



**WE KNOW
US**

Guide to Participatory Meaning Making
with Young People

PREFACE



We are a diverse group of young people with know-how as researchers, organizers, and experts in youth-adult partnerships. We created this resource to help adult researchers and practitioners become allies who fully understand the value of youth voice in research that is for, by, and about us. It is our truth that young people solely hold key understanding of our experience within our society. We should have the opportunities to participate in this work that claims to support us.

We are too familiar with the dominant presentations of decision-makers, often dressed in patriarchy and whiteness. We hope that you, as our adult allies, use our guide to challenge Western hierarchical practices within leadership, adopt equitable practices within your organization, and systematically incorporate our dreams for youth leadership to grow into real individual and collective power. We hope that this is just one step toward a lifetime commitment to centering the youth's voice in your work.

This guide is an overview of some of the key points we have synthesized through open dialogue, thought-provoking activities, and collaborative writing. It is dedicated to the activists before us that have left us with their wisdom to continue to push forward and demand systemic change.

Advancement toward the dismantling white supremacy culture and its various forms of oppression may not be seen in this generation. However, it is our obligation as stewards of our community to set the following generations up for liberatory success.

WHAT IS IT?

Participatory Making Meaning with Young People is an intentional process during which adult allies collaborate with young people to analyze and make sense of data collected about their unique lived experiences.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

We know that this process is invaluable for developing equitable practices in research and evaluation; elevating the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of young people; and developing actions and interventions that represent and support them.

Conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion help US organizations, institutions, and programs reshape their institutional practices. As we shift into thinking through how our complex and unique identities and life experiences help us form ideas, beliefs, and decisions, it is critical that we consider an often overlooked group: young people.

While the traditional concept of young people is a stable idea with key developmental markers, the actual experiences of young people change over time and alongside societal growth. This means that one generation's experience of youth is vastly different in significant ways from another generation's experiences.

This is why it is necessary to be intentional about including young people's lived experiences, ideas, and desires in research, evaluation, and decision-making processes about their lives.

Yet, formal training and the isolated act of gathering data about young people doesn't equate to an understanding of the nuances of their world and generational view.

Making meaning of data with young people allows researchers (both young people and adults) to glean new insights about why young people responded the way that they did, gaining new and deeper understandings of the data. It also can be the beginning of planning further action, such as addressing issues raised in the data, asking and formulating additional research questions and methods, making program improvements, and advocating for policy change.

WHAT OUTCOMES CAN I EXPECT?

Outcomes include

- Accurate and comprehensive data on youth experiences
- Youth engagement and leadership
- Youth feelings of value, empowerment, confidence, and accomplishment
- Improvement of youth well-being whether in small research spaces or nationally across personal identifiers, like race, gender, class, education level, etc.
- Community bonding and trust between generations

There are conditions that will prevent these outcomes being reached.

