

Traveling Down the Road of Youth Development: My Definition of Youth Development

Joseph J. Rand

University of Minnesota

Jennifer A. Skuza

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## **Traveling Down the Road of Youth Development**

I've been driving down the west coast the last five days thinking about this paper and my definition of youth development. Today I was smacked in the face with yet another approach that altered my perspective. My partner Todd reconnected with some friends from high school via Facebook who dropped everything and started traveling around the country in an RV with their four children. Can you imagine!? She is an artist, and he is now in consulting for warehouse storage. They have been on the road for four years now, and are loving it! Jenny and John's circumstances serve as a great analogy for my definition of youth development. I believe that youth development is ever changing, like driving around the country in an RV; meeting people along the way who challenge you, overcoming obstacles and adversity, and never knowing where you may end up, but always with a vision and goal guiding your way. My personal definition of youth development is constantly evolving, but seems to always center around three important factors; relationships, safe spaces, and inspiration

### **Relationships**

I believe that first and foremost youth development is about relationships with both youth and adults. Lloyd Martin states “there is no single skill associated with youth work...it is the place of relationships that defines youth work” (2003, p.15). He goes on to state “for youth workers, the relationship is their job” (Martin, 2003, p.116). In order to navigate the twists and turns and runaway vehicles of youth development, one must develop strong, authentic relationships with youth and adult volunteers. As youth workers we provide counseling, so in a fair comparison, Rogers stressed that all that was required for success with counseling was genuine regard for the client (1965). Rhodes (2002, 2005) proposed that mentoring affects youth through by enhancing youth's social relationships and emotional well-being, improving

their cognitive skills and promoting positive identity. Furthermore, mentors can challenge youth's negative self-views and demonstrate that positive relationships with adults are possible through genuine, caring mentorship relationships (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang and Noam, 2006). Additionally, Vgotsky (1978) describes a "zone of proximal development" in which learning takes place; the range between independent problem solving versus what can be accomplished with adult guidance.

Part of why Jenny and John began their adventure was because they weren't able to spend much time together. John was often pulled away and working all the time and Jenny spent her free time running kids around from place to place. Additionally, their extended family drama was taking a toll on their relationship with each other, and their children. They knew they needed a change in order to stay connected as a family, and that time was needed to foster positive relationships within their immediate family.

Knowing how to foster a wide variety of authentic, trusting relationships is a key to the success of youth development. Youth development takes more than just one person. Developing trusting relationships with volunteers and youth can make or break a program. This doesn't mean, however, that the youth development worker has to be friends with everyone. Rather, learning to work with everyone for the success of the program and benefit to the youth it serves. The most important resiliency factor is a young person's connectedness to others, in particular, people who model positive behavior and communicate with care and respect (Martin, 2003).

I can recall a time in youth ministry when I had to work with an older member of our congregation who wanted to do anything he could to help the youth ministry the church was engaging in. Harold was "old school." He was about 70 years old, retired, kids grown, lots of money to throw around, and was used to getting his way. Furthermore, he was about six feet two

inches tall, and weighed about 300 pounds with a giant belly, making him very imposing, which he used to his advantage. Harold decided that we needed a kitchen in the youth room. He was going to provide all the materials, and the kids and I would be the labor. He also decided that we would work on the project bright and early at 7:00 am on a Saturday morning, which just happened to be about the time our lock-in from the previous night would be getting done, and right about the time I would be ready to collapse. That didn't matter to Harold though. It would be good for me and the kids, character building. As you can imagine, only one youth and his dad showed up in addition to me. To make things even better...sarcasm implied...Harold just pointed and told us what to do and how to do it, never even picking up a drill or hammer. Once all the cabinets were installed, he said he would come back another day to hook up the plumbing for the sink. All I could think about was my soft warm bed at home calling my name. Then just before we were ready to leave, Harold had us unload several panels of linoleum from his truck that was to be installed around and on the sides of the cabinets. While we didn't have to do it right there and then, I was given a deadline of one week for its completion. Needless to say, I was left frustrated.

Whether or not they are aware mentors affect the emotions of their mentees, and can indirectly, or directly, provide emotion coaching that will either enhance or suppress the social competence of their mentees (Rhodes et al, 2006). Harold and I never saw eye to eye over the three years we worked together, but we did learn how to work with each other even though he had a tendency to infuriate me. It did teach me a lot about how to keep my emotions in check when working in relationships with adults and youth, and the unintended consequences that emotional interactions can have. Adults who convey positive emotions, especially in difficult situations, model the constructive use of those emotions for youth (Denham and Kochanoff,

2002). A major component of positive youth development is being able to determine one's role in relationship to others, in this case an adult volunteer/mentor. In this instance my role was to respectfully challenge Harold's "old school" methodology by helping him to see more positive ways of interacting with youth and supporting his passion for the program, while ensuring that the experience the youth were having was positive, engaging and educational. Most effectively engaging adults are not overly-directive, but rather are responsive and provide structure, challenge, enjoyment and support (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1998). Harold and I both understood that we were working toward the same goal of positive youth development and equipping youth to engage in what Martin would call, multidimensional relationships: relationships that develop across different social settings and beyond the original context (2003).

