

The youth development movement represents a broad trend toward promoting opportunity and resilience over preventing delinquency and failure. While the topic of youth leadership is clearly relevant to this movement, the connection between the two topics remains for the most part unexplored and undefined. With this chapter we examine the ways that youth leadership connects to the much broader context of the youth development movement.

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Youth leadership and youth development: Connections and questions

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WEBSTER'S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY defines a leader as "one who has commanding authority or influence; one able to direct the operations, activity, or performance," and states that the role of leader provides "a margin of advantage or superiority." The dictionary is a good place to begin, because leadership is a quality that few people can define. While many of us can name leaders, both good and bad, we may be hard-pressed to describe what good leaders have in common with each other. That is not unlike youth development, which most people struggle to define but can easily give an example of a program or organization they support, even if they cannot tell you what good programs have in common.



Ambiguous concepts

Both these concepts are laden with values about essential components, about who possesses “expert” knowledge and where to get accurate information related to basic ideas. This characterization is further complicated by other ambiguous concepts often confused with youth development and leadership, such as citizenship and character development. If we analyze leader development, we will find there is general agreement that successful leaders are defined by knowledge, competency, and character. If we parse those terms even finer, we focus on the tools of leadership, such as reflexive learning, communication, decision making, self-discipline, and other skills that, when combined, make effective action possible. It seems implicit in the term “leader” that abilities that aid in engaging others—motivating, managing conflict, and so forth—would be requirements as well. Few would disagree that leaders also require “character capacity,” or an understanding of the difference between right and wrong, and the courage to do what is right.

It is easy to become convinced that, whether we are developing leaders or developing youth, intentions and actions should be the same because both have many overlapping aims and the differences may be revealed only when we focus at more than a superficial level. In the field of youth development, just as with youth leadership, it is generally understood that programs are designed to build a set of core competencies needed to participate successfully in adolescent and adult life. However, a notable and more important focus in youth development is to design programs to meet the developmental needs of youth.

What do we mean by youth development?

With youth, it is easy to pay direct attention to the changes that can be seen; in other words, their growth. It is easy to recognize these changes, such as spurts in height or weight, and the accompanying needs, such as longer pants or bigger shoes. While growth is a critical issue, in youth development we try to understand and

pay attention to the needs that accompany *development*. What is the difference?

Quantity or quality?

Think of picking two apples. Both have grown equally, so their weights and circumferences (quantities) are the same. These two apples have similar growth but they taste and look very different. One apple is pale green, the other is a rosy red. The red apple did not grow more than the green apple; it simply ripened. This ripening, or maturation, is what development is all about. With youth development, the concern is with that which changes the *quality* of something—be it a muscle, a cognition, or an emotion.

We can measure and document growth easily; we have all stood on the scales or had our height marked on a door frame. These tangible indicators allow us to document factors that lead to and impede growth, but with development it is much more difficult. In the same way that we may not realize the importance a bee has in producing a ripe apple, we may miss the importance of contributors to the development of our youth. All youth will seek to develop fully, just as all apples would fully ripen given the right conditions. Whether we support them or not, youth will seek to meet their developmental needs, build skill sets and values, and use their skills, talents, energies, and time in self-gratifying and self-empowering ways.¹ It is easy to think that, without adult aid, young people would not be able to meet their own needs or develop skills and values, but the truth is that even very young children will create a framework of values and develop skills to manage daily life with or without adult aid. The question is: What kind of values and skills? Are the values and skills ultimately self-destructive or helpful in the life of that youth? Once we understand this part of human nature, we understand what motivates behavior and can begin to recognize unmet needs.

