

Moving Youth Work Practice Forward:

Examining Rights -Based
Approaches to Youth Work



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THE NORTHSTAR FELLOWSHIP

Introduction

The 2014-15 NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship coincided with the 25th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Adopted on November 20, 1989, the CRC both promotes and protects the rights of young people and acknowledges the role youth play as agents of change in their communities. The CRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history with 195 countries endorsing the document. In fact, only two countries have not ratified the CRC: South Sudan and the United States.

Despite the United States not having signed on to the CRC, noted University of Minnesota researcher Dr. Gisela Konopka wrote often about the rights of young people. In 1973 Konopka's "Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth" was published in the journal *Adolescence*. It included the following list of human rights, which are still held to be essential to the healthy development of young people:

- the right of the individuals to be themselves, to think their own thoughts and to speak them, consistent with the rights of others;
- the right to grow and to develop abilities to their full potential;
- the right to air grievances and to seek redress;
- the right to make mistakes without unreasonable punishment;
- the right to justice.

The CRC and Konopka's work became the lens through which the NorthStar Fellows examined rights-based approaches to youth work in Minnesota. This cohort of six experienced youth work practitioners spent a year in exploration, reflection, and study. Their resulting papers make up the third issue of *Moving Youth Work Practice Forward*. In this volume, readers will find papers that illustrate how youth work practice could be different if the purpose of the work was the promotion and protection of the rights of young people.

Ellie Kunkel scrutinized the practice of securing media release forms and approached it from a rights-based framework. As a result, her paper contains recommendations for organizational practices that protect a young person's right to control how his or her image is used. Nou Vang and Rebecca Edmund identified changes in policy and practice that would better promote and embody a rights-based approach to youth work within their own organizations. Rachel Katkar examined the right of a young person to fail and the role of adults to mitigate the harm. The papers written by Monica McDaniel and Julie Richards center on social justice and youth work as a way to both acknowledge and prepare young people to be agents of change.

The purpose of the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship is to generate wisdom, language, and leadership in the field of youth work in Minnesota. This cohort of NorthStar Fellows embodied this purpose. After reading their papers, we think you will agree.



A YOUTH RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO ACCOUNTABILITY IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

By Rebecca Edmunds

INTRODUCTION

To whom are youth workers accountable? Throughout my year participating in the NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship, this question has persisted. I have considered not only to whom I am accountable in my role as program coordinator at ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students), but also to whom we, as the field of youth work, are accountable. The fellowship provided a framework to consider this question through the examination of a rights-based approach to youth work. By focusing my perspective on the rights of youth, I have concluded that as individuals and as a field, we are accountable to the youth we serve. I am accountable to the young people participating in the ACES program. Thus, I am responsible for evaluating the structure, content, and activities of our program and implementing necessary changes to ensure ACES is honoring the rights of our youth.

To acknowledge this responsibility is to make a commitment to young people. Implementing a rights-based approach to youth development adds a critical layer of accountability to program administration and the board of directors. It challenges accountability to funders and grantors. It reshapes the meaning of accountability to a professional set of standards. A commitment to rights-based youth work means that what I do and how I work must include accountability first and foremost to the 8- to 14-year-old students who participate in my program. My role and the role of ACES must commit to creating a program that is structured to gather, respond to, and implement youth feedback while also developing the skills of youth to knowledgeably and confidently provide input. The process of youth input becomes a primary influence on program goals. All other outcomes would filter through that process. For this is their right and my duty, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 12)

As a youth worker, I become accountable to facilitate youth participation in defining successful ACES program outcomes, to ensure that we meet those standards of success, and to build the skills of my students to hold me accountable to the standards they help to define.

As a field of youth work, we must fulfill this commitment for both the benefit to the individual youth served and to the community. A rights-based approach recognizes that while all humans, and more specifically, all children have certain inalienable rights, they do not always have the skills or the empowerment to claim those rights and hold systems accountable. As the name suggests, the primary role of youth work is to provide supports and opportunities for young people to develop positive skills and attitudes. The greatest service we can provide is to support youth to become informed, empowered, and responsible rights-holders. Citizens who are knowledgeable about their rights and engaged in advocating for change are vital for a successful democracy. In claiming their rights, youth will also be developing skills that will benefit them and

the community throughout their lives. A rights-based approach to accountability can provide a process by which youth programs can meet this commitment.

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO YOUTH WORK

My position is grounded in a rights-based approach to youth work, and the assumptions of this approach must first be considered. Under the direction of the United Nations, our global society has recognized that all humans have certain inalienable rights. These rights are fundamental to who we are as individuals and how we function collectively. By nature of being human rights, we do not have to qualify, request, or in any other way seek out these rights. They are inherent and universal. Every human earns these rights equally and freely by simply existing. No one can deny these rights. In 1948, the United Nations General Assembly, recognized and codified these rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through the Declaration, we have collectively defined our expectations for the baseline treatment of each person on earth. Honoring human rights provides “the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations Population Fund). This is the standard to which we must hold ourselves.

We have also recognized that certain segments of society require additional protections of their rights, due to their marginalization or collective powerlessness. In these cases, particular care needs to be afforded to rights above and beyond standard human rights. The rights of the child are one example and are codified in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The Convention provides the field of youth work with a rights-based standard. In choosing to center our work on the rights of children, rather than on other definitions of outcomes or quality, we establish a rights-based philosophy and approach to our work. In so doing, the youth work field can follow the example set by the United Nations and international development programs in framing their work within a human rights focus.

Grounding youth work in youth rights is a paradigm shift that has been advocated before. Dr. Gisela Konopka identified human rights that are important for adolescent development in 1973. Since then, groups both within the United States and internationally have advocated for a youth rights framework (Lansdown, 2010; Anfinson, Oehrlein, O'Brien, Buskovich and Swayze, 2010; European Youth Forum, 2014). This advocacy has resulted in a variety of approaches to youth work including changes from needs-based to assets-based to positive youth development. However, these approaches lack the fundamental paradigm shift required of a rights-based approach.

In a rights-based approach, youth are “key actors in their own development, rather than passive recipients” (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.). Even as the language of youth work has moved beyond the needs-based approach, the underlying assumption remains that programs address a deficit for youth whether academic tutoring, a safe space, or mentoring from caring adults. Because they are defined by achieving an outcome for youth, these approaches restrict the interactions between youth and adults. However, in a rights-based approach the process of youth input becomes the goal. Youth work becomes grounded in the specific language of: “the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). This means that quality indicators such as youth voice, planning, and choice are actually functions of youth exercising their rights. Supporting youth rights becomes essential for youth work both in developing the skills youth will need for their future role as a democratic electorate and recognition of their humanity. A rights-based approach honors the idea that youth do not earn the right to make an impact by turning eighteen. As minors, their rights are present, but unclaimed. The youth-serving organization transitions from a provider of programming to a vehicle through which youth can realize their rights.

Additionally, in this framework, youth-serving organizations are held to a higher standard as the duty-bearer “to respect, protect and guarantee”(United Nations Population Fund) (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.) the rights of the youth. Youth have recourse if an organization provides poor quality programming because they have the ability and opportunity to provide input and demand accountability. In a rights-based approach, the actions of the organization, as the duty-bearer, can be viewed as a violation of a youth rights. A similar distinction was articulated when the United Nations Development Group (2003) established a common policy for using a human-rights approach:

A set of programme activities that only incidentally contributes to the realization of human rights does not necessarily constitute a human rights-based approach to programming. In a human rights-based approach to programming and development cooperation, the aim of all activities is to contribute directly to the realization of one or several human rights.

By adopting a rights-based approach to youth work, we declare that our ultimate goal is the realization of youth claiming their rights. The recognition and support of youth rights has to be first and foremost in our work. Thus, establishing means for youth to impact program decisions needs to be well integrated within the structure and practices of organizations.

To fulfill their role as the rights holders, youth also have to be supported in developing the skills to keep organizations accountable. Youth must be informed about their rights, educated in how to claim their rights, and empowered to hold the duty-bearers accountable for honoring their rights. By prioritizing the development of youth as actors, this approach provides a framework for youth-serving organizations to improve their own capacity to meet their obligations to youth (United Nations Development Group, 2003). In creating structures for youth to provide input, we will be structuring our capacity to respond to that input.

Adopting a rights-based philosophy fundamentally shapes our youth programs, the youth worker's role and the importance of youth input. While it does not trump all other organizational responsibilities, youth input is a major feature of our accountability as an organization. In using the context of youth rights, I have defined accountability as the “responsibility of youth workers and youth work programs to be answerable to the youth served in the organization by prioritizing a youth's right to provide input and impact program decisions.” This definition requires a shift from viewing organizational accountability as a hierarchical responsibility, where youth workers are accountable to the organization, organizations are accountable to funders, and both are accountable to the ethics of the profession. Instead, by using a youth rights-based approach, we can define accountability of the entire field to the youth. Within ACES, this means that all stakeholders including our board of directors, staff, funders, partners, and the families and youth that we serve understand and support restructuring to integrate youth input in the development and implementation of our program.

Accountability is a greater challenge in the field of youth work as compared to many other fields because young people may not have the skill set or the empowerment to demand recourse from the youth-serving organizations in which they enroll. Often, the greatest power that youth have is in their feet. If a program is not meeting the needs or incorporating the interests of the youth, we know because youth will not participate. When not given an avenue to provide input, youth impact programs by disengaging. As one youth worker said, “It could be the greatest thing that you think you've come up with, [but] if the kids don't like it, there's really no reason for you to even start” (K. Moua, personal communication, 2015). A system in which disengagement is the primary tool of accountability is a system in need of a power shift. Youth must

be engaged and feel empowered by the programs in which they participate. That is not only developmentally beneficial, it is their right! As youth workers, we need to ensure the power dynamic of our system of out-of-school-time programming is one which empowers participation.

We need to help youth impact programs and advocate for change when they are dissatisfied. We need to empower youth because “the realisation of children’s participation rights involves the transition of children from the status of passive recipients to respect as active agents. It necessitates a transfer of greater power for children to have influence in their lives” (Lansdown, 2010, p. 13). In so doing, youth not only improve the individual programs, but more importantly, develop an essential skill. Understanding how to provide effective feedback and make a positive impact through engagement, rather than disengagement, is a skill that impacts interactions youth will have in their communities. As youth-serving organizations, a rights-based approach to accountability necessitates a structure designed for intentional youth impact, a safe space for youth to feel comfortable providing that input, and the development of youth skills to promote effective feedback.

ACES CURRENT STRUCTURE EXAMINED

My role as program coordinator at ACES and the structure, content, and implementation of our program provides the perspective from which I examine a rights-based approach to accountability. My position has been impacted by ongoing conversations with colleagues at ACES and peers in the youth development field. I also used a critical review of the ACES curriculum, ACES data from youth surveys, and the responses from an internal staff survey. I joined the ACES team in August 2013 and my reflections on the program are based on the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years and the 2014 summer program. My recommendations reflect the conclusions that I drew from those results and do not represent the official policy or position of the ACES organization. My goal is to directly impact the design and implementation of our program and fundamentally change how my colleagues and I approach our work. I also hope that other youth workers and youth-serving organizations would utilize this template to incorporate a rights-based approach to accountability in their own programs.

My examination of the program is timely because ACES is going through a period of transition. During the 2014-2015 school year, our Executive Director, Christina E. Saunders opened up a dialogue as to how ACES could improve and provide a higher-quality program. ACES has served students in Minneapolis and Saint Paul for twenty years as an out-of-school-time tutor/mentor program aimed at closing the achievement gap. During that time, the organization has adapted the structure and approach of the program in an attempt to better meet the needs of the youth. Currently, we partner closely with the Saint Paul and Minneapolis Public Schools and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities to work with students in the fourth through eighth grades. ACES direct-service staff led classrooms of 10 to 15 students through a twice-weekly program of teambuilding, a project-based curriculum, and academic support or homework help.

INTENTIONAL WELCOMING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

Creating a safe and supportive environment for youth is inherent in the ACES mission. Development and skill building, especially for youth, requires risk taking and those risks are best explored when youth are secure in the knowledge that they will receive support from their peers and adult mentors. Creating this welcoming atmosphere is a strength of the ACES program. ACES uses a model of small classes, intentional team-building and caring adult staff and volunteers. The strong relationship-building model is reflected in the comfort of students at the program. For example, multiple responses from ACES students to the youth version of the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO-Y) in fall 2014 show students identifying ACES as a place where they feel welcome (see Appendix A for ACES Fall 2014 SAYO-Y results). ACES

students responded positively to questions such as “Are kids here friendly with each other?”, “Do you like coming here?” and “Do you have fun when you’re here?” The ACES internal 2013-2014 surveys also demonstrate a slight increase in positive responses from the pre- to post-program survey for the question “I have support from adults other than my parents.” (see Appendix B for ACES 2013-14 pre/post survey results). These student responses reveal that youth are comfortable in the ACES program. From a qualitative standpoint, I also judge the comfort of youth in the ACES program from the relationships that I see in our classrooms. Youth demonstrate a sense of community in their ACES classrooms, with their self-identification as ACES students, their desire to wear ACES t-shirts (earned through attendance goals and field trips), and in their interactions with classmates and staff.

In ACES, we intentionally develop a welcoming environment by emphasizing the use of student names and friendly greetings. Ice breakers and team-building activities are designed in the program schedule to encourage the sense of community, inclusiveness and belonging. Reflection and group projects provide a sense of group achievement. Attendance and participation incentives encourage self-identification with ACES. Staff are also hired and trained for a positive approach to youth work with respect, encouragement, and a belief in the ability of all students to succeed as being of the utmost importance.

INTENTIONAL CURRICULUM

Along with creating a safe and supportive environment, ACES staff builds student skills by encouraging student expression, choice, and reflection within the structure of the pre-set curriculum. As an example, in the ACES (2015) curriculum unit “4th Grade Fish Tale,” students learn about fish and practice their language arts skills by writing a fish story. In this unit, students may choose the style and content of their story. They are able to creatively express their ideas through writing and illustrating the story and will present their finished projects to their classmates. Throughout this process, staff prompt students to reflect on their work and provide feedback on how they feel about the project. Responding to this feedback is one form of accountability to our youth.

In addition to developing youth choice in the curriculum, ACES staff are encouraged to elicit feedback from youth on the program activities and adapt to the needs and interests of their class. They may extend or limit certain activities based on student feedback. Staff may also occasionally schedule a “free day” or “teambuilding day” to further build the community in their classroom. The relaxed environment and relationship building with ACES adult volunteers and staff encourages student expression (C. Saunders, personal communication, 2015). Additionally, the flexible schedule provides for greater student choice and adaptability to youth input.

When asked to reflect on the 2014-2015 program and on changes that they had made based on youth feedback in an anonymous internal ACES Program Survey (2015), ACES staff provided examples of eliciting youth feedback and adapting their choice of activities (see Appendix C for ACES Program Survey responses). One wrote, “My students requested more physical activity and hands-on learning. They have energy pent up from the school day. I now work this into the curriculum whenever possible.” Another staff shared, “Students regularly have two or three activities to choose from at any given time. Also, we frequently take informal polls to see how students would prefer an activity to be structured.” One response demonstrated that some staff have supplemented the content of the ACES curriculum based on student feedback, “Andy changed his entire curriculum to address the requests of his students for ‘real life’ information. They did a customized curriculum of taxes and job applications.” These adaptations and the example of the fish tale curriculum unit demonstrate the intentional development of youth expression and choice in the ACES program.

