How Engaged are Indian Youth? Exploring Behavioral Indicators of Youth Engagement

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Youth engagement has been widely recognized as one of the best practices for facilitating positive youth development and for enhancing youth mental health. The present study explored the indices of youth engagement in terms of its prevalence and associations in a sample of 300 college youth in India. A survey was developed for the study. A set of nine items on the frequency of engagement used in the survey were added up to form the youth engagement index, which had an internal consistency of 0.68. The results showed positive association between youth engagement and age, male gender, community connectedness, self report of having a mentor and a role-model. The study reiterates the role of trusting, authentic youth-adult connection for enhancing youth engagement, thus providing rationale for promoting youth mentoring in the Indian context. The findings underscore the need and scope of building awareness among youth about availability of opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Keywords: Youth Engagement, Positive Youth Development, Connectedness

In recent times the need and scope of mainstreaming youth and their participation has gained greater attention. The term youth engagement refers to the broad framework of approaches that facilitate meaningful involvement of youth in the society. Pancer et al (2002) defines youth engagement as "meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity with a focus outside of himself/ herself". Youth engagement approaches have been classified using the metaphor of a ladder in which the lower end refers to youth being considered as passive recipients of services, while the higher end refers to approaches where youth take active leadership and decision-making in the processes that lead to positive youth development as well as positive social changes (Hart, 1992).

Brady et al (2012) identifies five key discourses on social positioning of young people, which underlie youth engagement. The first of these is the positive youth development (PYD) perspective, which focuses on skill and asset building in youth as opposed to fixing problems. A core premise of PYD is that youth-society alignment leads to youth development, which is manifest through the Five Cs such as Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection, and Caring, which lead to the Sixth C, Contribution. Positive youth development promotes youth engagement, which in turn strengthens the Five Cs (Lerner, 2009).

The discourse of democratic citizenship aims at enhancing civic and political participation of youth for creating a vibrant democracy. Youth are viewed as active agents in shaping the welfare state through collaborating in non-governmental as well as governmental processes and youth volunteerism is encouraged as a means to this end. The third discourse – belonging and connection – views youth engagement as a vehicle for developing the ingredients of social capital such as trust, social connections, inclusion, support, etc which instill in youth a sense of belonging within the society as contrasted with the growing individualism.

The fourth discourse is about caring for youth who are vulnerable or disadvantaged by addressing their needs, building social support and enhancing mental health and resilience. There is a strong empirical evidence that links youth engagement and health/mental health outcomes as a protective factor against addictive and other risk behaviors in youth,

socio-emotional difficulties, teenage parenthood, academic failure, delinquency, and so on (CEYE, 2003). Finally, social justice based discourse of youth engagement aims at fostering critical social consciousness in the marginalized youth and enhancing their socio-political competencies so that they become social change agents.

Youth engagement approaches stand apart by a number of markers. Very important among them is an authentic adult-youth relationship marked by mutual respect, trust and support. This involves a process of symbiosis where both adults and youth engage with each other as opposed to a one-way process where adults engage youth. A second marker is passion and sense of purpose (Damon et al, 2003) that youth share with adults in the domain of shared vision and its pursuit. A third marker is youth-voice that is heard and is translated as inputs in planning and decisions. A fourth marker is collective action involving shared power and decision-making towards shared goals where the young people and the adults work together as partners. These markers have been described as 'rings of engagement' (Sullivan, 2011).

India is one of the youngest countries in the world. According to current estimates there is a youth bulge in India as 60% of people are below 30 years of age. The National Youth Policy 2014 has modified the definition of youth as the age group between 15 and 29 years. According to the 2011 India census this age group comprises 28% of India's total population. There is a vibrant volunteering sector fed by the youth bulge in India. However, comprehensive data about the percent of engaged youth is not available currently. According to Hindustan Times Youth Survey (2013) only 42% of Indian youth (age=18-25 yrs) believed that they must give back to the society in some way. In another national survey only one fourth of the young people reported familiarity with volunteering opportunities and 1 out of 10 participants reported membership in any social forum (IIPS and Population Council, 2010).

