Urban youth as community planners and leaders

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Exploring their potential with Urban Community Action Planning for Teenagers (UCAPT)

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Introduction

In Worcester, Massachusetts, USA, a growing number of teenagers are challenging the public's negative portrayal of urban youth by becoming active neighbourhood participants and decision-makers. Urban Community Action Planning for Teenagers (UCAPT), an urban, Northern adaptation of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and participatory action research (PAR), provides primarily low-income teenagers with neighbourhood problem-solving and planning skills. UCAPT integrates indoor and field-based exercises, where young people learn community-based development (CBD) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) techniques. Using these techniques, teenagers:

- explore meanings of community;
- analyse the current status of their community;
- investigate causes of community problems and origins of community strengths;
- prepare visual analyses and representations of community data through maps;
- brainstorm and strategise about possible avenues of change;
- develop action plans;
- explore partnerships with government and non-government organisations and agencies; and,
- implement, monitor, and evaluate their action plans.

As a result of UCAPT, teenagers gain a new understanding of their role in neighbourhoods, feel more connected to their community and are transformed into community activists, planners, and leaders.

Teenagers as community activists and planners in Worcester, Massachusetts

Worcester, Massachusetts is an older industrial city of 164,000 people. The poverty rate is 15.3 %, and 29% of the city's families are single-headed households. Twenty-five percent of the city's youth under 18 live in poverty, compared to a statewide rate of 13.2%[1]. In some of our youth-related community development work, we have learned the following from teenagers living in low-income households.

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[1] Figures are based on 1990 Census and 1997 DET data.

- The biggest problems they face are: 1) gang violence, often drug related; 2) after-school fights; 3) inadequate safe space and programmes; 4) smoking – marijuana and cigarettes; 5) teenage pregnancy; 6) lack of jobs for 14-15 year olds; 7) violence; 8) problems with schoolwork; 9) peer pressure; 10) money for college; and 11) relationships with boyfriends, girlfriends, friends, and family.
- Drug deals, vandalism, and fighting impacts their sense of security in and connection to the neighbourhood. Teenagers who do not feel secure in their neighbourhoods experience a chronic sense of worry and stress that permeates other areas of their lives.
- Teenagers living in poor neighbourhoods are aware that the overall health of their area is substantially below resource-rich neighbourhoods. These inadequacies extend to housing, street and sidewalk conditions, city services such as rubbish collection, police and fire protection, the amount and conditions of green and common spaces such as parks, and quality and/or quantity of institutions such as schools, medical clinics and childcare facilities. Teenagers interpret these disparities as a form of injustice. This sense of injustice leads to the belief that the city and larger community does not care about them or what they do.
- Teenagers want to participate meaningfully in their communities and to showcase their talents and skills. One young male focus group participant was particularly moving in his worry that without programmes, no one will ever know he exists. He went on to say that *"there should be more sports, if not sports, then arts and crafts, if not arts and crafts then the arts. People want to make it big, they want to get recognised, but they can't do it without programmes."*

Neighbourhood conditions worsen as teenagers, without seeing many other options, may be enticed into gangs, violence, neighbourhood destruction and drug-related activities. These activities contribute to the larger community developing a negative impression of teenagers and their neighbourhoods.

Despite the important relationships we see between teenagers and communities, teenagers have few avenues to voice their opinions constructively about what happens in their neighbourhoods. Younger teenagers cannot vote in elections. Youth and community organisations rarely have

mechanisms to incorporate young voices in decision-making. Unique is the organisation that includes young people on their board of directors or on an advisory committee. The public school's goal is to produce responsible adults, yet teenagers have few chances in school to prove that they are responsible[3]. Many communities treat teenagers as problems to manage or control rather than as a source of knowledge and energy.

Through UCAPT, we have discovered many benefits when teenagers are actively engaged in the planning process. Teenagers who use UCAPT to create neighbourhood action plans gain new problem-solving skills, community respect, a broader view of themselves as active community members and an enhanced sense of control over themselves and their environment. Teenagers who use UCAPT to design their own programmes create activities that are more likely to suit their needs and be attractive to other teenagers. When teenagers implement their own action plans, the community at large also benefits because neighbourhood conditions improve.