INTENTIONAL YOUTH VOICE

By complementing a welcoming environment with the intentional development of youth voice, ACES can encourage youth feedback and input on programming decisions. However, the overall results on youth input are mixed. On the fall 2014 SAYO-Y, students had mixed responses to the questions “Do you get to choose how you spend your time?”, “Can you suggest your own ideas for new activities?” and “Do you get to choose which activities you do?” Students were almost evenly split with only slightly more positive responses to these questions. The questions “Do you get to help plan activities for the program?” and “Do you get to help make decisions or rules for the program?” also had mixed results with slightly more negative responses. These mixed and negative results demonstrate that ACES is not supporting youth input in a consistent way in the program. The staff responses above also indicate that ACES students are not informing the overall structure, content, or goals of the ACES program. Staff and students are limited to adapting within the curriculum and structure.

Even if implemented with fidelity, student voice, choice, and reflection are all quality indicators and beneficial for student development, but are not indicators of full accountability. While youth voice is important, it does not lead to accountability unless the organization is responsive to the feedback provided. Without the intentionality of facilitating youth as active participants, youth can remain in a passive role even while organizations achieve quality indicators. Developing the skills of youth to go beyond providing feedback to expecting and requiring responsiveness from the organizations in which they participate is a challenging but crucial step toward accountability.

In the same ACES survey (Appendix C), staff shared obstacles they observed to youth providing input. These responses demonstrate that ACES will need to make significant changes to achieve accountability. Challenges were identified both for ACES structurally and in a lack of youth skills. Responses on structural challenges included the limited timeframe of program, “sometimes there just isn’t enough time”; the lack of intentionality, “they don’t have a formal way to give input” and inconsistent attendance. Even when staff attempt to incorporate youth input these obstacles can feel insurmountable: “[W]e may get input from some students but will not see the students at program again when we want to implement their ideas. Basically, unless we implement their ideas the same day, which can be challenging for staff, students will not get to see their input affecting programming.” To overcome these obstacles, ACES will need frequent opportunities for immediate youth input through short but intentional feedback and planning activities.

In reflecting on the need for youth to develop skills in providing effective input, staff identified a lack of youth confidence as a key challenge because only “the more outspoken students make their opinions known” and “students might not feel that their input is mature enough or their ideas will make them vulnerable to having them not be accepted.” Additional challenges arise when youth feedback and adult expectations for that input do not align, such as when “the younger students usually offer quite vague feedback when asked (e.g. more field trips, more candy).” While the ACES curriculum and structure attempt to develop these skills, the curriculum can also be detrimental, “There’s a sense that as Team Leaders we must stick to the curriculum at all costs which restricts us from being able to hear out the students’ concerns and input.” More flexibility will be needed in order for youth to develop into the role of the active participant. Student impact needs to go deeper, for as Gerison Lansdown (2010) asserts “It is not sufficient to listen to children. It is also necessary to give their views serious consideration when making decisions. Their concerns, perspectives, and ideas must inform decisions that affect their lives” (p. 12). A key component missing from the ACES approach to accountability is that ACES, as the duty bearer, must provide intentional structures by which the youth, as the rights holders, can claim their rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN YOUTH INPUT AND ORGANIZATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In order to develop organizational accountability, ACES will need to shift the focus of programming to structure each class, each curriculum unit, and each program day in ways that prioritize the input of youth. The emphasis should be on collaboratively creating the program and on partnerships between youth and staff. As argued in the joint publication from UNICEF and UNESCO, *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All*, “In good programming, participation is crucial, both as an end and a means. Participation does not mean that ‘they’ participate in ‘our’ education programme, but rather that we all participate in meeting the learning needs identified” (p. 14). The traditional model of a pre-set curriculum needs to be transformed into a more flexible curriculum framework through which students become an integral component of determining curriculum activities and outcomes.

To achieve this, ACES should implement the following best practices. Some of these practices are present in the current program model and should be strengthened. Others will need to be developed.

1. **Build strong relationships.** Accountability needs to be grounded in relationships and in mutual trust and respect. Curriculum activities that build teamwork, a sense of shared program identity, a safe and welcoming environment, and mutual respect between students and with staff are important components of a successful program. The intentional use of team-building activities should be strengthened in the ACES program. While there are some curriculum units designed for students to share their experiences with the class, these activities need to be more frequent, and timed for more intentional impact. For example, these activities are especially important at the start of each semester of program or when new students have joined the program. Through both team-building and lessons involving personal sharing, ACES can facilitate a sense of belonging in the program. Currently, ACES staff are encouraged to use team-building and sharing activities, but increased training is needed to expand the repertoire of activities and confidence of staff in intentionally scaffolding activities in order to be more effective.
2. **Intentional planning and feedback time.** Providing a dedicated space and time for students to give feedback is essential. Since ACES is both increasing student input and developing youth skills in providing that input, the process will take time. Students will need to have the process of providing feedback modeled and will need to practice. ACES can use multiple approaches for soliciting youth planning and feedback. Informal surveying techniques should be used to understand youth interest or questions on upcoming curriculum topics and reflect on past activities. Discussion groups in which “children come together each day in a circle to discuss issues of concern to them, identify problems and explore solutions” (UNICEF; UNESCO, 2007, p. 96) are also an effective practice for ACES to implement because they allow for authentic and detailed youth input. The timing of these circles may need to be adjusted to fit the framework of out-of-school time, but the concept is important.

Facilitated discussion groups not only provide a safe space for youth to provide feedback and input on planning future activities, but also develop youth skills. As Lansdown (2010) argues, “In order to contribute their views, children need access to appropriate information and safe ‘spaces’ where they are afforded the time, encouragement and support to enable them to develop and articulate their views” (p. 12). While students may initially be hesitant to contribute, the practice of regular circles will develop their confidence and skills. When first implementing this structure, students and staff may need to use guiding questions to facilitate the conversation for detailed planning and feedback. ACES could also use mixed-age groups to apply the skills of the middle school students in modeling the feedback process for younger students. The ultimate goal of this process is for the skills and

confidence of youth to reach a level at which youth will advocate for change, even when their input is not intentionally solicited. Unsolicited youth advocacy will signal successful accountability to youth.

3. **Increased flexibility in curriculum.** In addition to the ACES curriculum being intentionally designed to solicit and incorporate youth plans, ACES staff need to feel supported in adapting activities and lessons based on youth input. Staff comments in the internal ACES survey (2015) indicated that this is currently limited by the pre-set nature of the ACES curriculum. While ACES needs to continue to provide curriculum for staff to ensure program goals are met, in terms of academic content, that curriculum must also be designed around the inherent goal of student input.

Student input can be increased through programmatic flexibility. Rather than a strict program calendar with set curriculum units, ACES could design lesson frameworks which highlight the aspects of programming to be included, such as teambuilding and reflection, and provide a set of curriculum topics and suggested activities. Staff can introduce the topic, draw on suggested activities, co-plan additional projects with students, and implement accordingly. In this framework, emphasis would be placed on a continuous system of youth input and corresponding adaptations to the program. Youth input becomes the process through which all ACES content is explored. By making student input a stated goal of the program design, ACES can empower youth. As ACES youth develop experience and confidence in co-designing and implementing projects, they will learn to expect that their input will be solicited. Once that expectation is set, ACES will have provided the youth with a measure by which to hold the program accountable.

4. **Scaffold youth skills.** The success of youth-driven programming relies on the development of youth skills in effective planning, reflection, and feedback. ACES will need to scaffold the approach to youth input with “the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). More structure and modeling will be provided for younger and less mature students and their initial input may be limited to planning one aspect within a pre-set activity or choosing among limited options. However, as younger students gain experience and with older students who already have the necessary maturity, the scope of input should be expanded. Older youth will be more engaged and gain beneficial experience with greater input in program design and implementation.

Expanding youth skills begins with student involvement in developing program norms and setting group expectations. As stated in the joint report issued by UNICEF and UNESCO (2007), “All children are entitled to express their views and have them given due weight. This involves listening as well as talking. It requires that children play a part in the creation of constructive spaces that promote mutual respect” (p. 22). Rights have corresponding responsibilities. For youth this means respecting the input of others. Taking ownerships of that responsibility is a skill to be intentionally fostered. Staff need to support students in understanding that not every idea can be implemented and in finding compromises respectfully. These expectations provide a foundation for more intentional planning and feedback throughout the program. By articulating the development of youth skills in advocacy as a fundamental goal of the ACES program, curriculum and activities can be designed to meet both academic outcomes and, in the process, develop the skills of youth in providing effective feedback.

5. **Trust student voice.** As adults, we can easily minimize the power that youth have in making decisions. We can be dismissive about their authority. This is reflected in comments ACES staff

offered regarding the vagueness of the student feedback, their discomfort, lack of maturity, or as one staff member said “Their suggestions are often unrealistic” (ACES Program Survey 2014-2015, 2015). In dismissing youth input, we unintentionally foster disengagement as the means of impacting a program. To foster engagement, we must embrace the power shift.

Opening the ACES program to youth input and intentionally providing flexibility to adapt both the process and outcomes of the program is a risk. Providing frameworks and intentional scaffolding of the youth input process are necessary to support success for the program, staff, and students. However, there remains an often uncomfortable amount of uncertainty inherent in this process. Youth input, especially while developing the skills of providing effective feedback, may not always align with the adult-identified goals. Scaffolding the experience for youth is important. As is trusting that youth have ability to effectively reflect on and identify their needs and plan engaging activities that will meet program objectives. We have to give youth the opportunity to exceed our expectations. ACES will need to remain grounded in the framework that honoring youth input is not only beneficial, it is our responsibility as a bearer of duty. Youth input, even if messy, is a right which we must protect in order to stay accountable to our mission to serve youth.


6. **Stay reflective.** As an organization, ACES will have to hold itself accountable to these goals. With successful implementation, accountability from youth will develop. However, each year youth will graduate out of the program and the process will restart. Thus, program reflectiveness will be required with constant evaluation and reintegration of youth in decision making. Accountability to youth as an organizational goal is never completed. It will always be an ongoing process. Embracing accountability as a state of being, rather than an outcome, will be necessary.

AN ACCOUNTABLE FUTURE

There will be challenges inherent in the above recommendations. It will take time and critical conversations to achieve a cultural norm of a rights-based approach with all stakeholders, including students. I have recommended changes to the program structure, activities, and curriculum. This necessitates changes to staff training. Additional resources will be required to implement all of these changes. Although it will not be easy, now is the time for ACES to embrace these recommendations. As stated earlier ACES is in the midst of a transition and program leadership understands the importance of improving quality and youth engagement. A rights-based approach to accountability is the process by which to achieve both of these goals.

We are not starting from nothing. ACES has already established a quality program. Strong, caring relationships exist between youth and adults in the program. The ACES curriculum encourages youth expression and provides some choices. ACES staff informally seek and utilize youth input when the current structure allows them to make adjustments. Going forward, ACES needs to extend these practices. By striving for the process of youth input to become the outcome by which we define success, ACES can implement a youth rights-based approach to accountability. In the 2011 *Journal of Youth Development*, Dale Blyth argued that in order to improve the field of youth work we must welcome input from the youth:

As co-creators and participants in youth programs, young people have unique perspectives and valuable insights into what is happening and why. While we cannot simply defer to their wisdom, we can also not afford to ignore it if we are to grow as a field. Youth as colleagues in building our field is one of the greatest untapped resources available. (p. 172)



Recognizing the ACES youth as co-creators of the program honors their rights, develops their skills as democratic citizens, and answers my question of to whom I am accountable. Our entire field is accountable to honoring the wisdom of our youth and supporting the boundless potential students have for creating amazing programs that will serve their needs. I am excited to shape our future programming at ACES within the framework of rights-based accountable youth work. By centering our work in accountability to youth, we can set a model for other youth-serving organizations on how to honor the fundamental right of our youth to inform the program within which they participate.

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APPENDIX A

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) at Wellesley College developed a set of tools to assess the success of OST programs. These tools, referred to as the Survey of Academic and Youth Outcomes (SAYO) include three versions: the youth survey (SAYO-Y), the staff survey (SAYO-S) and the teacher survey (SAYO-T). Each version can be used to complement the others in an assessment system or to stand alone. The SAYO-Y is developed to assess youth experiences in OST programs and the research-based outcomes related to youth success and a focus on three areas: “youth's experiences in the afterschool program; youth's sense of competence; and youth's future planning and expectations” (National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2015). Through our partnership with the 21st Century after-school program at the Saint Paul Public Schools’ Flipside, ACES has access to youth responses on the SAYO-Y. Table A1 shows responses to selected questions from the SAYO-Y survey of ACES students in November 2014.

TABLE A1.

	Yes	Mostly Yes	Mostly No	No	No Response
Are kids here friendly with each other?	33	53	13	7	4
Do you like coming here?	69	30	4	3	4
Do you have fun when you are here?	65	36	3	2	4
Do you get to choose how you spend your time?	22	34	26	24	4
Can you suggest your own ideas for new activities?	28	41	15	22	4
Do you get to choose which activities you do?	25	33	28	20	4
Do you get to help plan activities for the program?	19	25	33	29	4
Do you get to help make decisions or rules for the program?	21	17	25	43	4

APPENDIX B

ACES conducts pre- and post-program surveys with the students each fall and spring to assess student attitudes. The data from these surveys is then compiled in an Internal Comparative Assessment of Student Data, Table B1 shows ACES 2014 data from question 9 of the survey, administered to 83 students.

Question 9. I have support from adults other than my parents.

1=Rarely, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Almost always

TABLE B1.

	Average
Pre-program survey	2
Post-program survey	2.695

APPENDIX C

In April 2015, ACES conducted an anonymous staff survey to gather feedback on the ACES program for the 2014-15 program year; included in that survey was a section for my position paper with two items on youth input. Items C1 and C2 list anonymous responses to those two questions.

C1. Responses to the question: *Please share an example of a time when a change in programming was made in response to youth input around ACES activities, content, or structure.*

- My students requested more physical activity and hands-on learning. They have energy pent up from the school day. I now work this into the curriculum whenever possible.
- The kids suggested doing homework time in the beginning, and we tried it. Didn't work out, but it was a good experiment.
- We got rid of a curriculum the kids weren't responding well to. They made it clear that they were not enjoying it.
- On Mondays, a couple students had to miss the first 30 minutes due to a mandatory school program, but the students still wanted to come to ACES so they asked if we could rearrange the structure our program so they wouldn't miss the curriculum. In result, we started with ice breaker then homework so students could join at the end of homework time and start curriculum with us. They liked that best!
- Tweaking curriculum according to class needs/preferences.
- No E-mentoring.
- Youth chose what ice breaker was used for the day.
- Andy changed his entire curriculum to address the requests of his students for "real life" information. They did a customized curriculum of taxes and job application forms.
- More craft-based programming was recommended, more craft-based programming was implemented.
- I have occasionally changed the structure of a day in order to accommodate students' requests to have extra time outside.
- Students regularly have two or three activities to choose from at any given time. Also, we will frequently take informal polls to see how students would prefer an activity to be structured.
- Group work.
- When students would find the material 'boring'/unappealing they would rebel, but when they gave some input to what could be done to make it 'funner' they enjoyed themselves a lot more.
- I feel like we are given a curriculum to teach that is easy to adapt to how students learn best...
- More time using computers.
- Site leader talked to some of the students who were considering leaving the program and asked them what they would like to see more of and less of in the ACES curriculum and we have made an effort to include a number of their suggestions.
- Creation of a PI-day.
- Green made a special field trip for middle schoolers based on what they are interested in.
- It hasn't happened yet, but one of my students offered an idea for our end-of-year celebration and we will hopefully see this go into effect in the next couple of weeks.
- When we learned to use constructive reinforcement and took note.

