

Community Youth Development: New Challenges for a New Century

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Over the past generation the field of youth development has given us powerful principles and practices that help us better understand and improve the lives of young people. Numerous frameworks for youth development have been advocated. At the University of Minnesota Extension Service, youth development thinking has been based on eight principles described in the pioneering work of Gisela Knopka, former director of the Center for Youth Development and Research at the University of Minnesota. These eight principles for youth include safe environments, a sense of belonging and ownership, self-discovery, development of self-worth, ability to form values out of conflicting situations, a chance to develop quality relationships with adults and peers, pride and accountability that comes with mastery and competence, and a chance to expand capacity in order to know that success is possible.

The Youth Development Movement
In Minnesota, awareness of youth development ideas became widespread through the work of Search Institute. *The Troubled Journey: A Profile of American Youth* by Peter Benson of Search Institute (1990) focused on 30 specific “assets,” defined as “factors promoting positive teenage development.” The assets were initially divided between 16 external assets (such as family support, positive peer influence, and positive school climate) and 14 internal assets (such as achievement motivation, values helping others, and

self-esteem). Focusing on assets changed the nature of the youth development conversation, partly because the assets were listed and defined very specifically. For example, external asset #13 “Involved in Music” was defined as: “the teenager participates in band, orchestra, or takes lessons on a musical instrument involving three or more hours of practice a week.” It became possible for parents, teachers, and other community members to see and understand how they might go about supporting and helping to build assets into the daily lives of young people. People could now mobilize around youth development.

Most recently America’s Promise, an initiative chaired by General Colin Powell, has advocated national commitment to youth and youth development through five promises. These promises are intended to provide all young people with the fundamental resources needed in order for them to lead happy, healthy, and productive lives. It is hoped that by focusing on only five fundamental issues—the promises—the nation’s ability to mobilize around youth development will take another step forward. The five promises are: An ongoing relationship with a caring adult, safe places and structured activities during non-school hours, a healthy start in life, effective education resulting in marketable skills, and the opportunity to give back to the community through service. The Center for 4-H Youth Development is now working with the Minnesota Alliance for Youth and the Association of Minnesota Counties

(AMC) to draw attention to the five promises throughout Minnesota.

Inspired by discussion and awareness of youth development principles, communities across Minnesota have created new collaborations to focus awareness and community resources on youth. These collaborations aim to increase the activities that embody good youth development principles. An article that appeared in this journal last year described one example in Moorhead, Minnesota (The Center, 1999).

Does It Take a Village? (And If So, Then What?)

As the Youth Development movement gains ground, important new efforts are enhancing and augmenting its impact. These efforts are grounded in the notion that the potential of the youth development approach is limited unless we can build, mobilize, and understand youth development from the vantage point of community development and community systems. In

other words, has the impact of youth development advocates been limited because we've been unable to have a crucial impact on deeper community systems?

Attention to the vital role of underlying community structures and systems has grown dramatically within the social science and policy communities since the 1977 publication of Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus's book *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*. Berger and Neuhaus focused awareness on the bedrock importance of communities and what they called mediating structures—structures that mediate between the individual and the larger forces of general society, including families, neighborhoods, churches, voluntary associations, and ethnic subcultures. The implication of Berger and Neuhaus's work is that without healthy underlying mediating structures, a programmatic approach to youth development will not have significant impact. This challenges us to integrate our work on behalf of



Any Dream Is Possible

by Matthew Boraas

Flying cars? TV phones? Time travel? Could we see these things in our lifetime? As a ten year old boy in the year 2000, it is easy to think such ideas are impossible. It is also easy to take for granted all the inventions of the 20th century that have made our lives easier. At one time each of these inventions was just someone's dream. To others, these dreams may have seemed impossible. But as I look back over the last century, I believe that any dream is possible.

When my great-grandpa was born in 1911, transportation was changing. The Model T car had just been invented. The Wright brothers had already taken their first flight. But my great-grandpa's family still used horses to travel and trains for long trips. Air conditioning had just been invented, but they still only used coal heat in their home. They didn't have a telephone in their home and TV wasn't invented until 1927. Even if they did have TV, they wouldn't have had time to watch it. Everyone had plenty of work to do. Horses were used to plow fields. They milked cows for their milk and they made their own butter. They raised chickens for meat and eggs. Days were long and hard. But even while they were working so hard, someone must have been dreaming of ways to make life easier.

