

Helping Youth in Underserved Communities Envision Possible Futures: A Youth Development Approach in Practice

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Introduction

Children and youth who reside in impoverished urban neighborhoods must deal with numerous disadvantages that threaten their general health and well-being (Lundberg, 1993; Wilkinson, 1996). These youth are plagued with negative influences often leading to deviant behaviors and a sense of hopelessness rather than healthy futures (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2000). The transition from school to employment for these youth in underserved communities is also difficult due to limited employment opportunities and comprehensive job-related programs (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2000). Studies have revealed that immediately after high school graduation, as many as 15 to 20% of African Americans and Hispanics are unemployed; two years later, the proportion rises to nearly 50% (Fernandez, 1990). These youth are, as a group, statistically less able to overcome career-related problems (Rojewski, 1995).

One way to confront such an apparent imbalance facing underserved youth is through extended day programs, a practice central to the emerging field of youth development (Dewitt Wallace/Readers Digest Fund, 1996; Hughes & Curnan, 2000; McLaughlin, 2000). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1994) reported that nearly 50% of American youth have large amounts of unsupervised time, leading them to experiment with drugs, engage in sex, and automatically turn to violence to resolve conflicts. Several of these programs consequently take place outside the standard school day to take advantage of the relatively large amount of youths' discretionary time.

Extended day programs in the field of youth development aim to replace traditional programs with ones that provide more than just safeguarded, organized, and pleasant opportunities for youth. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (cited in Dewitt Wallace/Readers Digest Fund, 1996) argues the case for positive youth development:

The purpose of a youth development approach is to mature lives, foster self-direction, and generate skills and commitments that enable young people to make positive contribution to society. The primary focus is on developing personal, social, and citizenship competencies and developing youths' connections and commitments to individuals, family, and community (p. 14).

Methods/description

This study provided the creation, implementation, and evaluation of an extended day youth development program specifically designed to empower youth in underserved communities to understand, envision, and facilitate their future decisions. It was developed based on the primary investigator's nine years of direct teaching experience with underserved youth; concepts from the fields of career education, cross-age teaching, and service learning; and the application of the theory of possible selves. Called the "Career Club," this program was an extension of Don Hellison's "Coaching Club," a part of his well-known Responsibility Model (RM) (1995, 2003).

As an extension of RM, the Career Club followed its primary principles, including prioritization of the instructor-student relationship through concern for the emotional, social, and physical well-being of each student. The Career Club was also empowerment-based, providing participants the leadership role of coaching younger students. In addition, the Career Club encouraged participants to become aware, self-evaluate, and set goals with special attention placed on experiences related to the contemplation of possible futures. RM's basic strategies and daily format also provided a structure for the coaches to work with younger students.

The Career Club took place for one and a half hours per week for nine sessions in an inner city elementary school on the near West Side of Chicago. Participants were comprised of 12 seventh and eighth graders who had at least one year of experience in a Coaching Club, which ran consecutively for four years (1998-2002). Assuming that participants were already familiar with Hellison's original concept of "coaching" as a form of empowerment and leadership, the Career Club applied these skills as a platform from which to approach possible futures in a self-selective and self-aware manner. The Career Club extended beyond the Coaching Club's practice of coaching their peers. A group of 20 fourth graders selected by the school's principal and classroom teachers became the seventh and eighth graders' students to provide both a real-world example of a career, which closely resembled coaching as a profession, and the opportunity to contemplate other possible futures.

The Career Club differed from other RM youth programs by empowering youth so that they can explore possible futures for themselves. The Coaching Club, along with other RM structures, have already engaged youth with leadership and service-providing experiences, including ones that may foster skills appropriate to the contemplation of their possible futures. This alternative and innovative program was, however, the first attempt with possible futures as the program's primary emphasis. In fact, many youth participating in RM programs have not transitioned well to the work world, college, or other aspirations viewed as societally acceptable. Such programs consequently have not effectively prepared youth for their future occupations. The Career Club continued the explorations and possibilities addressed by RM structures, attempting to complement their effectiveness.