C2. Responses to the question: *What challenges do you see at ACES that may prevent students from giving input?*

- They don't have a formal way to give input, so the more outspoken students make their opinions known.
- Students might not feel that their input is mature enough or that their ideas will make them vulnerable to having them not be accepted.
- I think that sometimes it can be hard to tailor the curriculum of ACES and the structure of the program to each and every student, so there is a balancing act between what they would like to see and what we can actually do.
- I feel like sometimes the students don't feel like they will always be listened to. Though I feel like they are given the opportunity.
- They don't attend consistently.
- There's a sense that as team leaders we must stick to the curriculum at all costs which restricts us from being able to hear out the students' concerns and input.
- Less free time.
- The younger students usually offer quite vague feedback when asked (eg. more field trips, more candy).
- At the Boys and Girls Club, we don't regularly see the same students, and so we may get input from some students, but will not see the students at program again when we want to implement their ideas. Basically, unless we implement their ideas the same day, which can be challenging for staff, students will not get to see their input affecting programming.
- Inconsistent attendance.
- They don't feel that staff will listen.
- Sometimes there just isn't enough time. Maybe implementation of specific time to offer ideas.
- Their suggestions are often unrealistic and don't involve academics.
- Extremely short amount of time on site to do curriculum/homework, which may make it hard to listen to kids in a less-structured conversational setting.
- Students who feel like we are 'making' them do things.
- I don't believe they have any challenges.
- If students don't feel comfortable enough to speak up.
- I feel that students aren't sure how to articulate why they don't like an activity. They often have time during reflection to critique the curriculum for that day.
- We don't structure much time in our schedule for student input, only the first day of the ACES semester, but after that staff have to evaluate students' behavior and interests to find out how to add in student suggestions in the curriculum.



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The ideas reflected in this paper come from many conversations with colleagues that are not directly cited. I especially appreciate: the facilitators of the 2014-15 NorthStar Youth Fellowship and the other fellows for a year's worth of conversations dedicated to youth rights; Karina Moua and Deon Houskin of the East Side Boys and Girls Club for sharing their ideas on how to engage youth; the ACES staff and volunteer team from 2014-15 for the extensive feedback throughout the school year on how to improve the ACES program; and ACES Executive Director, Christina Saunders, for her leadership in pursuing improvement at ACES and her support of my participation in the Fellowship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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YOUTH'S RIGHT TO FAIL

By Rachel Katkar

When I was in sixth grade, I failed a science test. It was the first time I had failed anything, since I came from an elementary school that did not use grades to evaluate students. I quickly shoved the failed test into my backpack, terrified that my peers had witnessed my failure and the teacher was judging me. Only when I was by myself at home did I take the crumpled test out again and cry when I saw all of the red correction marks. The next day, my science teacher, a former camp counselor and youth worker, gathered a small group of us together to let us know we had all failed and he was there to help. I was relieved to learn that I wasn't the only one. He worked with us to learn the material in a new way. Then we were allowed to retake the test. I passed with a B grade the second time.

Without redirection from a caring adult, relearning the material in a new way and building positive relationships, my failure would remain today. Because of my experience, I learned that failure is only temporary and can be resolved through positive guidance and action. I carry this experience with me as I promote youth's right to fail in my classes and programs. "Don't you mean youth's right to succeed?" one youth worker asked me during an interview. "No," I responded, "I really mean youth's right to fail, and adults' role to support youth through failure." The idea of a youth's right to fail is not novel; in 1973, Dr. Gisela Konopka published a document of youth rights including the "right to make mistakes without unreasonable punishment" (p.3).

As a youth worker in Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education, my job is to create programs that "create unexpectedly awesome experiences, provide opportunities for genuine discovery and grow change makers" (Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education staff webpage, 2015). All of these programmatic lenses include the caveat that youth must be allowed to make mistakes and try again.

The unique position that I defend in this paper is exposing how adults promote youth failure. Unfortunately, youth failure is often dealt with through punishment, isolation and remediation dictated by adults in systems created by adults. Youth must have opportunities to practice with limited consequences if and when they fail. Adults play the role of guiding youth through failure. How do adults promote the right of youth to fail? Adults promote young people's right to risk failure and emerge more resilient through positive relationship building, hands-on learning experiences and restorative justice. Ideally, adults need to build healthy relationships, provide hands-on learning opportunities and when someone else's rights have been infringed, use restorative justice practices to resolve youth failure.

WHY YOUTH FAIL

FAILURE IN SCHOOL

John Holt (1982) identifies three reasons that youth fail in school: fear, anxiety and boredom.

Most children in school fail. Close to forty percent of those who begin high school drop out before they finish. For college, that figure is one in three....Why do they fail? They fail because they are afraid, bored, and confused. They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for

them hang over their heads like a cloud. They are bored because the things they are given and told to do in school are so trivial, so dull, and make such limited and narrow demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents. They are confused because most of the torrent of words that pours over them in school makes little or no sense. It often flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know – to the rough model of reality that they carry around in their minds. (Holt, 1982, pp. 5-6)

ADOLESCENT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

There are also biological reasons for why youth are prone to fail. Abigail Baird (2015) explains that teens need hands-on experiences to make mistakes that are safe and supported by adults. They need these opportunities to explore, practice and reflect in order to learn. The decision-making section of the brain, the frontal lobe, does not fully develop until after the age of 20. As a result, teens struggle in their understanding of the full implications and consequences of their actions. These consequences can and do include failure. It is the role of adults to act as an external frontal lobe for youth.

EDUCATIONAL FAILURE AND RESILIENCE

In his article “Failing at Failure,” Macalester College president Brian Rosenberg (2015) discusses the lack of structured opportunities for youth to fail in education. In his own upbringing, Rosenberg refused to take risks because of his fear of failure. He reiterated the importance of using failure to teach perseverance and resilience to youth:

We are so focused on assuring them that everything will be all right that we leave them ill prepared for moments when everything is not. Sometimes they will not achieve their goals; sometimes they will not measure up; sometimes they will be rejected. Then what? The interesting question is how best to build resilience in students without subjecting them to the needlessly painful, or to things, like poor grades, that could have lasting, negative consequences on their lives. In environments that so prioritize safety, support, and success, can we teach students what it feels like to be (metaphorically, of course), knocked down? If we take our jobs as educators seriously, this is a question with which we should wrestle. (para. 6)

It is our job as youth workers and educators to build opportunities to overcome failure in our youth programs and activities. By promoting failure, we help youth learn perseverance, how to ask for help, and resilience.

THE MANY FACES OF FAILURE

Since there are so many types of failure, I want to take a moment to outline the broad categories of failure and illustrate specific examples from youth with whom I’ve worked. Bintliff (2001) outlined the different types of youth failure:

- Giving up
- Feeling alienated
- Failing to pass an exam/grade/graduation
- Disengagement
- Violence
- Substance abuse
- Criminal activities
- Truancy

I surveyed 50 youth and adults I worked with to collect their stories about how they dealt with youth failure. The survey (see Appendix) was conducted on Google Forms to protect the identity of the storytellers. In addition to the survey, five youth workers were interviewed for a more in-depth conversation regarding youth failure and youth worker's role in the failure.

STORIES FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

This first story is from one of the youth surveyed. It illustrates how sometimes our failures open the door to other avenues of learning and new adventures.

When I was five, I loved to watch my older brother draw. The process of him thinking of what to draw and then putting it on paper amazed me. I wanted to put my imagination on paper like him. My first attempt was as expected, terrible. So was the second, third, fourth, fifth, and fiftieth attempt. I became frustrated and gave up. Angry, I went into my room and turned on the TV. Too busy thinking of my failure, I hadn't realized that I had sat on the remote and turned on the Spanish subtitles. After a while, I gazed up at the screen and the unfamiliar words caught my gaze. What did it say? I became curious and asked my brother; he said it was Spanish and that I could take it at school. When I started kindergarten, I took Spanish and have been taking it ever since. I study it and hope to be fluent enough in it so as to travel to Central America and teach English. (Young person, personal communication, 2015)

Learning to draw was not going the way this youth wanted and in frustration, the youth learned about the Spanish language instead. Penicillin was similarly invented, not on purpose but by accident when a Petri dish with bacteria was left out over the weekend and mold happened to grow and inhibit the bacterial growth. What is truly remarkable is that the individual recognized the worth of the unexpected outcome.

In this next story, the student, despite a setback, became involved in a different capacity because a caring teacher provided an alternative where the youth took on a helper role instead of a participatory role.:

My sixth grade year, my accelerated math teacher asked me if I wanted to participate in the math tournament. I was overjoyed and couldn't wait to do it the following week. The day of the tournament I set my alarm early, but when it went off I was so tired I just thought I could sleep for a few more minutes. I soon woke up and found it was 8:00, when the tournament started at 7:45. I was so upset with myself, but I was determined to go anyways. Luckily when I got there, a friend of mine was able to take my place. Although I didn't participate in the tournament and I let down my teacher, she still allowed me to stay at the tournament and help out. (Young person, personal communication, 2015)

After all stories were collected and reviewed, three common themes emerged from the data that illustrated some ways that an adult can promote youth failure: building relationships, providing hands-on learning experiences and negotiating through restorative justice.

THREE THEMES TO PROMOTE YOUTH'S RIGHT TO FAIL

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Youth workers tend to be excellent mentors of youth, particularly when it comes to redefining failure. Relationships are often built over several years in a coaching, mentoring or supervising capacity. The following is an example of a youth worker making an important impact on a youth through persistence, determination and authenticity:

One of my students didn't graduate from high school. I worked with his graduating class for 2 years and was very involved in most of the emotional/mental wellness for around 50 of them. In September, we agreed he would go to night school. He didn't. In January, I got him set up with online school. Didn't follow through with that either. When June came and his class walked and he didn't, he kept his distance from me for two months. No response to phone calls, no usual meetings for food, or anything. In August he met up with me and a few others before they went to college. He apologized for avoiding me and said that it was worse facing me than anyone else because no one else cared if he graduated or not. I told him that I cared that he graduated, not on a certain date, not from a certain school, or with certain people. The important thing was that he finish his diploma. I explained the emotion that goes into this kind of youth work and that sometimes the people I work with don't consider how I might feel when they let me down, because our relationship is mostly based on their own feelings. But hey, I'm a person in all this too! It was as if his mind was blown:) He did manage to get his diploma and has kept in good contact with me since then. (Youth worker, personal communication, 2015)

The youth worker met with the young person, discussed the impact of the failure and worked together to find a solution. By building a long-term relationship with this youth, the youth worker served as a caring adult when others had given up. "When adolescents feel cared for by people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they... report higher levels of emotional well-being" (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum 2002, p.138). It is alarming that adolescents' feelings of being cared about by adults drop significantly from 52% males and 60% females in middle school to 35% males and 34% females in high school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2013, p.18). Youth workers step in to provide a caring adult relationship at an emotionally tumultuous time of a youth's development.

HANDS-ON LEARNING

Learning is defined as a transformational change in perspective. According to Mezirow and Taylor (2009), there are ten steps to learning:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a new course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. Reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives (pp. 168-169).

When learning is hands-on, youth gain practical skills that relate to lessons they want to learn. These “hands-on activities have lasting effects on motivation and comprehension” (Guthrie et al., 2006, p. 234). In addition, adults become learners by asking relevant questions. Adults “work with learners and try to find out about their lives and experiences even as learners may be questioning their values. When this happens, students become co-teachers, and knowledge is created collaboratively” (Cranton, 2006, p. 128).

One example of hands-on learning is told below from the survey data:

When I was working as a crew manager, one of my responsibilities was to hire high school-aged youth to work on a crew. I called back one young man to make him a job offer after a successful interview. Someone else answered the phone and called him to pick up the phone. When he got to the phone his greeting was, "Yo what's up big pimpin'?"! This professional communication failure was hilarious but it also could cost someone his/her job offer. Acknowledging that this was this young man's opportunity to learn from a mistake, I initially ignored what he said as though it were a normal greeting. I offered him the position, which he happily accepted. Then, before hanging up, I brought up the way he greeted me. I explained that if you are waiting to hear back from someone about news related to work, it's probably most appropriate to answer the phone in a more formal manner - just in case. I took the opportunity to have this be a teachable/learnable moment. As a hiring manager, I needed to have restraint and look beyond the surface interaction we had. As a young person and future employee, the young man needed to have an opportunity to learn from his mistakes and receive open and honest feedback. (Youth worker, personal communication, 2015)

The youth worker taught the new high school employee about the importance of professionalism in a hands-on learning approach. Since the job had already been offered and accepted, the lesson was taught in a low-stakes way that still impacted the youth's future.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative justice is a way for all parties affected by a failure to address grievances as equals, create an action plan together and reflect on progress over time. The “downside” of restorative justice is that it takes time; however, additional time is required if a failure continues or worsens. Restorative justice is a highly effective practice that involves youth and adults working together to build community. The circle facilitation method in restorative justice “acknowledges that we are all in need of community and help from others and in turn that we all have something to offer other human beings. The fact that participants sit in a circle form symbolizes shared leadership, equity, connection and inclusion” (Kay, 2005, p.11).

The following stories come from adult youth workers interviewed on this project. On a series of Outward Bound expeditionary trips across the country, Hmong boys and Native American girls most “at-risk” of truancy radically changed their trajectory (Bintliff, 2001). They shared personal stories and reflections during restorative justice circle time. Also, they fully participated in learning activities and increased their interest in social justice. After the trip, five of the youth attended post-secondary education, two dropped out, one got a high school equivalency diploma and the rest graduated and now have jobs. The restorative justice-immersive trip was an incredible transformation for these youth.

Another example of successful restorative justice is with students recommended for school expulsion in the Twin Cities. Youth, families and educators were brought together to address grievances. After the restorative justice program, youth showed significant increases in making good choices about behavior even when

upset. They recognized someone at school whom they could ask for help. Also, they talked to their families about problems and were more satisfied with their school environment (Legal Rights Center, 2015). School attendance increased, suspensions decreased and family members talked with their children about school more.

Another adult interviewee responded, “Failure is part of the journey towards learning. Success is perseverance.” The adult discussed that being a first-generation American meant navigating multiple world views. He viewed failure not as a negative but more as a stepping-stone to learning. In addition, he remarked, “so often, failure is about personal responsibility versus a collective consciousness in education.” The failure persists when the disconnect between the personal and the collective remains.

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH FAILURE

In all of the conversations and surveys of youth workers and youth failure, three themes emerged:

1. Restorative justice is highly effective because all voices, including youths’, are equal in addressing grievances and creating an action plan.
2. Hands-on learning provides authentic experiences for youth to make mistakes and co-learn with adults.
3. Positive relationship building fosters an emotional connectedness that correlates with motivation.

Youth workers utilize restorative justice, hands-on learning and relationship building to support youth through failure. As Brian Rosenberg said, it is important to teach youth that failure is a part of the journey. Sometimes things do not go according to plan and the important outcome is resilience and persistence. Only through relevant, authentic and supportive experiences can youth succeed. Remember, a youth’s frontal lobe, the area responsible for judgment, is underdeveloped. Like failure, knowing what to do in an uncomfortable, alienating situation requires practice and guidance.

