

GOLDEN RESEARCH THOUGHTS

TRENDS, ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES IN WORKING WITH YOUTH IN INDIA



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Abstract :

Young people are an integral part of society, a major resource and a key agent for social change, economic development and technological innovation. Their imagination, ideals, energies and vision are essential for the continuing development of the societies of which they are members. Youth workers, social scientists, educators, policy makers and NGOs in face the same problems and challenges in enabling young people and creating an environment for active participation.

The motive behind the birth of this article is to bring to the notice of all youth workers that there is a need to continue the creation of space for all those who work with young people, and who take decisions affecting young people's lives, also to be more reflective in their approach and to challenge themselves to involve young people actively in all areas of social life. Young people can only commit themselves to active participation and full integration in society when they find 'enabling' environments for the fulfilment of their civic potential and when their actual needs and conditions are taken into account.

Young people of this modern era have created numerous trends in all walks of life which led them into advancement of all technologies but made them to face unexpected challenges that resulted in mass destruction. Unless there is a change of attitude which portrays youth as human resource than a problem, there would be no visible changes and no better environment to live. This article attempt to throw some light on the trends, advances and challenges in working with youth with special focus on development, participation, justice, sexuality, health and well-being.

Keywords: Youth, Youth work, Youth Policy, Youth development, Youth Participation.

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INTRODUCTION

The young people of today are growing up in a micro-chip age characterized by economic uncertainty, steeply rising unemployment and major technological change arising from widespread application of computers. This rapid change and the attending attitudes of society affect the personal and social development of young people. A prosperous, happy and safe India is possible when young minds are empowered with an indomitable spirit through the participation of young people. Young people of today are maturing in an environment completely different from past generations. The present demographic, economic and social changes in the global society affect the life situation and lifestyles of young people.

In general, young people are trapped in the dichotomous paradigm of being simplistically portrayed either as a 'problem' or as a 'human resource'. I believe that one of the greatest assets we have today is our young people. When ignited, their minds are possibly the earth's greatest resource. The understanding the needs of youth and their participation necessitates attention to the formulation, adoption, implementation and evaluation of national policies and plans for youth in each country. Young people's opinions are frequently overlooked in the public policy sphere. Because their voices are not heard; the concerns or opinions of youth never reach the top of the political agenda¹.

My experience of working with young people and studying youth work in India enabled me to reflect on the importance of these changes and their impact on young people. In this study, I set out to answer the following research question: What are the trends, advances and challenges in working with youth of today's India and how can these explained in socio-cultural, economic, educational and environmental contexts? At the outset, I acknowledge that this paper is solely extracted from my doctoral thesis. The research method is 'interview analysis' which is merely the involvement of 12 personal interviews. It is empirical in nature. In this research work, the purpose is to understand the problems of today's youth in order to find a new way to approach them. Therefore, the aim is not only to interpret the result of interviews, but also to reveal the core message in thoughts and the connections between the various trends, problems and challenges.

It is an undeniable duty for me to explain the term 'Youth' before we venture into the core of the article. The meaning of the term 'youth' varies in different societies. Furthermore, definitions of youth have changed continuously in response to fluctuating political, economic and socio-cultural circumstances². Often they are viewed as 'citizens in the making' and 'not yet adult' and they do not deserve equal treatment in policy terms³. As both an idea and a word, 'youth' denotes the position of a person in the social hierarchy⁴. Selvam argues persuasively that youth is a stage in life between childhood and adulthood⁵. Denstad maintains that the concept of youth is socially constructed rather than biologically determined, because it differs with time, socio-economic development of a society, and even according to whom you ask. Around the world, the terms 'youth', 'adolescent', 'teenager', and 'young person' are used interchangeably, often meaning the same thing, only occasionally differentiated⁶. In some situations the youth category may be based on one's social circumstances rather than the chronological age or cultural position. Related categories like adolescent, teenager, or young adult provide a greater degree of specificity concerning age, but they also vary in their application across contexts.

According to National Youth Policy 2014, Youth is defined differently by different countries and in different contexts. United Nations defines 'youth' as persons between 15 to 24 years of age⁷. In the National Youth Policy 2003, 'youth' was defined as a person of age between 13-35 years, but in the current policy Document, the youth age-group is defined as 15-29 years with a view to have a more focused approach, as far as various policy interventions are concerned⁸.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Youth Development is a process by which young people acquire competencies and positive connections to self, others and the larger community. It is a combination of all of the people, places, supports, opportunities and services that young people need to be happy, healthy and successful. To be more precise, Youth Development is in essence, all of the essentials necessary for young people to move from childhood into positive, productive adulthood. As a vector for youth development, Socio-culture plays an essential role in promoting sustainable development for future generations. Youth can act as bridge between society and culture and serve as key agents in promoting peace and intercultural understanding.