These include

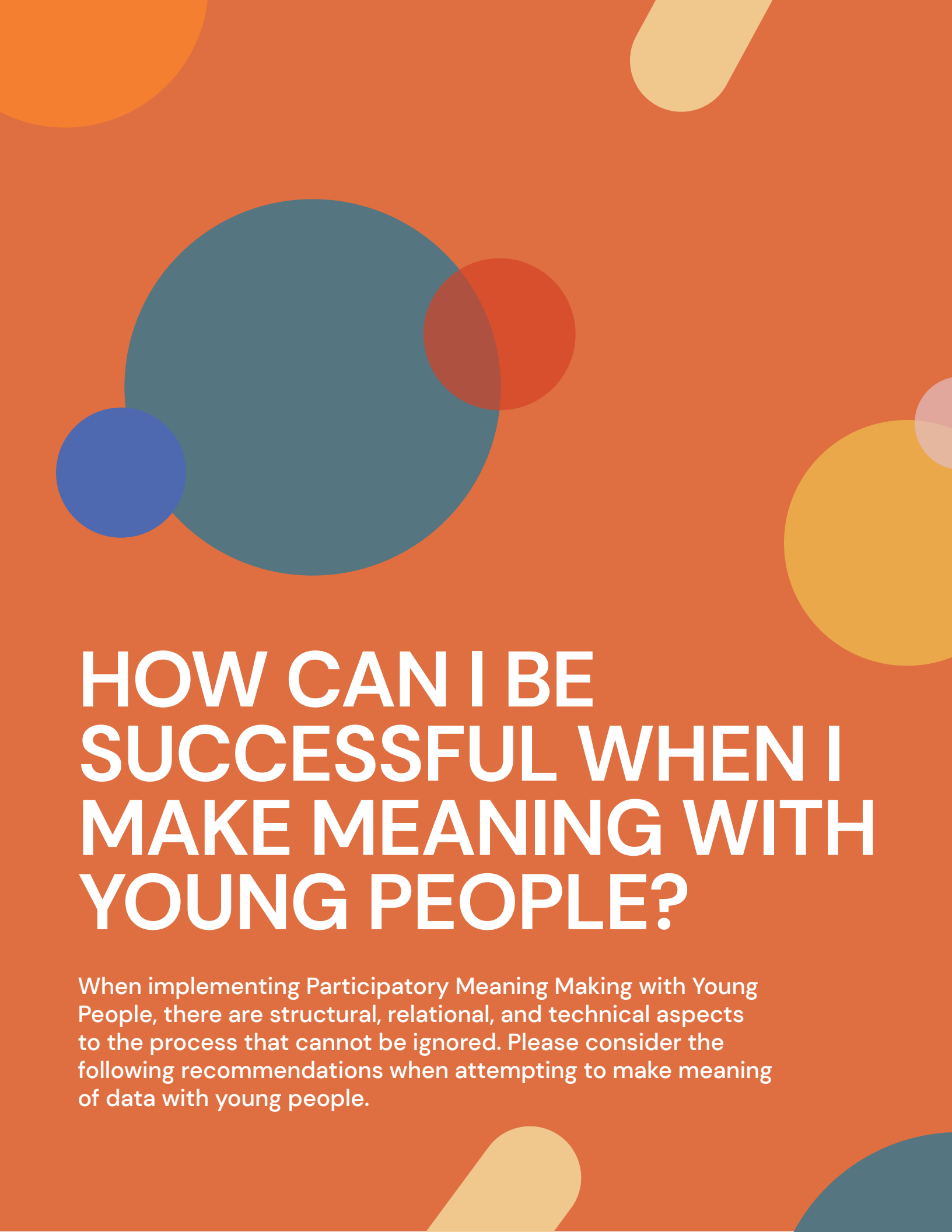
- Adult ally skepticism of the young researcher's ability, responsibility, knowledge, and/or capacity in accomplishing research goals. This may make youth researchers feel ostracized, coddled, uncomfortable, or inferior to adult researchers, especially if adult researchers are condescending
- Biased framing, during which adult allies only aim to reconfirm their own perspectives on young people's experiences

WHO IS INVOLVED? WHAT ARE THEIR ROLES?

Young people. The age and demographic make-up of young people are similar to those represented in the data. As researchers, they have leadership roles throughout the process, which includes question identification, research method creation, data analysis and synthesis, and meaning making.

Adult allies. Adult allies include researchers, youth workers, and other allies who have experience with or are proactive in learning how to work with young researchers. They help raise young people's voices and negotiate how and who uses the feedback. Adult allies respect, listen, engage, support, and guide young people in order to accurately access and interpret young people's experiences. One or more adult allies will have an appropriate understanding of the data being discussed, ethical issues related to research, resource needs, technical information, and, if necessary, legal knowledge.

Young people and adult allies form a **youth-adult partnership**, within which they establish intergenerational equity. To achieve and sustain this, adult allies and young people articulate roles and responsibilities at the start of the partnership. Adult allies may act as mentors; however, the aim is for young people and adult allies to teach and learn from each other.



HOW CAN I BE SUCCESSFUL WHEN I MAKE MEANING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE?

