

Clubs and Groups in the Social Education of Young People

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Clubs and membership groups have demonstrated great success in voluntarily attracting young people and providing a context for positive youth development education. In fact, club work has been the very reason-for-being for many national youth-serving organizations in the 20th century. Clubs and membership groups take different names—troop, patrol, league, society, team, gang, den, or pack. Whatever the term, they are generally small, flexible groups of young people formed within the framework of larger sponsoring organizations. Today many youth workers and parents ask about the value of membership groups as a vehicle for youth development work. It is worth looking closely at what we know about clubs and membership groups and the community youth organizations that sponsor them.

Features of Successful Youth Organizations

Successful youth organizations have these things in common:

- a hopeful vision of the future,
- a clearly focused and articulated mission,
- a dedicated staff who value youth and are committed to their success, and
- a positive identification not linked to social problems (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1996).

Successful organizations are relevant, respectful, and hospitable to young people, and they are focused on promotion and preparation rather than problem prevention and/or remediation (which was viewed as demeaning and punitive).

In their study of community youth organizations in inner-city neighborhoods, Heath and McLaughlin (1991) call successful youth organizations “family-like.” They compare neighborhood organizations (or neighborhood branches of national organizations) in inner-city communities to successful settlement houses of the late 19th century in their commitment to neighborhood, their focus on wellness, their multigenerational services, and their racial and ethnic sensitivity.

No single organizational type or national affiliation appears to be more successful than others. No particular program type or special mission is more successful than others, although creative arts programs and sports programs with an academic component are more directly linked to school achievement than are community service programs. This is because arts and sports programs require critical thinking, independent judgments, sustained practice, and youth participation in planning from beginning to end, factors not present in many service-learning programs.

Pittman (1992) believes that successful organizations are caring organizations. She writes that organizational caring is conveyed to young people in four important ways. First, environments are created in which youth feel welcome,

respected, and comfortable. Second, opportunities are structured to stimulate caring relationships with adults and peers. Third, information, counseling, and expectations enable young people to define what it means to care for self and to care for a definable group. Fourth, opportunities, training, and expectations encourage young people to contribute to the greater good through service, advocacy, philanthropy, and active problem solving.

Well-run youth organizations provide young people with five important benefits:

1. increased contact with adults,
2. teaching and learning of useful, practical skills,
3. practice in formal leadership and organizational roles,
4. opportunities to practice community responsibility, and
5. increased family involvement in the education of adolescents.

Marsland (1993) notes that organizations with a strong capacity to meet the needs of young people offer programs with a variety of active program options, emphasize social group experiences, and provide individual attention and counsel. Other researchers and observers have focused on these features as well.

Active Programming

Programs offering developmentally appropriate, adult-monitored activities that draw and maintain the involvement of young people provide diverse opportunities for activities, varied rhythms of work and play, opportunities to value different talents and ages, and approaches that are firm and flexible (Heath & McLaughlin, 1991). They engage youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be managed. Often these programs yield a recognizable “product” such as a performance, team record, newspaper, video, or service project.

Active programs invest significant energy in the process of developing young people, not just



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Team work builds community and provides opportunities to develop relationships.



producing a product or teaching a lesson. They do this by turning over the planning, leadership, and responsibility to young people. Such programs invest in their neighborhoods or communities, and they are grounded in the local ecology, responding to the untapped resources and unmet needs of children. Such programs listen and respond to the changing needs of the children, their families, and the community (Heath & McLaughlin, 1991).

Individual Attention

One-to-one relationships are essential. An adult friend and counselor is an important person in the life of a young person. In this context, a counselor is not a trained clinician or therapist, but an adviser, guide, and mentor. Pittman (1992) found that young people overwhelmingly defined their attachment to youth programs in terms of their relationship with a caring adult in that program. The opportunity to interact one-to-one and in small groups with adults of the same and opposite gender is one of the greatest advantages youth programs offer to children

and teens. A sustained relationship of mutual trust and respect enlarges the young person's circle of support and offers models for success, vocation, lifestyles, career options, and sound decision making.

Social Group Work

Dean & Yost (1991) note that youth programs can be structured in many different ways. Structures include membership groups; formal instructional settings; large group intergenerational activities; residential experiences at a camp, conference, or retreat; leadership practice in the community; community service; and significant one-to-one relationships with adults. The most common structure for religious instruction, and probably for most active youth programs, is the youth group, a clublike gathering of youth who see themselves as members who belong.

