in our research was that in the GUIC Canada project the youth and youth agencies were not on equal footing with the research agency. We found that the context and framework within which the project worked placed the research agency in a position of having to mandate predetermined research questions, undermining the basic tenant of PAR being that the marginalized group is to determine the questions to be asked based on their lived experience. We also found that there was a conflict between the research agency and the youth agencies about who legitimately can represent youth, who can determine what is to be researched and the research question itself. This conflict confused the research process, and caused negative consequences for both the project, youth and youth agencies due to lost time and loss of interest for some of the youth involved. But, even though these inequalities existed, the project still had some significant positive outcomes. This led us to look for and provide discourse on what processes within the individual GUIC projects facilitated contributed to this success.

In using the three different concepts in reviewing youth/adult relationship – the zone of proximal development, peer-to-peer training and guided participation – we argued that these concepts facilitated the positive development of youth involved in the GUIC Canada projects and contributed to the success of the projects themselves. Though the overall structure of the project was unequal, the work of the youth agencies in creating an equitable relationship using the concepts reviewed here within the local projects went a long way in affecting the fairness of the project. In the end we concur with Friere when he stated that “the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world”.<sup>34</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 International Children's Conference on the Environment 2002, Victoria B.C.
- 2 Blanchet-Cohen, Ragan, & Amsden, "Children becoming social actors".
- 3 BBC News, "World summit in quotes".
- 4 For this paper, we will attempt to be as deliberate as possible in age specification. If the age range is ambiguous we will use the term "young people".
- 5 For specific examples of this see Checkoway, Pothukuchi, & Finn, "Youth participation in community planning" and also Frank, "The potential of youth participation in planning".
- 6 See Driskell, *Creating better cities with children and youth*.
- 7 Chawla, Blanchet-Cohen, Cosco, Driskell, Kruger, Malone, Moore and Percy-Smith, "Don't just listen- do something!"
- 8 The notion of seeking a consistently equitable process is addressed in Government of Canada, "Status of Women", in *Gender based analysis: A guide for policy making / Analyse comparative entre les sexes: Guide d'élaboration de politiques*.
- 9 For discussion on PAR as a methodology see Wadsworth, *What is Participatory Action Research?*
- 10 Hart, *Children's participation*.
- 11 It is worth noting here the challenges faced when utilizing tools, such as Hart's Ladder, which are designed to be for children and youth up until the ages of 18, as per the Convention on the Rights of the Child definition, yet used for youth who are outside this definition – 18 to 25. This project worked with youth, from 18 to 25, from the youth agency partners who then worked with children in the GUIC programs they delivered. This paper attempts to posit different more nuanced ways in which adults can work with youth beyond 18 years old.
- 12 Blanchet-Cohen, Ragan, & Amsden, "Children becoming social actors".
- 13 Specifics of this grant and the project can be found in International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD).
- 14 This focus was in part due to the guidelines of the Government of Canada, the primary granting agency.
- 15 Chawla, Blanchet-Cohen, Cosco, et al., "Don't just listen- do something!"
- 16 The Canadian government at this time had a strong commitment to social inclusion, as it was seen as important to the overall health of the community.
- 17 Chawla, Blanchet-Cohen, Cosco, et al., "Don't just listen- do something!"
- 18 Of the three youth agencies Ville de Gatineau Youth Commission was the only group that ended up creating a separate program specifically related to GUIC Canada, while the other agencies all focused on already existing programs.
- 19 IICRD was the lead agency for the project and received the funding directly from the government. There was informal consultation on the budget but the

project was structured and promoted as an IICRD project.

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