
Tools for Community Engagement

November 2013

CE13-02E

Planning and Play: Collaborative design of youth friendly spaces in St Henri, Montréal

Lupton, L. & Heffez, A.

McGill University, School of Urban Planning

Abstract

An urban geography program was conducted for teens in Secondary One at James Lyng school in the neighbourhood of St Henri, Montréal, in collaboration with a local youth empowerment organization called Youth Fusion and the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) based at McGill University. The program aimed at educating students about urban issues, asking them for their opinions, needs and ideas regarding suitable urban spaces for children. Using Francis and Lorenzo's (2002) "Seven Realms of Children's Participation" to analyze the impact of the program, this briefing explores the four objectives of the urban geography course, then turning to discuss the challenges faced when implementing the program, and lessons for the future.

Un programme de géographie urbaine a été livré aux adolescents en première année de l'école secondaire James Lyng dans le quartier Saint Henri de Montréal. Cette collaboration entre Fusion Jeunesse, organisme d'engagement des jeunes de la région, et l'Alliance de recherche universités-communautés (ARUC) basée à l'Université McGill avait pour objectif d'éduquer les étudiants sur les questions urbaines, en demandant leur opinion, leurs besoins, et leurs idées sur les espaces urbains qui conviennent aux enfants. Cet exposé se sert des 'sept domaines de la participation des enfants' de Francis et Lorenzo (2002) pour analyser l'impact du programme. Il explore les quatre objectifs du cours de géographie urbaine puis discute des difficultés rencontrées dans la mise en œuvre du programme, aussi bien que des leçons à retenir à l'avenir.

Cite as

Lupton, Lauren & Heffez, Alanah (2012). "Planning and Play: Collaborative design of youth friendly spaces in St Henri, Montréal". Briefing Note. BN 13-02E. Montréal: CURA Making Megaprojects Work for Communities - Mégaprojets au service des communautés.

More reports and working papers at www.mcgill.ca/urbanplanning/mpc/research/reports

CURA } Community-University Research Alliance
Alliance de recherche communauté-université

Lisa Bornstein, **Project Director** — Jason Prince, **Project Coordinator**

School of Urban Planning
Suite 400, Macdonald-Harrington Building
815 Sherbrooke Street West
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2K6

Telephone: +1 (514) 398-4075
Fax: +1 (514) 398-8376
www.mcgill.ca/urbanplanning/mpc



Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| Executive Summary..... | 3 |
| Synthèse..... | 4 |
| Introduction..... | 6 |
| Theoretical Framework..... | 6 |
| Background and Objectives..... | 8 |
| Lessons for the Future..... | 10 |

Executive Summary

An urban geography program was conducted for teens in Secondary One at James Lyng school in the neighbourhood of St Henri, Montréal, in collaboration between a local youth empowerment organization called Youth Fusion and the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) based at McGill University. The program aimed at educating students about urban issues, asking them about their opinions, needs and ideas regarding suitable urban spaces for children.

Francis and Lorenzo's (2002) "Seven Realms of Children's Participation" is employed here as a theoretical framework from which to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the urban geography program on youth participation. Francis and Lorenzo contend that youth participation can take places in seven different realms. In the earliest three realms (romantic realm, needs realm, and advocacy realm) genuine participation amongst youth is not necessarily present. The latter three realms (learning realm, rights realm, and proactive realm) are presented as being positive improvements towards more progressive realms of participation, with the proactive realm being considered the most authentic level of children's participation. The last realm is the institutional realm where child and youth participation becomes mandated as part of the planning process.

Four objectives of the study were determined by the class's curriculum, Youth Fusion's mandate, and by the project's design, these being; urban environmental education, opinion solicitation, ideas generation and project development, and community engagement and empowerment. The urban environmental education component was determined to be situated in the 'learning realm,' as the project focused on imparting analytical skills and knowledge. Opinion solicitation within the project was also consistent with the 'learning realm'. The students commented that they learned how to communicate amongst each other, and to articulate their opinions. The idea generation objective had the potential to incorporate both the 'romantic realm' and the 'proactive realm' but the results remain inclusive until the outcome of a recent local design charrette (in which student-made models were presented) is known. Lastly, the community engagement objective was the least successful. Situated in the 'rights realm,' this was limited by the challenges of finding a suitable project in the community in which to engage the students.

