

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH THE PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT MODEL

The central argument of this paper is that political disengagement or apathy cannot be construed as young people's "problems". They are in fact problems resulting from schooling of young people in institutions where technical skills are given priority over real-life issues. The resulting lack of participation and informal learning opportunities in young people's lives weakens public institutions and renders them unsustainable. It is argued that learning and participation are key processes for political inclusion and integration of young people in Turkey, across Europe and elsewhere. A model of sustainable civic engagement (Public Achievement) is presented. Public Achievement has been successful in Turkey, the US, N. Ireland, Palestine, Eastern and Central Europe, and the Balkans.

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In 2001, the European Commission published a White Paper as a position statement to guide youth policies. This pivotal document emphasizes the linkage between the role of young people in public life and in democracies with participation and social inclusion. More specifically, it highlights the role of active citizenship, direct participation, experimentation and accessibility of institutional processes for young people. The White Paper, as with similar policy documents, does not shed light on the processes that could overcome barriers to participation and inclusion. In this article, a versatile model of civic engagement (called Public Achievement) that can facilitate participation and inclusion is outlined.

The central argument of this article is that lack of participation and informal learning opportunities in young people's lives weakens public institutions and renders them unsustainable. It is argued that learning and participation are key processes for political inclusion and integration of young people in Turkey, across Europe and elsewhere. A key institution in this process is the school. Schools, with their problems (e.g., school violence) as well as purported functions (e.g., genuine learning), are first and foremost an institution and an issue for the students, who always outnumber professionals, and students should be involved in all school processes.

In this context, political disengagement or apathy cannot be construed as young people's "problems". They are in fact problems resulting from the schooling of young people where technical skills are given priority over real-life issues.

Sustainability of Public Institutions and Processes

There is a consensus now across many disciplines, institutions and agencies that development and institutions should be sustainable and particularly driven by the local and internal resources of a given setting. Sustainability has therefore become part and parcel of the current debates on development, poverty, health, and more recently, on education. However, as Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, has noted, this is not an easy task: "Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that sounds abstract – sustainable development – and turn it into reality for all the world's people."¹ Turning abstract concepts into real processes and developing the capacities of individuals and societies to work for sustainability is a major challenge.

Education is often seen as the key mechanism to effect change in developing countries and a key process of socialization in the European context. Education has also become a core concept in the sustainability literature. The United Nations declared January 2005 – December 2014 the Decade of Education for Sustainable

¹ Daphne de Rebello. *The Role for Higher Education Institutions in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Education for a Sustainable Future: Shaping the Practical Role of Higher Education for a Sustainable Development, Prague, Czech Republic, 2003.

Development, following the recommendation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In the context of this effort, “Education for Sustainable Development” (ESD) is defined as “a dynamic concept that utilizes all aspects of public awareness, education and training to create or enhance an understanding of the linkages among the issues of sustainable development and to develop the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values which will empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future.”²

The ESD framework has four major principles:

1. Promotion and improvement of high quality, relevant basic education;
2. The reorienting of existing education policies and programs to address the social, environmental and economic knowledge, skills and values inherent to sustainability in a holistic and inter-disciplinary manner;
3. The development of public understanding and awareness of the principles;
4. The development of specialized training programs to ensure that all sectors of society have the skills necessary to perform their work in a sustainable manner.

In this paper, the argument is that sustainable development and a sustainable future are only possible if the second principle, the “reorienting of existing educational policies”, includes a re-thinking of the role of students at all levels of education and particularly in higher education. This process would require abandoning models of education that require removal of real-life and community issues from the school context in favor of an emphasis on technical and passive learning. More specifically, there is a serious need to recast the role of students as active learners and problem-solvers in the school and in the community.

Sustainability is an Issue in Developed Countries, too

In the European context, sustainability is often regarded as an issue for the developing countries and thereby largely neglected. The fact, however, is that all public institutions and practices risk losing their existing functions, qualities and rigor once the public contributions that are essential to democracy (e.g., direct participation of citizens in public life) start declining. The Council of Europe, for instance, is engaged in various initiatives to tackle this very issue, which is the negative influence of exclusion of young people from public processes. The recent riots in France exemplify the serious consequences of exclusion and feelings of alienation on the part of young people at the heart of Europe.

To put it more bluntly, public institutions and practices become unsustainable when young people are excluded from important spheres of public life. Schools play a key role in exclusionary processes because young people are expected to be schooled for long years (on average, 12-16 years) to become “competent” citizens. The second principle of the ESD framework, the “reorienting of existing educational policies”, therefore applies to the European context as well.