Group work brings young people together around a common cause or a commitment to a common goal or purpose. Social group work builds community and opportunities for interpersonal relationships through affiliation or group membership. Successful youth programs create a sense that members belong to an intimate group. They give power to young people instead of treating them like infants. These groups have clear goals and rules of belonging, often ones the youth had a role in establishing. Whether they are dance troupes, drill teams, tumbling groups, soccer teams, or theater groups, their range of developmentally appropriate activities are overseen by consistent and reliable adults who send the message that everyone involved is responsible for enforcing the rules and taking leadership for pieces of the program.

In a review of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish youth programs (Dean & Yost, 1991), responsive religious youth programs were described in a way that seems to apply to most

group programs. These programs provide a comfortable setting in which young people can explore the basis of their faith—the beliefs, values, ideas, and identity they discover in their faith. They connect religious traditions with opportunities for self-discovery and self-definition. (The same applies to the connection of cultural, racial, ethnic, family, or community traditions with understanding of self.) They involve youth and their parents, and they have clearly articulated rules that members appreciate and accept.

These programs are guided by mature adults comfortable with young people and willing to explore sensitive issues. Young people grow in competence as they get involved in meaningful tasks for their communities and congregations. Programs include time for laughter, high spirits, and physical activity as well as time for reflection and solitude. They encourage mutual acceptance and friendship among young people.

Characteristics of Youth Groups and Club Work

The concept of a club or membership group or society is an old one, and it is not confined to children and youth. For instance, the 19th century French Nabis, a group of malcontent graphic artists, forged a semisecret brotherhood around their fervent commitment to a new mode of artistic expression. Their society had weekly meetings, monthly dinners, and an evolving set of rituals including elaborate nicknames. Their membership was by invitation, and their loyalty to each other and their stylized poster and print art of urban life was strong.

In this paper, the word “club” refers to an entity that is youth centered and adult guided; has organizational sponsorship and a stated mission or purpose; and exists independent of the formal, credit-giving structure of the schools. The overarching purpose of clubs for children

and adolescents is to create a climate where young people can develop in healthy ways as they learn and practice the roles and responsibilities associated with active membership in society. Within the larger youth development purpose, most clubs or groups have a specific program emphasis ranging from sports to such competencies as dance, camping, handicrafts, entrepreneurship, cultural initiation, leadership, and community service.

Benefits and Challenges of Club Work

Club work offers some real advantages as a vehicle for doing sound, developmental social education around values, character building, leadership, racial and cultural identity development, in-group solidarity, and citizenship. However, it is important to recognize that aspects of group work that some people identify as strengths are by their very nature potential sources of discouragement, exclusion, and negative experiences for others. Based on the work of Kleinfeld and Shinkwin (1982), six critical themes emerge for youth workers, parents, leaders, and young people to consider in relation to clubs and group work.

Ideology of Leaders and Young People

What is the purpose of the group? Is this purpose understood and supported by the adults involved? How do adults define their roles—as leader, teacher, mentor, guide, consultant, adviser? Is the operational goal of the group fun or achievement? Is the theme cooperation or competition? What spoken or unspoken beliefs influence the direction of the program? Is the ideology grounded in sound youth development principles or is it anchored in the trappings, badges, mottoes, oaths, and rules of the past?

Organizations and programs with history generally work to preserve traditions of substance and discard artifacts that have lost mean-

Six Themes for Clubs and Group Work

1. Ideology of leaders and young people
2. Nature of adult influence
3. Number and nature of youth roles
4. Expectations for participation and performance
5. Degree of active parental and caring adult involvement
6. Amount of time spent together as a group



Group work gives young people a common goal or purpose.

ing for contemporary youth and their families. Kleinfeld and Shinkwin (1982) describe a Boy Scout troop in an Alaskan village in which the young people and their leaders decided there would be no membership list, no formal

leadership structure, and no badges, insignia, or visible signs to single out scouts from other youth. Youth-adult partnerships, an absence of hierarchy, and belonging in a diffuse sense marked the cultural attributes the native people valued and wished to demonstrate in their youth work. Boy Scouts they were, but very different in their practice from traditional Boy Scout troops.