Focus on developmental needs

Youth development focuses on developmental needs and there is general recognition of two basic types: those that can be met and fulfilled, often referred to as *deficit* needs, and those that persist as a

continuing driving force in our lives, the *being* needs.² To appreciate youth development completely, one must understand that higher needs, the being needs, matter only after all the basic needs have been met. In other words, the kinds of information and experiences that individuals seek at different points in their development will be determined by their unmet needs. Individuals for whom safety and belonging needs have not been met seek only experiences and information that will meet their basic needs for survival and connection. Information or experiences that are not directly connected to helping this individual meet his or her needs in a short time are irrelevant, no matter how attractive we might make them. For those whose unmet needs are at the being level, the focus is on experiences that create the opportunity to feel competent, powerful, and ultimately that their lives have meaning.

What makes the focus on developmental needs compelling is the understanding that if youth are not given positive outlets they may find potentially damaging alternatives. Youth may seek to belong through attention-seeking, promiscuous, or clinging behaviors. Youth with no productive opportunities for establishing their own competency can give up and avoid risk because it is easier not to try than to try and fail. And in a society where to be respected is to have power, winning respect through aggressive techniques is immensely important when there is so little power to be had.³

Some things cannot be taught

A rapidly changing society and a decreasing sense of community have reduced opportunities for many youth to receive the support necessary to become self-sufficient. Consequently, youth development focuses on the whole person within his or her context and not simply on one issue or problem or one set of skills. As a result, the outcomes of youth development are based on experiences and include complex dynamics, such as the development of character, citizenship, and leadership—things that cannot be taught didactically. This idea that some things cannot be taught but must be learned through experience is a key element of youth development. Development is supported through involvement with people or

places that offer intellectual, spiritual, and emotional nurturing. The goal of youth development is to foster the maturity of individuals through experiences with people and activities that are both challenging and supportive.

The vision for youth development

Much of what we think of as youth development began with the vision of learning espoused by John Dewey. For Dewey, it was vitally important that education be not just the teaching of facts but the full integration of the skills and knowledge that youth have learned into their lives as citizens and human beings.⁴ Dewey saw learning as a result of the interaction between youth and their environment, which meant that the experience was different for each individual, as it combined the new learning with previous learning and capacity.

Psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasized not only the interactional nature of learning but also the importance of relationships with others for learning to be most effective.⁵ What makes Vygotsky's theory relevant to youth development is the idea that instruction is most efficient when there are others who can assist in determining the correct balance of challenge and support. These others organize support to help learners complete a task near the upper end of their ability, or in the "zone of proximal development," as Vygotsky called it. In addition, they must then systematically withdraw this support as the learner moves to higher levels of ability.

A third major idea at the core of youth development is Bandura's social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors and attitudes of others.⁶ Instruction works best by modeling desired behaviors of value to learners and by providing situations that allow learners to use or practice that behavior to improve retention.

These are basic ideas of youth development: some things cannot be taught but must be learned through experience, experiences are transformed by the individuals who participate in them, development occurs when a person is at a level that she or he can only achieve with help from another person, and we can learn from

observing others and their actions. By putting these ideas into practice, youth development creates opportunities for youth to meet their developmental needs in productive ways. As a result, youth development approaches consider the *whole* young person as a central actor in his or her own development. With its focus on environments and opportunities, youth development is dependent on others as it occurs in the context of the family, community, and society. Finally, youth development is designed to focus on the positive outcomes we desire for all young people, such as becoming economically self-sufficient, remaining mentally and physically healthy, developing caring and cooperative relationships, and becoming a responsible member of and contributor to the community.

Leadership: One potential outcome

Just about every day, a youth walks into an organization and experiences a curriculum that has the intention of cultivating them as leaders. Whether or not that is the actual outcome is a discussion for later. While no one has suggested turning over the entire effort of the youth development field to the purpose of developing leaders, the distinction between the two endeavors is often blurred, which, coupled with the values of our culture, can create a pattern of efforts that favor young leaders and programs that focus on developing youth leaders and not primarily on developing youth. Is there anything wrong with that?