By the time my grandpa was born in 1939, cars and trucks were used for transportation. The jet airplane had been invented to make travel faster. He had a telephone and electric power in his home. The invention of the washing machine in the late 30s made the housework easier. Instead of horses, tractors were used for farm work. The first computer was made in 1944 and weighed 35 tons. It would begin to make life much easier. Now, if all the work was done, there might be time to go to town to watch the Saturday night movie.

Many things in life had changed by the time my dad was born in 1961. Many people traveled by air. In 1961 man went into space and a man walked on the moon in 1969. People could use touch tone phones by 1964 and by 1984 cell phones were invented. By 1981, the

personal computer was developed. Computer technology was faster and better than ever before. It was making everything in daily life easier.

I was born in 1989. We use a minivan for transportation. Sometimes when we go on a vacation, we fly on a plane because it's faster than driving. We have machines that wash clothes, dry clothes, and wash dishes. We buy all our food at a grocery store. We have phones that show us who is calling before we even answer. We can go to the theater to see a movie or rent one and play it on our VCR. We have our own computer and we can use it to talk to people anywhere in the world using the Internet. My life is easier than my great-grandpa's, my grandpa's, and even my dad's.

As a youth at the turn of the millennium, I have learned that there have been many inventions that changed the past century. There have been more changes in the last 100 years than all the other centuries combined. Most people may have thought these inventions were not even possible, but they were and they made life easier for all of us. I know big changes will continue to happen throughout my life. Every new idea starts out as somebody's dream. Dreams affect everyone, not just the dreamer. What I dream today may change the world in 20 years. Will we have flying cars, TV phones, or time travel in our lifetime? From looking back over the last century I have learned that in this new millennium, any dream is possible.



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Age 10

children, youth, and families with the understanding and skills necessary to work with and strengthen these local “mediating structures.”

In the 1990s the discussion was greatly advanced by the publication of Harvard researcher Robert Putnam’s article, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” Putnam studied regional democratic governments in Italy and based his work on research in the field of sociology that focused on social networks—the underlying interpersonal and interorganizational networks that exist in communities. Putnam found that governments worked better in regions that had choral societies and soccer clubs, as well as large newspaper readership and other indicators of what he called “civic engagement.” He argued that places rich in civic engagement have a large reservoir of social trust, organized reciprocity, and cooperative norms (just the kinds of things that mediating structures foster). Putnam called these factors “social capital” and declared them a precondition for successful adaptation to the modern world.

Again, there is an implicit challenge in Putnam’s research for those of us who work with youth: If the programs and collaborations that we create do not affect the long term underlying “social capital” of our communities, if they don’t go deep enough to change current patterns of community networks, then perhaps they will fall short of both our goals and our hopes. As we move into the 2000s, the discussion about underlying community systems and structures has grown dramatically. Putnam’s work has been attacked because communities of high social capital can also be highly exclusionary. Another caution by John McKnight, at Northwestern University, warns us that the very institutions that we count on to help strengthen communities—schools, local governments, foun-

dations, corporations, and universities—are often the institutions that actually hurt local associations by delivering services that undermine and replace local strengths and assets. Nevertheless, a consensus is building that as we work with

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youth and families we must take into direct account—and become skillful at—building and strengthening community systems and networks.

Emblematic of this new consensus, the journal *New Designs for Youth Development* recently changed its name after sixteen years. Henceforth it will be known as the *Community Youth Development Journal* (CYD Journal). In that journal’s inaugural issue (Winter 2000) Karen Pittman, a leader in the field of youth development, describes what she calls “The Next Paradigm Shift.” She says, “...community change is critical to youth development—indeed, young people do not grow up in programs, they grow up in communities.” And she adds, “Community youth development promises to be a powerful tool for transforming organizations that currently work with youth” (Pittman, 2000).