Groups must have the freedom to redesign themselves in different cultural, economic, racial, and ethnic contexts so that the ideology of the group reflects the belief systems, hopes, and values of young people and their families. When youth and adults are free to concentrate on the what, why, and how of positive youth development programs, old artifacts may diminish in importance and new ones may be invented in their place.

Successful youth programs create a sense that young people belong to an intimate group.

The expressed desire and apparent need of some groups to be “exclusive” challenges our notions of fairness, free access, accessibility, and choice for young people in their youth organizations. More debate and study are needed in this area. The question comes up most often in regard to groups formed to meet developmental needs around issues of gender, race, and cul-

ture/ethnicity. Heather J. Nicholson, researcher and evaluator with Girls Incorporated, suggests that youth groups devoted to the singular needs of one gender, race, or ethnic group are justified when there is an affirmative action purpose, that is, when there is an identifiable problem or issue that must be addressed to move forward with equity and equal opportunity. Examples include Operation SMART efforts of Girls Incorporated to bridge the gap in math and science achievement for girls or the growing number of programs targeting African-American males for identity development, self-protection, rites of passage, and community involvement (Nicholson, 1992; Ascher, 1992).

Leadership groups for Cambodian teens displaced from family and community supports during their immigration would be another example. Camino (1992) notes: “Regarding the apprehension that separate-ethnic programs foster the development of provincially oriented, ‘tribalistic,’ or militant youth who will grow into adults uncommitted to the concerns of a common American culture, no evidence exists to support these claims. On the contrary, it appears that youth who are encouraged to appreciate their own culture and who are secure in their own ethnic identities are more favorably disposed to positive attitudes toward individuals in other groups, and therefore more capable of forming solid cross-ethnic alliances and relationships” (p. 45).

If club activity is tailored to the needs of youth and adults in the club, organizational accountability sometimes appears difficult. Again, the key lies in designing programs and describing outcomes in youth development terms. Youth and adult leaders can document responsibility and acquisition of disciplined skills whether the activity is raising an animal, participating in a precision drill team, or registering voters.

Nature of Adult Influence

Who makes the rules? What boundaries are set by adults? What voice and power do young people have?

Important needs for safety and structure must be balanced with needs to experiment, to take risks, to get messy, and to learn from mistakes. These lessons are easier to deal with in the small group setting of a club or youth group. The small group size also facilitates highly personal interaction between members and provides opportunities for flexible programming designed to meet individual needs. There is a flip side, however.

A strong adult leader has enormous capacity to shape, influence, and even direct the activity of a small group, often with an unspoken understanding that the children and parents find this convenient and comfortable. Intrusive adult control robs young people of the opportunity to practice problem solving and decision making. For many young people, adult-dominated youth groups feel a lot like what they experience at school and at home; therefore, they move quickly out to spend their leisure and recreational time in arenas where they can exercise choice, control, and leadership.

Number and Nature of Youth Roles

What does it mean to be a member? What are the number and content of the roles held by youth? Do youth have roles of significant responsibility? Do youth do real work? Do young people have room to fail, learn from mistakes, and try again?

The typically small size and ongoing nature of youth clubs fosters an environment where young people feel free to have conversations and discuss issues without risk of ridicule, misunderstanding, judgment, or negative labeling. When they have active leadership for planning and conducting group events and meetings, they can establish an agenda that meets their needs. Also when roles are rotated and shared, young

people develop a sense of belonging, being useful, important, and contributing.

The absence of ability grouping and rigid age segregation is a real plus for youth groups associated with nonformal youth organizations. The club setting may be one of the few places where young people take on roles based on their willingness and interest.

Expectations for Participation and Performance

Are goals, standards, and expectations set by adults or negotiated with young people? If specifically intended to promote youth development, have youth been brought into agreement about them?

It is important that clubs and youth groups maintain the flexibility to build in and reflect the norms and values of families, neighborhoods, and significant community institutions. Young people need to be part of scheduling, determining expectations for participation, and establishing standards for performance. Sometimes rules created by adults to encourage participation inadvertently punish young people who, for reasons beyond their control, cannot meet the deadlines or obligations. Rules about attendance, timeliness, dress codes, and parental involvement need to be scrutinized to see if they serve the needs of the adult leadership or the developmental needs of the youth.