An important note is how much time is invested in helping youth through failure. Restorative justice requires finding time when everyone can meet face-to-face, in a space conducive to circle facilitation with follow-up from participants. Hands-on learning necessitates planning ahead with materials. Additionally, adults need to be flexible to accommodate changing needs and interests. Lastly, relationship-building means team-building, one-on-one mentoring or otherwise sharing in a bonding experience. The staff time, materials, food costs and long-term investment often rely on organizational budgets already earmarked for other ventures.

As a youth worker, I constantly search for ways to support youth through failure. I can recall my own failures as a youth and how they shamed me, frustrated me and eventually helped me grow. It takes a great deal of patience, persistence and perseverance to help another through such low points. As Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, phonograph and motion picture camera said, “Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time.”

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APPENDIX

YOUTH WORKER SURVEY

Please describe a time during your profession when a youth you were working with "failed." It could be when they failed to pass something, forgot to do something important, did something wrong, got blamed for doing something wrong they didn't do, got stuck and didn't know how to get out of the situation, hurt someone else, etc. What was your role in this situation? How did the situation resolve or not resolve?

To give you an example, here is one of my youth work stories:

*I was working with a middle school youth who was driving me crazy. Every day, she came to program and started arguments with other youth, did everything except the tasks I asked her to do, and generally had a belligerent attitude. Finally one day, she showed up to program so angry that I asked if she wanted to talk about it in the hallway. She nodded yes and as soon as we got out to the hallway, she burst into tears. She told me, "I just talked to my school counselor and tried to sign up for my classes for next semester like you were helping me to do. I told the counselor what I wanted to take but she told me I don't get a say because I'm trouble. I told her I wasn't trouble, I just have a hard time sometimes. But she just made me so mad and she threatened to call my mom and the thing is... *sob*... the thing is that I get into trouble because it's the only way my mom pays attention to me. If I do everything right, I just disappear. But when I get in trouble, she finally pays attention to me." We talked for a long time in the hallway about it and decided to follow up with her mother and her counselor. She told her mother how she felt. Her mother apologized to her about not paying enough attention to her and promised to listen in the future. Her counselor helped her register for the classes she wanted to register for, although they still had some tension in the discussion. In my class, this same middle school youth who drove me crazy initially became the leader of the program. She volunteered to hand out materials, get the group's attention, lead discussions and help officiate conflicts.*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RACHEL KATKAR has a Master of Arts in Education degree and specializes in music, science and youth leadership programs. Since 2006, Rachel has worked with youth at the Science Museum of Minnesota, YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities and Saint Paul Public Schools Community Education. Her favorite projects include hiring youth to translate science instructions into Spanish, Somali and Hmong, taking photographs using cameras attached to kites and displaying youth aerial photos in a local art gallery, and planting native Minnesota plants along the river to reduce pollution and attract wildlife back to the area.



MEDIA CONSENT FORMS:

Towards a Rights-Based Approach

By Ellie Kunkel

It's one of those things that there's no policy around, but in practice...

...just because it seems like the right thing to do...

But there's not necessarily a written process. It's based on individuals' integrity and knowledge.

...it's kind of like this unsaid rule...

INTRODUCTION

Youth workers like those quoted above are familiar with the challenging intersections of policy and practice. Policies may be designed by staff who don't interact directly with youth and their families, and might not have the rights of the child as their driving principle. Practitioners who have relationships with the young people involved may be more likely to consider their rights when implementing the policy. A media consent policy, for instance, is designed with the well-being, image, and legal risk of the organization at its core. Youth workers, though, feel the weight of the trust involved when asking a young person and his or her family to use their image. There's complexity in the process, and over and over in conversations about media consents, youth workers expressed how they balance this tension.

The primary goal of this paper is to explore how the practice of obtaining and respecting consent plays out in reality, and to propose a set of best practices that could inform how organizations craft their media release forms to ensure that young people's rights are respected. I explored how the consent-getting process is framed. I reviewed media consents and gathered both staff and student perspectives. All of this has led me to the conclusion that organizations and youth workers should be doing more to protect the rights of youth to control their images and identities, and it has become clear what it should look like. Youth and families are making the choice, whether they realize it or not, to waive their right to control their image. What more should organizations be doing to make sure that everyone understands the implications of that permission?

But there's a much bigger conversation I wanted to crack open, too. Are there instances where we simply shouldn't be using pictures of youth? "Photos," in the words of one youth worker, "are cherry-picked moments where something specific is happening that you want to show." The entirety of the experience is flattened and so is the wonderful, terrible complexity of that young person's whole identity. Inherent in that one moment that we choose to show are the millions of moments that we choose to omit. We turn the young person into a commodity in the true sense of the word, a raw product—a success story, or evidence of our good works—that can be traded interchangeably. This raw product already exists, in the form of stock photos; models and actors are paid for their time and image.

I didn't call that a "much bigger" conversation for nothing. I can't solve it, but posing that question puts the practice, the media consent process, into the bigger context of youth rights. It's important, and I'll come back to it. For now let's assume that using pictures of youth for advertising and fundraising is a necessary

evil. If an organization is going to use images of young people, how do they make decisions about obtaining consent and ultimately using the pictures? We need a set of best practices around media consent that puts the rights of the young person as its first priority. That's what I set out to find.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted a series of focus groups and individual interviews with 30 youth workers and 12 youth from Saint Paul. For my adult focus groups, I utilized Sprockets (a network of out-of-school-time youth-serving organizations) neighborhood meetings. The participants already knew each other to a certain extent, and most were direct-service staff. I was overwhelmed with their desire to help move this project forward. Their respect for the youth they serve was clear, and I'm in their debt for their candor and thoughtfulness. I also collected and reviewed media consent forms from about twenty youth-serving organizations in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. All of this was done under conditions of anonymity, and where I've used language or formatting from an existing organizational form (see Appendix), the specific organization isn't identified.

My youth focus group took advantage of a group of 12 seventh- to ninth-graders who meet weekly for service-learning and teamwork programming at my own organization. I tried to locate articles or publications about this topic and didn't have much success. So I focused my energy on hearing from youth workers who have experience with the complexity of this issue firsthand. Conversations focused on the process of obtaining consent for, and use of, youth participants' pictures.

I recorded and transcribed all of these conversations. As you'll see, this is a complex and multi-faceted issue. It was difficult to narrow in, but there were recurring themes that came up in every conversation I had, whether in a group or with individuals. I used the overarching themes to inform my position, and to create a set of best practices for organizations in crafting and using photo-release forms with youth participants and their families. A well-done media consent process can go further to empower youth and families, while respecting the rights of the young person to control his or her likeness, and also balancing the desires of the organization to show the work happening. I organize my findings and recommendations around two broad categories. I offer practical discussions of "form mechanics" or how a media consent form should be laid out. Further, I share "practice to policy" reflections to highlight how the mechanics of the media consent form can codify the practice of youth workers into policy.

FORM MECHANICS: SPECIFIC RELEASES VS. GENERAL

The question of how to obtain consent for using an image of a youth is a good place to start the conversation, but a complex one. According to the staff I interviewed, a majority of organizations include some sort of media release in the overall registration materials. Some organizations use separate forms for media release which are collected only for specific purposes from specific students. When we look more closely at drawbacks and benefits of each, there's a clear advantage to using one over the other when the rights of the young person are the primary concern.

Including media release forms among the general registration materials that all participants receive risks adding to the stack of paper that parents shuffle through, fill out and sign automatically. One staff noted that the consent signature line was "in the mass stack of things you're signing and the precedent is, 'I'm going to sign this'" (Youth Worker, 2015). Some even discussed that parents filling out the forms at home might assume that they have to sign the media release in order for their students to be involved in programming. "Unintentionally or intentionally... by putting it on the same form or in the same packet, you're [unconsciously] saying: you have to sign this or you're not part of the program" (Youth Worker, 2015). Do

parents going through “a stack of papers” realize that they have the option to not give permission? If they choose to waive their students' rights (or if students choose to waive their own rights), is the form on its own clear enough to lay out the implications and potential consequences? “You can legally cover yourself in a passive form,” one youth worker said, “but there's that icky feeling...do you think you really are thinking about the rights of the child and also of the family?” (Youth Worker, 2015).

This is one potential benefit that an event- or purpose-specific form could have over a general form. One organization's form listed which event was going to be photographed, and how the image would be used, although it was reported that in practice the photos were re-used for other purposes, and the form was often signed and collected after the photos had been taken. In one example of how this process could work well, though, a staff reported that she thought, while it was a “little more awkward” for staff to try to contact students ahead of a specific event, she thought it worked better for families. “For example, I contact all the parents and let them know what it's for, and then the parents send me the form. And I actually had a couple who said, ‘no I don't want them photographed,’ so then we were separating those kids out” (Youth Worker, 2015). Students who didn't have media consent forms for the specific event weren't photographed.

The major downfall of an event-specific consent form is that it might give parents an impression that isn't accurately carried out in practice. None of the event-specific forms that I had access to actually had language referring to specific events or uses! And as will be discussed in a later section, only a few of them had explicit limits on their use or expiration dates. So even though the practice of staff may have been to explain to parents what the event being photographed would be, and specifically how those photographs would be used, the policy was to store the photos on shared drives to be reused for different purposes, if needed. One staff said that in practice, “it's kind of like this unsaid rule that we won't use it for anything new, unless we get the new permission for it.” But, she said, if there were massive turnover in staff, the pictures would all still be there and accessible. A general release, on the other hand, will cover all potential photographs of the student in language that staff has had a chance to discuss with youth and parents up front, and, as will be discussed in a later section, should include an expiration date for all pictures taken of the student.

Another advantage of a general release is that knowing the wishes of parents and youth regarding photographs at the onset of program participation— or at the start of each program year or session, etc.— will allow staff to capture more authentic snapshots of students and programming, rather than only special events. Direct-service staff who have relationships with students can take and share photos with marketing or resource development staff as appropriate, rather than having to get multiple releases signed from individual students for each potential use.

A general release form could make it easier for staff to track which students have permission to be photographed and how those photographs can be used. If parental and youth wishes regarding photo use were collected at the same time as emergency contacts, for instance, these data could be tracked in the same way. One youth worker explained that a simple spreadsheet contained what type of media consent each student had given. The spreadsheet gave the youth worker quick access to the consent information so that at times, for example, when a partner organization wanted to take pictures of programming, or an organization photographer was visiting their site, she could reliably tell the photographer which youth could be included in photos. She also reported that on days when they knew there was the possibility of photography, they had students without media consent wear their organization logo t-shirts so that the photographer would clearly know which students not to photograph. Other staff also mentioned the particular difficulty posed when working with partners or communication staff who didn't know students individually. “You may know the name and you may know the face,” one staff said, “but not everybody does” (Youth Worker, 2015). A good tracking system for media consents can capture and preserve the nuanced wishes of parents and youth

regarding whether and how images will be used. Ultimately, pictures shouldn't be taken of students without consent releases in the first place.

PRACTICE INTO POLICY: INTAKE CONFERENCES

Several staff reported that their organization uses intake conferences, or the initial registration process, to explain the options and meaning of media consent language to parents. This keeps the media consent form from being lost in the shuffle of registration papers, gives parents an authentic chance to ask questions and make their wishes clear, and ensures that all students in programming have either opted into or out of having their picture taken—before the photographer shows up. One staff said, “I have a legal thing that says that [taking a picture] is OK, but on a personal level I'm still not necessarily OK with that because I don't think [parents]...fully understand the ramifications of where that image could go....I think I could convince them to [agree to using a picture of their student], just because of my position, and I don't necessarily want to” (Youth Worker, 2015). Having a conversation with parents to explain the language and options in a consent form ensures that parents understand it, and also ensures that staff members understand what parents' wishes are. When someone—direct service staff, communications staff, partners, etc.—wants to take pictures, staff don't have to scramble after the fact to collect media consent forms from parents who may have already been asked about their wishes several times. “We've explained it in the first place....We know that OK if they signed this, this is what they mean and we don't want to have to deal with that in the future.”

Interpreters are made available when necessary during these intake or registration conversations. This means that parents can ask questions and get clear information regarding the media consent release, not to mention the other registration materials. If, from an organizational standpoint, the purpose of registration is to gather accurate information from a youth and his or her family, and to ensure that appropriate permission is given—even if there were only a legal protection purpose for program registration—wouldn't due diligence require that the parent or guardian be able to read materials, ask questions, and get answers in his or her own language of choice? How could the organization expect to meet these goals otherwise?

I recommend that organizations include release forms for all students in their initial registration materials, and that organizations take concrete, formal steps to ensure that youth and their guardians clearly understand the media release portions and that staff clearly understand their wishes. In addition, organizations should share materials with youth and families before they're used, to gain input regarding content and to make sure that youth and families have a chance to opt out, if they wish. Many staff reported practicing this, but it should be codified into policy. Some may argue that this will take too much time, or make it too difficult for organizations to use youth images. It will take time, but if we shift our view of the purpose of media consent forms away from protecting the organization and towards empowering youth and honoring their rights, it's appropriate and necessary. This youth input, and the issue of how youth are portrayed, will be discussed further in a later section.

I found that the language used in media release consent forms varied widely. In order to empower youth and adults to make authentic choices about how their image can be used, a general consent form must use clear and specific language regarding photo use. The next section focuses on what options and clarifications should be included.

PRACTICE INTO POLICY: SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Media consent forms must include language that clearly outlines the safety and privacy considerations that will be taken by default, but also must include choices that clarify options of how photographs will be used if consent is given.

Safety considerations are being practiced (nearly universally, from what I could tell), but forms should state those practices as policy. The issue of whether or not a student's name will be used, for instance, seemed to be a simply-solved one in practice, but wasn't represented in the policy. Almost all youth workers agreed that student's real first names shouldn't be used, but most forms don't clarify this. One youth worker stated that staff at her organization would never put names or any other identifying information with images or descriptive text in published materials, but because the consent form doesn't include that policy, it's just their practice. This was a common theme. "It's one of those things," another youth worker said, "where I want to make sure the kids' privacy is respected as much as possible, but [the consent release] doesn't talk about [using students' names] specifically" (Youth Worker, 2015). Whether a form has an additional set of checkboxes to allow or deny the use of a student's first name, or simply a line stating that names and identifying information will be used, something must be included. This issue of safety, and particularly considering safety when sharing student images over social media, is much too big to cover here comprehensively. Based on my conversations with youth workers, these conversations are only starting to happen within organizations. Ultimately, organizations' media consent forms and policies should include considerations regarding how student images will be used (or not) on social media.

FORM MECHANICS: USE SPECIFICATIONS

These safety considerations should be outlined simply (e.g., no student names or identifying information will be used) in the form, along with declaring or providing options for how photographs of the youth will be used, and by whom. Many forms, for the sake of simplicity, have two options: "yes" (photographs can be taken and used) or "no" (photographs can't be taken). This is simple, but it doesn't go far enough to explain how the image might be used. Youth and parents might never consider that an organization would share a photograph with a partner or with corporate volunteers, for instance. Even if they think that the organization might post something on Facebook, would they expect that the corporate partner would put it in their public newsletter? Or that their photograph might be used on the front page of the website? Or a billboard? Even if, because of the number of youth involved or the complexity of tracking, the options are still just "yes" and "no," the ways in which an image might be used and shared must be outlined on the form.