² Daphne de Rebello (2003).

Schools as an Integral Part of Community and Democracy

The existing educational practices in Europe as well as in other parts of the world have turned schools largely into de-contextualized institutions that enhance technical skills and minimize involvement in public life. The risks involved in de-contextualized education have been outlined more than a century ago by John Dewey. In 1897, Dewey argued that “all education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness... This process begins unconsciously almost at birth, and is continually shaping the individual's powers... [The learner] becomes an inheritor of the funded capital of civilization. The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from this general process. It can only organize it or differentiate it in some particular direction.” He continued to argue that “the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through the responses which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms. The value which they have is reflected back into them.”³

Dewey recognized the fact that when school is divorced from real-life, education inevitably loses its value and its meaning, and most, if not all, students lose their motivation to learn: “[T]he individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests, and habits. These powers, interests, and habits must be continually interpreted--we must know what they mean. They must be translated into terms of their social equivalents--into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service.”

Dewey noted, even then, the evident failure of modern education in the distance it creates between life and community and democracy: “[M]uch of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative.”

³ John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed”, *The School Journal*, LIV, 3 (January 16, 1897), pp. 77-80.

Dewey also noted how education can become unsustainable if it is rigid, technical and de-contextualized in the context of modern life where rapid change is the norm rather than the exception: “To prepare [the student] for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.”

The history of educational practices in the last century clearly confirms Dewey’s worst fears.⁴ Schools have distanced students from the local agendas (i.e., the issues people have in the very settings students live) and this has increased the numbers of students staying away from the “mainstream” public life – the de-contextualized education drives students away from the very function schools are supposed to serve, which is learning.

The School Ethos – Technocracy vs. Democracy

In the 1960s, an entirely practical line of experience – experiences of innovative labor and community organizers – led to a similar conclusion. Schools and the regular school-to-work transitions were increasing the distance between individuals and their communities, and eroding the very basis of democracy – people’s relationships. One of those innovative labor organizers argued that citizens in a modern society had to be active, and had to recast their citizenship role as civic organizers: “[T]he free-society organizer is loose, resilient, fluid, and on the move in a society which is in a state of extraordinary and constant change. He is not shackled with a dogma. In our world today rigidity is fatal. The free-society organizer is constantly growing and learning. He knows and accepts political relativity... he has ... a belief in people, a complete commitment to the belief that if people have power, the opportunity to act, in the long run, most of the time, reach the right decisions. The alternatives to this would be rule by elite – either dictatorship or a political aristocracy of some form.”⁵ Alinsky further argued that solutions were within the society, rather than in some technologically-sophisticated group, industry or elite. Alinsky was foreshadowing the core concepts of sustainability, in the full sense of the term: “Believing in people, the radical has the job of organizing people so that they will have the power and opportunity to best meet each unforeseeable future crisis as they move ahead to realize those values of equality, justice, freedom, the preciousness of human life, and all those rights and values propounded by [religion] and democratic tradition. Democracy is not an end but the best means toward achieving these values.”

In the light of Dewey’s writings and the work by Alinsky and other civic organizers, it is only reasonable to argue that exclusionary practices or social exclusion of

⁴ Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics of Public Work* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁵ Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) p. 14.