Initiations and rituals have tremendous bonding power, but they can be personally destructive as well as uplifting. Adult leaders have particular responsibility for initiations and hazing, whether they play a formal, legitimized role or informal, secretive role in the group. As always, the goal is healthy youth development and education for responsibility and participation in the community.

An organization that bases its youth development work on a club or youth group delivery mode struggles with club autonomy versus orga-

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nizational consistency. The literature suggests that organizational flexibility and group responsiveness to children and families are very important. It is easy (and comforting) to address questions of inconsistency with the creation of rules and rigid structure. This approach is not recommended. It is probably better to put time and energy into clarifying the youth development mission and goals with the local units as well as training adult leaders to understand their work within a larger organizational ideology.

When clubs and groups are explicit about what they value and stand for, parents have a genuine opportunity to say, “This group stands for things I value” or “This group is not for my child!”

Degree of Active Parental and Caring Adult Involvement

Are parents and significant adults invited and welcomed to take part? Are parents supportive and trusting of the group’s purpose and work?

Youth groups benefit when parents, guardians, and significant adults in the community trust the sponsoring organization as one that promotes the values they themselves profess and share. When clubs and groups are explicit about what they value and stand for, parents have a genuine opportunity to say, “This group stands for things I value” or “This group is not for my child!” It is a mistake to assume that new audiences without a history in an organization understand the vision, mission, and values it represents.

Clubs provide a connection between normal everyday youth and the normal everyday adults who want to make a difference in the lives of young people. Camino (1992) states, “The value of caring and respectful adults who serve as credible role models in a variety of

venues—from ‘ordinary folks’ to more professionally oriented individuals has been recently highlighted as an important feature of youth programs. For young people in high-risk settings, the value of such adults who are also able to initiate and sustain nurturing and guiding relationships may be crucial” (p. 22).

Under the leadership of professional youth workers, organizations are challenged to recruit, train, and support a corps of caring adult leaders. Parents, the traditional bastion of leadership for mainstream youth organizations, may not be the primary resource. With more parents in the workforce, it seems that there is less time for volunteer work with youth. Young adults, college students, adult service groups, church outreach arms, and specialized producer groups are potential sources for volunteers who care about youth. The attraction shifts from building experiences for one’s own children to building a strong community of the future by investing in young people today.

Amount of Time Spent Together as a Group

Do young people come together often enough to benefit from the active programming, adult leadership, and individual attention a quality program offers? Does the group dominate the life and time of the children so that it becomes a pressure or a burden? What is the balance of planned and spontaneous activity? Is the invitation to participate always open? Can teens bring along younger siblings if they have to baby-sit? Are friends welcome?

When Kathy Thurber looked at why the programs of the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Department were underutilized by girls, she discovered that the “you all come” approach didn’t work very well for young women in her urban area. Too often fields, spaces, and equipment were reserved in advance by boys’ and men’s teams, creating a

sense that the girls were peripheral. Also, the girls often had major child-care responsibilities in their nonschool hours. Participation turned around when girls were explicitly invited for girl programs, when child care was provided, when safety and transportation were considered, and when women were enlisted as leaders. Soon the girls seized an active role in program planning, developed groups that met on overnights and lock-ins, and worked on issues they really cared about—sexuality, violence, and leadership. As they took charge of the times and places they spent together, their involvement grew.

Anne Campbell (1991) put it another way. In *The Girls in the Gang*, she notes that membership groups offer young women the chance to discover and practice “. . . the struggles to love without engulfing and to maintain a sense of self while being immersed in the lives of others” (p. xii). The adolescent task of discovering independence

works best in tandem with the lessons of interdependence and belonging (Gilligan, Lyons, & Hamner, 1990). A good club offers both.

Conclusion

Clubs and youth groups fostering social group work are critical resources focused to meet the needs of America's youth for social education and healthy development. Clubs are flexible, informal forums in which children and adolescents have the chance to relax and grow. We must realize that today's young people are being socially educated with or without the assistance of clubs and youth groups. Pittman (1992) states that youth development goes on whether or not adults support it. Precisely for this reason, adults must offer opportunities, support, and services that help young people find socially positive and constructive ways to meet their needs and to develop and use a broad array of competencies.

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