Ideally, though, the form would offer examples that highlight different ways a photograph might be used and shared and give youth and parents options to be involved at differing levels. The best example I found of this was a form that had three options for parents and youth to select from. The first option, known by staff as "none," meant that no photographs would be taken of the youth. Note that this doesn't say that photographs won't be used or shared, but that they won't even be taken, which removes the potential for accidental use. The second option, known as "some," meant that photographs could be taken and used only for official organizational publications like newsletters, brochures and the web site. The third option, known as "any," outlined that photographs could be used in organizational materials and also shared with partner organizations, funders, and professional networks. Rather than just being listed generically, partners and funders were listed by name so that it was clear what appropriate uses would be. Staff stated that this let parents who wanted to support the direct organization do so while still restricting their child's exposure to a more general public. In practice, staff noted that though Facebook and other social media weren't mentioned on the form, they tried to post pictures there only of students who had given consent for "any"

use, because, “I know things can be shared on Facebook....If parents give permission for only us to take pictures, I still try not to [put the picture on Facebook] because it can be shared 20,000 times” (Youth Worker, 2015). Social media use should be included in the least restrictive option given to youth and parents because once posted on social media, the organization has no control over how it may be shared or used. As noted before, these options should be explained to parents and youth.

PRACTICE INTO POLICY: SHARING IMAGES WITH PARTNERS

If organizations used common language in their consent release forms, it might go some way towards solving an issue that came up often in interviews and conversations: how should partner organizations handle images of each other's youth? At a city-wide event, for instance, having general consent release forms that include taking pictures and sharing them between Sprockets partners would let organizations share images of the great things happening, but would also ensure that parents knew that their child being photographed was a possibility and that they were comfortable with that for their students. Several youth workers mentioned that, if they don't know a student or what type of release another organization has, they err on the side of protecting a youth's privacy by taking “back of heads” pictures, or shots from far enough away that the subjects can't be identified, or shots facing the facilitator.

Still, more clarity is needed. One youth worker raised an important point: “What is the expectation when somebody who doesn't know the young people comes in, whether they're from outside the organization or within?” Another youth worker said, “There's not necessarily a written process, it's based on the individual's integrity or knowledge base. Like, I'll look at [other] organizations' Facebook pages and see pictures and wonder, 'oh, what's their policy, or do they even have one?’” How youth are portrayed will be touched on briefly in a later section, but at the very least, parental and youth wishes regarding how photos are taken, shared, and used should be clear from the beginning.

FORM MECHANICS: EXPIRATION DATE

Consent release forms must include a clear expiration date. This would seem like common sense, but the policies are complicated. General releases I found that were part of registration materials, for instance, never included language about the “longevity” of the photographs. In one case the permission was dated through the program year, but it was unclear as to whether or not consent meant that photographs taken during that year could be used only that year, or if they might continue to be used in future years. Multiple staff said that their organization recycled images over and over, and that once broad, non-specific consent with no expiration date is obtained, images are warehoused and reused as needed. Is that what parents and youth expected or intended to give permission for?

One staff expressed concern because the organization used a separate media consent form only when there was a need for photographs, but the form didn't include any language about timeframe or specific use. “The conversation is around that one use, and you use this form, but this form doesn't say anything about that one use, and it doesn't have an expiration date” (Youth Worker, 2015). As mentioned earlier, this sets parents and youth up for false expectations. In reality, those pictures are stored somewhere, marked as being consented to, and there are no restrictions on how long those pictures get used.

Just as permission to participate in programming expires after a year, or at the onset of a new program, permission to take, use, and share photographs should also expire. This expiration period should be stated on the release form. Once consent expires, photographs shouldn't be used for new publications, postings, materials, etc. It might not be reasonable to expect that an organization would take down Facebook posts or

automatically print new brochures when consent on an image expires. New materials, though, should always be created with images that have current consent. As we'll see, this should include consent from the youth themselves.

PRACTICE INTO POLICY: YOUTH CONSENT AND PORTRAYAL IN THE SELFIE GENERATION

Perhaps the most powerful way to respect the rights of a young person to control his or her own identity is to ask. This came up the most often in interviews and focus groups as something that youth workers do beyond the policy and the language on the consent form. They go out of their way to ask for youth opinions and permission. Why shouldn't this be written into policy? Giving youth control over their own identity, even after a well-designed consent release form has been signed, ensures that young people have the ultimate and abiding power.

This starts by empowering youth workers to take authentic in-the-moment pictures that youth are comfortable with. One youth worker said that when she's taking pictures, "often the youth will be like, 'Wait what are you taking the pictures for again?' And they've already signed a media consent form, but I'm going to remind them, 'yes this might be used on our website, yes sometimes it will be used for funders or things, mainly it'll probably just sit on my computer...at that point some of them will be like I don't want to be in this picture,' and then they're out of the picture" (Youth Worker, 2015). She went on to say that when the communications staff asks her for good photos representing her program, she's able to go through and find the good ones, and that's what they get. The pictures taken are taken by the staff who knows the youth and in a setting where the youth is comfortable. "It's on our registration forms, but each time I check with [the youth], so they still select themselves to be a part of it. You can share that power with them, even if they did sign the release, because hey things change you know?" (Youth Worker, 2015). Another staff mentioned that they might ask for permission to take a picture if it were going to be on Facebook, even if they knew the youth had a signed consent form, "just because it seems like the right thing to do" (Youth Worker, 2015).

This approach of having direct-service staff coordinate both the consent and photography process might help ease some of the tension felt where marketing, communications, or resource-development staff intersect programming. When staff who don't know the students come in to photograph them, one youth worker said, "often times it's for very good reasons, but...it seems exploitive." Another worker said, "From their point of view, the more compelling the story, the better, because then people are drawn in. But at whose expense?"

Another step in this process should be giving youth control over how their image is used. In an age-appropriate way, youth themselves should be asked for consent for the specific instances their image will be used. Many youth workers reported practicing this, even though it wasn't codified into the policy. One staff mentioned that a marketing brochure featured students she knew on its cover, and she decided to go talk to them. "They had no idea. They were surprised, they were a little skeptical about being the stars of the brochure, but they ended up being OK with it" (Youth Worker, 2015). She added that she didn't show the students the brochure because she was worried about her organization getting sued; she checked with the students because she respected their right to control their own image. Whether they articulated it this way or not, youth worker after youth worker expressed this same practice, or expressed their wish to be able to handle this differently. One youth worker reported that she always got verbal consent from the youth, but that she wished there were space on the consent form for the young person to sign. "For me personally, I get [consent to use an image] verbally from the kid...but we don't have anything in writing, and it's not common practice for anyone else to ask the kid if they want this information put up" (Youth Worker, 2015).

Something as simple as an additional line on the consent release form would recognize the youth as having power over his or her own identity.

Another youth worker shared an example of when a parent had given consent but youth hadn't been consulted.

We used a family's story, and it was a very compelling story, and of course we got permission from the mom. But, there were lots of pictures of her kids...and she told a story about her family's domestic abuse situation, and I thought, 'you know, I could run into one of those kids at school, and I'd know all of this stuff about them.' (Youth Worker, 2015)

If the youth had been consulted, or at least asked for their permission, it would have gone a step towards respecting their rights. Small, simple stories like this highlight *why* this conversation is important. In its 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations General Assembly stated that, “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 3). Even when parents are consenting, there must be an acknowledgement that their wishes might not be the same as those of the youth; it should be the policy of organizations to consider youth as full participants in the consent process.

This issue of how youth should be portrayed is too big and complicated for me to hope to cover comprehensively here. The topic should be explored in depth; how do the messages that an organization shares with funders, the outside community, stakeholders, etc. either perpetuate stereotypes or reaffirm an organization's strength-based perspective? It's crucial to consider how giving youth choices about how he or she might be portrayed shares power. “I'm really transparent about, 'is this ok with you? Do you have any changes you want to make?' I literally give the power over to the kid.” (Youth Worker, 2015) She went on to say that most of the time the kids approve, and are excited to be featured, but every once in a while a young person might ask if something can be changed or mentioned or tweaked in some small way. Another youth worker emphasized that we should always be respectful of the youth and mindful of how they want to be seen and how they might view themselves. Beyond a comprehensive consent form and process, and beyond getting consent from youth themselves, who should get to make decisions about how the youth are portrayed?

Organizations should give as much of this power as possible to the youth themselves. If staff can give youth the power to create media projects to represent themselves, it allows young people to portray themselves how they see themselves. They can share what they're proud of and how they authentically feel. One youth worker shared an example of a video project that the youth at her program wanted to create to share what activities they had at their center, why other youth should join them, and what good things they were doing in the surrounding community. “They were all involved in everything” (Youth Worker, 2015).

I wasn't able to talk to nearly as many youth as I would have liked through this process, but they overwhelmingly expressed a desire to show themselves and their program with pride. I knew the seventh-through ninth-graders I spoke with through my own work as a program coordinator. When I asked them how they would want other people to see them, their answers ranged from poignant to silly, but all were honest. “They should make the picture not look poor, take the picture in a cool place, make it look beautiful” (Youth, 2015). Another said, “People in the pictures should look happy. When they put someone's picture out there, there should be a story with it to tell more” (Youth, 2015). Thinking about the program space, one young woman said, “Get fake money dollar signs, bling bling the whole room,” but then she got more

serious, “Show not some boring picture, let them see we have computers, we have resources, we have two trophies” (Youth, 2015).

Some of the seventh- through ninth-graders I talked to were quick with reasons about why they would want to be in pictures representing an organization. “It’s a good memory to look back on,” (Youth, 2015). Another youth said that she would want to be in the picture if it was a good thing, helping the community, talking about what kids like. Said another, “This [referring to self] is attractive. I feel confident. YOLO [you only live once]” (Youth, 2015). Staff should consider the opinions and wishes of youth, but also have to balance the age-appropriateness of letting young people make decisions that might have lasting consequences.


There are clear generational differences in attitudes about image and identity that should be considered, too; this issue came up at several focus groups among adults who work with young people every day. “The concepts that we have at this table about photographs and owning and identity and being concerned about how images are sent...is that the same feeling that a six-year-old or a twelve-year-old who takes photos of themselves fifty times a day and at the age of fifteen has been on Facebook for ten years is going to have?” (Youth Worker, 2015). Young people today are photographed more than any generation before them. They and their friends are taking and sharing pictures of themselves and their lives constantly. They’re the Selfie Generation. How far should adults go to “warn” young people away from over-sharing themselves? One staff suggested that most organizations don’t go far enough in giving youth skills to use quickly-changing technology safely and wisely. Perhaps conversations about image and identity could be included in the much larger internet safety conversations. “At thirteen,” he said, “these kids should get an idea of how to use Facebook. This is a powerful tool you have, and there are some best ways to do it. Wrap that in with an image picture concept as part of that young person’s learning” (Youth Worker, 2015). I don’t have answers for how to do this successfully, but a good place to start would be to involve the young people in question. What are their attitudes and assumptions? How are they using media, and what do they believe about their image and identity?

Media consent forms should require youth signatures, and youth should be recognized as full participants in the consent and portrayal process. Legally, an organization can use a picture of a sixteen-year-old if they have consent from a parent. But if we want that same sixteen-year-old to act like a young adult, why wouldn’t we respect the youth’s right to control his or her own identity? Again, we must shift away from viewing the purpose of a media consent release form as protecting the organization to protecting the rights of the young person.

CONCLUSION: OTHER QUESTIONS I CAN’T ANSWER YET

The bigger question in the back of my mind since beginning this project was: Is there something inherently wrong with using pictures of program participants for marketing or fundraising? I intended to find ethical reasons for why organizations should use stock photos, or composite stories, rather than risk tokenizing the youth in their programs or treating them like commodities. Inevitably, the pushback would be: what’s an organization to do? And I would propose, and still do, that the onus should be on the organization. It may be convenient to use pictures and stories of real (potentially vulnerable) youth, and it might make a potential donor feel good, but that doesn’t make it an acceptable practice. I started exploring these conversations, but hope that they will continue much further.

Using a young person’s image and story to raise money that pays for operating expenses or salaries seems fundamentally wrong. Several staff mentioned that their organizations use stock photos or composite stories instead of real individuals. One said that the higher-level marketing pieces, like the large program catalog, used only purchased stock photos. Another explained that her organization, particularly because they often



were using stories from children in the foster care system, would piece together information to share the essence of their work without highlighting anyone individually. “I think you can make up composite stories,” she said, “that are true about different people and patch them together into one story, and it's still true in a global sense” (Youth Worker, 2015). Other staff confirmed that this was an acceptable practice. Even though it wasn't specifically disclosed as a made up story, none of it was fabricated, and it still told the story of their work. “It feels weird to do it, but it's still true” (Youth Worker, 2015). Organizations should consider the implications of having youth they serve trade their signatures for their image and identity, when a stock photo of a child model who gets paid would serve equally well.

If organizations are going to use the images of program participants, they should be doing more to protect the rights of youth to control their images and identities, and there are clear steps that they should take to do so. Organizations should have a media release form from each youth and his or her family rather than obtaining consent for specific instances or uses. Forms should be explained to youth and families as part of the intake or registration process, and there should be translators available if necessary. The choices that families and youth can make on the consent form should reflect the nuance of their wishes, for instance, whether or not the youth's name can be used, or if the image can be shared with organization partners. Just as organizations refresh their youths' contact information and permission each year, there should be an explicit expiration date for the media consent. Youth and direct-service staff should be involved in decisions about the creation and use of the media materials. Youth should be able to influence how they are portrayed in a meaningful way, and should be engaged in conversations about responsible use of technology in a way that equips them to make critical choices while respecting their different attitudes about image and identity.

What if the people crafting the messages that compelled others to pay attention had the same goal, protecting and upholding young peoples' rights, as direct service staff? In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the United Nations General Assembly stated that, “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 3). Are the people in an organization and the policies of the organization as a whole keeping those best interests as the true primary consideration? In a larger organization especially, the people whose job it is to communicate those “compelling” messages might have a different lens than the direct-service staff. “At least in my experience, those two realms in organizations don't talk, because the youth worker is in the program side and that communications person is an administrator. They don't talk” (Youth Worker, 2015). The hope is that the above recommendations for media consent forms could serve as an opening for discussions and problem-solving between communications or resource-development staff and direct-service staff. A starting point that might lead both sides to appreciate and respect the other's perspective more, but ultimately to come to a shared understanding of how young people's rights and voices should be at the core of the process.



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APPENDIX

EXAMPLE MEDIA RELEASE FORM

[organization logo]

Organization Name]
Media Release Consent Form [year]

In an effort to share the work [organization] does in the community, we develop our own publications and promotions (including websites, social media sites, and print materials) and sometimes work with local media like newspapers or television stations. We also get requests from community partners and funders to share images and stories of program participants.

Your answers on this form will not affect your student's ability to participate in programming. Please speak with staff if you have any questions or concerns.

Student Name _____

☐ I give permission for **[organization] and their partners ([partners, funders])** to use images and videos of me / my child taken while participating in programming for organization and partner publications including social media, websites, materials such as printed or electronic newsletters or brochures, fundraising efforts, television, newspaper, radio, etc..

☐ I give permission for my / my child's real first name to be used in connection with images or videos used in these public materials.

☐ I give permission for **[organization] only** to use images and videos of me / my child taken while participating in programming for organization publications including websites, materials such as printed or electronic newsletters or brochures, television, newspaper, radio, etc., but **not** including social media.

☐ I give permission for my / my child's real first name to be used in connection with images or videos used in these public materials.

☐ I **do not** give permission for images or videos of me / my child to be used for any purpose.

Staff will communicate with you before an image or video of you / your child is used. You may change these permissions at any time, but materials that have been created and / or shared may not be revocable. Your answers on this form will expire one year after you fill it out, and you may be asked to fill out a new form when registering for a new program.