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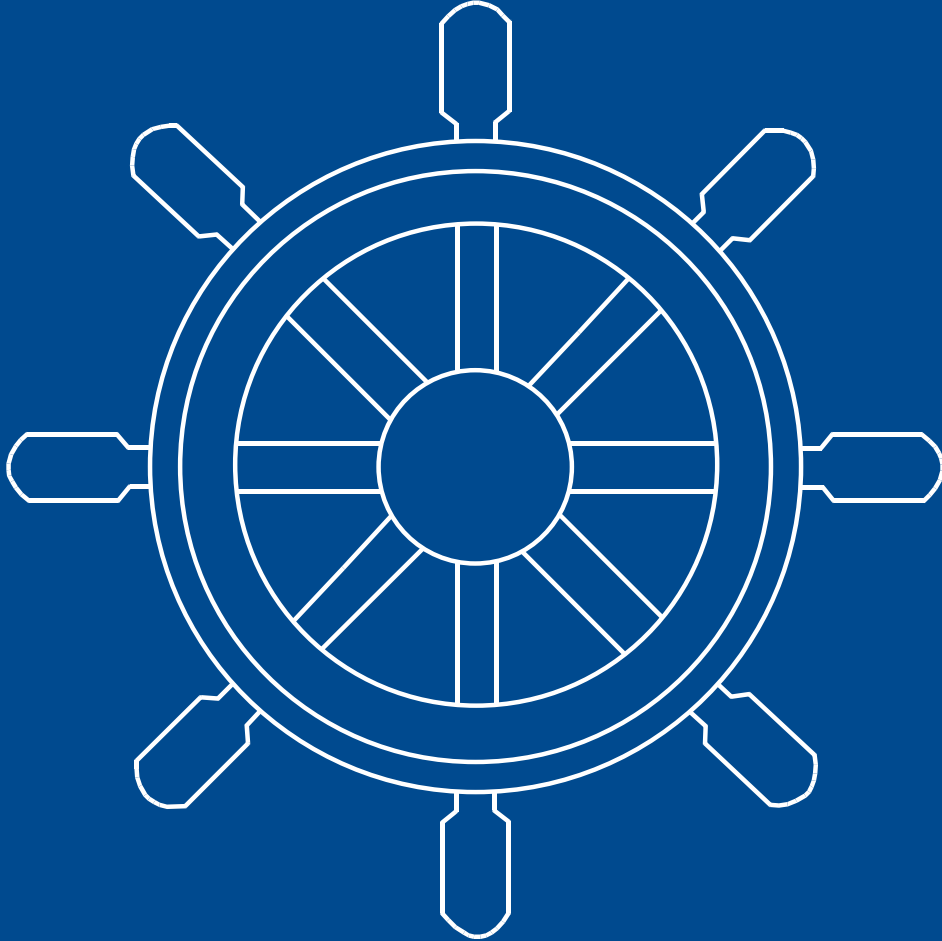
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young people can only be reversed if schools become open to local agendas (i.e., the issues people have in the very settings students live) or if alternative public spaces can be provided for young people where they can directly participate in dealing with their own problems and learn citizenship by experiencing it. In the ESD framework, this will fulfill the re-orienting of education objective that is necessary for public practices to be sustainable.

The Role of Young People's Actions in Learning and Schools

A careful examination of the literature on educational and psychological studies of young people immediately reveals a clear gap in the conceptualization of human action in these fields. Researchers have rarely carefully studied how action, involvement and engagement play a role in human development and in education. There is a parallel gap in social policymaking, particularly in welfare states with high standards of living, where there is an overemphasis on service and a neglect of the significance of action and engagement for human development.

The problematic status of action is particularly evident in research and policy on young people: Young people are not construed as contributors, collaborators and problem-solvers. Even in societies where democratic traditions are strong, young people are given very few chances of engaging in meaningful public action in the modern or the post-modern world. Young people are either implicitly or actively discouraged from participation in public life, including schools. This, in fact, is a serious violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, which requires that children (i.e., young people under 18) be consulted on all matters concerning them.⁶

More importantly, lack of participation by young people weakens public institutions, including schools. A key argument of this paper is that public institutions and schools in particular are not solely the domain of trained adult professionals and cannot yield sustainable outcomes without student participation or engagement. Schools, with their problems (e.g., school violence) as well as purported functions (e.g., genuine learning), are first and foremost an issue for the students, who always outnumber professionals, and students should be involved in school processes.

This point becomes even more obvious when the number of trained adult professionals in developing countries is considered. Economic and service models based on developed countries often fail simply on the basis of the number of trained professionals: Simply put, there are not sufficient numbers of trained professionals (teachers, psychologists, physicians, and so on) and these numbers probably will never exist. That means, services that can only be delivered by

⁶ Serdar M. DeFirmencioElu, "UN Convention on the Rights of the Child", *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).

these professionals cannot reach the public. Professional service delivery models are not models that developing countries can afford.

For welfare societies, on the other hand, service models often produce a distance between providers and the citizens, and often quickly reduce unpaid citizen contributions. Public practices that used to be sustained by the citizens become services that can only be sustained by the state/government. This is particularly obvious in the school context, where learning has become “education” and a service to be provided. Adults, other than teachers, have abandoned their roles in young people’s lives as educators, supporters, advisors, whatever the local functions and names were, and young people have become passive subjects of a school, rather than young citizens adults spend time with. This model of schooling has stalled all around the world and it is now time to accept the fact that schools cannot be sustainable without student participation and action on the part of young people is integral to learning.

Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Youth-as-Assets

The relatively recent literature on sustainability and social exclusion is in many ways paralleling recent arguments in various disciplines focused on social capital⁷ and civic engagement⁸. Researchers in developmental psychology, child care⁹, education¹⁰ and community development¹¹ have recently produced converging evidence that casts the role of young people as competent citizens and assets to their communities and institutions, such as schools and municipalities.

Research that uses a rights-based framework (i.e., based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Children) also highlights the contributions of young people in various domains of life.¹² Relatively independent literatures on school reform¹³,

⁷ See Gene A. Brewer, “Building Social Capital: Civic Attitudes and Behavior of Public Servants”, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 2003, 13(1), pp. 5-26. Yaojun Li, Andrew Pickles and M. Savage, “Social Capital and Social Trust in Britain”, *European Sociological Review*, 2005, 21(2), pp. 109-23.

⁸ Amanda Moore, McBride, Michael Sherraden, Carlos Benitez, and E. Johnson, “Civic Service Worldwide: Defining a Field, Building a Knowledge Base,” *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 2004, Supplement 33(4), pp. 8-21.

⁹ C. Spencer and Helen Woolley, “Children and the City: A summary of Recent Environmental Psychology Research”, *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 2000, 26(3), pp. 181-98.

¹⁰ Michelle Crozier Kegler, Roy F. Oman, Sara K. Vesely, Kenneth R. McLeroy, Cheryl B. Aspy, Sharon Rodine and LaDonna Marshall, “Relationships among Youth Assets and Neighborhood and Community Resources”, *Health Education and Behavior*, 2005, 32(3), pp. 380-97.

¹¹ Barry Checkoway, Katie Richards-Schuster, Shakira Abdullah, Margarite Aragon, Evelyn Facio, Lisa Figueroa, Ellen Reddy, Mary Welsh and Al White, “Young People as Competent Citizens”, *Community Development Journal*, 2003, 38(4), pp. 298-309.

¹² Anne B. Smith, Michael Gaffney, and Karen Naim, “Health rights in secondary schools: Student and Staff Perspectives”, *Health Education Research*, 2004, 19(1), pp. 85-97.

¹³ Kathryn Riley and Jill Jordan, ‘It makes sense to me’: Reforming classrooms from the bottom up: A case study in change, *Improving Schools*, 2004, 7(3), pp. 227-42.

problem-based learning¹⁴, experimental learning and learning-by-doing¹⁵ are completely compatible with the aforementioned work that emphasizes action, civic engagement and community.

In sum, there is sufficient evidence in the literature that supports two arguments related to sustainability of public practices: a) that participation and engagement are good for the young people and the society, and b) that when students' role in schools are altered, schools become easier to govern and various learning outcomes, including inclusion, democracy and sustainability-related learning, are improved.

What, then, is needed is a sustainable model that can help re-establish the ties between schools and daily life, real-life politics and action by young people and recast the role of young people as competent citizens. In the second part of this paper, such a model of sustainable civic engagement (**Public Achievement**) is presented. **Public Achievement** (PA) is an ongoing initiative and has been very successful in all of the schools it has been implemented in Turkey. It has also been very effective in the US, N. Ireland, and Palestine and more recently in Eastern and Central Europe, and the Balkans.

Public Achievement: Engaging Young People in Grassroots Civic Action

A sustainable model of civic engagement is particularly important in Turkey where the majority of the population is under 25. There are virtually no opportunities for young people for civic engagement and participation. Even university students are not very active. Many do not know how to get started, some avoid participation fearing political repercussions and negative responses from their families. However, democracy is based on the principle of people engaging in public actions to rule themselves. Recent European Union policies are based on active citizenship and that it has to start early. As Turkey becomes more democratic and prepares to enter the European Union, young people's civic engagement becomes more crucial and even critical.

PA is a civic engagement initiative for young people. It gives young people a framework to learn citizenship skills by doing work of real importance in their own communities. PA is simple to understand and implement. The main idea behind PA is that young people have the potential to address society's problems and build a stronger community for everyone. PA takes place where young people congregate and in modern societies, that public space is often the school. PA provides students a flexible tool to build community and democracy in their own schools.

¹⁴ Gary Coombs and Max Elden, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Problem-Based Learning as Social Inquiry – PBL and Management Education", *Journal of Management Education*, 2004, 28(5), pp. 523-35.