Overall challenges included a lack of feasible projects in which to involve the students, working with students with a wide array of learning abilities, and the need for a deeper and more meaningful development of trust between the facilitator and the students.

Structuring the program so that it is shorter in duration with more frequent and longer sessions may have generated greater trust, communication and collaboration amongst the adults and the children involved, moving the program closer to Francis and Lorenzo's preferred 'proactive realm'.

Synthèse

Un programme de géographie urbaine a été livré aux adolescents en première année de l'école secondaire James Lyng dans le quartier Saint Henri de Montréal. Cette collaboration entre Fusion Jeunesse, organisme d'engagement des jeunes de la région, et l'Alliance de Recherche Universités-Communautés (ARUC) basée à l'Université McGill, avait pour objectif d'éduquer les étudiants sur les questions urbaines, en demandant leurs opinions, leurs besoins, et leurs idées sur les espaces urbains qui conviennent aux enfants.

Comme cadre théorique nous employons les sept domaines de la participation des enfants de Francis et Lorenzo (2002) pour évaluer l'efficacité et l'impact du programme de géographie urbaine sur la participation des jeunes. Francis et Lorenzo soutiennent que la participation des jeunes se réalise dans sept domaines divers. Dans les trois premiers domaines (domaine romantique, domaine des besoins et domaine de défense des intérêts) il ne se trouve pas nécessairement de véritable participation des enfants. Les trois domaines suivants (domaine de l'apprentissage, domaine des droits, et domaine proactif) se présentent comme une progression vers une meilleure participation, dont le domaine proactif est jugé le niveau le plus authentique de participation des enfants. C'est au dernier domaine, le domaine institutionnel, que la participation des jeunes et des enfants fait partie intégrante du processus de planification.

Quatre objectifs de l'étude qui ont été déterminés par le programme scolaire, par la mission de Fusion Jeunesse et par la conception du projet, sont les suivants: éduquer sur l'environnement urbain, obtenir diverses opinions, générer des idées nouvelles et développer des projets, engager et responsabiliser la communauté. Il convenait de situer la partie de l'éducation environnementale dans le domaine de l'apprentissage, puisque le projet mettait l'accent sur la transmission de capacités analytiques et de connaissances. La sollicitation d'opinions se situait aussi dans le domaine de l'apprentissage. Les élèves ont déclaré avoir appris à communiquer entre eux et à exprimer leurs opinions. L'objectif de générer des idées pouvait appartenir soit au domaine romantique soit au domaine proactif.

On ne pourra préciser que lorsque seront connus les résultats d'une charrette récente, au cours duquel les élèves présentaient des modèles qu'ils ont faits eux-mêmes. Finalement, l'objectif d'engager la communauté était le moins réussi.

Parmi les problèmes qu'on confrontait, il y avait le manque de projets faisables et susceptibles d'engager les élèves, le défi de travailler avec des élèves qui souffraient de diverses difficultés d'apprentissage, et le besoin de mieux développer et approfondir la confiance entre le facilitateur et les élèves. Un programme de plus courte durée, dont les sessions étaient plus fréquentes et plus longues, aurait peut-être amélioré la confiance, la communication et la collaboration entre les adultes et les enfants, de sorte que le programme se rapprocherait du domaine proactif préféré de Francis et Lorenzo.