How does UCAPT work?

UCAPT is a participatory, systematic community development approach that shares some basic assumptions with participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

- Local knowledge – community members have knowledge and information about local problems, but they need help organising this information.
- Local resources – community members have resources (time, money, connections with local government, family, organisations, etc.), but these resources need to be mobilised.
- Attracting outside help – outside resources are available, but they need to be defined in the context of community-identified priorities[4].

Through four phases of data collection and analysis, teenagers collect rich information about community needs, strengths, resources, and the barriers that prevent a community from realising its vision for itself. Teenagers use neighbourhood walking tours and neighbourhood treasure hunts to begin to think about their area in a different way and to see it through the eyes of a community planner. In this way, they get a sense of the neighbourhood's strengths and weaknesses. They keep journals to reflect on their neighbourhood experiences. They also conduct focus groups and key informant interviews to get different perspectives on neighbourhood issues. In order to establish a prioritisation of community problems, the teenagers conduct pairwise ranking excercises and other ranking techniques. Teenagers and other residents then use this information to develop action plans based on community-identified problems, analyses of underlying causes and community-generated solutions. Because UCAPT assembles and then systematically narrows large amounts of data, this information helps the community to create an action plan. Therefore UCAPT acts like a funnel for community-based information management and action (see Figure I).

Figure I UCAPT as a funnel for community-based information
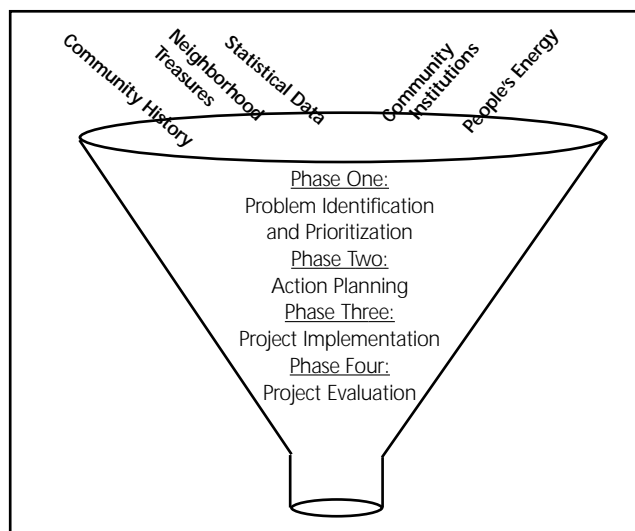
UCAPT case studies

We present two UCAPT case studies drawn from examples of Worcester teenagers. These examples highlight the roles of teenagers in action.

'Teen inspirators, on the move', Oak Hill Community Development Corporation

In the spring of 1996, Worcester's Oak Hill Community Development Corporation (CDC) embarked on a three-month Community Planning Initiative (CPI) using UCAPT. One of the most unanticipated, yet exciting outcomes of the CPI was the formation of a teenage group – Teen Inspirators, On the Move (OTM).

Twenty teenagers, both male and female, ages 11-16 from diverse racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds met weekly to plan activities for themselves and their neighbourhood. They used UCAPT techniques of mapping exercises, journals, neighbourhood treasure hunts, community interviews, ranking exercises, and felt board decision-making exercises to collect and analyse information about their neighbourhood[5].

