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Youth-Led Community Building: Promising Practices from Two Communities Using Community-Based Service-Learning

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Abstract

Little research exists about how youth voice and engagement in community building can be successfully implemented. This article discusses promising practices from an evaluation study of community-based service-learning, sponsored by 4-H/Youth Development. The practices are those that the programs used to promote youth and engagement and voice while also providing service in the form of community building to the communities. The data indicate that youth can lead community building. Implications for Extension include offering guidance on youth-led, asset-based community building, offering an additional model of service-learning, and offering a broad framework for documentation and evaluation to help explain such work.

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Introduction

There is recent widespread support for youth engagement in communities (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Youth engagement is predicated on the notion that youth have assets and are therefore capable of making meaningful contributions to their organizations and communities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Youth engagement is also predicated on the notion that youth voice is a necessary component of engagement (Lansdown, 2001).

Research highlights the importance of youth engagement and voice. In 60 neighborhood-based organizations examined over 5 years, youth voice--or involving youth in decisions, problem solving, and program planning--was found to be important in fostering positive youth development (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). Similarly, resiliency research indicates that opportunities for meaningful participation in communities--problem solving, goal setting, and planning--are major protective factors that help youth withstand the negative impacts of neglect, poverty, and other problems (Benson, 1997; Werner, 1990).

Service-learning, especially community-based service-learning (CBSL), has become a major pathway for supporting youth engagement and voice in communities (Claus & Ogden, 1999). The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 expanded funding for service-learning programs, creating the Learn and Serve America program. The Learn and Serve program is divided into school and community-based divisions. CBSL is operated through community organizations, not schools. As such, CBSL is limited neither to particular academic foci, nor scholastic calendars (Bailus & Lewis, 2003). CBSL thus provides a broad context for youth engagement in communities.

While the research studies cited above show the importance of examining outcomes related to youth engagement and voice, it is equally important to determine successful practices to understand how such outcomes can be achieved. Addressing the question of how youth voice and engagement are undertaken has been under-examined, however. Critical syntheses of the youth engagement literature note a gap in such research (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). The service-learning research literature contains a similar gap. Although many service-learning programs now seek to promote civic engagement and to incorporate youth empowerment and voice into programming, there is a paucity of implementation information in service-learning research (Billig & Eyler, 2003).

The purpose of the research discussed here was to examine the practices that two Extension-sponsored CBSL programs used to promote youth engagement and voice while providing service to the community. The illumination of such practices is important to Extension educators and leaders because it assists in implementing, improving, or adjusting programming in youth engagement. For 4-H educators, particularly, it is useful to know what practices they can use both for the long-term benefit of youth and the community.

Background and Methodology

The findings discussed here are derived from evaluation research of the Youth-Led Service-Learning for Community Change Initiative. The initiative was a demonstration, implemented with a grant from Learn and Serve America, Corporation for National and Community Service. An overall aim was to learn, document, and evaluate strategies through which 4-H/Youth Development can engage community residents in community building led by youth and in understanding the outcomes that result from such strategies. The 3 1/2-year initiative was sponsored by a partnership between the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development and National 4-H Council. The initiative was administered locally through Cooperative Extension, 4-H/Youth Development in Oxford Hills, Maine, and in Upton community in Baltimore, Maryland.

Oxford Hills is a cluster of eight towns located in rural Oxford County in western Maine. The population is 20,000, of which 95% are of European-American descent. Average per capita income in the county is \$17,323. The service-learning team, the Respect Team, engaged approximately 25 cross-grade, high-school-age youth during any one year.

Upton community is located in Baltimore, Maryland, and is one of the oldest communities in which African Americans settled in the city. The population is 6,589, of which 99% are African American. Median household income is \$12,861. The team, the New Upton Group, had 15 youth, middle- and high-school-aged, participating during any one year. Both teams led and mobilized hundreds of community youth and adults in community building over the course of the initiative.

The initiative was grounded in principles of community building. Community building is an approach to prevention that typically involves grassroots democracy, self-determination, bottom-up planning and implementation, and resident empowerment (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Minkler, 1997). It is assumed that when diverse people from the community are involved in decision-making, then it becomes possible for residents and stakeholders to improve their capacity to achieve collective vision and goals, and readiness to respond to opportunities and challenges (Mattessich & Monsey, 1997). In the case of the demonstration initiative reported here, the goal was to bring together youth and adult residents, two groups that do not typically work together in community building (Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

The cross-site evaluation took place over 2 1/2 years and addressed several key questions, including:

- What outcomes were fostered among the service-learners?
- What impacts did the activities of the service-learners bring about in the communities?
- What practices proved promising in enabling the service-learners to engage their voices, and lead youth and adults in community building?