¹⁵ Michael Marquardt and Deborah Waddill, "The Power of Learning in Action Learning: A Conceptual Analysis of how the Five Schools of Adult Learning Theories are Incorporated within the Practice of Action Learning", *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 2004, 1(2), pp. 185-202

With PA, students discover principles of democracy and recognize why pluralism is central to democracy. They discover that rules are for the public and are made by the public. Schools, they discover, benefit from students' work and that is why school governance, rather than what the teacher says, is very important. They learn that democracy is not just voting but real public work by ordinary people. PA builds community, pluralism, belief in rule of law, and trust in common people as producers of democracy. PA is particularly needed now as schools in Turkey seek ways to increase democracy in schools.

PA is simple to initiate: Young people (ages 6 to 25) in a school or community site identify real-life issues significant to them. Next, they form a **team** around each issue. Working in teams each week and with the help of a **coach** (a college student or a teacher), young people design action projects that have a real impact. The coach facilitates group work and helps the young people discover the public skills they need to implement their project. Teams comply with three principles: 1) The issue the team picks has to serve common good; 2) Team's actions to resolve their issue are non-violent, and 3) Team's actions are legal or lawful.

PA is engaging in real public issues. With the help of a **coach**, young people identify the public actors they should influence and engage in action projects to influence these actors to effect change. From the start to finish, all work is done by team members and every step they take in public life is considered a success; hence the name **Public Achievement**. Each team periodically presents its work to other students and asks for opinions. This is to discover accountability to the public when real public actions are undertaken. During this process, young people discover that democracy is real work and they can create democratic processes on their own. Coaches make sure that they are not didactic and treat the team as fellow citizens.

Typical PA action starts with an educator inviting PA to a school. Meetings are held with the administration, guidance counselors and teachers. If there is no opposition to PA, students in a classroom are told about PA and that they can make a difference in their own lives, in or outside of the school, using PA. They are told that participation is completely voluntary. If the students like the idea and want to do PA, a real public issue convention is held: Students identify issues and then they vote to choose the one they want to solve most. Teams of 6-10 students form around each issue. The team is paired with a coach and they start working in about a week. Most teams finish their work by the end of the term.

The main beneficiary of PA are primary and high school students. The second beneficiary group is college students, who assume the role of coach. By facilitating group work and helping team members discover the public principles and skills, they learn how to work with young people and find creative ways to motivate

civic engagement. There is often no single answer to the local problem the team has picked and the coach often does not know how the problem should be solved. Coaches meet every week and discuss each team's work. This Coach Meeting allows them to collectively reflect on the PA activities in the school and provide genuine learning of daily politics and democracy.

The third actor and beneficiary group is teachers. In PA, teachers may also assume the role of coach. Working with students in a non-didactic fashion helps teachers discover that a) students can learn without a curriculum, b) students' motivation is key to learning and fostering intrinsic motivation is key to teaching, c) "bad students" can be good students when they are working on their self-chosen topics, d) working with students in a challenging fashion invigorates teachers. Teachers often admit that they themselves learned from their team and discovered new public skills. They also attend Coach Meetings. They benefit from interacting with college students and find genuine learning opportunities.

All three actor groups form a civic engagement community and begin to discover that democracy lies in their joint non-violent, legal actions to serve common good. The collective action and the inherent collaboration open doors to informal learning opportunities that schools or other public institutions are unable to provide.

PA is not a civic education model. As can be seen from Table 1, common civic education models frame democracy mainly as a representation issue and an intermittent activity on the part of the regular citizen. PA emphasizes active participation, public work, and collective action. In this sense, PA is a action learning framework that can be used by multiple actors.

Table 1. Differences between Public Achievement and common civic education models

Common Civic Education Models	PA Model
Democracy is representative government, the rule of law	Democracy is work of the people; it is creating public process and results
Citizenship involves voting and choosing	Citizenship involves public work, creating and producing
Civic learning happens in programs that teach government and advocacy	Civic learning takes place in initiatives that teach the craft of public work
Advocacy, consistent use of a "rights" discourse; at best volunteering & service work	Public work for the benefit of the self and others; creating a "commonwealth" for all
Leadership is positional and involves mobilizing others	Leadership by all; it is never permanent; involves contact, coaching & co-creating
Accountability is achieved thru government agencies & non-governmental bodies	Accountability can only be achieved by the involvement of people thru public process
Young people need to first learn theory & structure before they act	Young people can generate theory & structure thru public action
Young people are not real citizens if they are legally underage	Young people are citizens at all ages & can be involved in public life
Young people do not have the skills, the patience, and the passion for politics	Young people have their own issues and motivation – adults coach them as they take action

PA does not have to be carried out in schools. Schools are regular sites of PA work because in most places around the world, young people do not have any other public space to work from. If, however, there are other public spaces for them to congregate and use freely (e.g., a community center, a youth center), PA work can be carried out in these settings as well. In principle, any person can serve as a coach and anyone can be a team member.