Student Signature _____ Student Age _____

Parent or Guardian Name (if student is under 18) _____

Parent Signature _____ Date _____

Phone number _____ Address _____

Email address _____ (Email belongs to: Parent ☐ or Student ☐)

Staff Use: [could be used to record staff responsible for intake conference, note when and where image is used, etc.]



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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SOCIAL JUSTICE YOUTH WORK:

An Actualization of Youth Rights

By Monica McDaniel

The field of youth work needs to shift its focus away from prevention/intervention and positive youth development models to one that examines the complex social, economic and political forces that affect the lives of young people and adults. Social and economic patterns of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia are some of the main problems confronting youth today. Models of prevention and intervention target specific groups of young people, claiming that certain youth are more likely than others to make destructive decisions. Positive youth development models shifted the paradigm by focusing on the strengths of young people and positive supports in their lives. However, positive youth development emerged from the same belief of prevention/intervention that young people need to be changed and molded by adults into productive members of society. This mold that adults are trying to fit young people into, is one of the dominant cultural framework: the straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied man. This is an impossible identity for the majority of society and denies a vast amount of experiences for how power, privilege and oppressive forces shape a person's identity and how they engage with society.

Social justice youth work is a third approach to youth work, distinctively different from prevention/intervention and positive youth development models. Social justice youth work requires youth and adults to work together to achieve a high quality of life in an equitable world. This may seem utopian in nature, but the necessity for change is real and begins with an examination of self and an engagement in the injustices around us. In the collective work *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, writer, organizer, educator and spoken word poet Walidah Imarisha states,

Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds.
(Imarisha & brown, 2015, p. 3)

Even if a more equitable world is currently science fiction, it does not mean that youth and adults should continue to ignore injustice. Most of us are, in fact, largely responsible for perpetuating these injustices.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION APPROACHES: TARGETING THE “BAD KIDS”

In my neighborhood in south Minneapolis, there is a gas station with a prominent sign out front saying that only four youth under the age of 18 are allowed in the store at a time. When I asked the owner about the sign, he unloaded a litany of stories about chasing kids out of the store for knocking goods off of shelves while they yelled racial insults at him, about kids stealing bags of chips as they ran away laughing and how kids just seemed to always hang out there for way too long without buying a thing. He was frustrated and tired of the disrespect, so he put up the sign and reserves the right to kick anyone out that he feels will cross him. Unfortunately, this sentiment towards young people is not isolated to this one storeowner and my neighborhood, but is a dominant perception of young people in communities across the country. One need look only at “get tough on youth crime” public policy initiatives like those of the 1990s as the basis from which prevention and intervention approaches to youth development emerged.

In 1994 Minnesota passed the Juvenile Crime Act, a response to the perceived threat of an escalation in youth violence both locally and nationally. This act moved away from the original Progressive Era intent of the juvenile justice system of rehabilitation to one of punishment. According to the Juvenile Justice Coalition of Minnesota (Kreager, 2008), this shift resulted in more youth being tried as adults, the simplification of transfer and waiver rules allowing youth to be tried in adult criminal court and mandatory sentencing laws. The response from youth advocates to these measures was one of prevention: the importance of institutions and organizations to provide opportunities for youth to learn self-confidence and resiliency in order to “transition successfully into adulthood” (p. 5) without getting involved in the criminal justice system or saddled with burdens as a result of poor decisions. Youth who did get involved in the justice system were sometimes provided with court-ordered interventions depending on the level of offense and disposition made by the court. As much as these initiatives were well-intentioned approaches to advocate for and support young people, they, like the storeowner’s sign, sent a message to young people that they are feared and expected to make poor decisions. In no way did these initiatives address the underlying factors associated with why youth make these decisions. It was simply up to adults in positions of authority to guide youth down a more productive path.

With a heavy reliance on teen pregnancy, crime and drug statistics, certain neighborhoods, schools and age groups were chosen for specific prevention programs. These early programs usually involved an adult with some authority coming into a school or community center to talk about the horrific atrocities that can happen as a result of poor decisions made by youth. The federally sponsored D.A.R.E (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program model of the 1990s had this type of single-issue model. The uniformed officer would get up to the podium in front of an entire class or school to talk about the amount of lives lost in the community due to drug overdoses, he’d show a few pictures with just enough graphic material to shock, but not scar, and have an emotional story of a young person, just like those in the room, whose life was forever changed because of a poor decision to use drugs. The program would then end with students taking a pledge to “dare to stay off drugs.”

These prevention and intervention programs still exist today. They target young people who are perceived as the greatest threat or who are the most susceptible to get involved in the criminal justice or social services systems; these youth are deemed “at risk.” At risk youth became code for young people of color and has expanded to a long list of youth in specific groups that encompasses youth in poverty, GLBT youth, and youth living in urban neighborhoods with high crime rates. Without examining oppressive factors in the lives of young people that might drive youth with these identities and experiences to make negative decisions, prevention programs suggest to young people that because of who they are and their environment, they are more likely to make poor decisions. This message is oppressive and can be detrimental both to youth involved in prevention programs and youth not associated with one.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH: HOMOGENIZATION OF YOUTH EXPERIENCES

Fortunately in the early 2000s, there was a shift in the youth development field away from prevention/intervention models towards positive youth development programming in out-of-school-time settings. Longitudinal studies of prevention programs pointed to specific predictors of problem behaviors in youth and the programs’ inability to demonstrate much positive influence over young people’s choices and behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). Therefore, a positive youth development approach was adopted, which took a strengths-based approach to working with youth. Instead of focusing on the potential ways young people could get involved in the juvenile justice or social services systems,

youth workers crafted a nurturing environment where they defined goals based on young people's capacities, strengths and developmental needs. Benard (1991) iterates that the primary factor that came out of the research on positive developmental outcomes was the presence of a nurturing climate that fosters caring relationships, high expectations and opportunities for contribution.

There is incredible power in an asset-based youth development model. As a white, middle class young person in the 1990s and early 2000s, I was privileged to benefit from positive youth development programming without all of the prevention strings attached. In the nurturing environment of an all girl's summer camp in northern Minnesota, the relationships I built with my fellow campers and counselors were foundational in shaping the person I am today. At 15 I was quite reserved and quiet, preferring the company of a book to the wholehearted engagement with others in program activities. Because of this, I had initially made the decision not to embark on the leadership opportunity awaiting my friends in the second 2-week session of our summer: a 9-day Boundary Waters canoe trip. We were the oldest campers on camp and this trip, to us, was our rite of passage towards becoming camp leaders and potential counselors ourselves. I almost didn't go. It wasn't until my counselor, one of the leaders assigned to guide the canoe trip, approached me about why I had decided against this formative adventure with the rest of my friends. I still remember her sitting on the bench with me, nervously trying to draw me out. I honestly didn't have an answer for her, well not one that I had wanted to share. I was scared that I wouldn't be able to make it and that I had nothing to contribute. She seemed to think otherwise and said that I, out of anyone, would actually thrive. I took the weekend to think it over, bought a sleeping bag and signed up for the trip.

In the first few days, I learned quickly that we all had to depend on each other to stay dry, fed, and moving forward in good spirits. The high expectations set by our team pushed me to take the heavier canoe on a portage or the stern in big winds, to pride myself in overcoming the day's big challenge and supporting the group. My biggest boost in confidence came after a storm had pushed us off the lake fast and we had to crash a campsite for the night. While everyone was relaxing and drying off in the tent, I was exploring our new surroundings, now completely comfortable with the landscape and rhythm of our days. But I was surprised when my leaders came to me saying that we were lost, asking if I knew how to read a compass. No I didn't know how to read a compass. I thought it was some sort of test, like they wanted to see how I would do at trying on a new leadership role: trail guide. It wasn't until they started disputing which way to go with each other that I finally understood that we were lost, or at least a bit turned around. I was shocked that they were trusting me with this piece of news, believing that I would be helpful instead of panicking. So I didn't panic, and immediately I knew exactly where we were, showing them how the map and compass lined up. The next morning, the group set off in the direction I had indicated and after passing a few unmistakable landmarks it was clear that we were on the right track.

Positive youth development can easily be summed up in a canoe trip. Trusting relationships are formed as your caring partner slaps mosquitos off your arms on a buggy portage. Expectations are high as you struggle to keep the canoe from tipping by pulling your paddle hard, stroke after stroke, through the water to keep the bow head-on into the waves of a windy lake. And everyone, not just the adults, leads the group with their own special gifts of laughter in a tough moment, thoughtful words around the campfire, hearty dinners deliciously seasoned from the spice kit, or the endurance to carry the heaviest load at the end of the day. There is no doubt that these guided life experiences build resiliency in young people.

However, Cammarota and Ginwright (2002) argue that positive youth development models shift too far in the other direction, away from any acknowledgement of the oppressive forces in young people's lives and can reinforce the exercise of certain privileges. Positive youth development models overcompensate by "promoting supports and opportunities as the only factors necessary for positive and healthy development

of youth, and does not examine thoroughly the ways in which social and community forces limit and create opportunities for youth” (p. 84). These models were also developed out of “universalistic, white, middle-class conceptions of youth” (p. 85).

The experiences of a canoe trip and that of summer camp are steeped in a hidden history of oppression and exertion of privilege. Some of the same lakes and trails I traversed on my “rite of passage” were those initially solely walked by the Anishanabe people and later carved into trails by the indentured French-Canadian voyageurs of the exploitive and extremely profitable fur trade. By the time I arrived in those woods, their legacy existed in names only of the lakes we paddled (Lac la Croix) or in the food we ate (pemmican). Van Slyck (2010) explores the history of the American overnight summer camp experience that emerged out of the back-to-nature trend of the 19th century. With the rise of the middle class and a need for respite from the moral and physical degradations of urban life, Christian, European-American, middle-class professionals designed and built environments for their children to spend their idle summers. Unfortunately, these nurturing environments did not include an analysis of how power, privilege and oppressive forces shaped these positive youth development experiences for young people.

For me, my positive youth development experience at summer camp suited me well, for the most part. I was able to develop a certain level of self-awareness, an understanding of my strengths and areas in which to develop myself further. However, that self-exploration only scratched the surface of the effects of oppression and privilege on my development. Before the 1980s, my camp was for boys only. When girls were finally allowed, it chose to remain single-gender, hosting girls the first half of the summer and boys in the second half. I believe this programming decision allowed us female campers to examine our diverse identities as girls and young women. At camp, we girls could defy oppressive stereotypes and be physically and emotionally strong, supportive to each other and confident in our internal and external beauty. However, we gave only a passing nod to and little discussion of identities that did not fall within the white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgendered, able-bodied cultural framework. As a counselor, I followed the example set for me that gay and lesbian counselors concealed their sexual identities from campers and their parents. Due to the fact that only certain aspects of our identities were explored, our positive youth development camp experience did not go deep enough into the oppressive and privileged forces in our lives. Therefore, it might have limited opportunities and stifled healthy development, especially for those of us who fell outside of the dominant cultural framework. It also reinforced the exercise of privilege especially based around race, class and sexual orientation.

SOCIAL JUSTICE YOUTH WORK: A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Positive youth development models that emerged in the early 2000s mirror those of the back-to-nature American summer camp model: European-American professionals are still designing spaces for young people to spend their idle, out-of-school time, so they do not fall into the moral degradations wrought by our society. The diversity of summer program offerings in urban, suburban and rural communities even call themselves “camps.” However, the majority of these positive youth development models homogenize youth experiences into one of the dominant cultural framework of the European-American, straight, able-bodied, middle-class man. This needs to change. The oppressive environments wrought by this framework also need to change, not just for young people, but for adults as well. The majority of our society does not identify as a Christian, European-American, straight, able-bodied, middle-class man. Also there is a real possibility that no one can actually achieve this ideal identity. Therefore a more inclusive and truer framework is necessary. I suggest a third way: social justice youth work. Youth and adults should be working together to achieve a high quality of life in an equitable world.

Social justice and youth work are both concepts that have many meanings and assumptions. However, when their origins and root definitions are examined, they both have the same foundation in fundamental rights of individuals. Kay and Jost (2010) explain social justice as:

A state of affairs (either actual or ideal) in which (a) benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle (or set of principles); (b) procedures, norms, and rules that govern political and other forms of decision making preserve the basic rights, liberties, and entitlements of individuals and groups; and (c) human beings (and perhaps other species) are treated with dignity and respect not only by authorities but also by other relevant social actors, including fellow citizens. (p. 1122)

Their definition is compiled from philosophical discourse where social justice is “a property of social systems” (p. 1122). This definition is quite broad, and is therefore open to many interpretations for what are the actual benefits in a society, the basic rights of individuals and the measurable markers of respect to individuals. Usually social justice is more easily defined when there is an absence of justice. This is where youth work can help to further explain social justice.

Young people exist within social systems that are unjust. Within these social systems, they are learning through observation and interaction with peers and adults how to engage and navigate these unjust systems. The youth development models of prevention/intervention and positive youth development are part of the problem, “because they assume that youth themselves should be changed, rather than the oppressive environments in which they live” (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2002, p. 85). The concept of youth work turns the focus away from molding young people into the ideal image of the dominant culture. By substituting the word “work,” youth work implies action towards something, but the end result is not as neatly designated as it is when “development” is used. Through a social justice youth work model, young people and adults work together in partnership to build their awareness of “how institutional, historical, and systemic forces limit and promote the life opportunities for particular groups” and to take social action against oppressive forces (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2002, p. 87). Prevention/intervention models have paved the way for social justice youth work to acknowledge and address social inequities. And positive youth development models have illustrated how impactful a nurturing environment can be beneficial to a young person’s self-discovery. Through realizing the blind spots and strengths of both types of models, social justice youth work is able to move forward into common practice for youth workers.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire’s approach to education is similar to that of social justice youth work. Freire (2000) believes that the initial step towards changing oppressive conditions is first coming to an understanding, or “conscientização,” that these conditions are not predetermined (p. 67). Self-awareness in youth work begins with youth and adults exploring issues of identity through “an analysis of how power, privilege and oppression threaten their identities and capacity for self-determination” (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2002, p. 89). This examination of self in this context easily leads young people and adults to think critically about the conditions in their immediate communities and how those connect to global systems of oppression within a historical context. Cammarota and Ginwright build on this concept by emphasizing that “people can only truly ‘know’ that they can exercise control over their existence by directly engaging the conditions that shape their lives” (p. 87).

Social action begins when young people are allowed to “claim knowledge in the field in which we all labor” (hooks, 1994, p. 14). In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks further explores Freire’s notion of education as the practice of freedom. Youth workers exhibit a knowledge base within the field of youth work when young

people are able to voice their own experiences. “Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically—to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (hooks, p. 148). By undergoing the process of self-reflection and examination of the ways one is oppressed and is oppressive, young people and adults are much more able to engage in understanding the oppressive forces dominating their lives and how those oppressive forces exist within the lives of others.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Adults, we have some work to do. We cannot continue, like the gas station owner, to tell young people what to do and how to be, especially when we have hidden messages about what mistakes youth are likely to make because of their gender, perceived race, socioeconomic status, sexual identity, etc. In the words of Teju Cole, “If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement” (2012). Our due diligence is to change our need to have a “big emotional experience that validates privilege,” to our actual need to self-examine how our own privileges and ways we may be oppressed affect the lives of young people and the lives of those around us (Cole, 2012). Only then can we actually authentically partner with young people to work towards changing the oppressive forces in all of our lives.