Young people's experiences are key in shaping the future of society. Their ambitions, goals and aspirations for peace, security, development and human rights are often in accord with those of society as a whole⁹. The basic objective of youth development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives, but this is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth¹⁰. The word 'development' has various meanings that reflect foundational assumptions about relationships between the individual and society, particularly with regard to human welfare and these assumptions permeate research, policy, and programmes¹¹. Human development on the societal level may be defined as 'a process of enlarging people's choices', particularly the acquisition and use of capabilities 'to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living'. Additional choices, highly valued by many people, range from political, economic and social

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freedom to opportunities for being creative and productive, and enjoying personal self-respect and guaranteed human rights¹².

Unfortunately, Youth are particularly affected by development challenges at all levels, frequently faced with disproportionately high levels of unemployment, insufficient access to education and professional training, intolerance and exclusion, among others. This is all the more important in cities where increased urbanization has further accentuated these challenges for young people.

Economic growth has created an urgent need for trained young people as well as for change in educational and occupational structures in ways that give young workers a competitive advantage. The modern labour market is characterised by a decline of routine work, growth in information technologies, and a shift towards a service economy. There is an increased need for teaming up with others and to prepare youth for these challenges. At the global level, educational systems have been forced to change. Schools and colleges have begun promoting knowledge management and soft skills, such as communicating effectively, critical thinking, and problem solving.¹³

Education has long been considered as a universal catalyst for poverty reduction, health improvements and overall social-economic development¹⁴. Jeffrey and McDowell state that both in Western and non-Western countries the value of formal education is recognised as a means of combating entrenched privilege and creating human capital by the young people themselves, the family, government, non-governmental organisations, and local people. Yet such ideas have routinely been the subject of criticism: from the radical de-schoolers to scholars who stress the role of formal education in creating failure as a social label. Others have pointed to the role of school and post-school education in the reproduction of overt national, religious, gendered, class identities and class beliefs. Young people in many areas, and particularly the poor, are trapped between declining state support and increasing familial and personal ambitions¹⁵. Although this is a worldwide trend, considerable differences among countries exist, depending on the legislation regulating access to secondary and higher education and on economic prosperity. Furthermore, individual characteristics, such as family socioeconomic status, remain important determinants of participation in further education¹⁶.

The educational and health initiatives for human development have achieved results on a global scale that include worldwide school enrolments at 67.5 percent of all age-appropriate children, literacy rates of 83.9 percent among adults over age 15, and a life expectancy of 67.5 years by 2007. On the other hand, thanks to the global consensus that led to the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), young people are increasingly the focus of international attention because there are over 200 million youth living in poverty, 130 million illiterate, 88 million unemployed, and 10 million living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS)¹⁷. In 2010, the global youth unemployment rate remained at 12.6 percent (compared to 21.1 percent in the European Union), dramatically overshadowing the global adult unemployment rate of 4.8 percent. It is unsurprising, therefore, that during economic downturns, young people are often the 'last in' and the 'first out' – the last to be hired, and the first to be dismissed. A recent analysis of global trends in labour market detected scant progress towards improving the position of youth in labour markets and concluded that 'young people still suffer disproportionately from a deficit of decent work opportunities'¹⁸.

The gap between economic growth and human development is neatly captured in a formative document which asserts that 'economic growth is essential for human development' and also that 'there is no automatic link between economic growth and human progress'¹⁹. This situation demands further investment in young people. Moreover, world leaders must also commit themselves to ensuring the well-being of the next generation and the achievement of many of the MDGs²⁰.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Youth participation in civil society and political life is increasingly recognized as an important development objective. The opportunities for participation that young people experience in their communities may influence their development and the kind of transitions they make to adulthood. Youth participation means that young people are citizens now and have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them²¹.

