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

By Julie Richards

YOUTH WORK AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

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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 Progam 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 Progam 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:

> - *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.*

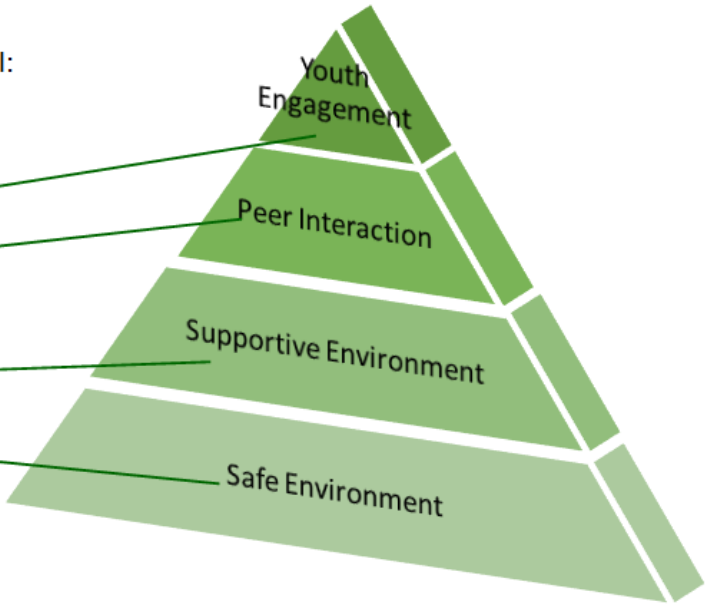
Essentially, the YPQA doesn't measure, or perhaps mis-measures the ability of a program to competently meet the cultural, social and emotional needs of its youth, leaving us with the question: how do I make sure my youth have the ability to authentically create and change a community they imagine?

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 I 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 Manuel 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 Manuel 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.

REFERENCES

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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.	• 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. Appropriate emergency procedures and supplies are present. Program space and furniture accommodate the activities. Healthy food and drinks are provided.	• 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 upon standards of behaviour in the family, school, the community, and the wider world. • Major international instruments that exist to implement the protection of human rights - such as the UNDHR and the UNCRC • 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• The ability to participate in and organize social groups.
Youth have opportunities to act as group facilitators and mentors.	• 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.	• 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.	• The ability to participate in and organize social groups.
Youth have opportunities to make choices based on their interests.	• 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	• 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	• 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	• 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.