

WORKING PAPER

PARTNERING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO TRANSFORM EDUCATION SYSTEMS

A Global Network's Approach and Strategies



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“Youth engagement processes can be truly inclusive when they ensure diverse representation, actively remove barriers to participation (such as financial constraints or accessibility issues), provide capacity-building opportunities, and create safe spaces where all voices are genuinely valued and acted upon.”

*– A 23-year-old from Peru
(Shared by NEST member Enseña Peru)*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Network of Education System Transformation (NEST) is a global impact and research network co-led by ten civil society organizations from the Global South in collaboration with the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution, united to catalyze the transformation of education systems globally to equip all learners with a breadth of skills to learn what matters. NEST organizations are located in Chile, Ghana, India, Jordan, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, South Africa, and the United States. NEST recognizes that sustainable transformation of education systems requires reshaping the interconnected structures and power dynamics that sustain inequities, from policy design to classroom practices, and cannot occur without centering the voices of those at the heart of the system: children and young people, who represent over half of the planet's population (United Nations Population Fund 2022).

NEST acknowledges that transformation requires authentic youth engagement, where youth participation, collaboration, their voices and contributions are acknowledged, valued and acted upon by all system actors.

Building on this foundational belief, NEST also acknowledges that transformation requires *authentic* youth engagement, where youth participation, collaboration, their voices and contributions are acknowledged, valued and acted upon by all system actors – including policymakers, researchers, practitioners, teachers, and family and community members. NEST argues that a truly transformed education system requires policymaking to be a collaborative, intergenerational process between young people, policymakers, and all ecosystem actors to design structures that enable each to reach their full potential. To this end, NEST

members created the Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group (“the Discovery Group”) in January 2024 to explore how the network would more deeply, meaningfully, and sustainably embed youth engagement into its own education research and network practices, and move beyond tokenism (Naeem et al 2025).

NEST’s Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group initially comprised representatives from member organizations, as it was designed to be a space for reflection and learning, to examine existing gaps, deepen understanding, and develop principles and pathways for authentic, equitable, non-tokenistic youth participation in research, practice, and policymaking. Through the work of this Discovery Group, NEST aims to strengthen its own readiness and capacity to partner with young people as co-creators in education transformation while ensuring that future efforts are not only informed by youth perspectives, but shaped with them.

This working paper explores how NEST member organizations currently define, engage and involve young people across research and programmatic activities, highlighting both best practices and existing gaps. Utilizing Roger Hart’s Ladder of Children Participation, NEST surveyed the member organizations to understand the existing practices at each organization, the emerging practices of the network as a whole, as well as key challenges to and recommendations for centering youth voice in the network.

NEST aims to integrate youth representation in decisionmaking, embed participatory research into the Network's research, and leverage digital platforms to amplify youth voices in educational research, policymaking, advocacy, and ongoing school practices.

The survey findings revealed that while the definitions, engagement frameworks, and strategies for youth participation vary across NEST members, there is a strong consensus to move toward a youth leadership-driven and power-sharing approach. To operationalize this vision, the Discovery Group recommends that the network expand and deepen its pathways for active youth contribution throughout the research processes, from design to dissemination. Similarly, young people may also participate via advisory roles, mentorship programs, and intergenerational collaboration.

Moving forward, NEST aims to establish a formalized youth participation and collaboration framework for the Network. With this framework as a guide, NEST aims to integrate youth representation in decisionmaking, embed participatory research into the Network's research, and leverage digital platforms to amplify youth voices in educational research, policymaking, advocacy, and ongoing school practices. By institutionalizing these efforts, NEST seeks to transition from

a network that promotes consultative youth engagement to one that enacts co-leadership, ensuring that young people are not just heard but actively shaping research, policy, and systemic transformation.

This is the first part of a series of working papers NEST's Youth group will produce. While this paper was shaped primarily by adult allies, NEST acknowledges the absence of youth members in the group and commits to co-designing future iterations with youth collaborators and co-authors. The Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group's goal with this working paper is to begin documenting its journey toward meaningful participation of young people in its research and policy work to transform education systems and provide opportunities for all children to learn a breadth of skills. NEST hopes this paper is helpful to other networks seeking to share decisionmaking with young people and create space for them to direct and initiate action to change the institutions and systems that affect their lives.

1. BACKGROUND

In 2023, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution (USA) launched its new 10-year strategy focused on systems transformation for holistic education, locally-defined priorities, and collaboration to bring together research and practice across education ecosystems. Responding to these strategic focuses and aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”, NEST was formed as a global network co-led by 10 civil society organizations in partnership with CUE across 11 countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, North America, and South Asia on October 2023

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NEST’s work is rooted in fostering capacity, commitment, and cohesion (the “three Cs”) among local ecosystem actors (Cannon, et al 2024). NEST does this by co-creating contextually rooted evidence and resources to strengthen policy

and practice so all children and young people thrive and reach their full potential in a rapidly changing world. When the network first convened in January 2024, members first recognized authentic youth participation, intergenerational collaboration, and collaboration as priorities for systemic change in the education sector. NEST envisions a world where young people are not just passively recipients of knowledge, but co-creators of the education system. NEST’s Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group was created in response to this desire, with a mission to explore ways of authentically centering youth voice in the Network’s mandate at both country and global levels. This Discovery Group consists of 5 members of the full Network, representing Malawi, India, Pakistan, Mexico, and Chile. Members self-selected based on their interest and expertise in engaging youth at their own organizations. This Discovery Group is dedicated to advancing youth engagement at the Network level.