This article addresses the last question; findings on the first two questions are reported elsewhere (Camino & Payne-Jackson, in press). The overall methodology for the cross-site evaluation was the multiple case study. This is a standard research and evaluation method for explaining complex community programs and for examining contemporary events where behaviors cannot be manipulated by the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1984).

Another strength of case studies is the use of multiple sources of data to maximize validity (Patton, 1990). Data sources for this study included four site visits to each community, observation of activities and events, document review, monthly conference calls with the Extension educators in each community, 11 focus group interviews with the service-learners, and 20 individual in-depth interviews with Extension educators and community youth and adults.

Promising practices were identified through an iterative process. As the 4-H educators and teams discovered through their community work that a given practice seemed to work, it became a focus for further inquiry. That inquiry included linking the practice to outcomes, as well as to published descriptions in the community-building literature. This strategy is consistent with that urged by Patton. In a recent critique of the concepts of "best practices" and "lessons learned," he (2001) argues that rigor and confidence increase when a practice is supported by multiple and triangulated data sources, including observation, interview, program document review, and the wisdom and experience of practitioners and expert opinion contained in published sources. In the present study, triangulation included the sources noted above, as well as corroboration of practices across the two sites.

All data were maintained in detailed transcripts. Reliability was maintained through the construction of data collection protocols. The protocols were designed to elicit detailed answers to the key study questions, while also allowing for individuals to raise new research avenues and for

context-appropriate probes by the researchers. The data were coded and analyzed independently by the author and another experienced researcher to guard against bias and to strengthen validity and reliability. In addition, informant checks, another method to check validity, were employed (Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1990).

Results

The promising practices enabling the service-learning teams to engage their voices, and lead youth and adults in community building were:

- Create a core leadership team and train youth in leadership and community facilitation methods;
- Develop widespread participation, and use an asset-based community approach; and
- Use reflection not only for service-learners, but also for community youth and adults.

Create a Core Leadership Team and Train Youth in Leadership and Community Facilitation Methods

Literature on community building emphasizes the necessity of engaging wide segments of the community (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997; Wates, 2000). Crucial is creating a core group, which takes responsibility for moving an initiative along (Minkler, 1997). For youth, providing incentives to sustain involvement is important in fostering civic engagement (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002).

In Oxford Hills, there was one adult, and in Upton two adults, in addition to the 4-H Youth educators, who helped guide and coach youth. Both youth and their adult coaches recognized the importance of creating teams. This was because the service-learning was directed toward long-term community building, rather than focused on short-term, discrete projects. Because the expectation for involvement was at least 6 months, but more commonly for a year or longer, there was also recognition of the need to employ incentives.

In Upton, initial incentives included logging service hours (72 hours of community service is required for high school graduation in Maryland), stipends, and the promise of learning new skills. However, the young people reported that after participating in the team for a few months, their motivations expanded to include the intrinsic rewards of doing community-building work. For example, the New Upton Group youth initially joined because of the chance to fulfill service hours, but then became excited by learning about the little-known history of Upton as a distinctive community that nurtured African American culture, arts, and leaders. The youth were also inspired by opportunities to be part of positive community-wide change. The team in Oxford Hills was similarly motivated by discovering community assets and to learn and exercise leadership for the common good.

Successful community building also involves developing local leaders who are able to gain self-understanding, as well as facilitation and community-building skills (Mattesich & Monsey, 1997). As residents learn leadership skills, their ability to lift their voices for the common good is enhanced. In Oxford Hills and Upton, youth were trained in relevant skills, including leading and facilitating discussions, public speaking, problem solving, conflict resolution, and community event planning.

Youth also learned to routinely assess their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and to give and take constructive criticism from teammates. In particular, youth learned to recognize the difference between their personal wants and needs, and those of the community. This was important because the community-building work necessitated that youth lead the community, which meant including diverse groups and voices of youth and adults, and helping them come to consensus in decisions.

Develop Widespread Participation, and Use an Asset-Based Community Approach

A fundamental premise of asset-based, long-term community building is that building partnerships with multiple organizations and groups yields greater likelihood of effectiveness and sustainability (McKnight, 1995; Morris, Pomery, & Murray, 2002). The teams developed several means by which to connect with, and involve, diverse groups.

The Respect Team in Oxford Hills used three primary strategies:

- Planning and leading an annual Respect Week,
- Delivering character education training to elementary schools, and
- Planning and leading an annual Community Summit.

Respect Week consisted of speaker presentations and workshops on 5 consecutive days for students and faculty of the local high school that served eight local towns. Community children, youth, and adults were also invited. Topics included diversity, social responsibility, and the

consequences of bullying and violence. Speakers represented national, regional, and local leaders.

The team also facilitated workshops on character education for elementary-school-aged children in several local schools. The youth based their training on the nationally developed curricula, but they also innovated by tailoring modules and/or creating new training materials and processes.