The concept of participation and involvement of youth have been stressed by most of the interviewees. For instance, Indian Interviewee Seven argues that 'we need to ask young people what they want for themselves, and it is sad that while framing policies for the youth, they are not part of the process.' Indian Interviewee Eleven goes a step further and demands reservation for youth in parliament: 'We talk about reservation. Why can't we reserve some seats in the parliament for young people?' Involving youth in politics would result in a manner wherein they are made into decision-makers, and to exercise an influence on policy making for themselves. It further adds the following: 'How many young people are there in the parliament? Should we not encourage that their voice is heard by ensuring that at least some seats are reserved for young politicians?'²²

Youth participation is at the core of good youth work. Good youth work is informed by young people deciding what they need and what they would like to take place. Youth organizations benefit from young people's involvement; if the young people have involvement and have ownership, they will value the work of the organization. Youth participation is necessary in order to keep young people engaged and to ensure that youth work is enjoyable.

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Youth participation requires the transfer of power from adults to young people. It is about a relationship that involves power with, rather than power over young people. It is about partnership with young people. It must involve efforts to allow all young people to become involved, through offering different kinds and different levels of involvement in decision-making. It must provide supervision and monitoring to support all young people, but particular efforts must be made to involve young people from diverse identities, circumstances and backgrounds. There are number of theorists who have proposed frameworks which articulate the degree of participation individuals have in any given project or social endeavor. One of the frameworks which helps us to critically reflect on the participation of youth in any of youth services is "Hart's Ladder of Participation." Hart's Ladder of participation describes the participation of young people in terms of a ladder. Each rung describing a different level of participation by young people going from rung 1 which sees young people as being manipulated whereby adults use young people to support causes and pretend these causes are inspired by young people to rung 8 where young people are fully involved in decision making with adults²³.

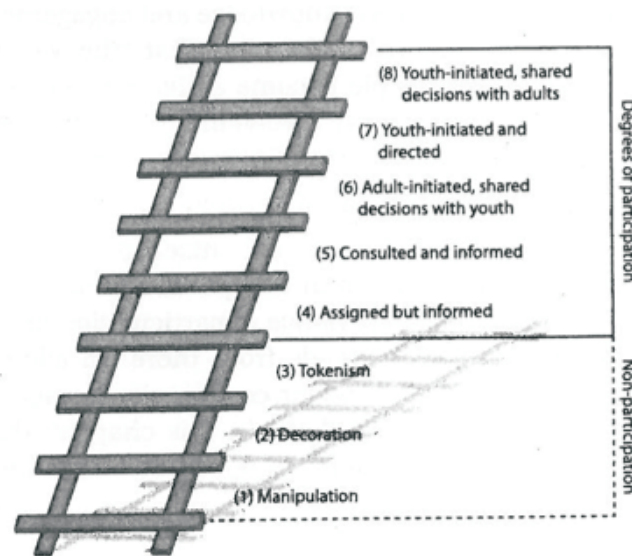


Figure 6.1: The ladder of participation (after Hart, R. (1992))

Hart makes it very clear that the bottom three rungs of the ladder are non-participation, while the top rung would be described as youth/adult partnership. While the upper levels of the ladder shows a great measure of involvement by young people, the lower level of the ladder does not give opportunity to young people to participate. These lower levels used young people to participate. In examining this ladder I think it is important to be mindful of its usage as a tool of measurement, i.e., that it is purely talking about the intent to involve young people, to engage them in meaningful participative action²⁴.

It is important to recognize that young people's ability to participate at different levels in matters that affect their lives varies according to their level of development. Adults engaging with young people should behave in a respectful way with a willingness to take them seriously and recognizing that young people have the capacity to reason and make decisions. When positioning ourselves as the powerful adult, being ageist in our own view and our actions and therefore not giving opportunity to young people to enhance their imagination, build on their self-confidence and sense of responsibility, will not enable young people to grow and glow.

YOUTH JUSTICE

As discussed earlier, defining and categorizing 'youth' differs from country to country, state to state. There are several Indian central and state legislations that define 'youth' for separate treatment. The Juvenile Justice Act-1986 states that a juvenile is a person below 18 years (for a boy) and 21 years (for a girl), while the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act 2000 specifies 18 years for both the genders. The Planning Commission of India (2002) refers to youth as the age group between 15 and 34 year. The Constitution, under its fundamental rights, prohibits employment of children below 14 years of age in any factory, mine or in any hazardous occupation²⁵.

Young people are often key actors in powerful social movements that transform the course of human history. They took part in many ways, including through the appropriation of the "new media" tools of their time, which they

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used to create, circulate, and amplify movement voices and stories. Yet today, youth are often framed in the mass media as, at best, apathetic, disengaged, and removed from civic action. Many young people have the desire and capacity to transform the world, and are looking for opportunities to do so. In fact, youth have been key actors in nearly every major social change in modern history. Youth can speak truth to power, in ways their peers can hear. Young activists often develop powerful concepts and use sophisticated aesthetic forms to call out or identify systems of oppression, speak up, and mobilize their peers.