2. ABOUT THIS PAPER

In the long-term, the Network aims to cultivate a more participatory and co-constructive learning model, in which young people are active collaborators in system transformation rather than passive recipients of new practices and reforms.

This working paper begins with a review of frameworks conducted by the Discovery Group on youth participation to identify theoretical and conceptual frameworks upon which to ground the network's research and practice. This framework review helped the Discovery Group design its first network member survey. The survey was administered digitally in early 2025 to 10 Global South organizations and was designed to surface insights into network member organizations' localized youth engagement practices. These insights were to serve as a baseline for meaningful engagement practices of NEST's activities, with the aim of moving those ideas beyond tokenistic involvement of children and young people to authentic modes

of participation. The survey also captured network organizations' current perceptions of NEST's current youth engagement vis-à-vis the work of the Network, as well as its aspirations for long-term research and policy work toward education systems transformation. The discussion that follows lays the foundation for developing a collective stance on how NEST can evolve from consultative models of youth engagement toward power-sharing and leadership-driven approaches. In the long-term, the Network aims to cultivate a more participatory and co-constructive learning model, in which young people are active collaborators in system transformation rather than passive recipients of new practices and reforms.

3. FRAMING YOUTH PARTICIPATION

NEST has identified Hart’s Ladder of Participation as particularly valuable for assessing and strengthening youth participation across the Network’s work.

As part of its initial process, the Discovery Group conducted a review of existing youth engagement frameworks, examining key theories, models, and best practices that have shaped the field of education over time. The following section highlights the ways youth participation and collaboration have been conceptualized, upon which NEST’s understanding of youth participation emerged.

3.1 Overview of Existing Frameworks on Youth Participation

Various frameworks have emerged over the years that offer guidance on defining youth participation, including Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation (1992), Shier’s Pathways to Participation (2001), Treseder’s Degrees of Participation (1997), and Farthing’s Justification for Participation

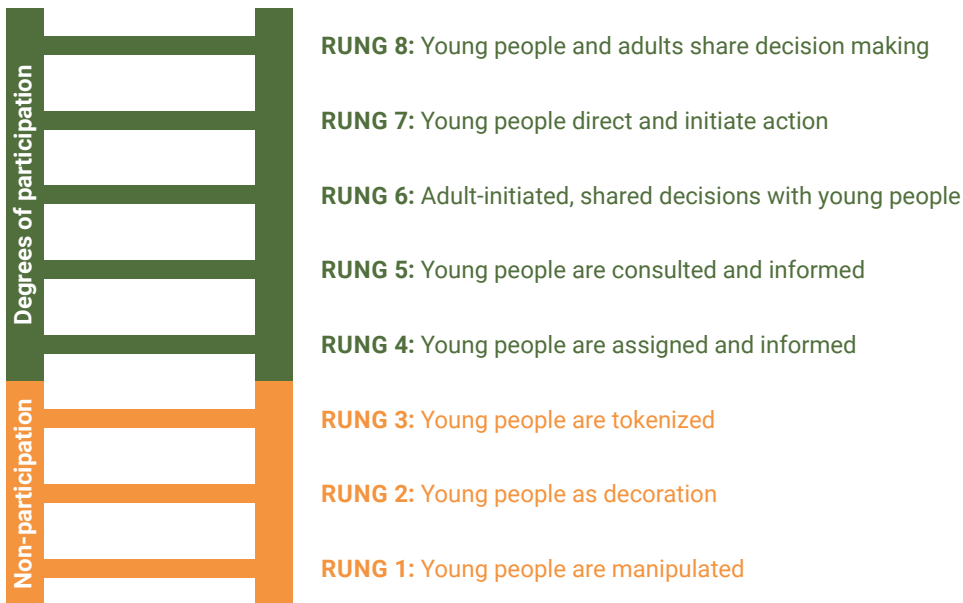
(2012) (Farthing 71–97). These typologies, focused on the spectrum of youth participation in decisionmaking processes, offer complementary perspectives on how young people can move from being passive recipients to active collaborators and leaders in policy research, decisionmaking, and beyond. While each framework emphasizes different dimensions—from rights and empowerment to capacity-building and structural reform—they collectively highlight that authentic youth participation requires both attitudinal shifts and systemic changes in institutional operation.

Among these frameworks, NEST has identified Hart’s Ladder of Participation as particularly valuable for assessing and strengthening youth participation across the Network’s work. Structured as a ladder with eight rungs, Hart’s Ladder of Participation (image below) describes the various levels of engagement, progressing from non-participation to full participation.

