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' inabilities 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 "conscientzaçao," 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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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.