When implementing Participatory Meaning Making with Young People, there are structural, relational, and technical aspects to the process that cannot be ignored. Please consider the following recommendations when attempting to make meaning of data with young people.

SET THE FOUNDATION

- 1 Focus on DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) when selecting young people and adults to engage in the process. Keep in mind that DEI includes not only race, but other identities, such as gender, ability, and sexual orientation.

A conversation about identity should be happening throughout the meaning-making process.

Creating strong DEI takes time, and some organizations may not have strong strategies in place when they begin this work. However, organizations must fully adopt DEI practices in order to successfully engage with young people.
- 2 Establish the purpose of the research with young people. This includes why it is being conducted, what the questions need answers, and why it is targeting specific communities.
- 3 Share the intended impact of the meaning-making process.
- 4 Be clear about things that cannot be changed. Some reasons that recommendations might not be put into effect include budget constraints, pushback from ethics committees, and/or power dynamics.
- 5 Compensate young people fairly for their time and expertise.
- 6 Ensure young people's accessibility needs are fully met.
- 7 Hire diverse BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) staff with ages close to the young people's demographics.
- 8 Provide staff training on youth development and youth-adult partnership ahead of the meaning-making process.

BUILD TRUST AMONGST ADULT ALLIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

- 1 Establish clear guidelines, roles, and expectations. Work with young people to establish community guidelines and expectations from everyone involved in the process. Seek to build on the unique strengths and address the limitations of both young people and adult allies. Make sure that everyone agrees with their roles, guidelines, and expectations.
- 2 Create a comfortable and hospitable environment. Avoid inaccessible locations like government buildings. If done virtually, choose an easily accessible and easy-to-use meeting platform like Zoom or Google Meet.
- 3 Take time to build trust in the group. Incorporate icebreakers and get-to-know-you activities. This is especially important to do before going into difficult discussions that might be brought up during meaning-making.
- 4 Create affinity spaces among young people and adult allies with shared identities.
- 5 Keep an open mind when approached with young people's new ideas. Create organized places to record and categorize young people's ideas, as well as the adult allies' responses.
- 6 Fight against adultism. Adultism includes upholding professionalism over connecting with young people, addressing young people as inferiors rather than equals, and sticking to academic standards rather than listening to young people and meeting them where they are.
- 7 Hold all involved in the process accountable for any mistakes, insensitivities, or unwarranted behaviors towards each other.

SUPPORT YOUNG RESEARCHERS' TECHNICAL SKILLS

- 1 Ensure that the data follows accessibility standards. Data format and presentation should be accessible to all, including to those with visual impairment, color vision deficiency, and hearing impairments.
- 2 Define and discuss the research foundations. Make sure everyone has common comprehension of terminology; the type, sources, and structure of the data; and approach to research. Discuss understanding and share experiences. Do not assume everyone knows what data is or how it is used.
- 3 Develop research training for young people and adult allies, if needed.
- 4 Make data presentations clear. Present data in multiple formats (charts, drawings, stories, photos, music, etc.). Invite young people to create data visualizations.
- 5 Provide access to the tools, such as computers and applications, that are necessary for making meaning of the data.
- 6 Take time to review data results. Schedule individual time to review any graphs, charts, and pie charts that come from the data; reflect on what they observe; and journal key takeaways and implications.
- 7 Enable young people to draw conclusions about the data. During meaning making, include activities that allow young people to draw connections between their personal experiences and the data.
- 8 Provide young people with support and resources to be successful. These include emotional support, encouragement, check-ins, professional support, and mental health resources.

HOW CAN I MAKE MEANING-MAKING ENGAGING?

Ask all participants to share feedback via a survey at the end of each making-meaning session. Limit the survey to five questions or less. Responses should be anonymous so that each participant can provide feedback about the session and share additional opinions or ideas that were not presented in the session.

Ask an open-ended question at the end of each session. The question should relate to the topic of the next session. This will allow the young people to prepare before the next session.