LADDER OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

Adopted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*.

Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.



In monthly discussions from 2024 through 2025, this framework served as a foundation for the Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group to explore authentic ways to center youth participation and collaboration. The framework was selected for the following reasons:

Alignment with NEST's mission toward power-sharing: Hart's ladder provides a practical roadmap for NEST to move from lower levels of youth involvement (consultation) toward higher levels (shared decisionmaking), reflecting the network's commitment to authentic engagement.

Practical assessment tool: The framework offers concrete criteria for NEST to evaluate its current practices and identify specific steps to enhance youth participation and collaboration across its research and programmatic work.

Practicality: With NEST spanning multiple contexts, the ladder provides a shared vocabulary that transcends geographical boundaries while respecting local interpretations of meaningful participation.

Utilizing the framework as a guide, the survey was designed to assess localized youth participation and collaboration practices across NEST member organizations. In discussions, the Discovery Group noted that Hart's Ladder provides a template for reflection and a planning framework to support NEST's goal: elevate youth engagement from a solely researcher-subject dynamic where youth are tokenized in storytelling and program participation to higher rungs where their voices and collaboration are authentic, and their experience and knowledge valued.

The survey was designed to assess localized youth participation and collaboration practices across NEST member organizations.

4. METHODOLOGY

Youth engagement is not a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, it is shaped by diverse cultural, political and social contexts. To understand how NEST members from various contexts are thinking about, supporting, and approaching youth participation across the Network, the Discovery Group designed and released a survey informed by the Ladders of Participation model to all ten member organizations. The survey asked how NEST organizations would describe and practice youth engagement in research and practice in their own contexts. With this baseline understanding, we hoped to leverage cross-organizational expertise and best practices to enhance youth participation in the network's processes of research and practice.

The survey included sections for each NEST organization to describe their current levels of youth participation in research and programs in the terms of Hart's Ladder of Participation. Subsequent sections asked NEST organizations to describe the current assessment tools and frameworks they use to understand youth participation and engagement, a call for suggestions on possible direction forward in research, and space for organizations to offer strengths and needs to network peers.

Eight of ten NEST organizations responded to the survey, representing Chile, Ghana, Malawi, India, Kenya, Mexico, Peru, and Pakistan. Jordan and South Africa did not participate. Two Discovery Group members conducted a preliminary analysis of

survey data which it brought with early recommendations to the full groups, who then reflected on the data and learning. The refined data and recommendations were brought to the full Network for consideration and advisement.

In addition, to see how young people in NEST organizations are working to understand and define youth engagement themselves (and their idea for enhancing youth engagement in education), a second survey was conducted: "A Youth Engagement Survey for Transformation". Eight youths from ages 15 to 24 responded from four organizations in Mexico, Chile, Pakistan, and Peru. The Discovery Group plans to conduct a more extensive youth survey to get wider representation from all Network geographies. The quotes in this working paper are from that survey.

Common definitions & key indicators

Defining "Youth/Young Person" as a Network

The definitions of "youth" or "young persons" vary considerably, reflecting the complex social, cultural, and developmental aspects of this life stage. The United Nations (UN) Secretariat, for example, uses the terms "youth" to refer to individuals aged 15–24, while recognizing that member states and UN entities often use different age ranges (UNESDA 2013). The African Union defines

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To foster consistency and adopt a more expansive definition of youth within the network, NEST proposes a shared definition of youth: individuals aged 10 to 35, spanning late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

youths as those between 15–35 years old, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines youths as those between 15-29 years old (African Union 2006, OECD 2022).

Survey results from network organizations across Asia, Africa, and Latin America revealed two primary approaches to defining “youth”:

Age-based definitions: These varied widely, ranging from 6 to 35 years old, with many organizations aligning their definitions with governmental policies. This underscores the influence of policy in shaping youth classifications across sectors and regions.

Education-based definitions: Some organizations define youth by school levels rather than age, categorizing them as primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, or university students. This approach aligns youth with educational transitions rather than strict age limits.

Overall, the definitions that NEST organizations use fall into two main clusters:

Narrower age cluster (11-25 years old): Common in education-focused organizations, associating youth with secondary and early post-secondary years.

Broader age cluster (10-35 years old): Aligned with governmental policies, workforce development, and lifelong learning perspectives. The inclusion of individuals into their 30s acknowledges the extended transition to adulthood driven by evolving social and economic conditions.

To foster consistency and adopt a more expansive definition of youth within the network, NEST proposes a shared definition of youth: individuals aged 10 to 35, spanning late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

5. KEY FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Youth's roles and levels of participation vary significantly, depending on the type of work involved.

Survey responses revealed wide variation in youth participation across member organizations, but a shared desire to move toward leadership and power-sharing. Most NEST organizations surveyed currently consult and inform youth, fewer involve them in shared decisionmaking, and none yet report youth-initiated collaboration.

