

## The Role of Youth in Education Research

Research provides important insights into education policies and practices that support learning and development. Although adult researchers may possess extensive expertise in both theory and practice to conduct rigorous and high-quality research, they often lack firsthand knowledge of youth experiences.<sup>1</sup> Youth's firsthand experience with how current education policies and practices support their learning can offer unique knowledge and expertise that may be inaccessible to adults.<sup>2, 3</sup>

Engaging youth and adults as partners in research can leverage their collective expertise to gain deeper insights into how education policies and practices support youth learning and development,<sup>4</sup> and incorporating youth into the design, implementation, analysis, and/or dissemination stages of research can increase the accuracy and validity of research findings.<sup>5</sup> For example, during data collection, youth participants may be more comfortable sharing their experiences with their peers than with adults, and during data analysis, youth may have insights into the experiences that students shared that may be missed by adults.<sup>6</sup>



## Engaging Youth in Research

There are multiple ways to structure opportunities for youth to engage in education research.<sup>7</sup> These include:



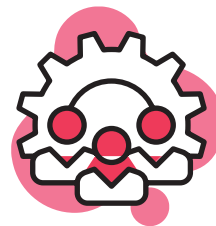
**Youth as research participants.** Adults conduct research on youth and youth serve as the data source. Adult researchers are experts and hold ownership over the research process and data use.

- Example: An adult researcher administers a survey to students to understand their perceptions of school climate.



**Youth as research informants.** Adults solicit feedback from youth during the research process. Adult researchers are experts and hold ownership over research process and data use.

- Example: An adult researcher asks students to provide feedback on the questions asked in a school climate survey to ensure that questions capture student experiences.



**Youth as research assistants.** Adults include youth in the research process. Adult researchers are experts on conducting the research and youth researchers are experts on collecting data. Adults share limited ownership over research process and data use with youth.

- Example: An adult researcher enlists students to help collect data from their peers on a school's climate through surveys, interviews, and focus groups.



**Youth as research partners.** Adults partner with youth to conduct research. Both adult and youth researchers are experts and hold joint ownership over research process and data use.

- Example: An adult researcher partners with students to conduct research on a school's climate.

# Promising Practices for Engaging Youth in Education Research

The following promising practices offer some ways to ensure that youth and adults are supported in conducting research and that research is conducted in an ethical way when engaging youth as research informants, assistants, or partners.



**Consider the importance of engaging youth in research.** Desired benefits for including youth could include: understanding youths' unique perspectives on a topic, building the capacity of youth to conduct research, or building the capacity of adults to understand youth experiences.



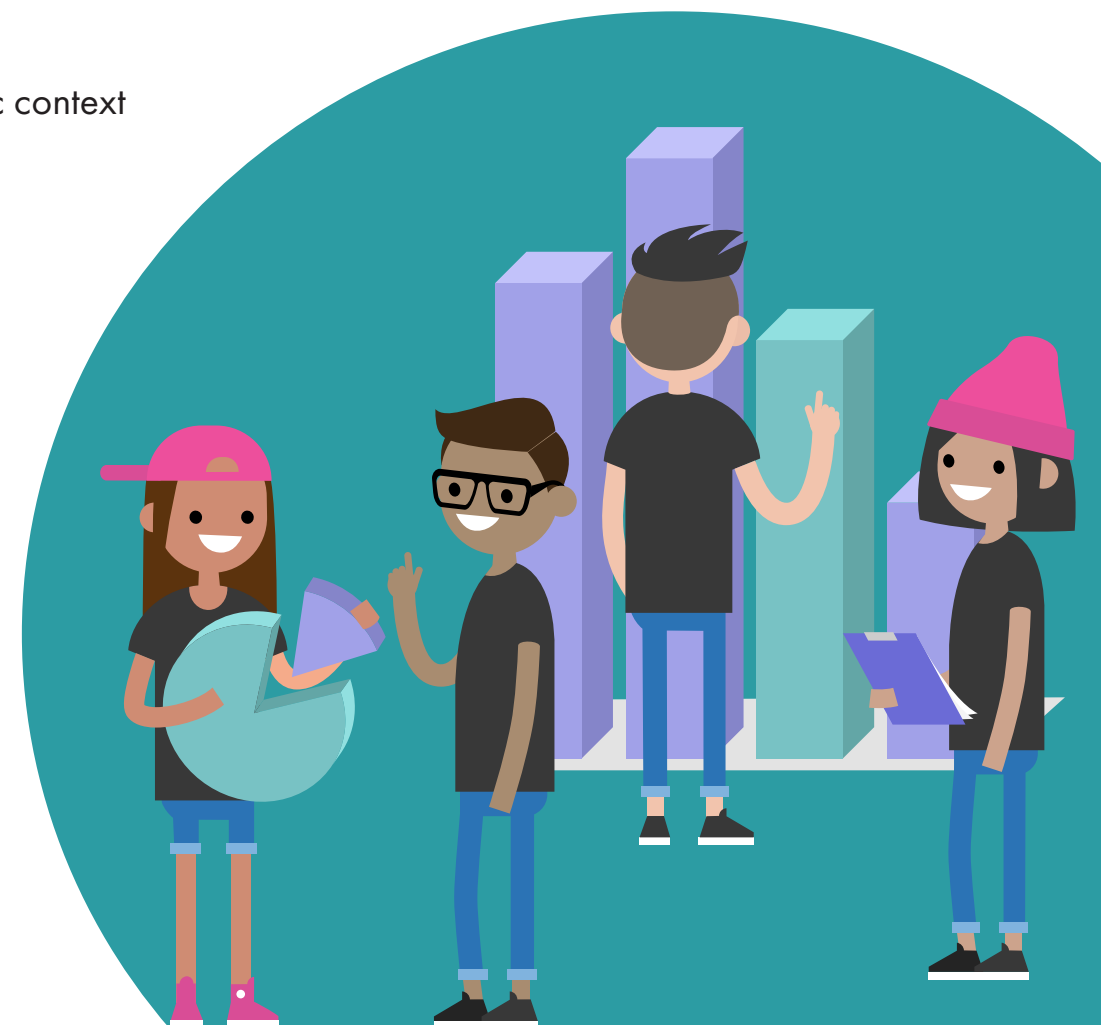
**Establish criteria and a plan for recruitment.** Be intentional about how youth are recruited.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup> It is important to engage a wide range of youth, not just youth who are "high achieving." Example questions to consider when recruiting youth:

- What specific youth and adult perspectives are valuable to the research topic?
- What level of commitment (for example, time) and skills (for example, language or research) do youth and adults need to participate?
- How old do youth need to be to participate? Consider how age may affect what roles youth can perform.<sup>11</sup>
- What strategies, such as recruiting youth from a specific course or program, may be helpful for your specific context and research?
- Are there funds available to compensate youth for their time and to remove financial barriers, such as the need to hold a part-time job?<sup>12</sup>

Youth and adult researchers should understand the personal benefits (and potential risks) of participation.<sup>13</sup>

**Define collective expectations.** Collaborate with youth to establish clearly defined roles and responsibilities for both youth and adults.<sup>14, 15, 16, 17</sup> Efforts to define collective expectations early on can minimize tokenization. Tokenization is broadly defined as a symbolic effort on the part of researchers to be inclusive of youth in which they don't truly include youth ideas, feelings, and thoughts in decision making. Consider:

- How will decisions be made? How will youth and adults be included in decision-making?
- What will the role of youth and adults be in executing research activities?
- How will youth and adults resolve conflicts if they arise?





**Consider cultural and contextual factors.** Work with youth, especially historically marginalized youth, should always include attention to the cultural and contextual factors that are relevant for the populations of interest.<sup>18</sup> When engaging youth in research:

- Consider the needs of all youth and reduce barriers to participation (for example, flexible meeting times and formats, monetary stipends).<sup>19, 20</sup>
- Build upon youths' different backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, skills, and perspectives to develop a research project that reflects diverse perspectives.<sup>21</sup>
- Consider and acknowledge the different areas of power (for example, race, ethnicity, gender, and ability) that youth and adults have within research to address imbalances. It is important to be sensitive to cultural norms (for example, the importance of listening to adults) while ensuring that all youth researchers' views are taken into account and play a role in the research.<sup>22</sup>



**Build positive relationships.** In youth and adult partnerships, building a positive relationship is essential.<sup>23</sup> To develop and maintain a positive relationship, both youth and adults should:

- Foster an environment of mutual respect between youth and adults. Acknowledge the expertise that youth and adults bring to the space.<sup>24</sup>
- Involve a trusted facilitator (youth or adult) to oversee and monitor the process as needed.<sup>25</sup> The trusted facilitator can help support youth engagement in research and support youth in navigating conflicts (within the research team or external) that may arise.<sup>26</sup>
- Construct clear, transparent, and safe lines of communication where youth and adults feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas, and questions.<sup>27</sup>



**Provide professional learning for youth.** Help develop and strengthen youth skillsets and understandings about how research can be carried out.<sup>28, 29</sup> Professional learning can:

- Support youth in understanding the general purpose and types of research, including helping youth understand methodologies, data collection tools, and data types.
- Align with the specific role(s) that youth will take in research.
- Teach and reinforce principles for conducting ethical research.<sup>30</sup>
- Support youth in understanding how to translate experiences into future collegiate and work opportunities.



# Conducting Education Research with Youth as Partners

Including youth as partners in research requires shared ownership over the research process and data use by both youth and adult researchers. This section details several stages of the research process and describes how youth and adults can collaborate within each stage.



**Stage 1 | Develop the research study.** Youth participation in the development phase is important to ensure that youth perspectives and experiences are included and prioritized. Further, early youth involvement helps mitigate potential tokenization. At this stage, you can involve youth by co-developing research questions with an eye to wording, tone, etc. While developing the study, consider collaborating with youth to identify the specific quantitative (for example, descriptive or correlational) and/or qualitative (for example, thematic analysis) approach for analyzing the data.<sup>31, 32, 33</sup>



**Stage 2 | Define methodology and collect data.** Identify the quantitative and/or qualitative methods that will be used collect data (for example, surveys, interviews, focus groups, or secondary data sources, which include already collected data). Develop data collection instruments (for example, surveys, protocols) in collaboration with youth. At this stage, consider the specific role youth and adults will play in data collection. Adult supervision may be needed. You might also consider embedding a reflection period for youth and adults to discuss their data collection experiences.