Two phases were developed, progressing from coaching-as-a-possible-future to individual-future-choices. Phase I involved the dynamics of coaching opportunities for awareness, self-evaluation, and goal-setting. Success could be said to occur when participants felt comfortable with their coaching, and realized a certain measure of coaching skill. Phase II involved a transference in which they could hopefully become aware, self-evaluate, and goal-set in their own career exploration. Success could be said to occur when the participants observed the similarities between coaching responsibilities and those responsibilities required to set goals for possible futures.

Two methodology sections encompassed the creation, implementation, and evaluation of the Career Club: 1) methodology that supports program creation as a form of research, and 2) methodology that supports the Career Club as a case study, including those procedures utilized to study and evaluate this innovative program.

Scialabba (2001) discusses four intellectuals, referred to as "The Metaphysical Club," who can be considered founders of the world of ideas: William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey. They are responsible for the "idea about ideas," and for moving American thought into the modern world.

Applying some of these so-called "pragmatist" concepts, Martinek and Hellison's (1997) service-bonded inquiry offered the notion of "ready-fire-aim," which refers to the practice of implementing a new program idea without working through all the nuances, followed by reflection to fine tune or even significantly change the original plan of action. Such a cycle of reflection, planning, and implementation continues until the modifications become minimal. In retrospect, exactly such an approach aided Career Club implementation. The Career Club was an attempt to create an innovative intervention program for youth in a real life setting, which contributed to the creation of new ideas for RM and career-driven pedagogical research.

Merriam (1988) describes a case study as a way of gaining in-depth understanding from a real life situation, and providing a rich, holistic account of the meaning of those involved. Sanders (1981) writes: "Case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects, and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object" (p. 44). Case studies are intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit of study such as an individual, program, event, group, or community (Stake, 1995). The Career Club is a case study that provided intense descriptive data from the participants and the instructors of the program based on nine sessions. The overall objectives were to discover the program's efficacy, reveal whether this approach contributes to RM, determine if the program is worth continuing in the future, and suggest program improvements based on the results of implementation and analysis.

Patton (1990) advocates utilization of qualitative methods that represent the best match to the intended evaluation. Evidence for the Career Club came from four sources:

- 1) *Documents*: The documents collected for the Career Club included attendance records, kids' weekly journal workbooks, and instructors' journals and notes.
- 2) *Logs*: Three types of logs were recorded including field notes that recorded observed classroom events, and participants' behaviors; study logs that described the strategies and components altered as the study progressed; and diary entries that contained theoretical questions, concerns, and personal comments (Grabber, 1988).
- 3) *Interviews*: The instructors participated in open-ended interviews (Patton, 1990), and the participants participated in a focused interview at the end of the program (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990).
- 4) *Participant observation*: Each instructor filled out a protocol of questions following each session. The protocol was a short list of questions, with space provided for writing unique situations, kid quotes, and other open-ended comments.

Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, and tabulating the process evidence and study outcomes. Unlike statistical analysis, few formulas guided this data analysis phase. Instead, much depended on the primary investigator's own style of rigorous thinking, along with a sufficient presentation of evidence (Stake, 1995). The main goal of the data analysis was to describe the common themes and categories that best portrayed the meanings, perceptions, processes, and outcomes from the instructors and participants.

Results

Determining Career Club effectiveness was based on the various data sources in the formative and summative evaluation by examining the program's two primary goals: 1) the successful sharing of coaching elements (i.e., how well did the participants actually adapt themselves to their role as coaches?), and 2) the successful relating of coaching to their possible futures (i.e., how well did the participants understand the relationship between being a successful coach and being a successful adult?). In other words, effectiveness was determined by how well the participants took to their coaching responsibilities, and the degree to which they succeeded in establishing a relationship between the effectiveness of coaching and the understanding of their possible futures.

Empowering youth to experience and reflect on coaching was a significant Career Club component. Each of the instructors explained how this dynamic was an essential component of the program. According to one instructor, "We could have talked about their futures, but letting them experience a job woke them up." Another instructor further elaborated by stating, "Without it [coaching], they wouldn't have that hands on experience of a specific career...you can talk all you want, but they need to be immersed in a career to understand what it's like." A third instructor thought coaching would resonate within them for a long time because "[coaching] allowed them to see how much hard work is involved." The participants, through the real-world, hands-on experience of coaching, were given the necessary tools to reflect on both the seriousness and the inherent difficulties involved with reaching their future goals.