Develop check-in questions or get to know you activities. Use these at the beginning of each session (10–15 minutes), or dedicate entire sessions on getting to know each other. Taking time to get to know each can help build team morale and encourage openness and honesty.

Facilitate group breakout sessions. These groups can take more time for deep thinking and reflection, allowing youth to go over and reflect on the work with like-minded people. During these sessions, the group might address potential inequities, misunderstandings, or missed opportunities. Groups should be small, and may be created randomly or based on affinities.

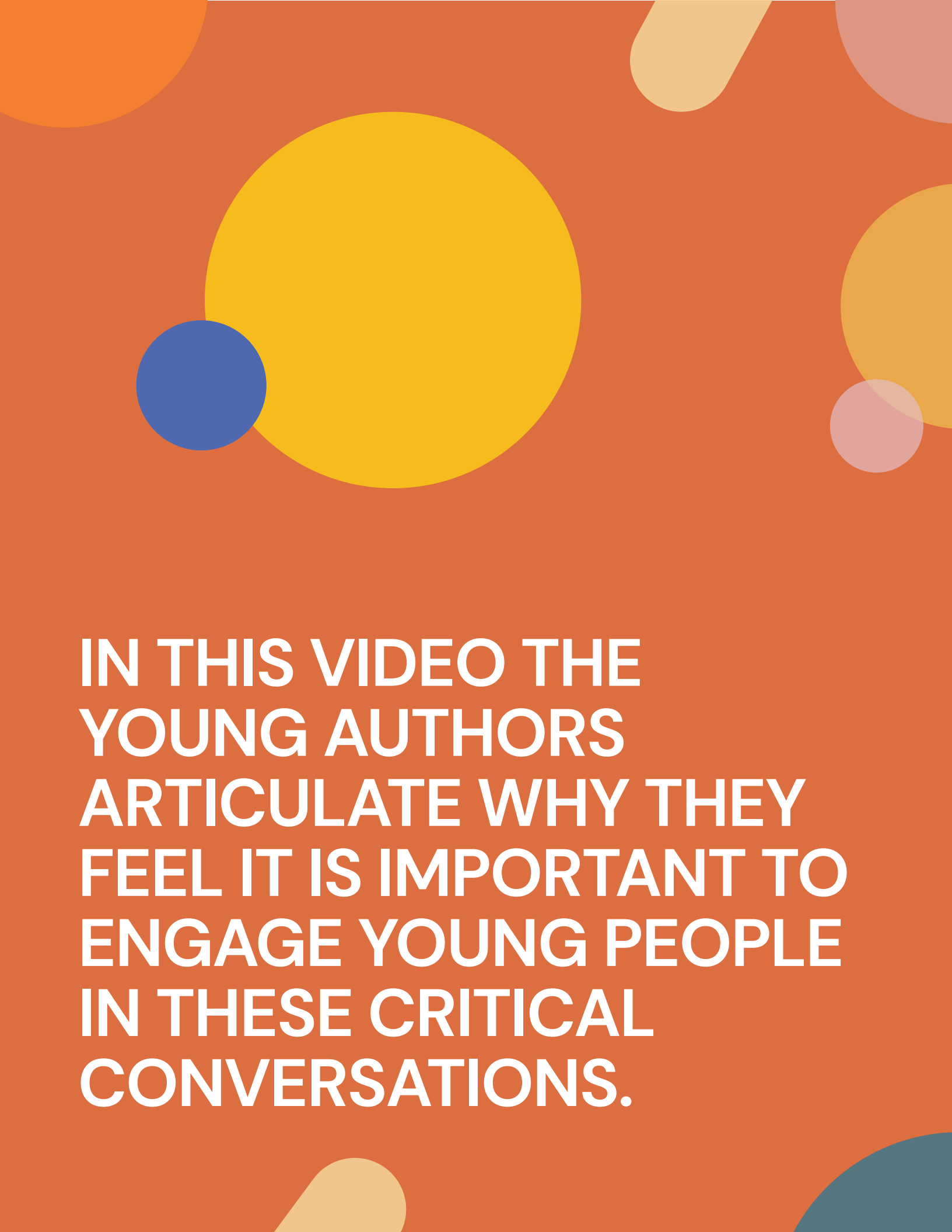
Facilitate a think-pair-share activity. Similar to small-group breakouts, this activity allows two young people to discuss topics deeply. The two individuals may focus on the same question or answer different questions then swap after a few minutes. After the one-on-one time, pairs can share ideas and conversations with the entire group.