“ For me, authentic youth participation means having real influence, respect, and decisionmaking power. I feel heard when my ideas shape policies, not just inform them; valued when my insights are taken seriously in spaces dominated by older professionals; and acknowledged when I see tangible action from my contributions, like in concrete education projects. ”

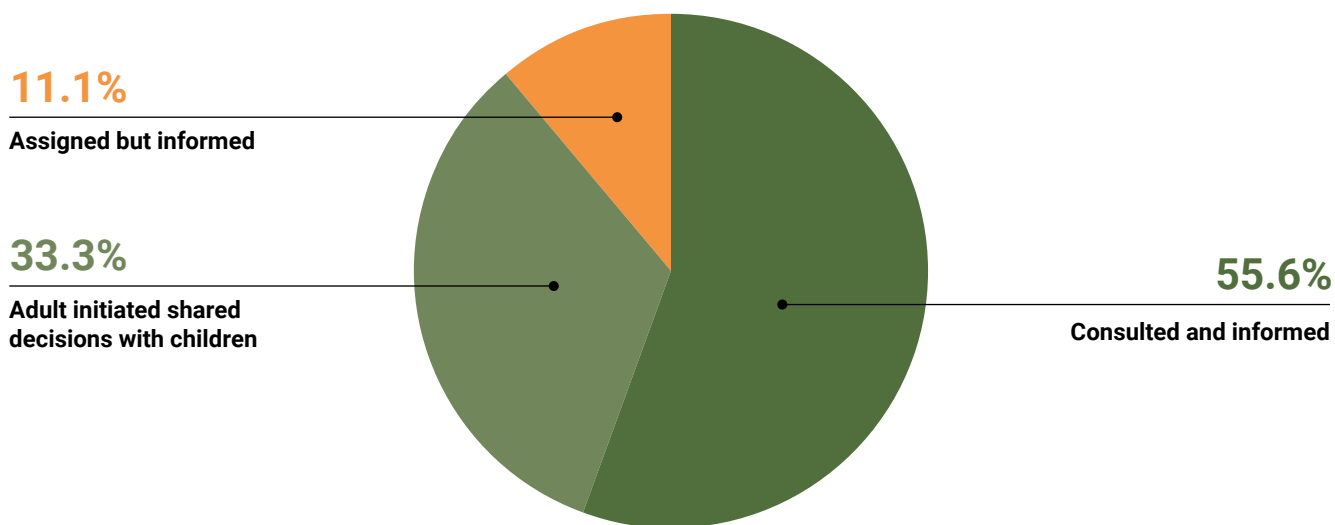
- A 23-year-old from Peru

5.1 Understanding authentic youth participation: NEST's current practices and ideal visions

Overall, surveys revealed that the definitions and strategies around current youth participation vary significantly across eight NEST organizations' research and programmatic work, with organizations adopting different approaches depending on their organizational goals (for details, see Appendix B). 55.6% of NEST respondents indicated that youth

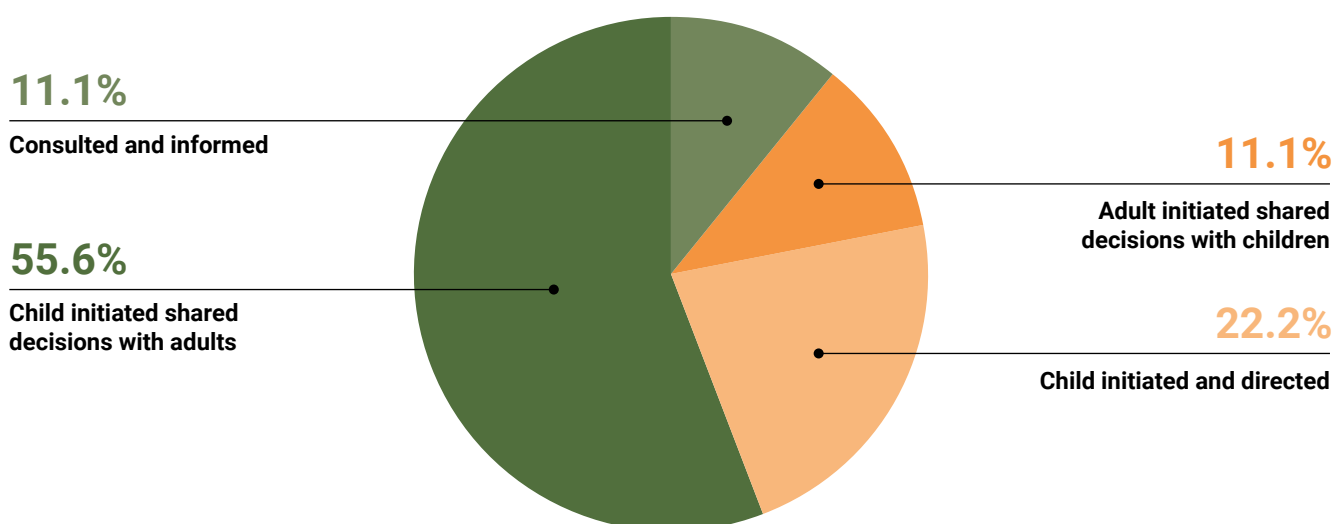
are currently consulted and informed during the research and programmatic work related to NEST (i.e., asked to provide their views and opinions on a project designed and led by adults), while 11.1% of organizations shared that young people are assigned and informed (i.e., actually given a specific role in an adult-led project or research, understand the project's goals and why they are involved, and play a meaningful part). In addition, 33.3% of the organizations ranked the NEST research and policy work higher in terms of youth participation, claiming that adults initiated shared decisions with youth (Figure 1). However, no organization ranked their NEST-related work in the highest levels of youth participation (child-initiated and directed, or child-initiated and shared decisions with adults). Youth's roles and levels of participation also vary significantly, depending on the type of work involved. (Please see Appendix B for a detailed table describing the Network's youth engagement in programs and research.)