There are measures on youth engagement in terms of assessing the level of participation in a program or organization such as Youth Involvement and Engagement Assessment Tool (Jones et al, 2006). –Nevertheless, very few measures are available which are generic in content and can be administered to the general samples of youth in order to assess their level or frequency of engagement (e.g., Zukin et al, 2006).

There is very little empirical literature on youth engagement in India and most of the available data are limited to youth volunteering. There is no published literature available, to the best of our knowledge, measuring youth engagement in India, especially for assessing frequency of behaviors manifesting engagement. Against this background, the present study was planned with the aim of exploring self-reported frequency of involving in activities that manifest youth engagement including volunteering and other engagement indices, and to understand the association of youth engagement with socio-demographic variables and connectedness, and sources of inspiration, facilitators and barriers in a representative sample of urban and semi-urban college going youth in India.

Method

The data for this paper are based on a larger study on social wellbeing of Indian youth. Survey methodology was used in the present study. Institute ethical clearance was obtained prior to launching of the study. Literature survey of relevant variables and twelve focus group discussions with diverse groups of young people were used to generate relevant items for the survey. Youth engagement was conceptualized to include domains such as 1) cognitive engagement manifested by accessing news and discussing social issues, 2) campus engagement as in participation in extracurricular activities in college, 3) civic engagement including membership in social forums, active involvement in community events, behaviors manifesting a sense of civic responsibility, and formal volunteering through an organization for any social cause, 4) civic/political activism manifested through signature drives, public demonstrations, etc and 5) electoral engagement in terms of frequency of voting (Zukin et al, 2006; Ekman & Amna, 2012). The survey items were content validated by a panel of three mental health professionals. The survey comprised items to elicit basic socio-demographic variables, connectedness, and domains of

youth engagement, including awareness of opportunities, sources of inspiration, and barriers for engagement.

Frequency of engagement: Nine items were used with a three point Likert type response format (regularly/ occasionally/ rarely) to capture frequency of engagement. The items covered behaviors such as accessing news, discussing social issues (cognitive engagement), online voting for social causes, participating in public demonstration for a social cause (civic activism), attending cultural/spiritual programs, engaging in community/ neighborhood activities, rendering help for in-campus programs, and organizing community programs or cultural events (campus/community engagement) frequency of volunteering through an organization (formal volunteering). These items were added up to create the youth engagement index. The internal consistency of this measure developed for the present study was 0.68. The scores on this measure were normally distributed (Sample K-S, Z = 1.27; p=0.08).

Civic responsibility and voting: Four items using a two-point responses (Yes / honestly speaking No) were used to tap civic behaviors such as avoiding littering in public, following traffic rules, and avoiding wastage of natural resources. A single item with five point responses type (ranging 'never voted' – 'voted every time') was used to assess frequency of voting.

Formal volunteering and awareness of opportunities: A single item was used to tap current volunteering through any organization (yes/no response) and another yes/no item explored whether the participant has volunteered anytime for a social cause. Yes/No type items were used to explore a) awareness of opportunities for volunteering, b) youth training programs aimed at social change, and c) interest to know about such opportunities.

Informal helping: A single item with four point response type (never/ once-twice/ a few times/ several times) was used to tap self-reported frequency of rendering help to people other than one's close friends/ family members 'in the last six months'.

Expanse of connection: The breadth or expanse of connection was explored by a single 'True'/ 'Not True' response type item about whether the participant has a wide circle of connections.

Circles of Closeness: Two items were used to tap self-report of closeness or intensity of connection with family and with friends. Visual representation on a seven point response type was used wherein closeness between two circles represented perception of one's closeness to family/friends.

Sense of belonging: A single item with a three point response type (Not true/ somewhat true/ very much true) was used to explore sense of belonging to community/groups.