Create and share an end-of-program survey. Survey responses should be anonymous. Questions should ask respondents for feedback on their experiences during the whole program.

Use digital collaboration platforms, such as Jamboard and Padlet, to ask questions, organize thoughts, and visualize information.

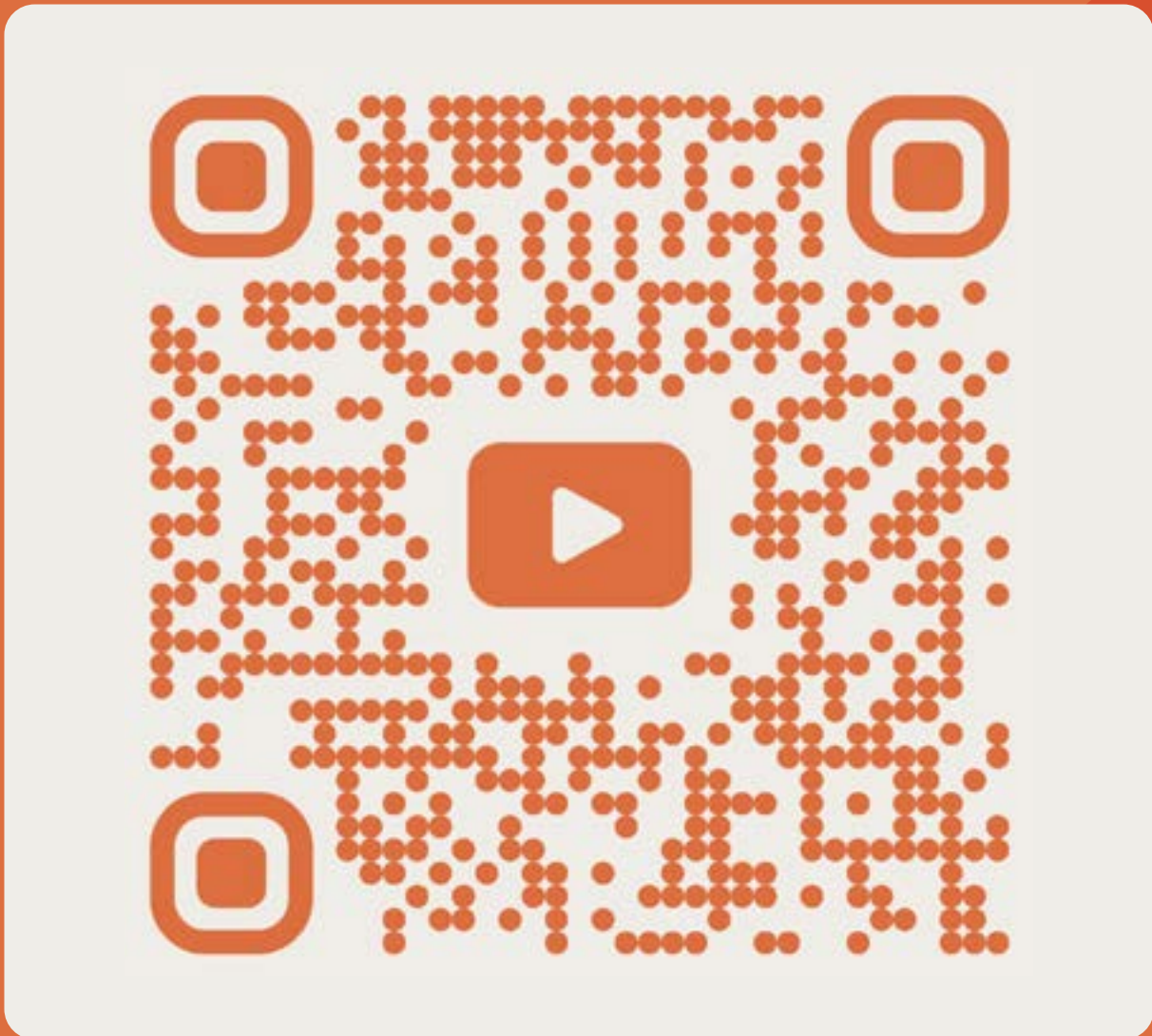
SUMMARY

In order to create policies and programs that set up young people to succeed, it is critical that data that reflects young people's lived experiences. However, remember that data alone cannot bring accurate insights that lead to equitable and well-informed decisions. Data combined with meaning-making directly from relevant young people can strengthen the data and the recommendations for change. This is why it is so important to engage young people and center their voices the right way.



**IN THIS VIDEO THE
YOUNG AUTHORS
ARTICULATE WHY THEY
FEEL IT IS IMPORTANT TO
ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE
IN THESE CRITICAL
CONVERSATIONS.**

Scan the QR code or go to: ins.gt/weknowus to see the video



MEET THE AUTHORS



TIARA AMISON

My name is Tiara Amison but you all can just call me Tee. I'll be 20 years old in January 2022.

I was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. I have a 12-year-old brother. I used to attend Auburn University as a pre-vet animal science major, but came to realize that being a veterinarian does not speak to all my interests. I am a natural nurturer at heart. I love to sing and write my own songs. I love natural hair care. And I have a passion for self-expression and being heard in my own way. My goals are as follows: finish prerequisites, apply and be accepted into Lawson State Community College's nursing program, graduate with an associates degree, transfer to a four-year university where I will work to obtain my BSN and master's, and begin work in nursing while returning to school to earn a degree and license in cosmetology. During all this time I will be releasing my music. After reaching all educational goals, I will create my own hair care line and write a book (or multiple). I joined this project because being heard is one of my passions and speaking and learning are two of my strengths.



LASHAWN MCCARTHY JR.