Opportunities for youth to experience independence and autonomy and to extend their influence are important elements of youth development, but they are not the primary elements, just as leadership is one potential outcome of youth development but not the only potential outcome. By confusing leadership and youth development, we force youth leadership programs to reside within the egalitarian mandate of the broader youth development field. This forces youth leadership to be seen through a lens that insists that nearly everyone can be a leader and that leadership abilities are distributed equally among various talent areas. This assumption contributes to leadership programs being watered down to the

point that we have difficulty defining what leadership is and what these programs should offer. It also denies that some youth truly have the skills, talent, and character to be *exceptional* leaders.

Many people will argue that all youth *do* have the potential to be leaders, and one of the great myths of our society is that anyone who wields any influence is already a leader. While influence is one of the important constructs of effective leadership, it hardly contains the sum of leadership, no matter how much we might wish it. Leadership requires influence but it also requires substantial vision and some level of authority, whether formal or informal. Without any authority, there is no recognition from those who might be followers, and without that there is no leadership. However, the illusion that any and all teenagers could be leaders seems like a good thing to people who are uncomfortable with the reality that abilities are not equally distributed and that illusion is what generates a willingness to fund those programs eager to respond to it.

Issues in youth leadership

Youth leadership is the involvement of youth in responsible, challenging action that meets genuine needs, with opportunities for planning and decision making. For the most part, our culture places youth in powerless situations with no meaningful role other than as consumers. In addition, many adults do not understand that their role is not to mold participants in their programs but to provide tools and opportunities for youth to discover their unique spirit, genius, and public life.⁷ This type of practice has not been modeled effectively, nor is it often valued. Well-intentioned adults often play the expert and re-create the power relations that keep youth in the role of consumer. If an adult is oriented toward serving as an expert, rather than facilitating the construction of knowledge, it does not seem likely that they will work effectively in partnership with youth.

Furthermore, there is often a disconnect between efforts at youth leadership education and the needs of today's youth. Too frequently, didactic methods are employed to teach an assortment of

skills related to leadership in isolation from an experience of real influence or without being cast within issues related to authentic youth concerns. The idea of leadership as a developmental, lifelong trait that transcends day-to-day achievements has been replaced with a set of abilities. When this happens, we relegate leadership to a position of commodity to be displayed rather than as the unique state of mind and being it really is. It is true that the skills can be taught, but the accumulation of skills does not necessarily equal leadership. Leadership consists of skills, experiences, needs, and motivations and is a long and cumulative effort, not the single act of one individual who may serve as a catalyst for action. Although leadership typically resides in an individual, it is an effort far greater than the individual who fills the role. The cultivation of effective leadership requires the “calculated epiphany” that can occur through experiences that create the balance of challenge and support necessary to sustain influence.

When programs do generate leadership experiences to complement skill building, it is often hard to find the balance between actively engaging youth at their experience level and overwhelming them with too much responsibility. This difficult balance, what Vygotsky would have called an incorrect assessment of the zone of proximal development for youth leaders, can result in either youth with artificial status and no real power or youth burdened by responsibility that has no context within their former experience. As youth leaders struggle with these issues, reliance on adults can result in a lessened commitment and accountability from youth or the imposition of agendas from the adults. Finding that balance is more difficult than most experts in youth development initially imagined and embroils us in debates over what we are fostering—youth empowerment or youth partnership with adults. Youth empowerment suggests handing both the power and responsibility completely to youth, who are often unprepared for its reality. This autonomy is often nothing more than abandonment by adults who are unsure how to partner effectively with young leaders.

This becomes even more complicated when we consider the short leadership cycles in most youth groups, with the result being a loss of organizational capital (goal momentum and institutional memory). The continuous change in leadership, often on an annual basis, leads to a duplication of past projects and problems without the advantage of experience. Without the advantage of experience (which clearly benefits leadership), a strong new leader, armed with the skills of leadership and emerging talents, can easily succumb to the tendency to allow everything to be handled and executed by a small number of people. Not only is this discouraging to the group members (the other youth one hopes to lead), but it can also lead to a vacuum at the top when the leadership changes. The end result is a weakening of the capacity of youth leadership to sustain itself.