Although the instructors described coaching as a crucial Career Club component, the participants nonetheless had some unfavorable experiences. One participant explained, "They [the fourth graders] ain't got enough experience...it was just too hard." Another said, "Some of it was irritating...they wasn't doin' what you said." Yet another argued, "The little kids got on my nerves." Each of the instructors interpreted some of the negative coaching experiences, often in the light of their necessity as pedagogical tools. One instructor explained:

"Some sessions they were on top of their game and other times they didn't want to be involved, but the Career Club gave them an opportunity to be exposed to information they don't normally get in elementary school."

In response to some of these early concerns, a one-on-one coaching component was added to the Career Club format in Session Five to lessen the participants' frustrations toward their coaching responsibilities. Each instructor thought this strategy created a more pleasant environment. One instructor stated, "It was just much easier." Another instructor added, "They benefited the most from the one-on-one coaching, it was easier than coaching four or five fourth graders." Even though the participants had some unpleasant experiences with the coaching, they also had many favorable experiences. According to one participant, "It was all fun... I liked that we help them [fourth graders] with some of the things that they need help with."

Several of the participants described actual lessons learned from their coaching experience, and thereby began to bridge the conceptual gap between being successful as a coach, and being successful later in life. One participant realized, "In order for me to get better at stuff I gotta work hard and keep focused, don't ever give up, always believe in myself." Another explained her newly found communication skills, "I got more patience and I can talk up when I feel like it." A third participant explained, "If I speak up more then I'll be helpin' out others and I just like that."

The instructors also described how coaching seemed to work as a medium to help the participants better reflect on their future orientations. One instructor said, "We actually used coaching to get to the career process...they realized that coaching and their careers are both hard work." Another instructor witnessed that "coaching requires skills that can apply to any career and it's a great way to learn people skills." One instructor commented on the program's ability to get the participants to self-reflect, "They had an experience to reflect on how they did, what needs to change, what was good and bad, opposed to just sitting there and talking to them about their futures."

Each of the instructors went on to provide several tangible examples of effective linking between coaching and possible futures. One instructor stated:

"It opened them up to the reality of what they need to do to reach their goals and future careers and that if they are responsible enough and start early they can reach what they are trying to achieve."

Each instructor discussed how the participants began to associate the hard work necessary for coaching with the hard work necessary for career building. One instructor explained, "They realized how hard coaching really was and that they are going to have to work harder than they anticipated." Another instructor stated, "They realized that their dreams are going to be harder than anticipated; they didn't know, you can't blame them."

In order to intensify the link between the coaching component and the understanding of their possible futures, the instructors mentored the participants one-on-one with the concept of procedural knowledge (Yowell, 2000), which was added to the Career Club format in Session Four. This strategy outlined the detailed necessary steps to not only achieve success as coaches, but also to help them conceive of and perhaps even realize their own careers of choice. Breaking down the task of coaching into an exercise in procedural knowledge, the participants were showed as concretely as possible that any and all careers they chose for themselves would entail a similar set of procedural difficulties and opportunities. They needed to be provided not so much with obtuse concepts, but tangible, real-world tasks that directly related to skill sets capable of impacting their lives and life choices. The instructors thought this was a significant contribution to the program in that these more intensive, personal exchanges encouraged the participants to reflect on and help envision their possible futures. One instructor stated, “I liked that they had an opportunity to have the one-on-one mentoring time to discuss their futures and different career paths.” Another instructor described the one-on-one time as “extremely effective in talking about their futures and fill out their workbooks.”

The coaches seemed to learn that coaching proved more difficult than they anticipated, but nonetheless helped them have a better sense of their futures. One participant explained, “Like I see it clearly...I see myself working with a lot of kids.” Another explained, “Coachin’ kids, that’s a big responsibility, having a job is a big responsibility, so it made me think I could do it.” He continued, “It taught us about goals, your journey to what you want to be in life.” Some of the participants described having a better sense of their futures with the help of their newly found skills. One participant elaborated:

“I know my new talents, now I can coach. That makes me open up to new jobs I can get. Cuz a business woman, I didn’t want that until [the instructors] told me I could talk to people, I didn’t think I talked enough, that’s why I didn’t want to become one.”