Introduction

Children and youth participation in the planning of urban spaces, particularly play spaces, has gained momentum as planners and communities have come to understand that their participation tends to lead to neighbourhood designs that are safer, more pleasant and more sustainable for all members of a community. Between October 2011 and May 2012, I facilitated an urban geography program for teens in Secondary One at James Lyng school in the neighbourhood of St Henri, Montreal. This project was designed in collaboration between a local youth empowerment organization called Youth Fusion and the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) based at McGill University, to educate students about urban issues and to ask them about their opinions, needs and ideas regarding suitable urban spaces for children. This paper first describes Francis and Lorenzo's (2002) "Seven Realms of Children's Participation" and the moves to analyze the program in the context of the literature discussed. This project and its analysis contribute to a growing body of documented projects that will enable educators, planners and community leaders in the future to develop more authentic methods of engaging youth. The paper concludes with suggestions as to how children and youth participation can move towards what Francis and Lorenzo (2002) call the proactive approach to planning with children, which sees children as active participants working in collaboration with adults and planning professionals, as well as towards Illtus and Hart's (1994) upper rungs on the ladder of children's participation.

Theoretical Framework

Francis and Lorenzo's "Seven realms of children's participation" (2002) is a thematic model of gauging children's participation. It traces a history of trends in children's participation that began with the 'romantic realm', where children were viewed as planners who were capable of conceiving and executing plans without collaboration with adults. Illtus and Hart (1994) caution against the "tendency to romanticize the creative abilities of children" (p. 361).

Children's lives have become more structured; they have less access to outdoor and informal play spaces, resulting in less control over these spaces. Additionally, children's play places have become more structured and institutionalized, which has resulted in the 'adultization of childhood'. As Francis and Lorenzo state, "[p]laygrounds have become more ordinary and less challenging" (p. 159). In Francis and Lorenzo's framework, early responses to promoting children and youth participation began with the 'romantic realm', and then progressed to the 'advocacy realm', defined as planners planning for children.

Genuine participation amongst youth is not necessarily present here in the advocacy realm. Closely related is the 'needs realm,' which is more academic and seeks to identify the spatial needs of children.

After these three realms comes a more radical shift in the practice and theory of children's participation, which branches off into two different directions as understood by Francis and Lorenzo. The first direction moves towards three more progressive realms of participation that include the 'learning realm' where urban and environmental education become important as a goal of hands-on planning; the 'rights realm', closely associated with Illtus and Hart's theory of authentic children's participation, predicated on the recognition of children and youth as global citizens with rights equal to those of adults. This realm recognizes children as fully-fledged members of society, who possess the right to freely express their opinions, and to be engaged in planning, politics and projects in their communities—especially those that directly affect them. The recognition of children as citizens is situated in the concept of children's rights, as defined by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, ratified by over 100 nations, including Canada.

Current theory and practice endeavours to engage children in what is considered the most authentic level of children's participation—the 'proactive realm' as termed by Francis and Lorenzo, where children and adults collaborate to develop child and youth friendly spaces.

The second direction in theories and practices of children's participation as presented by Francis and Lorenzo moves towards the 'institutional realm' where child and youth participation becomes mandated as part of the planning process. Again in this realm, children are treated as if they were adults; the danger here is that the ideas of children are often passed up in favour of adults' ideas, or ideas that run counter to what children actually want.

The James Lyng Project: Background and Objectives

The project involved outdoor learning through exposure to the urban environment around the students' school so that the students could formulate ideas and opinions, which would then be used to generate design ideas for their schoolyard. The students were all approximately 13 years of age, and there was an array of ability amongst them. The majority of the students were labeled as "coded", which meant they either had some form of learning disability or behavioural issue.

The project had four main objectives, which were set by the class's curriculum, Youth Fusion's mandate to facilitate civic engagement amongst youth, and by the project's design:

- Urban environmental education
- Opinion solicitation
- Ideas generation and project development
- Community engagement and empowerment.

The two main questions this paper seeks to address are, "how authentic was the level of participation as it relates to each of these goals;" and "how can the program be improved to increase the authenticity of youth participation?" I will address the first question by analyzing the objectives in the context of Francis and Lorenzo's seven realms of participation.