Though much of the new focus is embryonic, the national Extension Service and other key places around the country are developing pilot projects, research and program evaluations, different job descriptions, alternate funding categories, and staff training concepts. These efforts must continue if community youth development is to come into its own during the next generation,



Revitalizing the American Research University (or Villages Are Us)

This turn toward local communities, community systems, and community building is parallel to an equally strong movement to refocus and remind the great American universities of their obligation to “be the agents of democracy.” Many believe that universities have become too disengaged from their communities, and that we educate and train people in ways that do not foster or reward contributions to civic purposes. As Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute and Elizabeth Hollander of the Campus Compact see it, the question for universities (and for us) is “How to renew throughout our institutional life and cultures a robust sense that our work contributes to the commonwealth of our communities.”

Happily, the notion that the University of Minnesota Extension Service needs to be dedicated to significant community impact is not new. For close to 100 years Extension educators have been working in every county in the state. Our task has been to transfer research and other information from the University to the communities within which we worked. But such work is often not as straightforward as it sounds. How should a person bring a community together to discuss information? Who participates? What are the social consequences of choosing infor-

mation to present, or issues to put time and resources into? How might communities choose and act upon priorities? The simple transfer of information is rarely simple. Our educators often become community builders, or community connectors—people who build bridges between (and gain participation from) the stakeholders in a community.

In fact, it’s amazing how far the gifts and talents of individual educators have taken us, and how much has been accomplished. From all ends of the state—from 4-H clubs working with Habitat for Humanity in Montevideo to summer math and science programs at the White Earth Indian Reservation—creativity and community building has blossomed.

The White Earth program (a math and science summer school program for American Indian youth in grades 7–12) is used to train Extension educators in collaborative and community building techniques. The program has been exemplary in many ways. First, it was given enough time to develop. Planners, including tribal elders, convened to get to know each other and develop a comfortable working relationship, discuss roles and cultural aspects of the program, and finally identify curriculum. The program’s goal was not only to increase science and math scores for kids (it did), but also to enhance linkages between tribal elders and youth (which it also did). The elders, tribal leaders, Extension and Reservation natural resource managers worked together to create a program that would help prepare young people to take their places in the complex world we live in by building on the strong foundation of Ojibwe traditions. The natural resources of the Reservation itself—its waters, birds, plants, and trees—were used to instill respect and appreciation for the traditional ways while providing a vast hands-on learning laboratory in which to experiment and learn about math and science. Whenever possi-

ble, instructors operated as a team, with the elder(s) talking about the cultural perspective, a local natural resource manager (who is a tribal member) talking about the tribal perspective, and the University of Minnesota team member(s) providing information for planning and carrying out the hands-on learning experiences.

Our efforts at White Earth and elsewhere prove that we can succeed at effective community building for youth development. Still, Extension educators need support to overcome the barriers that prevent them from integrating their work with community building. With the growing demands and complexities of Extension work comes a growing need for educators to be community builders. Finding the time and resources to do so will become harder and harder.

From over 100 responses in two recent sessions on youth development and community building with 4-H and other Extension educators, there were strong indications that while many educators want to work on community building issues, and would consider integrating it into their work with youth, lack of resources is an obstacle. One educator (who expressed interest in the "It Takes A Village" approach) said their office was "...spread too thin and not enough funding..." An enthusiastic educator

commented: "We must have this. We believe this is the way to go! If we don't outreach to the whole village we won't survive." Yet another interested educator expressed a fairly common view, "need to learn about it...hard work—different than other work..."

Indeed, it is hard work. Lisbeth Shorr, in her book, *Common Purpose* (1997), argues that what we need are "new practitioners" who can see children "...in the context of their communities." We in the Extension Service have understood that need for a long time. But as Dale Blyth, Director of the Center for 4-H Youth Development at the University of Minnesota argues, it is time to face "...the real need to develop tools and training" around the framework and help communities use (the new theories) effectively.

We are challenged to create the tools, supports, and structures needed by Extension educators to blend into their practice both the research in youth development and the new research in community building. In this way our practices with youth will deepen and grow more effective and our communities will remain vital. We (at the University, Extension Service, and 4-H) can build on commitments and successes in Minnesota communities while honoring the goal to continually democratize our practice.

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