LaShawn McCarthy, Jr., is a recent college graduate from Warner Pacific University in Portland, OR.

He is now an associate at Metropolitan Group, a strategic communications and social change agency. He comes from a background of youth voice, having served eight years on the Multnomah Youth Commission, which is the official youth policy body of the City of Portland and Multnomah County. He is interested in understanding the well-being of youth and students through data analytics.

**EBONY WOODS**

Ebony Woods is an incoming freshman at Emory University.

She has participated in many Youth-led Participatory Action Research programs and collaborated with other organizations to elevate youth development. She believes in utilizing all resources to inspire other youth to do and be more. Her passion in life is to help others achieve their goals and live their lives by any means necessary.

**IYA C.M.**

Iya C.M. is a young Black organizer who holds many interlocking identities that have influenced their dedication to community healing and building.

Based in Oregon, they are taking a year off from school after which they will pursue a BA in sociology with a minor in Black studies. Outside of work and school, their passion for envisioning and dreaming of the collective liberation of disabled, queer/trans multi-marginalized BIPOC youth holds heavy influence over the ways they engage in social spaces and society.

**DESIREE ARMAS**

Desiree Armas is a recent graduate of Saint Peter's University.

She has her BA in environmental studies and anthropology, with a minor in social justice. She is a social researcher and currently involved in a number of social justice-related projects. She is based in NJ and loves her cat, Zoey.

**ATIKA NUSRAT**

Atika Nusrat is an undergrad student at the University of Michigan studying economics and international studies.

Atika is driven by her interest in economics, policy, and data analytics. Her interest in youth welfare is influenced by her experience of growing up in Detroit and growing up in the era of social media. When not in class or working, Atika enjoys going on hikes, reading books, or joining her local art group for late-night painting sessions.

THANK YOU!

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