Objective 1 - Urban Environment Education

The first objective is situated in the 'learning realm'. Students were given the freedom to self-select into groups and take on tasks according to their interests, such as observation recording, and photographing places of interest. This part of the project focused on imparting analytical skills and knowledge about the urban environment around the school.

Objective 2 - Opinion solicitation:

The learning that took place as part of the first objective enabled the students to generate and articulate opinions and ideas about their neighbourhood. They noted pollution, places of historic interest and places of opportunity, and shared their thoughts on the places they liked and disliked. This objective was met with great success.

The students commented that in addition to learning about their environment, they learned how to communicate amongst each other, and to articulate their opinions.

Objective 3 - Ideas generation and project development:

From here the project moved towards the design of their school green space. Students were asked to utilize their analysis and opinions as inspiration for their designs, and to add elements that they felt were lacking in order to create a 3D plasticine model of a youth friendly space consistent with their interests. As a follow-up to this activity, I presented their opinions and 3D designs at a recent local design charrette in the neighbourhood. Their ideas were well-received, but it is uncertain at this point as to whether or not the students' ideas will have any tangible bearing on the outcome of the charrette.

With regards to Francis and Lorenzo's seven realms, this objective is difficult to categorize, as it depends on the outcome of the charrette, which is pending. It potentially touches on many of the realms, including those that are seemingly polar opposites. It may fall within the 'romantic realm', where children are treated as planners. Many of the school yard ideas generated were not feasible projects, and as such, would likely never be implemented. However, this could also be classified as the 'proactive realm', but again this is dependent on the outcome of the charrette and whether or not the students' ideas were seriously considered. This objective also touched on the 'learning realm'—the main outcome being that the students learned about the planning process, including design and the presentation of their ideas.

Objective 4 – Community Engagement and Empowerment

One of the greatest challenges as the facilitator was finding a suitable project in the community in which to engage the students, which is why the project focused on their school green space. Consequently, this objective was not fully achieved. However, the objective is clearly situated in Francis and Lorenzo's 'rights realm'. Their rights as young citizens were articulated to them at the beginning of the program, and as we moved towards the presentation of their work, they began to vocalize that the students felt they had a right to be consulted and to be involved in projects that might directly impact them as teens.

Lessons for the Future

Francis and Lorenzo (2002) consider the 'proactive realm' to be the most authentic and progressive realm in children's participation. It views participation as a communicative, collaborative and visionary process that seeks ultimately to "reinvent childhood and the places that support it" (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002, p. 164). Highlighting the challenges that arose in this program may provide insight as to how to move beyond them, potentially enabling future programs to operate within the proactive realm.

The three main challenges were first, a lack of feasible projects in which to involve the students. This challenge could be overcome by structuring the program so that the facilitator had time to build ties in the community to generate opportunities, if there were none readily apparent or feasible. This would also generate more potential for collaboration. The second challenge was working with students with a wide array of learning abilities. Educating the adults (facilitators, community members, etc.) about children's differing abilities to become engaged, as suggested by Iltus and Hart (1994, p. 363), including special needs of the students would enable facilitators to tailor the objectives and projects to suit the ability levels of different students. Finally, this project, if implemented in the future, may move towards more authentic and proactive participation had the schedule of lessons and activities been modified in order to allow for a deeper and more meaningful development of trust between myself as the facilitator and the students. The main tenets of the 'proactive realm' are communication, collaboration and a vision. To these tenants I would add the development of trust, as it facilitates those aforementioned benefits of the 'proactive realm'. Structuring the program so that it was shorter in duration with more frequent and longer sessions may have generated greater trust, communication and collaboration amongst the adults and the children involved.

References

- Francis, M., & Lorenzo, R. (2002). Seven realms of children's participation. *Journal of environmental psychology*, 22(1), 157-169.
- Iltus, S., & Hart, R. (1994). Participatory planning and design of recreational spaces with children. *Architecture & Comportement/Architecture & Behaviour*, 10(4), 361-371.