Our failure to conceptualize youth leaders outside an adult model of leadership is further evident in our selection processes for youth leaders. Do youth leaders represent their constituencies or the adults who empower them? “High-achieving,” middle-class youth are often overrepresented among youth leaders, even in the leadership of groups intended to focus on at-risk youth. Often, successful youth organizations are elite driven, as they attract into leadership involved and achieving youth, who typically come from the more educated and included groups and reflect only a small segment of the total youth population. Should we not be worried about the gap between the youth affected by decisions being made and the youth making those decisions?

Of course, the issue of who gets to lead illustrates the broader challenges in developing or expanding effective programs for youth. Here, a different elitism, not tied to talent or ability but to who has access, has emerged. To have the opportunity of youth leadership, one must first participate, and the reality is that programs must be attractive and relevant to target audiences. In addition, income, race, and gender influence who participates, and youth from low-income communities—rural or urban—are least likely to be offered consistent support or a wide array of opportunities.⁸

It is far too easy to limit the power of youth by casting them solely as the “leaders of tomorrow.” This rhetoric of the future means they can be excluded from the leadership of today. There is comfort for adults in perceiving youth only as leaders in incubation, particularly when we are unsure of the optimal balance of power and support. One of the great barriers to cultivating leadership among youth is the treatment of them solely as the “next generation.” As a result, youth often fail to see themselves as actors in decision-making processes today.

Understanding youth leadership

As we define what youth leadership really is, it is instructive to view it as one potential outcome of youth development—an outcome that shares overlapping goals, values, and ideas with youth citizenship and character development—but that does not make leadership and development the same concept. It is heartening to understand that youth development can strengthen all three qualities shared with youth leadership, but that should not convince us to use the terms interchangeably, apply efforts toward each universally, or believe that one type of experience will affect them all equally. And while leadership is as fraught with our values and esteem as is character development, there is a difference between those outcomes we hope to build for *all* youth, such as character and citizenship, and those we recognize as being unique to individual youth, such as scientific inquisitiveness, musical talent, or exceptional leadership.

Just understanding youth leadership in these terms helps us to tie the concepts of best practices to the central ideas of quality youth development. To be effective, youth leadership efforts must focus on creating environments in which youth matter and are part of a supportive group that knows them well enough to recognize the optimal zone where they can achieve more only with help from other people—environments where youth skill development is

encouraged through hands-on participation and by recognizing that experiences are transformed by the youth who participate in them. These environments must also involve caring adults who willingly allow youth to learn from observing their actions and who engage in actions worthy of being emulated. Leadership is one potential outcome of youth development, and positive developmental opportunities can help aspiring leaders to gain the experience that will propel them toward becoming exceptional leaders, just as historically we recognized the importance of apprenticeships in the preparation of journeymen and masters.

First, this understanding suggests that we must conceptualize youth leaders in different ways than we conceptualize adult leaders. Our inability to do so dooms youth leaders to failure for a couple of reasons: the more dependent role youth have in our culture—primarily as consumers of programs, ideas, and knowledge—and the short span of time most youth possess their leadership roles. Forcing youth to lead within traditional ideas of adult leadership tied to experience, authority, and adult concerns has the potential to create self-fulfilling prophecies for those who doubt youth's ability to lead. In addition, addressing this concern through attempts to strengthen youth power rather than through participation creates an artificial dynamic that often highlights the weaknesses of youth leaders rather than their strengths.

Second, identification of leadership potential among youth is another step toward meeting the needs of young leaders in productive ways. Many who work in the youth development field already recognize youth who naturally gravitate toward leadership roles, but little work has gone into tools to assess both capacity and achievement that would allow us to nurture leadership traits most effectively. This type of assessment could help to clarify the types of experiences a youth is ready for and the support still needed.

Finally, more research is needed to understand the different types of youth participation and how these ideas relate to and foster youth leadership by pursuing developmentally appropriate strategies for involving youth with adults in significant leadership.

Notes

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