FIGURE 1: WHAT IS THE LEVEL OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN YOUR NEST WORK AND RESEARCH?



The survey results also revealed that, while the Network organizations’ approaches to youth participation vary (some via direct engagement and others via broader societal stakeholders), there is broad agreement that work must involve both voice and action. When comparing current levels of youth participation to NEST organizations’ ideal vision and principles guiding their engagement strategies, the survey revealed a strong desire from NEST organizations to move towards a vision of research and practice driven by youth leadership and genuine power-sharing (see Figure 2).

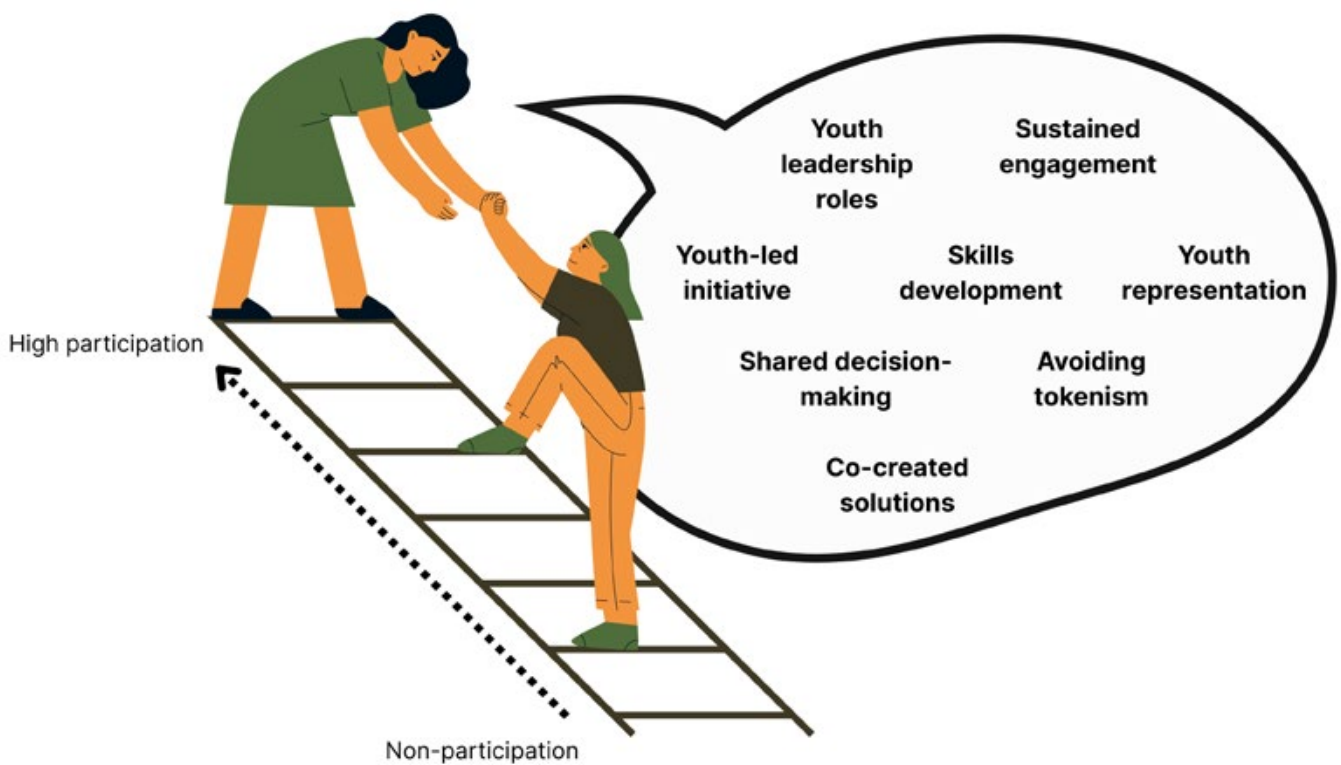
FIGURE 2: AS NEST, WHAT IS THE DESIRED LEVEL OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION WE WANT TO ACHIEVE?