Sources of inspiration: Individual items were used to explore whether participant considered an adult person as mentor/guide (Yes/No response type), whether there are people who have inspired the participants to think about social issues or do something good for others/ society (Yes/Not sure/No), and whether media is a source of inspiration (Yes/Not sure/No). Open ended items were used additionally to further probe the responses.

Facilitators and barriers: Two sets of check lists of 10 items each were used to explore facilitators (e.g.:"volunteering by friends") and barriers for youth engagement (e.g.:"lack of opportunities").

The survey participants comprised of 300 college students recruited from 10 colleges/ universities where the survey was group administered after informed consent was taken from each participant. Out of the 300 participants 80 (27%) were students from colleges in non-metropolitan towns (non-metropolitans). Another 78 participants (26%) reported residing in a metropolitan city along with family where they studied (metropolitans). A third subgroup of 138 participants (46%) who studied in the metropolis reported that they were away from their family as they have come to the city from other parts of India (migrants). This was in keeping with the high percent of migrant youth population who studied in colleges in the city many of whom migrated in view of higher education opportunities not available in their own home towns/villages.

Table 1. Youth engagement and socio-demographic variables

Variables	Subgroups, Mean (SD)		t Value	P value
Gender	Male	Female	2.29	0.02
Youth engagement index	17.85(3.39)	17.03(2.82)		
UG versus PG	UG	PG		
Youth engagement index	16.8(2.83))	18.21(3.3)	3.97	<0.001
Metropolitans versus Non-metropolitans	Frequency (percentage)		chi square	P value
	Metropolitans	Non-metropolitans		
Anytime volunteered for a social cause	42(58%)	14(18%)	26.63	<0.001
Currently volunteering through an organization	22(29%)	12(16%)	4.14	0.04
Interested to know about volunteering opportunities	43(67%)	42(88%)	6.19	0.01

Out of 300 participants 134 (45%) were male and 166 (55%) were females. Participants were in the age range between 18 and 30 years the average participant being 21 years old. There were 174 (58%) undergraduates and 126 (42%) postgraduates. Majority of the participants (60%) reported they belonged to Hindu religion, the remaining participants reported to be from Christian (25%), Muslim (10%), Buddhist (3%), Sikh (0.7%), and 6% (20 participants) did not mention any religion. Self-reported socio-economic status was tapped through a 4-point response type item about the extent to which financial situation was perceived as satisfactory for managing day-to-day needs, and most participants reported being 'able to manage'.

Results

Youth engagement index was found to have a low positive correlation with age (Spearman's rho = 0.201; p<0.001) as well as years of education (Spearman's rho = 0.22; p<0.001). Consistent with this finding postgraduate students reported greater frequency of engagement as compared to undergraduates (t = 3.97; p<0.001). Gender difference was found wherein male participants reported significantly higher frequency of engagement as compared to female participants (t = 2.29; p = 0.02).

The self-reported financial status was not found to be associated with the indices of youth engagement. Similarly, the subgroups of participants from the metropolis and those from non-metropolitan towns were not different on the youth engagement index. However, on the items about formal volunteering it was found that the metropolitan subgroup were more likely to respond in the affirmative about 'volunteering currently' as compared to the sub-group of participants from non-metropolitan towns (X2= 4.14; p=0.04). The metropolitans were more likely to report 'having anytime volunteered for a social cause' than the non-metropolitans (X2=26.63; p<0.001). Nevertheless, as regards to interest to know about volunteering opportunities the non-metropolitans were more likely to report interest to know than the metropolitans (X2= 6.19; p=0.01) [See Table:1].

Out of the 300 participants 85 (28%) reported having membership in a social forum such as youth clubs or cultural associations. It was found that only 62 participants (21%) reported being currently engaged in volunteering through any organization whereas nearly half of the participants (47%) reported having anytime voluntarily involved in any activity for a social cause.

