Youth Development Education: Supports and Opportunities for Young People

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Community-based youth development work has a long and respected history in America. The powerful tradition of community organizations sponsoring voluntary youth groups for constructive leisure and learning continues. In youth groups, young people work with dedicated adults to learn the values, skills, knowledge, and practical applications necessary to become an active, functioning adult in the community. Support for this intentional, hands-on, voluntary, youth-focused, community-based education is the primary interest of faculty and staff at the Center for 4-H Youth Development.

The Center for 4-H Youth Development is committed to practical program support, applied research, and teaching to sustain and improve community-based youth development education for all Minnesota young people. 4-H Youth Development is the University of Minnesota's homegrown success story. Center faculty support Minnesota 4-H as well as the broad field of nonformal or social education.

Community youth development work is called nonformal education, in contrast to the formal education carried out in schools (LaBelle, 1981). Both have purposeful curriculum and intentional learning activities, both are committed to learning. But the distinctions are interesting: Schools typically employ certified teachers to instruct young people grouped by age and ability, while nonformal programs engage caring adults (often volunteers) to work with young people of varied ages and abilities. Grades, tests, and diplomas are associated with school, while ribbons, badges, trophies, and awards are associated with nonformal groups. Formal education is usually centered in the school building; nonformal education happens everywhere in the community. Schools have public governance structures and are accountable to the community; community youth organizations are most commonly operated by and accountable to the sponsoring nonprofit agency.

Social education is a term used to describe the essential learning that must occur for a child to grow to adulthood prepared to take on the roles and responsibilities associated with active membership in the society (Marsland, 1993). Social education involves passing wisdom and knowledge from one generation to the next as well as integrating the past with the challenges of the future.

Typically, social education has focused on the development of life skills for work and daily living as well as character-building education for the preservation of a democratic society. The goal of social education is positive youth development.

Parents and educators are calling for more attention and resources in support of youth development work. Increased opportunities for social education in nonformal settings have implications for community agencies and institutions, and raise important questions about public funding, leadership from professional youth workers, and support within families and neighborhoods. O'Brien, Pittman, and Cahill (1992) believe community youth organizations play a central role in social education, one that complements but does not generally duplicate the work of the schools. Schools address academic and vocational skills–"credentialed competencies"–while community youth groups address personal and social skills–"uncredentialed competencies" (p. 7). It has been said that schools address what we want our children *to do* whereas socializing institutions address what we want them *to become*.

Community-based youth development programs encourage young people and adults to make choices, to freely participate in activities of interest. This personal choice is critical to youth development. Social education is primarily associated with the leisure and recreational time in the life of a young person, and this leisure-time learning plays a central role in building assets that promote positive learning and prepare young people for work and adult responsibilities.

The Directory of American Youth Organizations (Erickson, 1996) describes 500 active youth groups in the United States. That is in addition to thousands of independent community programs that promote youth development and learning in churches, museums, libraries, park and recreation departments, sports leagues, neighborhood centers, settlement houses, and other public and private contexts. While each group follows its own mission, all share the goal of youth development. For example:

Social education involves passing wisdom and knowledge from one generation to the next. . . .

- The national Girl Scout organization (GSUSA) has local affiliates that work to help girls grow up to be caring, competent, confident women.

- Camp Fire Boys and Girls hold up the ideals of work, health, and love as guiding principles for young people to build into their healthful recreation and practical training for daily life.

Social education focuses on the development of life skills for work and daily living.

- 4-H Youth Development programs offer splendid examples of thoughtfully designed educational youth programs carried out in every imaginable setting and emphasizing topics as varied as nutrition, aerospace, personal management, computer science, and HIV-AIDS education. The values of head, heart, hands, and health symbolize the 4-H emphasis on thinking, feeling, doing, and healing.

In each case, the mission of the organization drives the educational program in purposeful ways consistent with the expressed developmental needs of young people. While the mission of the sponsor may determine the program emphasis, all youth development education programs have some common principles guiding their work.

Youth need to feel the pride and accountability that comes with mastery.

Youth development programs keep the needs of young people front and center.

Community-based educators with the University of Minnesota Extension Service have studied what they call the eight key elements of youth development work. These elements (Pittman and Wright, 1991; Konopka, 1973) are remarkably similar to the eight categories of developmental assets identified by the Search Institute (1996). Strong programs and activities revolve around the fundamental needs of youth to:

1. feel physically and emotionally safe;
2. experience belonging and ownership;
3. develop self-worth;
4. discover self;
5. develop quality relationships with peers and adults;
6. discuss conflicting values and form their own values;
7. feel the pride and accountability that comes with mastery; and
8. expand their capacity to enjoy life and know that success is possible.

Youth development programs engage young people in practical, relevant learning experiences.

Most youth organizations build programs to strengthen five areas (Pittman and Wright, 1991):

1. health and physical competence;
2. cognitive and creative competence;
3. personal and social competence;
4. citizenship competence; and
5. vocational competence.

Youth development education takes place everywhere.

4-H groups gather in homes, churches, public buildings, camps, fairgrounds, and university campuses. Some groups have their own buildings; this is common with the YMCA, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Red Cross groups. Other groups meet at libraries, gymnasiums, ball fields, community centers, recreation centers, museums, or city parks. Groups generally meet after school, in the evenings, on weekends, and in the summer, although some

arrange to do their educational activity in school locations during school hours.

Youth development programs emphasize active learning–hands-on, learn-by-doing strategies that can be messy and dirty, but absorbing, fun, and real.

Experiential education is grounded in the philosophy of American educator John Dewey (1963), who believed that children learn best when they are engaged in significant tasks with real consequences and guided to carefully reflect on their experiences. 4-H has adopted an experiential learning model intended to engage youth in activity and then analyze the activity and make meaning out of the experience in order to synthesize the learning of all the youngsters involved.

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