Based on the survey, the Network defines meaningful youth participation as **participation that ensures young people have both a voice and a role in decisionmaking with real opportunities for leadership and action, going beyond consultation and emphasizing long-term engagement, inclusion, and respect for youth expertise.**

NEST uses four key markers to conceptualize authentic youth participation in research and practice: 1) Active Participation, 2) Leadership & Co-creation, 3) Inclusion & Representation, and 4) System-level Integration. Utilizing Hart's Ladder as an analytical framework, the following image illustrates the key indicators of meaningful youth participation that NEST has identified to achieve the aforementioned vision.

NEST'S REFLECTION ON KEY INDICATORS OF MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION



NEST members reflect that youth participation should also go beyond consultation and involve playing active roles in designing, executing, monitoring, and evaluating programs, research, and policies.

In NEST's country- and network-level work, these key markers and indicators of youth's voice and autonomy should be centered in decisionmaking and in shaping initiatives that affect them. Young people who were surveyed described feeling that their perspectives are often sought but rarely translate into meaningful action or change. A 24-year-old from Pakistan illustrates this challenge of tokenistic consultation as follows:

“ In more formal decisionmaking spaces, especially those dominated by senior professionals, it sometimes feels like youth perspectives are acknowledged on the surface but not truly considered in the final decisions. There is a tendency to listen but not act, which can be discouraging. I have also noticed that the way ideas are presented matters—if I speak with confidence and structure my arguments well, they are more likely to be taken seriously. ”

In response to this, NEST members reflect that youth participation should also go beyond consultation and involve playing active roles in designing, executing, monitoring, and evaluating programs, research, and policies. Members and young people also argue that diverse and marginalized youth voices should be meaningfully integrated into decisionmaking processes and embedded within not only specific organizations, but also larger structures like schools and government initiatives. Particularly, young people voiced desires for equal self-expression and the opportunity to develop their voices alongside adults. An 18-year-old high school student from Mexico describes his understanding of youth participation as follows:

“ Youth participation is about how we can express ourselves the same way as adults—to be able to say, ‘I’m fine with this,’ or ‘I don’t like that.’ For example, maybe we don’t know what young people are thinking, so it is very good that through participation, we as youth can do something now so that tomorrow when we are older and more capable of developing more skills, this seems easier because we already did this. ”

Along this line, the idea that organizations should create opportunities for “real decisionmaking power” for young people was noted in the youth survey responses. A 23-year-old from Peru stated the following:

“ Organizations and networks should engage young people by giving them real decisionmaking power, not just a symbolic role. This means valuing their input, providing mentorship and capacity-building opportunities, ensuring diversity and inclusion, and creating safe, supportive spaces where their voices are respected and acted upon. ”

These testimonies collectively underscore a critical insight for NEST's future work: transforming education systems requires not just inviting youth to the table, but fundamentally reimagining who holds the power to shape, design, and lead that transformation.

5.2 Enablers of and barriers to authentic youth participation

In addition to capturing how Network member organizations currently engage youth in research and programming and their ideal vision of authentic youth participation, the survey also identified the current enablers and barriers we are facing as a group. These factors are summarized below.

TABLE 1: ENABLERS OF AND BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

ENABLERS OF AUTHENTIC YOUTH PARTICIPATION	BARRIERS TO AUTHENTIC YOUTH PARTICIPATION
<p>Commitment: Shared passion and dedication of NEST members drives engagement and commitment to amplifying youth voices.</p> <p>Diverse expertise: Diversity of knowledge and experience within the network is a valuable resource for mentoring youth.</p> <p>Structured involvement: Establishing formal structures like youth advisory boards and mentorship programs creates consistent opportunities for youth to be meaningfully engaged.</p> <p>Capacity strengthening: Training youth in research skills, policy analysis, and project management empowers them to participate more.</p> <p>Inclusive design: Engaging youth from different backgrounds and grades with diverse interests to ensure broader participation and avoid excluding voices.</p> <p>Youth enthusiasm: When spaces of trust and collaboration are created, young people demonstrate a genuine willingness and ability to lead and contribute to transformative action.</p>	<p>Lack of a clear definition of youth participation: Unclear understanding of what youth engagement means for the Network creates inconsistent approaches.</p> <p>Institutional and research inertia: Rigid structures, power imbalances, and resistance to change limit meaningful engagement.</p> <p>IRB requirements for youth under 18: Research involving minors often requires guardian consent— an important but time-consuming safety mechanism that can complicate engagement.</p> <p>Limited access to literate youth in remote communities: Difficulty in identifying youth with the necessary literacy skills to participate in research, particularly in rural areas.</p> <p>Language barriers: Research tools and materials are often in English, limiting accessibility for non-English-speaking youth.</p> <p>Resource constraints: Limited funding restricts the number of youth who can participate.</p> <p>Tokenistic participation and lack of feedback: Youth feel disengaged when participation lacks real influence.</p> <p>Competing priorities: Youth have to balance school or work commitments, which causes struggles to participate consistently.</p>

