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#PassTheMicYouth Multimedia Program: Setting the Stage to Amplify Youth Voices

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Abstract

The #PassTheMicYouth multimedia program is a youth-centered, youth-led podcast and blog that amplifies the voices and lived experiences of young people across social identity groups. Grounded in a positive youth development framework and informed by a critical pedagogical tradition, #PassTheMicYouth shines a spotlight on sociopolitical issues important to young people and provides a platform that supports creativity and candor. Archived podcast episodes and blog posts are accompanied by lesson plans Extension professionals and other educators can use to promote dialogue and critical reflection among youth and adult audiences. This article introduces the #PassTheMicYouth program and examines potential applications for youth-serving professionals.

Keywords: youth voice, positive youth development, youth–adult partnerships

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Introduction

In an increasingly divisive sociopolitical climate, youths recognize that the road to social transformation is frequently paved with hostility and setbacks. Within their communities, young people—especially those who hold marginalized identities—all too often bear the burden of discrimination, violence, unjust police searches, and heightened surveillance, among other experiences (Gonzalez & Kokozos, 2017; Russell, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). Despite these challenges, today's young people are driven by the knowledge that every moment is an opportunity to mobilize, tweet, dialogue, and learn (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016).

Research on positive youth development (PYD) has indicated that young people across social identity groups

thrive when they are connected to their schools and communities and when they feel empowered to leverage their voices to motivate social change (Search Institute, 2018). In particular, personal storytelling can foster connection and self-empowerment for those whose voices are missing from the broader discourse (Rodriguez, 2010). Such stories can provide critical insights regarding the nature of structural oppression and the need to invoke societal change (Ledwith, 2005).

It has long been acknowledged that youths benefit from deep involvement in leadership roles (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Camino, 2005). Less often discussed, however, is the fact that the adults with whom they partner also experience a myriad of benefits, including increased commitment and energy, improved effectiveness and confidence in working with youths, increased positive perceptions of youths, a more comprehensive understanding of young people's concerns, and a greater connection to youths in their communities (Flage, Vettern, Schmidt, & Eighmy, 2010).

A PYD approach to youth development grounded in positive youth–adult partnerships is at the core of Extension. Missing from the PYD framework, however, is a critical understanding of the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on youths' development. Given the rise in hate crimes (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018) and an increasingly diverse population, Extension professionals should be equipped with the knowledge and resources to cultivate critical reflection and center social justice in their work. To heed this call for youth-centered, youth-led critically conscious programming, we created #PassTheMicYouth.

Program Description

Grounded in a PYD framework (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003) and informed by a critical pedagogical approach (Freire, 1970), #PassTheMicYouth is a podcast and blog intended to amplify youth voices, shine a spotlight on youth activism, and provide educators, including Extension professionals, with resources to develop critical consciousness and youth voice. Hosted and produced by three university students, two of whom are on our author team, each podcast episode focuses on a social issue and features an interview with a young activist followed by a youth-submitted contribution such as original music, a personal essay, or a poem.

Further, #PassTheMicYouth can be leveraged pedagogically to afford youths the opportunity to learn from the young trailblazers who are changing their communities or to submit their own contributions. Archived podcasts and blog articles are available on the #PassTheMicYouth website and are accompanied by discussion questions Extension professionals and other educators can use to generate further dialogue. The website also features curricula and resources for fostering self-reflection, personal storytelling skills, and a critical understanding of social justice issues. To move youths from awareness and analysis to collaborative action, the #PassTheMicYouth team and collaborating educators host events to encourage youths to share their contributions in public settings, thereby allowing them to both raise awareness about social issues and build coalitions to motivate change.

Dissemination

The innately collaborative structure of #PassTheMicYouth facilitates dissemination and outreach efforts. For instance, we partnered with a high school to gather submissions as part of a classroom project on civic engagement. Additional calls for submissions are marketed to schools and Extension agents as well as youth-serving organizations, such as 4-H and Juntos. We have presented our program at Extension conferences,

including 4-H Congress, and we provide training opportunities for youth-serving professionals. Further, our resource-heavy website and active social media presence expand the ways in which #PassTheMicYouth is disseminated, facilitating wide-reaching impact.

Impact

Experts in the areas of social justice education, youth development, and leadership education created #PassTheMicYouth. All related documents were reviewed by young leaders, educators, and youth development experts nationwide; their feedback was considered and integrated before the program officially launched. Formal evaluation of the program is forthcoming.

By calling on youth-serving professionals to focus on critical consciousness and youth voice, #PassTheMicYouth enables the development of more connected, meaningful, and inclusive youth–adult partnerships, prompting a greater sense of belonging among all the young people they serve. For example, one of our authors is currently using #PassTheMicYouth to collect stories from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youths with whom he works, a project the youths have found both affirming and empowering as they move from self-reflection to collective action. Such a dynamic also provides the opportunity for adults to become more critically self-aware and committed and to develop a deeper understanding of the issues facing young people.

The initial response to #PassTheMicYouth underscores the benefit of youth-centered, youth-led efforts to engage the public in conversations surrounding the influence youths can have in their communities and the significance of the issues on which they choose to lead. Young people have expressed an eagerness to learn about the work their peers engage in and the ways they represent themselves in social justice work within and across diverse communities.

Applications for Extension Professionals

Whether incorporated into a traditional classroom setting or used within an organization, #PassTheMicYouth provides opportunities for educators to work with youths to facilitate their (a) understanding the value of their own voices and lived experiences; (b) learning about social issues through the lens of youth leaders; (c) interacting with relevant issues through a variety of multimedia platforms; (d) unpacking and developing critical consciousness, including an understanding of the complexity of identity within an unequal social system; and (e) engaging in collective action to improve their communities. In addition, #PassTheMicYouth content can be applied in capacity-building workshops with youth-serving professionals to foster greater understanding of young people's needs and experiences and to facilitate best practices for working with young people across social identity groups. Additional information about #PassTheMicYouth is available at www.passthemicyouth.com.

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