**Stage 3 | Analyze collected data.** Youth should have the opportunity to be involved in all stages of the analytical process, including analyzing and interpreting the collected data. Involving youth in data analysis is important to ensure nuances in youth experiences are captured and retained.<sup>34</sup> At this stage, consider the specific role youth and adults will play in data analysis. Depending on the type of data used, youth may not have permission to access and analyze the data (for example, personally identifiable data). When the analysis is completed, provide youth with the opportunity to individually and collectively review findings to ensure that interpretations reflect youth experiences. Embed a reflection period for youth and adults to discuss their data analysis experiences.



**Stage 4 | Summarize and present research findings.** This stage provides an important opportunity for youth to reflect on and share their experiences.<sup>35</sup> At this stage, the product should clearly identify and acknowledge the specific role(s) and contribution(s) that adults and youth provided. When finalizing the product(s), provide youth with the opportunity to individually and collectively comment on the product to ensure that youth voices and experiences are captured.

**Go a step further | Support youth in taking action based on research findings.** Youth-adult research partnerships can generate useful research data and energize a desire in youth to address education issues that are meaningful to them.<sup>34, 35</sup> Mentor youth in taking action by helping youth consider how research can inform practice and spark change. Empower youth knowledge and leadership and encourage youth to continue to conduct research on issues in their communities and use their findings to facilitate change.



## Considerations for Conducting Ethical Research With Youth

Partnering with youth to conduct research needs to be planned with care to ensure that risk is minimized. This involves practicing a wide range of ethical research practices.<sup>36</sup> When partnering with youth in research, consider the following:



Check your school, district, and state policies for conducting research prior to engaging youth as researchers.



Keep in mind safety issues involved in undertaking research with youth, including potential risks to youth, adults, and the community/stakeholders.<sup>37</sup>



Balance the need to protect youth with the benefits of participation.<sup>38</sup>

# Student-Centered Data Collection Techniques



**Surveys.** Provide opportunities for youth to co-develop surveys designed to understand students' experiences in learning (for example, school climate, well-being, engagement, or mental health).



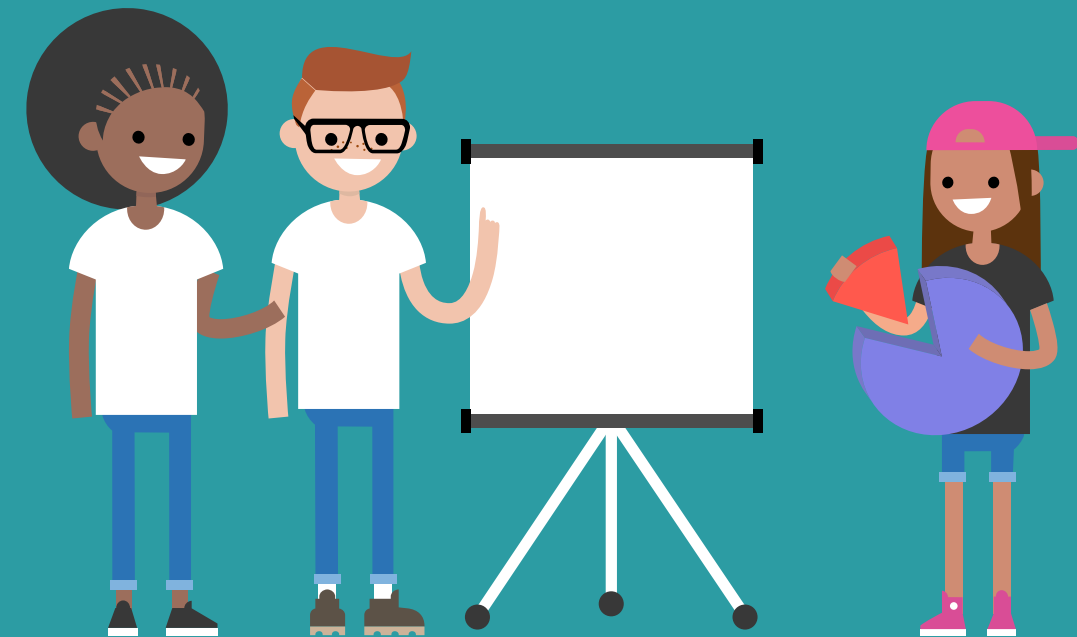
**Interviews/Focus Groups.** Work with youth to design interview or focus group protocols to investigate the research topic. Empower youth to facilitate interviews or focus groups, as youth participants may be more comfortable discussing their experience with a youth facilitator.



**Observations.** Collaborate with youth to identify contexts in order to observe insights into the research topic. Encourage youth to conduct observations alongside adults to understand how youth and adults may perceive a context differently.



**Photo Voice.** Co-construct photo voice protocols with youth to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. Support youth in facilitating conversations with youth participants about their photos, as youth may be more comfortable sharing their stories with youth facilitators.



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