As regards to awareness of opportunities for engagement, one third of the overall participants (33%) reported that they were aware of any program/organization that train youth to take up activities aimed at social change, 27% reported awareness about activities being carried out in one's locality, which involved volunteering, and 21% reported awareness of opportunities

for episodic/one-time programs arranged by any organization. As many as 174 participants (58%) responded in the affirmative about whether he/she was interested in knowing about volunteering opportunities.

Regarding behaviors manifesting a sense of civic responsibility, it was found that more than three fourth of the participants were affirmative about most of the time following traffic rules (81%), being careful about not wasting water and other resources (76%), and avoiding throwing waste in public places (73%). On the 5-point response type item on voting, 48% of the participants (112 out of 232) who were eligible to vote reported never having voted and only 24% (55 out of 232) reported voting 'most of the time'/ 'every time'.

On the youth engagement index an average participant scored 17.4, which was slightly above the midpoint score of 15. It was explored whether behaviors linked to engagement such as formal volunteering, membership in a social forum, and engaging in behaviors indicating a sense of civic responsibility were associated with scores on the engagement index. Those reporting membership in a social forum compared to others (t = 5.65; p<0.001) those volunteering currently (t = 6.59; p<0.001), as well as those interested in knowing about volunteering opportunities had higher scores on engagement index compared to their

counterparts (t = 4.29; p<0.001). Significant subgroup differences were also found on items about sense of civic responsibilities wherein higher scores on the engagement index were positively linked to self-report of following traffic rules (t = 2.08; p=0.04), and not wasting resources (t = 2.18; p=0.03) "most of the time". After eliminating participants who self-reported non-eligibility for voting at the time of the study, it was found that the subgroup who reported that they never voted were significantly lower on the engagement index as compared to all other participants who reported voting at least once (t = 1.96; p=0.05) [See Table:2]. The engagement index had a low positive correlation with the 4-point response type item on frequency of giving informal help (Spearman's rho= 0.24; p<0.001).

On the single item on the expanse (wide circle) of connection, the subgroup reporting to have a wide circle of connections was significantly higher on the engagement index when compared with their counterpart (t = 2.48; p=0.01). Youth engagement index was not found to be associated with the items on closeness to family and friends. On the other hand, self-report of a sense of belonging to the community was found to be positively linked to anytime involving in an activity for a social cause, where the subgroup who reported anytime volunteering

Table 2. Youth engagement index and association to other engagement indices

Other indices	Youth engagement index, Mean (SD)		t value	P value
Having membership in a social forum	membership	No membership	5.65	<0.001
	18.94(3.11)	16.79(2.9)		
Currently volunteering through an organization	Volunteering	Not volunteering	6.59	<0.001
	19.56(3.26)	16.81(2.81)		
Interest to know about opportunities to volunteer	Interest to know	Not interested	4.29	<0.001
	17.99(3.21)	15.74(2.43)		
Following traffic rules 'most of the time'	Yes most of the time	Not most of the time	2.08	0.04
	17.56(3.01)	16.59(3.44)		
Not wasting resources 'most of the time'	Not wasting	Not careful about it	2.18	0.03
	17.59(3.11)	16.67(2.93)		
Voting	Voted at least once	Never voted	1.96	0.05
	17.98(3.16)	17.17(3.16)		

Table 3. Connectedness, youth engagement index and volunteering

Variables	Subgroups, Mean (SD)		Man Whitney U Test Z/ t value	P value
Having a wide circle of connection	Yes wide circle	No wide circle	2.48	0.01
Youth engagement index	17.67(2.98)	16.69(3.33)		
Anytime volunteered for a social cause	Volunteered	Not volunteered	2.31	0.02
Sense of belonging to community	2.55(0.68)	2.36(0.74)		

Table 4. Youth engagement and Sources of inspiration

Sources of inspiration	Youth engagement index, Mean (SD)		t value	P value
A mentor or adult-guide	Having mentor	Not have mentor	3.4	0.001
	17.87(3.12)	16.55(2.93)		
A role model	Have a role-model	No/ Not sure	3.27	0.001
	17.9(2.95)	16.69(3.16)		
Content in media	Media has inspired	No/ Not sure	2.23	0.03
	17.71(3.12)	16.84(3.04)		

was higher on sense of belonging when compared to their counterpart (Man Whitney U Test, Z = 2.31; p=0.02) [See Table:3].