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[3] Public schools in the United States provide 12 years of guaranteed instruction to all young people in the country, and are publicly funded.
[4] Ford, R. (1992). Sustaining development through community mobilization: A case study of participatory rural appraisal in The Gambia. Worcester, Massachusetts: Clark University.
[5] The Felt Board Exercise (Ross and Rocheleau 1995) allows teenagers to put the neighbourhood knowledge they acquire from their journals and walking tours to work on actual community planning. They create and use felt icons to represent community features. Then they create and recreate their neighborhood using felt. Once they create a felt map of their actual neighbourhood, we ask what they would like to change. With the felt, they are able to move houses, trees, and to create ideal neighborhood. The Felt Board is an excellent planning tool because it allows teenagers to simulate different decision-making outcomes. For more information on the Felt Board, see, Ross, L. and D. Rocheleau. (1995). Land use feltboard. In Slocum, R. et al. (Eds.), *Power, Process and Participation: Tools for Change* (pp. 132-137). London, England: Intermediate Technology Publications.

While on the neighbourhood treasure hunt, the teenagers searched for the actual treasures of their neighbourhood. Interesting architecture, beautifully maintained yards, teenager-friendly stores and safe places to 'hang out' topped their list. They also explored potential treasures (for example, neighbourhood problems such as abandoned lots that could be opportunities for change).

One such potential treasure proved to be Banis Park, a small park located at the corner of two busy streets in the neighbourhood. They found the park to be in a state of decline. The swings were broken, the fence was damaged and the park was littered with broken glass and other rubbish. There were no benches and no shade except along the fence that surrounded the park. Additionally the park had become a location for drug deals. Community members viewed the park largely as a liability to the neighbourhood but the teenagers saw it as a potential neighbourhood treasure.

The Teen Inspirators OTM used UCAPT to engage nearby residents, park users and city workers about the possibilities for Banis Park. Mapping exercises generated hundreds of ideas for the park. Focus groups and interviews narrowed down the list. A park planning party held at Banis Park was a community-building planning event that combined a barbecue with discussions about the future of the park. Although it took almost two years to gain approval for the plan, acquire endorsement from key city agencies and raise the necessary funds for the rehabilitation, the Teen Inspirators persevered and prevailed. The collaboration between the city, community groups, several non-governmental organisations and a university, and enabled the Teen Inspirators, OTM to raise $60,000. In June 1999 the renovated Banis Park was reopened (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Teen inspirators
at the Banis ground breaking**

Photo: Kristina Allen

As a result of the teenagers' hard work, the support of Oak Hill CDC and the systematic, participatory community development approach of UCAPT, a group of teenagers, who had previously seen themselves without a community voice, were able to transform a neighbourhood problem into a true community treasure.

University Park Campus School SPARCS students use UCAPT action planning to 'trashform' their neighbourhood

Over the past year, ten 8th and 9th graders (13-15 year olds) at the University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts who are part of the Students Participating and Acting to Reinforce Community Spirit (SPARCS) programme, have used UCAPT to develop a long-term strategy to address the problem of rubbish in their neighbourhood. They began to recognise the seriousness of this problem during the Problem Identification Phase of UCAPT in the autumn of 1998. The group is now calling themselves 'the Trashformers' and is committed to involving neighbours, community based organisations, and city officials in their efforts to clean up the neighbourhood. They want to show the larger community that young people do care about the neighbourhood, and they want to be recognised for their efforts.

To create their action plan, the Trashformers realised that they needed additional information. First, they refined their definition of the rubbish problem, in terms of what types of trash most concerned them. Then, they interviewed family members, neighbours, and business owners about rubbish in the neighbourhood. These interviews provided students with an idea of how the problem has changed over time, its causes, and people's ideas for solutions. While these interviews gave the students a starting point, they recognised that in order to convince city officials about the extent of the problem and their dedication to the issue, they would need to collect more systematic data. They decided to collect three types of information: actual amounts of trash throughout the neighbourhood, people's perceptions of the problem, and endorsement of possible solutions. Students broke into two groups to collect this information.

To collect data on actual amounts of trash, one group developed a trash data collection and ranking system. First, this group decided what types of rubbish concerned them, for example, paper litter, recyclables, and large items such as sofas and car parts. After experimenting with different versions, they designed a five-point system to rank the amount of rubbish in a given area. A ranking of 1 represented no or little rubbish, and 5 meant the area was extremely dirty. On neighbourhood walks, they would take maps and mark the number that corresponded to the amount of trash on a given part of the street (they also brought rubbish bags to clean up the garbage once they ranked it). Once they had the ranking of the streets on paper maps, they could enter it into their Geographic

Information System (GIS). Other important neighbourhood features, such as trashcans, fast food restaurants, stoplights, and institutions, could also be entered into the computer.