Prevention/intervention and positive youth development models are based on the same fundamental argument that young people need to change and therefore discount the oppressive forces that they are navigating. In his article, “When Language loses its bite,” freelance writer Zahir Janmohamed examines the effectiveness of human rights work. He says,

In discussing human rights, we seem to be stuck on two questions: is human rights work effective? And has it really achieved anything? If we measure the success of human rights violations worldwide, then the answer is a resounding no....However in thinking about human rights,...if you want to move an audience, use specific language—in short name names. This, I believe is the power of poetry and it is also the power of human rights work. It is the ability and the willingness to say things that we often bury. (Janmohamed, 2015, para. 8 & 9)

Social justice youth work is human rights work. This collaborative effort allows youth and adults to name names, which starts with naming ourselves and the stories that we bury. Unfortunately, our attempts to hold on to our privileges is at the expense of someone else’s rights. In the words of social justice activist adrienne maree brown, “We hold so many worlds inside us. So many futures. It is our radical responsibility to share these worlds, to plant them in the soil of our society as seeds for the type of justice we want and need” (Imarisha & brown, 2015, p. 279). We need to make sure that young people and adults have spaces in which to share their stories and engage the world in order to change it.

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MONICA MCDANIEL joined the Youth Farm team in the summer of 2012 and became the Hawthorne program director in the fall of 2013. Monica came to Youth Farm from the YMCA of the Greater Twin Cities where she developed leadership programs in partnership with young people from Camping Services and Beacons. She is also a budding farmer who is a certified Urban Farmer from the Permaculture Research Institute Cold Climate. She is a graduate of Linfield College in Oregon with a degree in English, French and gender studies. In her spare time, she enjoys curling up with a good book, playing soccer and thinking up metaphors that link youth work and growing food.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO YOUTH WORK

By Julie Richards

YOUTH WORK AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

Youth Work as Social Justice

Youth work is, at its core, social justice work. The beauty of youth work is that its process and purpose are rooted in human rights. It is defined here as intentional programming designed to further enhance a young person's personal and social development and to engage with and bring about social change in an unequal society. Youth work is visionary in that it places highest value in providing opportunities to develop the social and emotional aspects of youth as a means to re-imagine narratives. Similar to organizers, youth workers engage in speculative fiction. As author/poet/speaker/educator Walidah Imarisha (2015) writes,

Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds.
(Imarisha & Brown, 2015, p. 3).

Social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. It includes a vision of society that is equitable, with all members being physically and psychologically safe and secure. Perhaps most importantly, social justice is both a benefit and a burden. It is not enough to be the beneficiary of living as individuals fully within our human rights, because the rights of all of us are so intricately linked together. We must bring everyone along so that we may all thrive. In terms of youth work, this translates into providing opportunities for our youth to grow, learn, and reflect. Equally important, we must inspire and instill in our youth the desire to provide space for others to do the same, whether through personal growth and awareness or public leadership.

After speaking with several other youth workers and reflecting on my own experiences as a youth worker, the most common thread I found was that people feel called to do the work. Be it a strong sense of compassion, an experience in which they benefitted from the guidance of someone else, or an upbringing rooted in the idea that 'it takes a village,' youth workers feel compelled to give back.

Like others working within their calling, those called to youth work have both the aptitude and passion to improve their craft. They most value the importance of environments and relationships where youth thrive, which speaks to the ways youth work benefits young people. Comprehensive knowledge, training and application of best practices don't necessarily translate into youth being able to apply those same skills and relationships outside of programming, speaking more to the degree to which youth internalize the burden of the benefits.

YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT

In Saint Paul, Minnesota, the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) is the main tool used to evaluate and shape best practices in local youth work. The YPQA "measures the quality of youth experiences and

promotes the creation of environments that tap into the most important resource available to any youth-serving organization—a young person’s motivation to engage critically with the world” (Youth Program Quality Assessment, 2005).

The YPQA is the result of a multi-year study funded by the William T. Grant Foundation and High/Scope early in the millennium. High/Scope began as a summer camp in 1963 by David P. Weikart. The programs, which ran from 1963-2002, offered disadvantaged youth summer learning experiences rooted in active participatory learning (active learning means students have direct, hands-on experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas). By 1970 Weikart had broadened his audience and High/Scope Summer Camp became the Institute for Ideas, a piece of High/Scope. High/Scope is perhaps best known for the Perry Preschool study and their resulting High/Scope Preschool curriculum.

In the late 1990s, High/Scope’s youth development group created trainings for youth workers that supported the philosophy of the learning approach used at the summer program. These eventually became the Youth Worker Method series. In 2005, the YPQA was published. In addition to the evaluation tool, workshops and other supports were established to provide a roadmap for how to reach the higher levels of the various domains.

Despite 18 years of youth work under my belt, I first experienced a multi-organizational youth work community complete with monthly networking opportunities and access to free professional development when I moved to Saint Paul and began accessing Sprockets. Through Sprockets I become very familiar with the YPQA assessment tool and noticed several aspects that I appreciated. First, it aligns with the philosophy of Montessori education. In 1949 Maria Montessori wrote:

And so we discovered that education is not something which the teacher does, but that it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher’s task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child. (p. 8)

Youth work started due to a realization that young people needed more than academics to be productive and even better, to flourish. The YPQA, rooted in a youth-centered approach to emotional and social growth, requires that staff engage, encourage and empower youth because “the most important resource available to any youth-serving organization [is] a young person’s motivation to engage critically with the world” (Youth Program Quality Assessment, 2005). Youth work provides that environment in which youth get to question, experience, practice and reflect on the skills that allow them to reach academic and social success not encouraged within traditional educational settings.

Second, the YPQA tool provides a shared language and framework from which to plan, discuss and improve programming. Youth workers tend to cycle through jobs quickly and the YPQA provides common language and standards that apply across the field. Whether working for Youth Farm or Kitty Anderson Youth Science Center, providing a safe and supportive environment, opportunities for interaction and engagement are key components. As a supervisor, familiarizing my staff with these concepts has absolutely created consistency in both my expectations for how youth experience programming as well as how the youth expect to engage with their out-of-school-time (OST) world.

Third, the YPQA tool evaluates programming in terms of the process as opposed to the outcomes. The point of youth work, for example, is not to change reading levels but to change attitudes that affect learning. Those

attitudes are rooted in youth feeling safe, supported, and actively engaged in the work they are doing through community building, choice, leadership and reflection.

BRIDGING YOUTH PROGRAM QUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

After three years and two organizations, several internal YPQA observations, and becoming an external assessor, I find myself needing more from the tool. I am called deeply to the work because I cannot live with the inequities and oppression over-present in our city, our society, our country, our world. As the child of four educators, I believe the answer lies in education—though not that found in traditional school settings. My experiences as the sole person of color among all white students and later as a proud HBCU (Historically Black College and University) graduate tell me the educational system adds to the oppression of those considered “other,” be it through race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual preference, ability, etc.

While my programs consistently scored mostly fives on the various domains and scales, I knew I wasn’t adequately preparing my youth to use what I was teaching them outside of our walls, nor was I inducting them into the world of indignation that our work was even necessary, or that they held the power to reimagine and demand a different world.

Certain I was not the only one struggling with these ideas, I engaged youth workers who were doing work I admired in conversation. Hoping to gain insight and ideas with which to better my own work, I realized we held similar sentiments.

We appear to be doing well based on assessment scores but we know we aren’t quite reaching the youth the way we want to. Are they using what they learn here outside of here? (Youth worker, personal communication, 2015)

Managers furthered this by saying that even within their organizations the caliber of one youth worker’s score of 5 compared to another’s within the same scale/domain could look very different. As we dove further into these conversations, two questions popped up frequently:

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- *How do we build community more intentionally within our programs that highlight and celebrate differences and similarities AND give our youth the tools and confidence to do it outside of our walls?*
 - *How do we help our youth link the skills they are learning through our program to other aspects of their lives? It is not enough to score a 5 in a given area if youth are unable to take what they are learning and use it to enhance their lives outside of programming.*
-

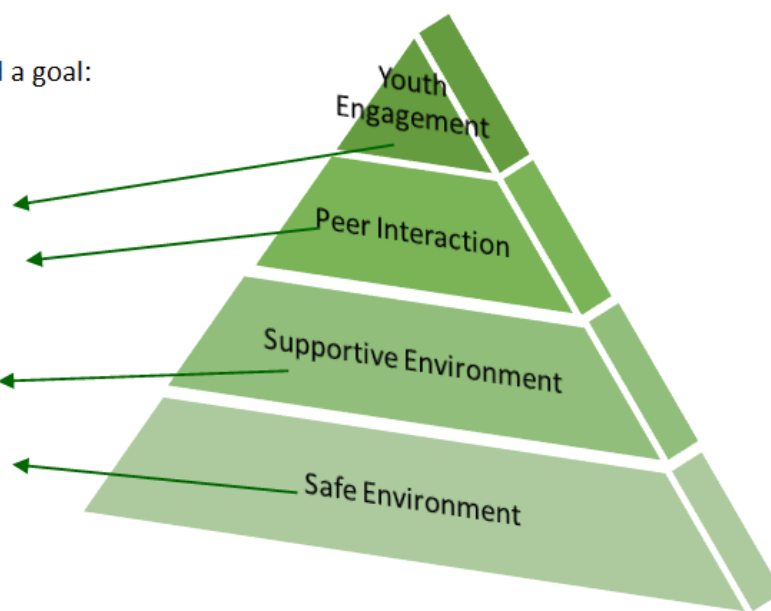
Essentially, the YPQA doesn’t measure, or perhaps mis-measures the ability of a program to competently meet the cultural, social and emotional needs of its youth, leaving us with the question: how do I make sure my youth have the ability to authentically create and change a community they imagine?

If youth work is, indeed, social justice work, and social justice is the ability to live fully within one’s rights as well as to accept the rights of others, it is imperative to acknowledge the attitudes, values and skills required. Figure 1 shows the YPQA pyramid and its current relationship to the definition of social justice.

FIGURE 1.

Social Justice is both a process and a goal:

Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. It includes both burdens and benefits and is a vision of society that is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.



SOCIAL JUSTICE OUTCOMES

In order to create opportunities for youth to claim the ability to live within their rights, it is necessary to define key knowledge/understanding, skills, attitudes and values imperative to a justice-minded individual. *Compass: A Manual on Human Rights Education with Young People* gives the following comprehensive list:

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING:

- Key concepts such as: freedom, justice, equality, human dignity, non-discrimination, democracy, universality, rights, responsibilities, interdependence and solidarity;
- The idea that human rights provide a framework for negotiating and agreeing standards of behaviour in the family, in school, in the community, and in the wider world;
- The role of human rights and their past and future dimension in one's own life, in the life of communities, and in the lives of other people around the world.
- The distinction between civil/political and social/economic rights;
- Different ways of viewing and experiencing human rights in different societies, different groups within the same society, and the various sources of legitimacy - including religious, moral and legal sources;
- Main social changes, historical events and reasons leading to the recognition of human rights;
- Major international instruments that exist to implement the protection of human rights, such as the United Nations Declarations of Human Rights (UDHR), the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR);
- Local, national, international bodies, non-governmental organisations, individuals working to support and protect human rights.

SKILLS

- Active listening and communication: being able to listen to different points of view, to advocate one's own rights and those of other people;
- Critical thinking: finding relevant information, appraising evidence critically, being aware of preconceptions and biases, recognising forms of manipulation, and making decisions on the basis of reasoned judgement;
- The ability to work cooperatively and to address conflict positively;
- The ability to participate in and organise social groups;
- Acting to promote and safeguard human rights both locally and globally.

ATTITUDES AND VALUES

- A sense of responsibility for one's own actions, a commitment to personal development and social change;
- Curiosity, an open mind and an appreciation of diversity;
- Empathy and solidarity with others and a commitment to support those whose human rights are under threat;
- A sense of human dignity, of self-worth and of others' worth, irrespective of social, cultural, linguistic or religious differences;
- A sense of justice, the desire to work towards the ideals of freedom, equality and respect for diversity (Brander et al., 2012, p. 37). (Compass: A Manual on Human Rights Education with Young People, 2006)


Youth work, which is at its core social justice work, plays a bigger role in the world than our current outcomes suggest. We need a tool that explicitly embeds and reflects human rights-based values because our work exists in and affects a much larger ecology. Appendix tables 1-5 illustrate how the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values outcomes found in Brander et al. (2012) might be applied to flesh out scales that enhance current work. Please note rather than have four domains, as described in the YPQA, Reflection has been added as its own domain.

CONCLUSION

As I imagine ways this might work, I find my ideas blur process with outcome. For example, in the YPQA the first scale under Supportive Environment is “Staff provides a welcoming environment” (Youth Program Quality Assessment, 2005). The first item under that scale lists three examples focused on the degree to which staff greet youth within a certain time frame that align with scoring a 1, 3 or 5. While this speaks to a youth’s experience in the space the adult created, it doesn’t speak to whether or not the youth has internalized and can apply the importance of why we acknowledge and greet each other. What if this item included a score for the degree to which youth greet each other within a certain time frame? This shift involves youth in the process of providing a welcoming environment as well as acts as an outcome/reflection of the space the adult has nurtured and encouraged. With the support of researchers, youth workers and funders, a tool explicitly embedded with human rights-based values and skills could provide what so many of us feel is missing.

“A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead



As youth workers, we have the privilege of putting into practice our re-imagined versions of what an equitable community looks like, feels like and sounds like. Old institutions cloaked in new names such as “the war on drugs” intentionally engender situations like the pre-school to prison pipeline and justify continued police brutality against the very people the Civil Rights Act of 1964 legally protects. Youth workers provide opportunities and environments for youth to question, learn, share and reflect because we dare to envision and demand a future rooted in acknowledging human dignity.

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APPENDIX

Correlation of YPQA domains* with outcomes found in Brander et al. (2012).

TABLE 1. YPAQ Domain = Safe Environment

YPQA	Outcomes of Human Rights Education
Safe Environment	Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes and Values
Psychological and emotional safety is promoted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of human dignity, self-worth and others' self-worth, irrespective of social, cultural, linguistic or religious differences.
The physical environment is safe and free of health hazards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key concepts such as freedom, justice, equality, human dignity, non-discrimination, democracy, universality, rights, responsibilities, interdependence and solidarity.
Appropriate emergency procedures and supplies are present.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The idea that human rights provide a framework for negotiating and agreeing upon standards of behaviour in the family, school, the community, and the wider world.
Program space and furniture accommodate the activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major international instruments that exist to implement the protection of human rights - such as the UNDHR and the UNCRC
Healthy food and drinks are provided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local, national, international bodies, non-governmental organizations, individuals working to support and protect human rights.

TABLE 2. YPQA Domain = Supportive Environment

YPQA	Outcomes of Human Rights Education
Supportive Environment	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Values
Staff provides a welcoming atmosphere.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of human dignity, self-worth and others' self-worth, irrespective of social, cultural, linguistic or religious differences. • Curiosity, an open mind and an appreciation of diversity.
Session flow is planned, presented and paced for youth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to participate in and organize social groups. • Critical thinking: finding relevant information, appraising evidence critically, being aware of preconceptions and biases, recognising forms of manipulation, and making decisions on the bases of reasoned judgement.
Activities support active engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curiosity, an open mind and an appreciation of diversity. • Critical thinking: finding relevant information, appraising evidence critically, being aware of preconceptions and biases, recognising forms of manipulation, and making decisions on the basis of reasoned judgement.
Staff supports youth in building new skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active listening and communication: being able to listen to different points of view, to advocate one's own rights and those of others. • Different ways of viewing and experiencing human rights in different societies, different groups within the same society, and the various sources of legitimacy - including religious, moral and legal sources.
Staff supports youth with encouragement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active listening and communication: being able to listen to different points of view, to advocate one's own rights and those of others.
Staff uses youth-centered approaches to reframe conflict.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to work cooperatively and to address conflict positively. • Active listening and communication: being able to listen to different points of view, to advocate one's own rights and those of others. • A sense of responsibility for one's own actions, a commitment to personal development and social change.