A large majority of the participants responded in the affirmative about having sources of inspiration for youth engagement. The three factors explored were: having a mentor/adult-guide (63%), having a role model who inspires to think about/ contribute to social good (64%), and having come across inspiring content in the media (67%). Subgroup differences were found on each of these items on the sources of inspiration, wherein the subgroups who reported having been inspired (as compared to their counterparts) were significantly higher on the youth engagement index. This was on all three items explored, i.e., about having a mentor/adult guide (t = 3.4; p=0.001), having people/role-models that have inspired to think about social issues or do something good for others/society (t = 3.27; p=0.001) and being inspired by media for meaningful engagement (t = 2.23; p=0.03) [See Table:4].

Facilitators and barriers for youth engagement were explored by using a checklist of items, which combined relevant items drawn from literature survey and focus group discussions. Out of the 300 participants 39 (13%) reported that they never volunteered nor were inclined to volunteer. After excluding this subgroup, it was found that among the pool of nine facilitators/motivators used in the checklist, the item "to learn new skills" was endorsed by the highest percent of participants i.e., 59% (154 out of 261). More than 40% endorsed items such as "important life event", "volunteering by friends/family members", and "opportunities or exposure programs in colleges" as facilitators. More than one third (36%) of the participants endorsed the item "my parents encourage me (to volunteer)". Only about one fourth of the participants endorsed the items "to have fun", "to get grades", and "opportunities in the religious circle". Very few participants reported that "volunteering activities by celebrities" motivated them (9%) and furthermore, among participants who reported having a role model as an inspiration for youth engagement, only 8% (15 participants) endorsed the item about celebrities.

Among the pool of barriers to engagement explored through another checklist, the item "lack of information about volunteering" was endorsed by the highest number of participants i.e., 63% (189 out of 300). The items, "lack of time" and "academic pressure" were endorsed by 55% of the

participants. About 43% endorsed "not having a friend to accompany". One third of the participants (32-33%) endorsed the items "lack of opportunities" and "not finding activities according to one's taste" and 28% reported peer discouragement. The items on "lack of support from family" and "responsibilities in the family" were endorsed by just 20% of the participants. The item "loss of motivation after enrolling in an NGO because expectations were not met" was endorsed by the least number of participants (16%).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore in a representative sample of urban and semi-urban college going youth self-reported frequency of youth engagement and its association to socio-demographic variables and connectedness, as well as to understand sources of inspiration, facilitators and barriers of youth engagement. A reliable youth engagement index could be formed and the scores on this index were meaningfully associated with other indices of youth engagement such as volunteering, membership in social forums, and other behaviors manifesting a sense of civic responsibility.

The pattern of findings that emerged on the association between self-reported connectedness and engagement was corroborative of PYD and Youth Engagement literature according to which expanding of connection by the adolescent beyond family and friends, deepening of connection/sense of belonging to community, and authentic relationship with adults/mentors are markers of youth engagement (Sherrod, 2007; CYCC Network, 2013). It was observed that having a wide circle/network of connections was positively linked to engagement. Positive association was found between self-report of volunteering and sense of belonging to community, a finding that is in keeping with the belongingness discourse of youth engagement (Brady et al, 2012).

The significance of fostering authentic youth-adult relationship within a positive youth development approach has recently gained some attention in the Indian context. A few youth mentoring programs have been reported in India in both urban and rural setting (Pryce, 2011; Gupta & Gowda, 2012). Positive benefits of mentoring relationships for the youth have been documented such as in goal setting, overcoming fears, and identity development, along with difficulties linked to unfamiliarity with the very concept of mentoring as it is still new in the Indian context (Gupta & Gowda, 2012). In keeping with this context, the phrase 'adult guide' was used along with the 'mentor' in the present study. The study provided some empirical evidence on the benefit of having a mentor/adult guide as a factor positively associated with youth engagement.