The annual Community Summit was a day-long event during which youth and adults discussed topics and issues related to youth and the community, and then outlined actions they would like to see occur within the next year. Examples included creating a cafe for youth and adults, engaging youth on the school board and other local civic boards, and establishing a teen hotline.

The New Upton Group in Baltimore also used three primary tactics:

- Planning and leading a Community Youth Speak-Out,
- Connecting with Upton's Planning Committee, and
- Integrating into a long-term community development process.

The Community Youth Speak-Out was a day-long meeting of youth and adult residents and representatives from various organizations. The purposes were to network, obtain youth views on community development, and develop common understanding of what community youth were doing related to service-learning.

The Upton community has a Planning Committee that has been active for many years. The committee is an umbrella organization for many organizations, institutions, and associations in the community. The New Upton Group connected with the committee, and a rotating subgroup of the team attended meetings to advise the committee and participate in decision-making processes. It was the first time youth had ever served on the committee. The team also integrated into and contributed to the community's 5-year Master Planning process for comprehensive community development.

Both teams also focused on community assets by conducting community asset mapping. Asset mapping (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1997) provides widespread understanding of a number of community contexts, such as geographic layout, history, and human resources. In Upton, the team completed a photographic survey, interviews with residents on talents and skills they would be willing to teach or share with others, and research on the community's history. The team in Oxford Hills identified natural features in the area, pathways, and meeting places that could serve as resources for community building and development.

Asset mapping enabled the youth to increase their own civic understanding of the communities' historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and geographic resources. Armed with such knowledge, youth were able to speak with authority in public forums and meetings. The youth also shared their maps and results with other community groups. This contributed to the success of the teams in changing community adult attitudes from viewing youth as current or potential problems to seeing youth as responsible, knowledgeable, and contributing individuals. Finally, asset mapping formed a basis from which the youth were able to lead community involvement. Youth led various community groups in asset mapping as way to include diverse perspectives, and to facilitate community members' first-hand learning of assets and resources.

Use Reflection Not Only for Service-Learners, But Also for Community Youth and Adults

A feature of service-learning distinguishing it from community service is the emphasis on reflection (Eyler, 2001; Stafford, Boyd, & Lindner, 2003). Reflection helps individuals connect their experiences with learning. Reflection has traditionally been used in many 4-H activities, so the importance of reflection was not new to the Extension educators who supported the teams. Both teams employed several options for reflection, such as journal writing, discussion, and making videotapes.

What was new, however, was that the youth led reflection sessions among community youth and adults. The youth routinely led sessions after the community activities they implemented. The youth used a framework of questions aimed at promoting reflection on thought, feeling, and action-oriented levels (Stanfield, 1997). These reflections provided a space and framework for honest dialog through which community youth and adults were able to further learn about and from each other. As Tirozzi & Uro (1997) note, opportunities for purposeful and respectful listening and dialogue are associated with enhanced understanding and positive relationships. This is a hallmark of successful community building (Freire, 1983; Minkler, 1997).

Conclusions and Implications for Extension

These promising practices demonstrate that youth, not only adults, can lead community-building work. Virtually all of the literature on community building, however, is focused on and reflects, the efforts of adults, with scarce reference to youth. Specifically, efforts aimed at involving youth to focus primarily on community building are relatively few, for youth service and service-learning activities are dominated by charity and short-term project models involving discrete tasks (Kahn &

Westheimer, 1999; Morton, 1995).

Looking across the promising practices, it is interesting to note similarity to ones emerging from the research by the Search Institute about assets that youth need for positive development (Benson, 1997). These include support from the community, empowerment, commitment to learning, and engagement in planning and decision making. The experience of the service-learning teams in this demonstration expands the Search Institute findings by highlighting that youth cannot only benefit from such practices, but can themselves follow the practices to promote positive community building.

The practices described here also highlight that in community building, learning is not just learning for the sake of youth; all in the community can become learners. Residents learned about their communities through asset mapping activities and reflection sessions led by youth. The vehicle for the youth to do this, CBSL, focused on community building that aimed to promote broad critical learning about the community, including the contexts of history, culture, economics, and politics.

There are several implications for Extension. First, these findings can offer guidance on how to help youth discover and lift their voices in civic work. Second, CBSL can offer another model and set of practices for 4-H to complement community service and traditional service-learning models (Stafford, Boyd, & Lindner, 2003). Just as positive youth development is built on assumptions of youth assets rather than deficits, youth-led CBSL can help others in the community develop their capacities and resources, based on collective assets. Third, this study indicates a funding source. Specifically, the Learn and Serve American Program, Corporation for National and Community Service has a dedicated funding stream for CBSL, which can be tapped by Extension.

Finally, the practices discussed here may also serve as a framework for documentation and evaluation. Such a framework can be useful in explaining to county legislators and other constituencies the multiple benefits and strategies of community building, thus adding another source of clarification and accountability for the important work of 4-H.

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