

BOOK REVIEW:

PLACEMAKING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH: PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES FOR PLANNING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Paul Bocko

Patty Collins is a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher at Reading Elementary School in Vermont who is “educating a sustainability army.” That is what she told me when I interviewed her for a research project in June 2019. Patty later clarified her meaning – she guides her students to develop understandings and behaviors to be sustainability leaders now and in the future. Patty could have easily been featured in Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla, and Mara Mintzer’s book, *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities*. She tells her students that “I am being an advocate for my planet by educating you so that you can hopefully use it for the sustainability of our planet” (Collins, 2019). Moving away from a militaristic tone, Patty concluded that she is really training “peacekeepers” who participate in real-world problem-solving and understand that they can be successful activists.

Derr, Chawla, and Mintzer were thinking of people like Patty when they wrote this book. Its purpose is to present methods that “embed child and youth participation in the culture of urban decision-making” (p. 1). Chapters are organized sequentially but can be read in any order, based on reader interest and applicability. The first few chapters (1 – 3) give a lay of the land, looking in turn at policy, various program and project frameworks, and ethical considerations. Chapter two, in particular, introduces and defines the characteristics of effective participatory planning:

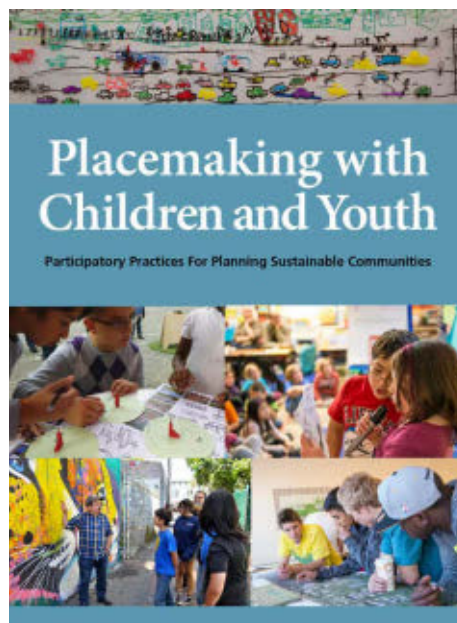
local and place-based, transparent, inclusive, relevant, education for all, sustainable, voluntary, and playful. These characteristics inform the participatory methods discussed later in the book.

The heart of *Placemaking with Children and Youth* centers on program development and the different types of child-centered participatory methods.

Chapters four and six are pivotal, as they seek to ensure that “activities will accurately represent the people who live in a place...” (p. 51) and share traditional tools to seek this accuracy, such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Chapter five explores arts-based methods for conveying values and ideas, best exemplified by “nicho boxes” (p. 80) – students decorating and filling small boxes with items that represent themselves and how they want their city to reflect their identity. Chapter seven is all about getting students out of the classroom and into the

city through experiences such as bioblitzes, photo-framing, and mapmaking. My favorite example from this chapter was the child-led tour, where youth lead adults into their community and share experiences and perceptions of their local place.

Chapters eight through ten cover activities that promote reflection, outcome sharing, and evaluation. Chapter eight looks at ways in which students and community members can work together to develop and share ideas. A prime example is



child-participatory budgeting, where youth help to decide how financial resources are allocated in their community. Chapter nine highlights program dissemination and includes a call for adults to tell youth “how their ideas are used and reasons for outcomes” (p. 253). Chapter ten offers resources for evaluation and “creating a culture of reflection” (p. 263) through methods like pre- and post-project photos. Evaluation methods reflect the vital role of youth through an activity called “analysis of change,” where “children discuss changes that they have experienced as a result of project participation” (p. 268).

The book concludes by presenting program examples (chapter eleven) and revisiting the key characteristics of participatory planning (chapter twelve) introduced in chapter two. The eight case studies featured in chapter eleven highlight the many iterations and combinations of methods illustrated in the preceding chapters and demonstrate the importance of tailoring the methods you choose to use to the people and places that make up your community.

The foundational concepts and variety of methods presented in *Placemaking with Children and*

Youth provide a wealth of resources and ideas for embedding child and youth participation in urban decision-making, setting the reader up to heed the book’s call to action and do the work needed to intentionally collaborate with children and youth at all levels of decision-making. The book definitely piqued my interest and, if anything, left me wishing that it included more first-person youth voices throughout.

I highly recommend *Placemaking with Children and Youth* to any educator who has even the smallest opportunity to facilitate children’s decision-making. Farm-based and nature center educators who work with local public school districts can begin using the book’s methods immediately. Classroom educators can increase student achievement and motivation by employing concepts found in the book. Happily, this work can be fun. The book defines playful as to “enjoy each other, and foster a lighthearted spirit” (p. 332). While Patty jokes about “educating a sustainability army,” she goes on to tell her students that “we’re here to learn, but we’re going to enjoy the process immensely and...our brains are actually designed to enjoy the process...” so that we can “fight for this thing that matters” (Collins, 2019).

Derr, V., Chawla, L., and Mintzer, M. (2018). *Placemaking with children and youth: Participatory practices for planning sustainable communities*. New York, NY: New Village Press.

Works Cited

Collins, P. (2019, June). Personal interview.



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