One participant described the procedural knowledge necessary to reach her professional goals:

“I’m in eighth grade now and I know I gotta work real hard and pay attention and score real high on the tests. Then in high school I gotta work even harder, because it’s gonna be more advanced ...then I go to college and I have to make sure that I work hard and pay attention so that when the test comes to go to law school then I can ace it, then I’ll be in law school. When I get in law school I do the same thing, but it’s only gonna be law questions. And then I take the bar exam, then I’ll become a lawyer.”

Together, the formative and summative evaluation seemed to corroborate that the participants’ coaching performance was, in general, a success. Most of them were able to bridge the gap between coaching and their possible futures, irrespective of whether their session experiences were primarily positive or negative. Offering them the opportunity to experience a specific career and its requisite challenges — in this case, coaching — allowed them to encounter a realistic, self-reflective, existential journey. Some mastered the task at hand, some did not, but all participants seemed to walk away from their Career Club experiences with a better understanding of themselves and their own potentialities.

Discussion/implications

Coaching was merely the chosen vehicle through which the participants could envision possible futures for themselves. Such a highly complex, emotionally interactive, self-actualizing feedback mechanism between coaching and possible futures could only be expressed in a real world, completely grounded environment. This experiential component precluded the participants from dreaming of lofty ideas and romantic accomplishments typically viewed by society as “making it,” without first reminding them of the hard work, determination, and commitment necessarily involved. The Career Club hoped to anchor them in the reality that their own effort, personality, attitude, patience, and intelligence, combined with persistence, would determine what they could realistically achieve in their lives.

While this “big idea” central to Career Club philosophy seemed to improve and compliment RM by developing, implementing, and evaluating a practical hands-on approach to helping youth envision their futures, the implementation component of this “theory to practice” study provided several improvements to the initial concept. By Session Seven these ongoing changes and improvisations began to solidify into the beginning of Career Club’s daily, “standard” format, but the evaluative component provided suggestions for future research and educational development.

First, the coaching structure was initially too intense for the coaches. Although we had successful attempts at lessening the coaches “burnout,” future Career Club programs would require some restructuring. Providing youth an experience with a specific career has proven effective in getting them to reflect on their futures, but with what intensity should such transference be encouraged? Future programs could perhaps first introduce youth to the Career Club concept in a Coaching Club, thereby lessening the probability for overload or burnout. Next, participants should experience

coaching younger youth, allowing them more room to assert themselves comfortably and decisively. Interactions with instructors should be more frequent and intense; participants could then discuss the actual process of coaching in greater detail, hopefully allowing more time and energy to improve and grow in these faculties. One-on-one coaching could be offered until they would want to extend the experience to coaching an entire group, if desired. The experience would then be limited to two or three sessions, after which the Coaching Club format would resume. Once back in the Coaching Club “comfort zone,” they could be mentored on how the experience related to their futures, giving them ample opportunity to ruminate over their experiences and process all the information. Participants would be exposed to a specific career in manageable doses, without the heavy immersion of a full-blown nine-session Career Club workout.

Based on the first three Career Club sessions, the participants had a difficult time relating their coaching experiences to their own careers of choice. When discussing their future orientation, the instructors realized that they were not making the connection to their futures or were simply not comfortable talking about their futures in a group setting. Beginning with Session Four, we intensified and personalized their future orientation by providing them individualized mentoring with an instructor. Each instructor immediately valued this beneficial component, and the participants seemed to enjoy being mentored; an atmosphere was thereby created where coaches were finally comfortable enough to discuss their futures.

The Career Club is merely the primary investigator’s first attempt at providing a fresh approach to RM. While he sincerely hopes that this effort will favorably impact future practitioners and researchers, and perhaps in some small measure contribute to the field of youth development, the primary emphasis was to help underserved youth. As one of the participants stated during her in the final session, “I learned that I have patience, could talk up in the crowd, and be a leader.” The chance to continue impacting lives in such a way makes this study eminently worthwhile.

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