Youth Work as a Contested Terrain: Perspectives from Youth Workers in African American Communities – Pilot Study

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Introduction

Current literature surrounding youth work has increasingly developed over the past ten years but there still seems to be unexplored territory. In fact scholars have found some evidence that youth service can be detrimental to healthy development of Black youth. Few sources have been written that focus on Black youth and skills youth workers need in order to support their healthy development. Scholars such as Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) have suggested that a Social Justice Youth Development Model was the best approach to use when working with Black youth. This research was an initial look into the lived experience of youth workers in the Twin Cities and how they work with youth of color and provide a basic understanding of working with Black youth.

Methods

**Participants:** Criteria for selecting youth workers 1) Current youth worker in the Twin Cities community 2) Work with African American youth

**Characteristics:**
- Ages from 20-45
- Education level ranges from High School to College Graduate
- Experience with youth: Ranged from 2.5-26 years
- Jobs include: Recreation Leader, Service Learning Coordinator, Probation Officer Assistant, Program Leader, Active Mentor

**Method:**
- This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with adult youth workers
- Extensive notes taken during interviews were main data source
- Purposeful sample strategy and thematic data analysis

Results

- Effective work begins with understanding each unique young person
- Primary focus on expanding and exposing young people to new opportunities and possibilities
- Primary strategy is on involving young people in decision making, program planning, and implementation

Discussion

Interviewees described youth work as both focusing on the individual and a decontextualized activity. This finding correlates with Yowell and Gordon (1996) research on the iatrogenic condition: the lack of collaboration with social institutions in African American youths’ lives.

Examinining these findings through a Social Justice Youth Development lens, few programs support all of the stages of self, community, and global which are argued by Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) as essential in the healthy development of Black youth.

Future Research

- Conducting additional interviews outside of the Twin Cities including rural areas working with African American youth
- Comparison of youth worker perspectives along different spectrums (race, gender, background, education level)

Limitations

- Not to be generalized outside of youth workers interviewed
- Purposeful and small sample of youth workers with African American youth
- One technique used – Interviews (both face-to-face and phone) were the primary data collection process

Research Questions

- What are the lived experiences of youth workers in the Twin Cities with African American youth?
- Does the Social Justice Youth Development Model provide guidelines for effective youth work in the Twin Cities?

References (Select)


Quotes

“I teach them to be sustainable when I’m not around, I build strong leaders”

“You give yourself to them, they will give themselves to you”

“I would like to start a community center focused on the arts and social consciousness”

“Lift as you climb! Develop a positive relationship and be a tool for your youth”

“I want to allow them to think outside the box and get them out of their environments”

“As you grow, it’s important to keep it simple [as a youth worker]. Have a common goal and keep your youth on track”