NEST argues that in order to achieve our collective vision to authentically center youth voices in both research and programmatic work and ideally ascend the rungs of Hart’s ladder, the Network must systematically address these barriers while building upon existing enablers. This requires not only developing clear frameworks and definitions for youth participation, but also fundamentally reimagining power structures, investing in capacity strengthening, and creating institutional pathways that elevate youth from mere consultants to genuine co-creators and leaders in the transformation of education systems. The following reflections from an 18-year-old from Chile echo this sentiment:

“ I think diverse expertise and inclusive design are fundamental

for the comprehensive development of projects and organizations, not just for youth but for all ages. Every age group should be included in these spaces because having a wider spectrum of people brings more interesting ideas and solutions that wouldn’t normally be evident with only one age range. In my opinion, the more diverse the people involved, the better the solutions to problems—rather than having only youth or only adults making decisions. ”

For NEST, it will be important to address these barriers throughout its work by clarifying the Network’s desired youth participation goals and the strategies to achieve them. The Discovery Group will facilitate this conversation with the full Network in the coming months and consult youth leaders from NEST organizations as it develops its desired goals and strategies.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NEST

Considering the broad applicability of Hart’s Ladder of Participation, the Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group proposes it as the foundational framework for NEST’s engagement strategy. Over time, the Network can consult and integrate additional frameworks to strengthen the depth and breadth of its work.

The collective goal is to steadily move from the lower rungs of the ladder toward the highest ones and reach the ideal end state, which a majority of members identified as child-initiated decisions shared with adults.

ROADMAP OF ACTIONS

Short-term (0–3 months: by October 2025)

1. Establish the foundations for the Network (shared frameworks, terms, and indicators)

- *Reach consensus on guiding framework:* Develop a clear understanding of and reach a consensus on Hart’s Ladder across NEST members. Pinpoint the rung where NEST currently sits and agree on milestones for short-, medium-, and long-term progress.

Milestone example: *Within 6 months, aim to reach Rung 5 (“young people consulted and informed”). Within 1 year, reach Rung 6 (“adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people”).*

- *Define key terminology:* Reach a consensus on key definitions of “youth,” “meaningful participation,” “leadership,” and “intergenerational collaboration.”. These must be succinct, technically sound, and adaptable across contexts.

Definitions (from survey analysis):

Youth: *Individuals aged 10 to 35, spanning late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood*

Meaningful youth participation (engagement): *Ensuring young people have both a voice and a role in decisionmaking, with real opportunities for leadership and action. It goes beyond consultation, emphasizing long-term engagement, inclusion, and respect for youth expertise.*

- *Identify indicators of authentic youth engagement:* Build on the findings of the baseline mapping survey by synthesizing key barriers, enablers, and best practices across member organizations. Use this evidence to guide priority actions and design indicators defining and measuring the quality and depth of youth engagement over time.

2. Create a Youth Advisory Group: Early planning

- Initiate planning for a Youth Advisory Group to support NEST’s Youth Agency Cluster Research Pathway. Define group membership, principles, selection process, mandates, and role in research processes.
- Facilitate peer learning exchanges between Youth Agency Cluster organizations piloting this model and organizations with established advisory structures.

- Pilot the advisory group in the three-to-four organizations in the Youth Agency Cluster and focus on supporting their research over the next year. Develop country-level advisory groups as well to ensure contextual relevance.
- Actively document lessons learned and establish cross-learning mechanisms to ensure experiences from the pilot inform the wider network and support scaling across the network.

Medium-term (3–6 months: by January 2026)

1. Design and support Youth Advisory Group functioning

- The Youth Agency Research Cluster develops engagement calendars, mechanisms, and feedback templates to standardize input from advisory groups.
- Advisory groups provide structured feedback to the Youth Agency Cohort on defined areas throughout the research process.

2. Develop knowledge products

- Develop and disseminate knowledge products (e.g., blogs, webinars, podcasts, and case notes) that capture the ongoing journey and lessons of youth engagement.

Long-term (6–12 months: by August/September 2026)

1. Documentation and learning

- Host a webinar series featuring youth research advisory group processes, experiences, and recommendations.
- Document advisory group members' experiences, highlighting areas of success and improvements in engagement approaches.
- Develop youth-friendly research outputs to enhance accessibility and impact.
- Convene a network-wide workshop to share the Youth Agency Research Cluster's pilot experience with the larger NEST network.

After Year 1, potential areas for expansion

- *Institutionalizing youth leadership*: Formally create a NEST Youth Advisory Council with at least one youth representative per member country. Alternatively, adopt a model of country-level advisory groups depending on member consensus.
- *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)*: Pilot and gradually expand YPAR projects across NEST, embedding youth into every research stage (design, data collection, analysis, dissemination, and advocacy).
- *Partnerships*: Partner with youth-led organizations for localized collaboration and outreach.
- *Mentorship pipeline*: Develop a sustainable mentorship and leadership pipeline to support youth engagement within and beyond NEST.
- *Platforms for youth voices*: Provide multiple spaces for young people to engage with NEST at local, regional, and global levels (e.g., digital platforms, advocacy campaigns, and research forums).