Although youth have been and continue to be involved in progressive social justice, they face powerful challenges. Youth are mostly invisible, within the broader context of systematic misrepresentation of youth throughout the globalized media system. Positive messages about youth, while laudable, frequently focus on individual behavior change; youth are rarely represented as social participants or leaders²⁶.

Youth are often dismissed for a lack of civic engagement, or attacked for being disruptive. Yet disruption of oppressive laws, norms, and practices is a crucial aspect of all social injustice: think of the struggle to end slavery, or to gain suffrage for women. We should recognize and respect young people as potentially powerful social justice creators, and allocate resources to support, amplify, and extend their impact²⁷.

It is important to ensure that the youth of all backgrounds are free from discrimination, stigma and disadvantage; and have recourse to a justice system that is swift and equitable. It is important that an effort is made to mainstream the disadvantaged groups through affirmative action and other targeted programmes. Hence, it is important to create systems of education and moral transformation at the grassroots level to eliminate these practices of stigmatization and discrimination, and deliver social justice for all.

YOUTHSEXUALITY

Young people receive a range of conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender on a daily basis. Mostly young develop negative norms about themselves, about relationships and about their health as well as responsible citizenship. Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) emphasizes a holistic approach to human development and sexuality. UNESCO identifies the primary goal of sexuality education as that “children and young people become equipped with the knowledge, skills and values to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV.” The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) defines a rights-based approach to CSE as “to equip young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they need to determine and enjoy their sexuality – physically and emotionally, individually and in relationships”²⁸.

‘Sexuality’ within the context of emotional and social development, recognizing that the provision of information alone is not enough. Today’s young people face lot of challenges with regard to essential life skills and positive attitudes and values. Evidence has shown that comprehensive sexuality education that is scientifically accurate, culturally and age-appropriate, gender-sensitive and life skills-based can provide young people with the knowledge, skills and efficacy to make informed decisions about their sexuality and lifestyle.

Scholarly research during the last two decades has also shown that sexuality education does not increase rates of sexual activity among teenagers and does increase knowledge about sexual behavior and its consequences. It also reduces risk taking behaviors among those who are sexually active. When young people are equipped with accurate and relevant information, when they have developed skills in decision-making, negotiation, communication and critical thinking, and have access to counselling and services that are non-judgmental and affordable they are empowered.

It is a global template that can be adapted to national needs which takes a comprehensive approach to sexuality – and includes attention to human rights issues and gender. The development of the Guidance was motivated by the urgent need to address the knowledge gap on HIV prevention amongst young people. The Guidance lays out clearly what works in programming for HIV prevention or sexual health for young people and provides evidence to demonstrate that CSE does no harm – critical in many advocacy efforts²⁹.

The Guidance also provides the ‘how’; recommending that sexuality education should start at age five, building on basic concepts in a building block approach, and continue through childhood and adolescence. The Guidance gives a clear framework for the kind of learning objectives that are needed and the key concepts that should be covered in any set of curricula, for specific tranches of age. This is what it takes for me to be sexually healthy:

- ❖ I am comfortable with my body and my sexuality.
- ❖ I can talk effectively with my peers, family, and partners.
- ❖ I know my body and how it functions.
- ❖ I understand the risks, responsibilities, and consequences of sexual behavior.
- ❖ I am able to recognize risks and ways to reduce them.
- ❖ I know how to access and use health care services and information.
- ❖ I am able to set boundaries when it comes to sex and sexual relationships.
- ❖ I act responsibly according to my personal values³⁰.

YOUTHHEALTHANDWELL-BEING

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A concern with the health of the population is a further important factor influencing government policy. Health is not only the absence of any disease but the state of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Youth can be a time of energy, idealism and enthusiasm but it is also associated with a variety of physical and emotional challenges. Among those who commit suicide a considerable proportion are young people. It is estimated that 1.5 to 2 million young people commit suicide annually in India³¹. Young people are also victims of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases. One of the prime concerns of the Youth Policy of India 2012 is to work towards ensuring a healthy atmosphere for its young people, be it in the home, the work place or in public places³².

The growing issues related to the health of the young people required the government to initiate programmes that relate to youth nutrition and health³³. The National Health Policy (NHP) was first adopted in 1983 which gave the call for 'Health for all'. Other follow-on policies have all articulated India's commitment to promoting and protecting the health and rights of adolescents and youth, including those relating to mental, and sexual and reproductive health.