In Table 2, a coaching matrix is provided to outline a number of possibilities. The yellow boxes indicate most common forms of PA work. Various people can serve as a coach (e.g., professor, a college student, a community member) depending on the site. If the site is a university, PA work will involve a professor as a coach, an older student as a coach, and students as a team. In a community setting, a community-based organization can provide coaches and local youth can be teams members. This is particularly useful in disadvantaged communities where the young adults who have “made it” despite the difficult circumstances would like to reach youth in the community and work with them to reduce social exclusion and improve their collective life.

Table 2. Coaching matrix

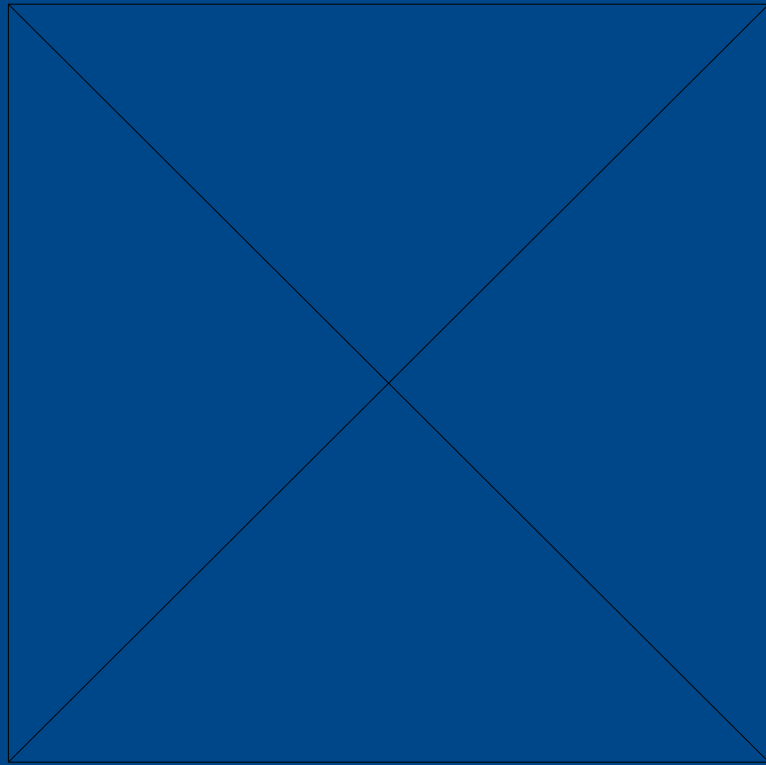
	Site where public work takes place (e.g., a team engages in action)			
	University	School (primary or secondary)	Community Center	Another Community Site (e.g., firehouse, museum)
Coach				
Professor	Professor coaches students	Professor coaches students	Professor coaches young people	Professor coaches professionals or young people
University student	Senior student coaches junior students	University student coaches students	University student coaches young people	-
Teacher	-	Teacher coaches students	Teacher coaches young people	-
Parent	-	Parent coaches students	-	-
High-school student	-	High school student coaches primary school students	-	-
Alumnus	Alumnus coaches students in his/her alma mater	Alumnus coaches students in his/her school	-	-
Community association member	Community association member coaches students	Community association member coaches students	Community association member coaches young people	-
Adult community member (e.g., a retired individual)	Adult community member coaches students	Adult community member coaches students	Adult community member coaches young people	-
Professional community member (e.g., a firefighter, museum worker)	Adult community member coaches students	Adult community member coaches students	Adult community member coaches young people	A professional coaches young people

Each school has a PA coordinator. All PA schools and all coaches are linked with each other in an e-mail group and meet each other in general meetings. Student clubs, which needed a tool to make a difference, have provided coaches to different schools. Currently, a country-wide youth organization is considering the same option. Some members of the Ankara Chamber of Architects have been trained as coaches. Efforts are underway to collaborate with local governments to initiate PA at community centers.

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