Other-oriented emotions such as elevation and admiration have been found linked to pro-social behavior intention (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). This study provided evidence supporting the relevance of role-modeling for youth in India as a source of inspiration for engagement, in terms of thinking about social issues/and contributing to the society. Responses to open ended items indicated that rather than public figures, people associated with ones' lives (teachers, family members, neighbors, etc) were identified by youth as the sources of inspiration for thinking about social issues or contributing to the society. Corroborating this, only a very small number of participants endorsed the item 'volunteering activities of celebrities' from the list of motivators/facilitators for youth engagement. While empirical evidence is inconclusive on benefit versus adverse effect of media influence on youth engagement, the overall effect of media is found to be favorable for youth engagement (Pasek et al, 2006). The present study points towards a positive link between media influence and youth engagement.

It was found in a survey in the United States that by and large, only one out of four men and women between 20 and 25 years of age reported voting regularly (CIRCLE, 2005) and the data from this study approximates to this figure. In the Hindustan Times youth survey (2013) 57% reported considering it one's duty to vote while 30% reported having no interest in politics. Similarly, the findings about voting vis-à-vis other civic behaviors explored in the study corroborate the recent empirical data, which suggest that while a significant portion of young people are politically disengaged, youth are relatively more engaged civically (Putnam, 2000; Brady et al, 2012). Percent of volunteering in this study (21%) was slightly below the current

figure of 23% for youth in the age range of 16-34 years in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). While there is consistent data pointing to higher rate of volunteering by women, on the broader frame of youth engagement there is no consistent evidence for gender differences. In the present study there was no gender difference on self-report of current volunteering, but men scored higher on the youth engagement index as compared to women. This may be partly explained by gender role-types, and data from a national survey in India seem to corroborate this finding, wherein it was found that 45% of young men as compared to 15% of young women reported participating in community-led civic activities such as health promotion and cleanliness drives, festivals, and national day-events (IIPS & Population Council, 2010). The positive association of age with youth engagement is consistent with literature (e.g., Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). A higher percent of volunteering by youth in the metropolis as compared to the sub-urban youth may be attributed to availability of more opportunities and exposures in the metropolitan city.

The responses to check list on facilitators/motivators suggested that youth attach more importance to skill development as a perceived benefit through volunteering. This is in keeping with the positive youth development discourse. Responses to the checklist of barriers showed that it is not lack of opportunities, but lack of awareness about opportunities that pose a major barrier to youth engagement. Available studies in the Indian context have consistently documented the same (e.g. Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010). This was also corroborated by the finding that two-thirds and more of the participants reported lack of awareness of opportunities.

Limitations and implications

Youth engagement has been widely recognized as one of the best practice approach for facilitating positive youth development and for enhancing youth mental health (CEYE, 2003). Nonetheless, it is very much a new approach in the Indian context, and the present study is one of the first efforts to explore the indices of youth engagement in terms of its prevalence in a sample of college youth in India. The

study has reiterated the role of meaningful and expanding connectedness in general and trusting, authentic youth-adult connection in particular for enhancing youth engagement, thus highlighting some rationale for examining the utility of youth mentorship programs in the Indian context. The findings have underscored the need and scope of building awareness among youth about availability of opportunities for volunteering. The study profiled a set of behaviors covering the broad framework of youth engagement. Future studies should explore their relevance as well as the utility of the youth engagement index as a screening tool for assessing frequency of engaging in behaviors manifesting engagement, especially while planning programs for youth engagement promotion. The study has its share of limitations. The figures and estimates are based on self-reports and were not corroborated by objective parameters. There is need for exploring the study variables in other contexts such as working youth, rural setting, and youth in marginalized section of the society. Use of a larger sample befitting the survey design would make the conclusions more robust.

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