CONCLUSION

In its next working papers, NEST will: 1) detail the framework confirmed by all members that it will use to design and evaluation youth participation and collaboration opportunities, particularly in its research, 2) define key terms for this work (e.g., participation, collaboration, etc.), 3) share a first draft work plan to lift its proposed road map and recommendations over the next two years. NEST will also share youth participation and collaboration stories from its members in-country work.

The three C's—Capacity, Commitment, and Cohesion—that guide our action framework for systemic transformation can be leveraged as guiding principles for this effort and include authentic youth participation and intergenerational learning.

NEST must build the:

Capacity to create meaningful spaces for youth engagement and leadership.

Commitment to centering youth voice, agency, and sustained youth engagement beyond a single project or consultation.

Cohesion to unite as a network, build on each other's strengths, and amplify collective impact through an intergenerational approach to developing NEST and the local education ecosystems where we work and live.

An 18-year-old male from Chile stated the following:

“Every age group should be included in these spaces because having a wider spectrum of people brings more interesting ideas and solutions that wouldn't normally be evident with only one age range. In my opinion, the more diverse the people involved, the better the solutions to problems—rather than having only youth or only adults making decisions.”

The work of NEST's Youth Voice and Engagement Discovery Group offers broader lessons for global education networks and coalitions seeking to move beyond symbolic inclusion of young people. It demonstrates that authentic youth participation requires more than isolated consultations. It demands structural shifts in how research, policy, and practice are designed, governed, and evaluated. By grounding engagement in shared frameworks such as Hart's Ladder, centering intergenerational collaboration, and institutionalizing youth leadership across levels of decisionmaking, networks can create pathways for young people to act as co-architects of transformation rather than mere beneficiaries of reform. This approach invites other education networks, multilaterals, and global alliances to reimagine their own practices and reposition youth as not only voices to be heard, but as partners whose lived experience, creativity, and leadership are essential to re-shaping the future of education systems.

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ANNEX 1

The table below outlines the frameworks and tools used, highlighting the diverse perspectives and methodologies organizations use to engage young people across programs and research.

FRAMEWORKS USED BY NEST ORGANIZATIONS TO GUIDE YOUTH WORK

FRAMEWORK NAME	TYPE	NUMBER OF TIMES MENTIONED AND ORGANIZATION(S)
Life skills Assessment Scale	Assessment Tool	1 (Dream a Dream) (India)
Social and Emotional Wellbeing Assessment for Adolescents	Assessment Tool	2 (Dream a Dream) (India)
Ladder of Participation (Robert Hart)	Youth Participation Framework	2 (Enseña Peru and Pakistan Coalition for Education)
Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment Pyramid (Naima Wong, Marc Zimmerman, and Edith Parker)	Youth Participation Framework	1 (Pakistan Coalition for Education)
Student Voice & Agency Literature (Cook-Sather, Brassof & Levitan, DeJaeghere et al.)	Theoretical & Research-Based Framework	1 (Enseña Peru)
Indigenous Theories (Dezin et al.)	Theoretical & Research-Based Framework	1 (Enseña Peru)
Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Anyon et al.)	Youth Research Framework	1 (Enseña Peru)
National & Global Frameworks (Children's Act 560, UN CRC, SDG 4, etc.)	Legal & Policy Framework	1 (GNECC) (Ghana)
Social Mobilization Campaign Model	Advocacy Model	1 (CRECCOM)
Arnstein's Ladder of Participation	Youth Participation Framework	1 (CRECCOM)

ANNEX 2

STATUS OF ORGANIZATIONS' YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN NEST RESEARCH AND PROGRAMS

ASPECT	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH	YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN PROGRAMS
Level of Engagement	Youth participate mainly as research subjects (i.e., interviewees, survey respondents, etc.). Some organizations involve them in data collection and dissemination.	Youth are engaged as program participants, mentors, and changemakers with many organizations creating spaces for them to assume leadership roles in some programs.
Leadership and Decisionmaking	Some organizations include youth in advisory committees or train them to serve as research assistants, but few have them leading research or setting research agenda.	Youth take more active leadership roles, particularly in advocacy, policymaking, and program design. Many organizations empower youth to develop and lead their initiatives or propose solutions.
Training and Capacity Building	Training focuses on basic research skills like data collection and advocacy-based research. Youth participation in analysis and interpretation is very limited.	Programs do emphasize skill-building in leadership, advocacy and life skills via mentorship programs, leadership networks, or other youth-led initiatives.
Influence on Policy and Broader System	Research helps inform policy decisions, but youth engagement here is indirect. Organizations use their perspective as research subjects to shape research findings.	Programs directly involve youth in advocacy and policymaking, giving them tools to engage policymakers and drive social change.
Inclusivity	Efforts focus on ensuring diverse youth perspectives are captured in the research (youth as subjects)	Representation tends to be more action-oriented, with youth from different backgrounds actively leading programs and advocacy campaigns.

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