TABLE 3. YPQA Domain = Interaction

YPQA	Outcomes of Human Rights Education
Interaction	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Values
Youth have opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy and solidarity with others and a commitment to support those whose human rights are under threat. • Different ways of viewing and experiencing human rights in different societies, different groups within the same society and the various sources of legitimacy, including religious, moral and legal sources.
Youth have opportunities to practice in small groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to participate in and organize social groups.
Youth have opportunities to act as group facilitators and mentors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of responsibility for one's own actions, a commitment to personal development and social change. • The ability to participate in and organize social groups.
Youth have opportunities to partner with adults.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to participate in and organize social groups. • Local, national, international bodies, non-governmental organizations, individuals working to support and protect human rights.

TABLE 4. YPQA Domain = Engagement

YPQA	Outcomes of Human Rights Education
Engagement	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Values
Youth have opportunities to set goals and make plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to participate in and organize social groups.
Youth have opportunities to make choices based on their interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to participate in and organize social groups.

TABLE 5. Domain = Reflection

* Please note rather than have four domains, as described in the YPQA, *Reflection* has been added as its own domain.

YPQA	Outcomes of Human Rights Education
Reflection	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and Values
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The role of human rights and their past and future dimension in one's own life, the life of communities and the lives of other people around the wider world.• Key concepts such as freedom, justice, equality, human dignity, non-discrimination, democracy, universality, rights, responsibilities, interdependence and solidarity.
Internal application	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different ways of viewing and experiencing human rights in different societies, different groups within the same society, and the various sources of legitimacy, including religious, moral and legal sources.
External application	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A sense of justice, the desire to work toward the ideals of freedom, equality and respect for diversity.• Acting to promote and safeguard human rights both locally and globally• Main social changes, historical events and reasons leading to the recognition of human rights.• The distinction between civic/political and social/economic rights.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JULIE RICHARDS first fell in love with youth work as a youth. After spending her teens and early 20s coaching, camp counseling, and working in after school programs, she baffled her parents by majoring in English and secondary education at Howard University with no real desire to teach. After spending one year teaching in a non-traditional classroom, Julie found her niche in out-of-school-time programming as an after-school program director at a progressive school in Washington, DC. Since then, she has remained loyal to the field, often incorporating case management and wrap-around services in many settings including non-profit, public school, private school and gang-outreach organizations. After living on both coasts, Julie has returned to the Midwest with her son and dog.

BUILDING CONSISTENT AND AUTHENTIC STUDENT VOICE INTO SCHOOL POLICIES IN MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

By Nou Vang

When I first moved to Minnesota from California, I was 13 years old, about to start my first year at Patrick Henry High School. My freshmen year consisted of me trying to make friends, trying to find my place while adjusting to Minnesota. During my sophomore year, I became more involved in school by joining the school newspaper and the Literary Club as well as running for student council. I knew I wanted to join spaces where my voice could be heard. However, I only wrote one article for the school newspaper and served as part of the editing team for the Literary Club. I was afraid to use my voice because I was never taught how to use it.

That was over 10 years ago. Today, I work as the Career and College Center (CCC) coordinator at the same school where I started as a freshman. In my work with students, particularly with seniors getting ready to graduate high school, I realize how important it is to have student voice. Part of my job now is to advocate for my students and try to do what is best for them. How can I do that if they don't get a say in what is best for them? Finally, this nagging feeling in the back of my mind has a name: student voice. Where is student voice in all the things we are expecting students to do? Where is student voice in deciding what graduation requirements translated to a "career and college ready" student?

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every child has a right to a quality education, particularly with the goals of the "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 29, section b). That resonates with Dr. Gisela Konopka's "Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth," a study done in 1973 commissioned by the Office of Child Development of the Department of Health Education and Welfare and the Center for Youth Development and Research at the University of Minnesota. In this framework, Konopka identifies adolescence as an age of commitment that "elevates adolescence from a stage frequently regarded as one that must be endured and passed through as rapidly as possible to a stage of earnest and significant human development" (Qualities of Adolescence, para. 9). We are educating our future citizens and teaching them skills to function as citizens and healthy human beings. One essential skill is teaching students to advocate for themselves, to use their voice to fight for their rights. As Konopka states, "Those working and living with youth can foster healthy value formation by *encouraging open discussion* and refraining from trying to superimpose their values upon them" (1973, Conditions of Healthy Development of Youth, para. 5). Further in that section she states "*Adolescents should have a genuine chance to participate as citizens, as members of a household, as workers-in general, as responsible members of society*" (para. 9). If we want our students to be ready for life after high school, we need to get them to participate in meaningful decision-making and advocacy.

Before we can begin to examine student voice, it is important to define it. What is authentic student voice? Authentic student voice is realized when young people speak and advocate on their own behalf and adults respectfully and seriously listen and consider student views when making decisions that will impact them.

This means being accountable to students and clearly stating how their input will be used in the decision-making process. For example, if students are given a survey, it should be clearly explained how results will impact them and/or decisions being made. Authentic student voice is intentional and purposeful. It should not be something that is included to make a policy “look good” nor should it be used as a sort of youth-endorsed stamp of approval.

Why is student voice important to me? It is important because it demonstrates to students they are valued and heard. It is their right as youths to be heard, to be educated. The United States signed the UNCRC, and every UN member but two (the United States being one of them) ratified it. There is substance to the UNCRC, a document that says our children are human beings and entitled to rights. Those of us in power need to hold ourselves accountable to upholding those rights. School is about them: why would you *not* want their voices? As Konopka alluded, and as I’ve seen in my current and former work with high school students, the prevailing view of students is one of immaturity and irresponsibility. Teachers, myself included, think and do what we think is best for them. Nowadays, we have a variety of college and community programs at our school to help support students: College Possible, Get Ready, Beacons Boys and Girls Club, Check and Connect, etc. I reflect back to my days when I did not have they all these community partner programs to guide me. I had to do everything on my own because I did not know who to go to for help or the questions I needed to ask to be ready for post-secondary. I wonder if we have lost our student voice because they have been crowded out by other voices.

To try and answer this question and others related to it, I decided to talk to Henry students and the Minneapolis Youth Congress to get their perspective. I wanted to see what youth voice looks like today at Henry and in the community.

SURVEYING THE CURRENT SITUATION

My first month as the CCC coordinator, I remember being mesmerized and impressed by a student who was making a sign in the hallway about student safety and public transportation. This student was inflamed that the school and the district were not doing more to protect their students who were constantly harassed and put in unsafe environments as they tried to make their way to and from school. She was in student council and hoped to get their voices heard on behalf of their peers. Fast forward months later and I had heard nothing about this change I was waiting to see happen. What happened to this student who was on fire at the beginning of the year? What happened to her flame?

Aside from student council, students at Henry have the opportunity to join various clubs and activities to get their voices heard. Senior Committee planned what they want their school activities to look like (school dances, prom, Senior Night, etc). Black Student Union educated staff and students about notable African Americans from the community for February via school announcements and posters. Link Crew is a space for upperclassmen to provide leadership to their peers and school, whether it be to speak on a student panel or help direct parents/families during parent-teacher Conferences. Henry also has “Youth Are Here” youth workers who serve as advocates for students, functioning as a third party who does not work for the school or district and thus can ease tension between staff and students. There are many opportunities at Henry where students can get their voices heard in school activities. However, where are their voices in other spaces at school? Adam Fletcher (2005), founder of SoundOut, a program that promotes meaningful student involvement through publications, states:

Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy. (p. 5)

Henry is involving some degree of student voice in its school. However, we need to do more to involve students in all spaces that affect them, particularly in school policies and rules. As a student expressed to me in regards to the no-pass policy, “Why are we being punished for what other kids do?” This is not to say there should not be a no-pass policy, but that there should be a step of student consultation and discussion required before such a wide-reaching policy is put into place.

Currently, our high school is going through some big changes. Next year, all freshmen and sophomores will be in the Middle Years Program. This program requires that all freshmen and sophomores do a personal project. In addition to this new initiative, our school will also be adding advisories back to the school schedule. All these changes are going to have major impact on students, but how are student voices being accounted for?

What is being done to ensure we are getting *authentic* student voice in these processes? In the past, Henry has generally given surveys to students as a way to gather input—thus, indirectly getting student voice. I believe that Henry High School places value on student voice, but the reality is that there is not enough time nor are there structures in place to solicit and make effective use of authentic student voice. Authentic student voice is an investment that takes time for its value to be seen; it cannot happen overnight. It is not something with immediate results that schools can report back to the public or the district. As such, student voice has become secondary to more public-garnering priorities such as graduation rates and test performances.

I initiated interviews and conversations with several Henry students in order to hear views about the role and utility of student voice in their school. It is important to keep in mind that all the students I talked to were students who either showed an interest in student voice through their involvement with student council or other activities, or were students who knew how to seek out resources (e.g. students who often came to the CCC). All whom I spoke with agreed that their voices and opinions were heard and respected in most classrooms: teachers fostered discussion in classrooms and students felt that most teachers respected them and allowed them to speak their minds. However, when asked about changes in the school policies and rules, all but one student stated they had little to no voice about changes. An example was the no-pass policy. When I asked one student why he thought students had no say, he said that the administration feared their input and that students would cause disruption to the flow of school. Another student said he believed the administration did not think youth were mature enough to make important decisions. “They don’t want our voices heard because they think we will make unrealistic expectations like, ‘Hey, let’s have a pizza day’” (Henry student, personal communication, April 22, 2015). Another example one student described related to the sit-in that happened at Henry after the Michael Brown decision. Michael Brown was an unarmed, 19-year-old African-American male who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The morning after the decision was made to not indict the police officer a handful of students decided to not go to classes and sat outside the main office hallways as a sign of protest. This student felt the administration was not supportive and instead wanted to quash their voice. Why is it that teachers seem to listen more to students than the administration does? The expectations of the role of a teacher compared with that of an administrator are vastly different.

To get a broader sense of what student voice may look like in Minneapolis, I also went to talk with the Minneapolis Youth Congress (MYC), described on its website as

A representative body of youth that has authentic power and influence in decisions and policies relevant to youth. The Minneapolis Youth Congress works in collaboration with elected officials focusing on a common understanding of the welfare of the youth in the City of Minneapolis (Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board, 2015, No Decision about Us without Us).

Students interested in becoming members of MYC apply in the beginning of the school year and are interviewed and selected by the committee coordinators (adults). Throughout the last school year, MYC members met weekly to discuss policies and issues that were pertinent and important to youth in Minneapolis. They helped effect policies they deemed important. For instance, the MYC Health Committee helped get the Clean Air Act passed on e-cigarettes by working in partnership with the city's health department. At one of their meetings in April, I had the opportunity to ask the group of roughly 35 MYC members for their opinions on youth voice in Minneapolis. All were students from a Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) high school and/or Minneapolis residents. For the most part, many felt their voices were heard and respected in Minneapolis. They felt empowered and had an outlet for their voice to make change. When asked about their respective schools, it varied by school. Some felt their school was supportive, others not as much. Students who attended school in South Minneapolis seem to have more positive experiences with student voice compared to those in North Minneapolis. South Minneapolis students were also the students who spoke up more at the meeting.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

In the past 10 years, Henry High School has had four principals and the MPS district has had four superintendents. Such frequent changes in leadership make it hard to build and maintain systems to support students. This situation is not unique to Henry or MPS, it is true of many urban school districts. Therefore, it is even more important to have student voice systematized so that it becomes ingrained in the school and the district. It is encouraging that this year the first ever student representative was sworn in to the MPS School Board. Even more encouraging, this student was selected by his fellow student council peers across the district. MPS also holds a monthly meeting for student council members from all high schools.

Last year MPS also created the Office of Black Male Student Achievement (BMA), realizing there was a need in this group of students who were the lowest performing academically. The director of BMA has made it a point to talk to students across the district to get their perspective and feedback on why MPS is not succeeding in educating its Black male students. Henry also has its own respective BMA group. From this BMA group, events were planned to encourage BMA participation and a new BMA Coordinator for Henry was hired. Students met with BMA staff to talk about how the school could better work with this group of students and were assigned a staff mentor. BMA students also did a professional development presentation for Henry staff about how they felt they were being treated in school and ways to improve. Clearly, through Henry's various opportunities for student involvement and our focus on BMA, Henry values a youth's right to education and to his/her right to participate as a citizen in voicing his/her concerns. However, more work still needs to be done to make it consistent.

Some may ask why student voice is so important. Henry was designated as a Reward School by the Minnesota Department of Education (2015) last year, and this year U.S. News and World Report (2015) ranked it as the third best high school in Minnesota. The need for more authentic student voice is not to say Henry is not doing a good job in many arenas. The need for student voice is so we can better continue the good work of Henry and MPS to ensure our students are college and career ready. Being college and career ready means more than performing well academically. It also means knowing how to advocate for oneself

and how to claim one's rights. This needs to be at the forefront of conversations at schools. Doing this work will require a new way of thinking. It is imperative to read and use the framework of Fletcher and Konopka, as well as the UNCRC, to understand that at its core, student voice is about human rights. We, as those in power, are responsible for making sure students know and are accorded their rights, if we truly care about their future.

Again, it is important to note what authentic student voice should look like. Authentic student voice includes meaningful student involvement that makes students an integral part of the school just as the principal is integral to running it. At South High School, there is an Equity and Diversity program coordinator who seems to take on this role of student voice and also leads a student leadership group. Thus, to be more equitable in obtaining student voice, the first step is to require that every school has a staff position that is tasked with student voice, whose primary responsibility in the first year is to gather information. Similar to what the director of the Office of BMA has been doing in his first year, the priority of this person should be to investigate, to gather information and take an inventory of student voice by asking some key questions:

1. Where are spaces for student voice?
2. How is student voice used within those spaces?
3. Is the school seeking out student voice? If so, where and how? If not, why not?

After answering these questions and more, it is vital to gather the whole student perspective. For instance, those who do not usually speak up or are not successful academically in school must also be included. This must be purposeful and executed with clear intention. It cannot be just another survey that gets lost in a pile among the dozens given to students. The ultimate goal would be to create a student-led group with this new staff position where student voice is regularly sought out and expected when it comes to school policies, much like Henry's BMA group, where students are regularly consulted and respected for their expertise and experiences. The goal would be that student voice becomes integrated in the school system seamlessly, that no matter the change in leadership, it remains in place. Thus, it will take time and patience, trial and error. More importantly, as a student from the MYC said, "it has to be legit-- students want[ing] to do it" (Personal communication, Minneapolis Youth Congress, April 2, 2015).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NOU VANG is the first to graduate college in her family. Education was important to Nou and led her to serve as an AmeriCorps member with College Possible fresh out of college. That experience introduced her to the field of youth work and college readiness, paving the way for her to be where she is today, helping youth reach their full potential through her work as the Achieve!Mpls Career and College Center coordinator.
