Youth Programs Foster Citizenship

This study shows how involvement in a youth-led program can promote citizenship. From conversations with youth participants, researchers created a three-phased model to describe this process. First, young people find their way to the center and take part in programs. Second, they connect to their peers and find meaningful ways to contribute. Third, they expand their awareness of and involvement in the larger community.

Benefits of Participation in Youth Programs

Youth programs increase:
- ✔ positive identity
- ✔ respect
- ✔ ability to overcome difficulties
- ✔ physical, social, and intellectual skills

Youth programs lessen:
- ✘ drug use
- ✘ antisocial behavior
- ✘ school failure

Background

Many studies have shown that the amount of time young people spend in youth programs is one of the most consistent predictors of their ability to thrive. Through participating in these programs, youth develop strengths such as: a positive identity; respect; the ability to overcome difficulties; and new physical, social, and intellectual skills. They are also less likely to use drugs, take part in antisocial behavior, and fail at school. Further, youth who participate during high school stay more involved with their communities than their peers over time.

For youth with disadvantaged backgrounds who lack supportive adult relationships, getting involved in youth programs may be especially important. These young people often lack opportunities and experiences that promote positive outcomes in their growth. They also tend to be less emotionally adjusted and financially successful when they become adults. Providing disadvantaged youth with chances to participate in youth programs may be one of the best investments in their well-being and communities.

Because taking part in programs helps adolescents move successfully to adulthood, researchers want to better understand the process of developing citizenship. That is, how does participating

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in youth programs over time lead youth to give positively to self, family, and community? In programs that focus on promoting social responsibility, the process can be seen as one of sociopolitical development. First, youth become involved in the programs' day-to-day workings and program decision-making. In the process, they identify issues meaningful to them. They also interact with others to address these issues. By actively taking part in improving their own programs, they are motivated to become involved with concerns of the surrounding community.

What Is Citizenship?

Citizenship occurs when individuals find meaningful ways to get involved with and contribute to their communities. Examples include:

- Getting involved in the political process such as voting, running for office, or picketing for social change
- Volunteering in community activities such as neighborhood clean-up day or stage crew at a free local concert
- Working with others to resolve a community crisis such as school shootings

About the Study

Youth development researchers interviewed small groups of disadvantaged young people who participated in a youth-led community center. They wanted to hear directly from these youth about how their experiences promoted personal development and a sense of social responsibility.

The center offers after-school youth programs such as dance classes, art classes, and community

volunteer support. About 400 young people participate on a regular basis, often weekly. The center provides drop-in services such as crisis intervention, initial case management, food, and clothing to about 2,500 youth. A core group of about 40-50 youth act as lead volunteers and plan events, design a "zine," and locate and prepare grants. Most of the youth who participate (75%) are low income, from single-parent homes, or living on their own. Youth served by the center include 60% females and 40% males between the ages of 12 and 25. The ethnic composition includes 51% Caucasian, 45% Hispanic, 2% African American, 1% Asian, and 1% Native American.

A Three-Phase Process Model

The researchers led focus group discussions with a total of 32 members (23 males, 9 females), aged 16-23. Before the discussions, eight youth leaders helped design the questions. Afterwards, the researchers identified themes that they heard in the focus group conversations. Based on these themes, they developed a process model for achieving citizenship (see Figure 1). It consists of three phases: Participation, Connection, and Expansion. Each phase includes several steps that often overlap with the next phase.

1 Participation

The first phase explains how the young people first contacted the center. The youth talked about being drawn to the center for enjoyment, such as listening to music or meeting friends. The center was a place where they could "hang out" with their friends and relax. They stayed in the center's programs because they felt comfortable. The atmosphere at the center encouraged youth to be themselves. Even though it was located in a dangerous section of a downtown area, the center felt like an oasis to them. They also experienced a sense of being changed and developing new skills through their interactions with others.
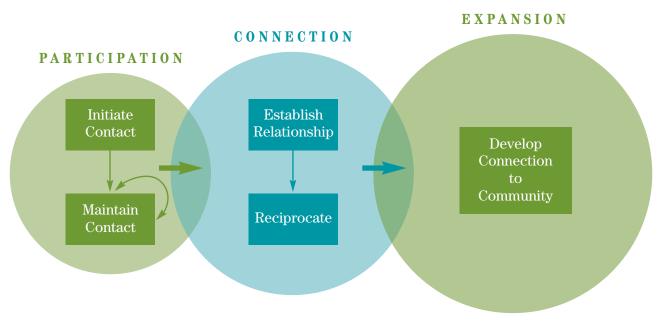
Youth Programs Foster Citizenship

Initiate Contact

Maintain Contact

Establish Relationship

Reciprocate

Develop Connection to Community

FIGURE 1. PROCESS MODEL FOR ACHIEVING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

2 Connection

The second phase describes how ongoing participation in the center's programs allowed the youth to establish relationships with peers and adults. They explained that people became more familiar to each other even though they had different interests and backgrounds. Bit by bit, a culture of respect emerged. Youth tried to get along to keep the atmosphere friendly. They kept coming to the center because they felt part of a community that cared about them. Over time, they felt the need to "give back" to the center. One young man talked about teaching classes for free every week. A young woman described how the center's director gave her space in the building to create an eating place. She found resources in the community and opened a café that provides vegetarian food options.

3 Expansion

The third phase shows how the youth reached out to the larger community. As they became more invested in the center's programs, they explored connections between the center and the surrounding environment. They said they saw the center as an important part of the city's youth culture. Many street kids dropped in through word-of-mouth because the center felt less

threatening than other non-profit agencies. In addition, the young people became aware that the surrounding community was important to the center and got more involved in it. For example, they found out that the center's funding depended on city and community grants. As a result, they attended a city council meeting to advocate for the center.

The Model Explains How Youth Become Engaged Citizens

The three-phase process model explains why youth participated in the center. It also shows the natural progression through each phase. From first being interested in music or hanging out, young people developed a sense of belonging to a youth community. As they continued to participate in the center's programs, they saw how people of different backgrounds and interests formed a community. The center offered youth a way to learn what it means to be, and how to become, an engaged citizen. They took that knowledge and began to get involved in the larger community.

According to the model, for youth to become fully engaged they needed to have progressed through all

three phases. The focus group discussions provided insight into why some youth did not move beyond the first phase. Some said that other responsibilities, such as full-time work, prevented them from staying involved. Others preferred just to attend the concerts. They did not blame the center for their lack of involvement in other areas.

"Youth can support their communities directly through the political process by voting or running for office. They can contribute indirectly by addressing social justice issues or volunteering in community organizations."

—Dr. Lynne Borden, the study's lead author, extension specialist and professor of Family Studies and Human Development, The University of Arizona

Implications

- Young people who become involved early in community organizations develop a civic ethic and social trust. They are also more likely to stay involved in their communities throughout their lives. When adults offer young people opportunities to participate in youth programs, they are making a key investment in future community leaders.

- Community-based programs may offer more useful opportunities than school-based programs to promote social responsibility. Types of activities include commu-nity clean-up days, finding resources the community needs, or working for changes in policies. When youth actively participate with supportive adults in addressing community issues meaningful to them, they develop reasoning skills and confidence. They also become more interested in the political process, have opportunities to be heard, and take part in building community.

- Community-based programs may be especially helpful for disadvantaged youth. These youth have limited opportunities in traditional educational settings to express themselves, develop skills, and support the community. Programs like the center offer youth chances for fun, personal growth, and meaningful interaction that can bring about change.

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