### **Safe Spaces**

Creating safe spaces where youth feel they can be themselves is also a crucial part of youth development. Larson and Walker suggest that safety is a fundamental concern with regard to youth development programs (2010). Jenny recalled a story for us of a time the brakes on their RV went out as they descended a hill with a 9% grade and lots of sharp turns overlooking steep drops. She literally feared for her life, and the lives of her family. As John skillfully navigated his way down the hill, Jenny cheered him on and tried to give him confidence, all the while praying inside that they would be safe. Luckily, they came across a flat somewhat rocky area where he could turn off, and use the last bit of break left knowing it would most certainly start a fire because they were so hot. After they stopped moving, John ran out to check out the RV and noticed the flames. He yelled to his family, who were in their pajamas and sleeping, as he grabbed the fire extinguisher and put out the flames.

While John was attending to the physical safety of his family, which is the foundation of the YPQA pyramid from the Center for Youth Program Quality, emotional safety is also of crucial importance. Only when youth feel safe emotionally as well as physically are they able to present themselves in an authentic way and engage in positive development. If that authenticity is absent, true development cannot take place. Barry discusses the need for safe spaces in fostering peer-to-peer relationships and developing coping strategies and community with regard to LGBT students (2000). The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education network indicates in their 2013 report that schools are unsafe and unwelcoming for LGBT students. If schools aren't welcoming to all students, they cannot provide safe spaces for all children to develop.

I can recall a time in my recent work with 4-H where several youth were concerned about the behavior of an adult volunteer. The adult volunteer meant well, was incredibly knowledgeable about their area of expertise, and was always willing to help, but presented herself with a gruff demeanor. Because of this, the youth weren't able to learn through their experience, not only with that particular adult, but from any involvement in the program because they did not feel safe. They were not able to present their authentic selves, but rather, were always on guard. Helping this adult learn to present themselves in a non-threatening way was instrumental in helping the youth feel safe and able to participate, learn and excel.

### **Inspiration**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I believe learning cannot happen without inspiration. Dewey states, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 3, Para 30) and, "the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile." (Dewey, 1938, Ch. 5, Para 1)

Inspiration can come in many forms, but always creates a hunger for more learning experiences. Jenny created inspiration for her whole family and many communities around the country by inviting them to take part in a community art project. As they traveled around the country for several months, community members were invited to place a colored, vinyl dot on the side of their RV. The final product was a beautiful monarch butterfly that covers their 30 foot home. Each person also recorded their name and city when placing a dot. Jenny shared stories of getting emails from people who were inspired to engage in their own artwork after placing their dot, as well as stories about how her kids had started their own individual projects that engaged community and helped them create new friendships.

I can remember being inspired at a very young age through my visits to the greenhouses here at the University with my grandpa, who was an agronomist here for 20 years. I loved wandering around the greenhouses, looking at all the different kinds of plants and watching people work. Every spring, right around my birthday, grandpa would stop over to our house with a car full of bedding plants he'd grown in the greenhouse over the cold winter. We'd unload them, and then go to work planting everything at my house, and then at he and grandmas. Grandpa was very methodical about how things were planted and grown, straight lines and rows...always. I'm certain this discipline was developed during his youth growing up on the farm, planting row after row of corn. I remember thinking how constrained this made me feel, but I was young, so I just mimicked grandpas methods, planting in rows, carefully placing labels and tags, and fertilizing and weeding on a regular basis.

As I grew older, feeling more and more constrained by grandpa's methodology, I started to experiment more by planting things in different ways making groups and patterns instead of rows. I even started to throw the tags in the garbage because I realized I could remember what

everything was, and didn't like how un-natural the gardens looked. Rather than rows of petunias or snapdragons, I would plant in a triangle or star or circle, and make fun patterns of flowers.

So many of the things I learned can't be gained from reading a book, they had to be learned through experience, from people, from doing, from failing, and from succeeding. I wouldn't have been able to learn them without the passion I gained at a young age, inspired by those trips to the greenhouse with my grandpa. Little did he know what those seemingly innocent trips to work with him would grow into, and what they would inspire.

In my own work, I strive to inspire learners of all ages. Rather than just going through a PowerPoint or having a business meeting, I try to incorporate some element of inspiration. Often it's a hands on activity, but has also been a reading or as simple as sharing a quote or story. Recently, I have engaged several audiences in a short diversity workshop designed to break down barriers and inspire participants to see beyond labels to what experiences truly connect us as humans. Seeing the light bulbs go off for people, and hearing that they are inspired to replicate the work with others has been awesome. This ripple effect is helping create a stronger program, and more caring and authentic youth and adults who are better equipped to engage the world.

## **Conclusions**

The review of literature indicating that relationships are crucial to positive youth development is overwhelming. Time and time again it states that the relationship between mentor and mentee, as well as other positive relationships, provide resiliency, model behavior and can make or break the development of youth. Additionally, safe spaces are needed in which to engage in these relationships. If youth don't feel safe, they will not be able to engage in authentic relationships with others. Finally, beyond the connectedness, inspiration that creates a



hunger for additional experiences and learning is needed to sustain relationships between practitioners and youth.

I don't know what lays beyond the next bend in the road or over the next horizon. I do know though, that whatever it is, I will be guided by my vision of youth development creating passion and inspiring learners of all ages to have new experiences through authentic relationships that take place in safe spaces.

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