Delving on the health issues faced by the youth, Indian Interviewee Seven contends that not only physical health but mental, psychological, social and emotional health issues are a big problem among youth. Government does not seem to be doing enough to address these issues. The failure to address their mental and psychological health needs results in young people being driven to 'anti-social activities and there could be an increase in youth crimes'. Indian Interviewee Nine opines that today's youth are 'more and more prone to crimes and they become addicted to drugs, alcohol and substance abuse'. Indian Interviewee One too expresses a similar concern: 'Youth, both in urban and rural areas, have [an] alcoholic attitude and indulge in limitless drinking. For instance, in the state of Tamilnadu, the government itself has opened alcohol shops called the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC)'³⁴.

Indian Interviewee Nine argues that the success-driven Indian society has forced the young to commit suicides, get addicted to alcoholism because not all young people attain economic success. To address this issue, the government networked with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to meet the psychological needs of the youth. It made a study on the need for counselling in schools. Indian Interviewee Seven contends that adequate physical, emotional, and intellectual help is not offered for the young from their families. While there are counselling centres available in many western countries, this is not the case in India. The further argument says that 'when we talk about the health policy and health, the number of primary health centres are ok. But are there sufficient doctors, medicines, nurses and the like? So where can the young people access for their health-related issues? It is not enough to have health policies, youth policies and programmes, there should be political will to implement them'. Indian Interviewee Six contends that while children and mothers are covered by various health policies, the youth are a neglected category. She strongly contends that the health needs of the youth be studied, recognized and addressed by the government³⁵.

The holistic health of young people has become a challenge in contemporary highly- industrialised society. Governments are forced to address diverse issues arising from physical, mental, psychological, social and emotional health needs of young people. In India, the government does not seem to be doing enough to address these issues. The success-driven society has resulted in suicidal tendencies among youth. Indian Interviewee Six and Indian Interviewee Seven observe that there is a lack political will to implement health policies. The government itself accepts that it has had only limited success with regard to health care for youth. Unless a healthy lifestyle in youth increases the chances for a good quality of life as an adult they will be at risk. More importantly, the elements for good mental and physical fitness during the growth stage is at the stage of end³⁶.

CONCLUSION

Young people are the future of the country and they have the power to create significant impact not only as they grow older, but also right now. So how do we motivate and organize young people to help in this important work? How do we access this spirited resource in an effort to create healthier youth?

Young people in all countries are both a major human resource for development and a key agent for social change, economic development and technological innovation. Their imagination, ideals, considerable energies and visions are essential for the continuing development of the societies in which they live. Children and young people are gaining more respect in society, and are being allowed to have their say, which is now considered a basic human right. I believe that youth workers, social scientists, educators, policy makers and NGOs have an important role in creating an adequate environment that would enable young people towards active participation. There is a need to continue to create a space for youth workers to be reflective which will enable them to develop and challenge their approach and position in relation to their work with young people. Assisting young people to identify where the power lies, how procedures work and how to participate in their decisions can be part of a youth workers' role.

Young people can commit themselves to active participation and full integration in society only when they find, enabling, environments for the fulfillment of their civic potential and when their actual needs and conditions are taken into account. In India, a vast majority of young people have less opportunity or are denied participation in making decisions that affect their life. Many are not aware of their own rights, and the policies and programmes available for their empowerment. If the proper environment is created then 'genuine participation' of young people is possible which could enable them to pursue their rights and responsibilities as individual members of communities.

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This paper vividly presents the paradigm shift in life and youth work. This shift does not mean the destruction of the existing realities, but a changed and improved understanding of it in keeping with the demands of today's context. The paradigm shift involves two types of shifts. They are: 'Structural Shift' and 'Attitudinal Shift'. In structural shift, the focus is on the involvement of the 'Youth'. The existing tendency marks that youth workers are exhorted to work for youth but the structural shift uncurtails the remarkable value of working with youth. Thus the organization is not centred but young people, with method of Justice rather than charity. This results in networking of youth forces and projects by the youth, no more for the youth. To achieve the targeted goal, mass intervention should take the place of individualism.

The outcome of attitudinal shift is a radical change of roles of youth in the development process. Most of the countries consider youth only as beneficiaries and consumers but there is a call for realization which articulates the truth that the youth are benefactors and creators of our destiny, so called the future world. Therefore they are our valuable resources and not a problem. Eventually, Young people need models, not critics.

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