In order to collect neighbourhood perception data, the other group developed a survey. This group wanted to be sure that most residents shared their concern about the rubbish problem. Additionally, they recognised that, before attempting to implement any solutions, they would need community endorsement and support of those solutions. Without community approval and involvement, the students knew their efforts would, at best be ignored, and, at worst, undermined by the larger neighbourhood. Thus, they included questions on their survey to allow residents to rank possible solutions. These surveys were administered to all students and their parents in the school. They were also administered at several key locations throughout the community.

Both groups are now close to completing their data analysis. They will begin to develop strategies to address the problem. Then they will present their findings and recommendations to City Council, the School Committee, and other community-based organisations. Over the course of this year, the Trashformers have gained important data collection and analysis skills. They have learned about the challenges inherent in systematic, valid data collection. They have also discovered that there are private and public organisations that share their commitment to make neighbourhoods more healthy – and that these organisations are willing to help young people who are serious. UCAPT helped these students to become neighbourhood experts and leaders and gain knowledge and skills needed to strategise for community change.

Final reflections

We have discovered great rewards and some significant challenges working with teenagers in community planning. While much of this short piece has focused on positive aspects, we want to discuss a few of the more difficult aspects of this work. One of the most challenging issues when working with young people is to know where the line is between offering guidance and directing the process. We struggle with how much do we give or tell the teenagers and how much do we let them learn on their own. Additionally, because this line changes at different points of the process, this issue becomes even more challenging.

Another difficulty is convincing teenagers that they really can make change happen. Many young people have never had their voices heard; thus they do not believe that UCAPT will be different. We try to address this by asking for their input often – and changing the course of direction when the teenagers feel it is necessary – even when, or especially when, these changes were not part of the master plan. For example, with the Trashformers, we never would have anticipated they would have wanted to conduct a survey.

Yet, when they offered their rationale for the survey, we said 'fine', and began working with them on survey design.

One final issue is that UCAPT requires a great deal of time and organisational support. Whether the process is introduced into a school or an out-of-school programme, the institution that takes on this programme must believe that teenagers can be in charge of a planning process. If there are adults who will feel the need to take the process over, the organisation should seriously consider whether UCAPT is an appropriate programme. Because one cannot anticipate when going into the process what the primary issues are going to be, the organisation and project leaders have to be flexible. Some weeks, the group may need to visit other neighbourhoods or have access to telephones. Some weeks they may need to work on the project for 20 hours, other weeks only one or two. Time, flexibility, and dedication to the participatory process are absolutely essential to ensure success with UCAPT.

We know we will be able to work through these challenges. Others in Worcester are beginning to take notice of UCAPT[6]. Discussions are underway to introduce UCAPT to the city's Community Schools programmes. Due to young people's stated interest in community-service, a city-wide, summer youth programme is also considering ways to bring UCAPT into its offerings this year. These additional opportunities to explore the possibilities and benefits of UCAPT will allow us to think of ways to address the challenges and ultimately bring more young voices to the decision-making table.

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Notes

Staff involved in the project include: Jody Bird, University Park Campus School Project Coordinator; Ricci Hall, Donna Rodrigues, Richard Ford and Gil Pontius, the SPARCS steering committee; and Antonio Gonzalez and Ian Newton, the GIS instructors for the project.

[6] For more information on UCAPT, please see Ross, L., Coleman, M. and Hall, R. 1999. *Students, Schools and Neighbourhoods: A SPARCS Action Curriculum for Community Change.* Clark University: Worcester, MA.; and Ross, L. and Coleman, M. 2000. Urban community action planning inspires teenagers to transform their community and their identity. *Journal of Community Practice.* 7:2.