

Youth Activism

An International Encyclopedia

Volume 2: K-Z

Lonnie R. Sherrod
Editor

Constance A. Flanagan and Ron Kassimir
Associate Editors

Amy K. Syvertsen
Assistant Editor

2006



GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London

Positive Development. Participation in activism, of course, develops youth's capabilities as activists. They are likely to learn organizing skills, gain a sense of political empowerment, and build social networks that make them more effective activists in the future. But participation may also encourage young people's development in broader ways. Youth may acquire critical-thinking skills, become more responsible, and develop a clearer sense of identity. Some youth have the experience of "waking up"

or coming alive, which leads to general transformations in who they are. As a result of these broader transformations, they may change their approaches to school and career or alter how they relate to people. We are concerned here with understanding these general processes of development. What broader developmental changes occur in youth activists, and how do these changes occur? First, we need to provide some background.

What Is Positive Development?

There is a field of social science concerned specifically with the question of "adolescent development." This field includes thousands of university professors and others who do research, develop theories, and teach about the age period of youth. Much of the research in this field, however, has focused on young people's problem behaviors from conflicts with parents to drug use, delinquency, and suicide. Like the rest of society, many of these researchers have bought into a negative image of youth: that they represent a host of problems that need to be prevented.

The term "positive youth development" has been introduced to bring together scholars and practitioners concerned with young people's development as an affirmative process. Those who identify with this new label do not deny that many youth have problems (as do many adults). But, in the words of Karen Pittman, they recognize that "problem free is not fully prepared" (see Pittman, Irby, and Ferber 2000). The core issue is not solving youth's problems but facilitating their growth as contributing members of society.

A key tenet of the positive-development perspective is that people are *agents* of their own development. This means that development is not something that other people do to you. In fact, this does not work very well; people cannot be easily changed from the outside. Rather development is something you do to and for yourself. It is a process of self-change. Sometimes this happens as part of a group: people

To illustrate this process we are going to focus on one effective youth activism program that we studied in depth. We focus on a youth activism program because such programs often incorporate an agenda of youth development into their mission of community development (see Sullivan 2000). Of course, much youth activism occurs outside youth programs, and self-change can certainly occur in any activism context.

The program we studied, Generation Y, is devoted to educational justice and equal rights. Urban high-school-aged youth in this program work to improve their schools and, as their brochure says, "fight for our rights." Many of the characteristics of Generation Y resemble those in other youth activism programs. It is youth-led and focuses on issues that are directly relevant to its Hispanic, African American, and Arab membership. It combines working for social change with educational activities aimed at raising members' political consciousness and skills. Most youth join the program to fulfill a service requirement for high school, but many stay on as they become invested in social change. The program is coordinated by a highly effective Arab American young man, Jason Massad (names of people in this entry are pseudonyms), who works side by side with the youth as a partner in their work.

We followed members of Generation Y for a period of four months. During this time, the youth organized a citywide youth summit and worked on several action campaigns, including trying to reduce the capricious use of suspensions by their schools. Our information came from participant observations and ongoing interviews with the youth and with Jason. This information showed that, as youth worked toward social change, they also grew personally in many different ways. We will describe four of these ways.

Types of Positive Development

Action skills. One thing the young people in Generation Y learned was how to get

things done. Many adolescents (and adults for that matter) live in the present moment and have limited abilities to organize their efforts to work toward a goal. Yet many job in the modern world require skills to formulate and carry out a plan; often this requires using information and being able to influence people and human systems. The young people in Generation Y develop these kinds of action skills. We will illustrate this by describing what they learned through their campaign to change the school's capricious use of suspensions.

The idea that you could actually change a big school system may sound naive. What is harder to change than a huge bureaucracy? First, the young people in Generation Y realized that they had to gather information on the problem they were addressing. They surveyed students about suspensions at their schools. They even used the U.S. Freedom of Information Act to access the school system's own records on suspensions. The data showed that the majority of suspensions were for reasons that the school board's policies defined as "minor," like being late for class or bringing a cell phone to school. Second, they learned how to use this information strategically. They figured out that good information was key to influencing the board of education. They prepared charts and testimonials that documented how many students were being suspended for minor reasons. Third, they developed a deliberate plan of action. One youth, Leon, described how many board members were initially indifferent to their presentations. "But after we kept doing it and doing it, you know, getting more and more concrete facts and solid figures, after a while it was too obvious to ignore," he said. "If you have research and analysis, then you can't ignore it." Persuaded by the evidence, the school CEO and board directed principals to limit suspensions to "major" offenses, like substance use and violence.

The action skills the youth learned through this and other campaigns were many. In the contemporary world information is

power, and they had learned how to use this power to achieve their ends. They had also learned important teamwork, communication, and planning skills, and they had learned to view constraints and obstacles as challenges to be solved. These action skills were valuable to the youth's future campaigns for social change, but they were also useful in these young people's personal lives. They described using them in their schoolwork, career planning, and in other contexts.

Personal empowerment. Acquiring these action skills led youth to feel more confident in their ability to take on challenges. To create social change it is often necessary to do things that you have never done before. This might range from speaking at rallies to learning a new computer system or knocking on doors in your neighborhood and sometimes getting the door slammed in your face. What we noticed in our interviews was a transition from a point where members of Generation Y were anxious about their abilities to handle such challenges to becoming more self-assured.

After taking part in several campaigns to improve public schools, many youth had developed the ability to carry out imposing tasks with confidence. Some members spoke in small, closed-door meetings with school board members, while others volunteered to speak at rallies or on panel discussions with audiences in the hundreds. Youth took this self-confidence with them outside of the program as well as into other areas of their lives by being more outspoken in class or by feeling that difficult career goals were now attainable. One youth, Rosa, described how she had changed: "I didn't think I could be a lawyer. I'm like, it's got a lot of schooling, but I think it [Generation Y] has really made me say, yes, it's a possibility." The sense of empowerment that youth gained from successful political actions thus led to a more general sense of empowerment in other areas of their lives as well.

Transcending the self. Another developmental change that we witnessed at

Generation Y involved learning to understand others. Humans are by nature egocentric and ethnocentric. We are born seeing things from our own personal point of view. These youth made strides in transcending this egocentrism and learning to see things from others' points of view. We were particularly struck by the growth they reported in being able to interact with people who were different from them in ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation. We call this "bridging difference," and it is a form of development that is crucial in the global and mobile world of the twenty-first century. Adult life requires that you be able to interact with diverse people at work, in your community, and even within your own family.

Generation Y was a context in which youth developed this ability for bridging difference. First, it provided young people safe chances to interact with people from different groups. Hispanic youth, African Americans, and Arab youth all worked together on equal footing and began to learn about each others' ways of life. As a result of these interactions, they reported overcoming stereotypes and breaking through barriers defined by race and sexual orientation. They discovered the humanity in these others: in the language of youth, they learned that people from these groups were "cool." They also learned to be sensitive. One said, "Instead of, like before, listening and actually not paying attention, now I really pay attention. I've learned to hear people out more."

As a result of this ability to transcend the self, youth reported developing many friendships through Generation Y, friendships that bridged diverse worlds. In the language of sociology, they developed connections that provided valuable social capital (Jarrett, Sullivan, and Watkins in press). Other research shows that youth in civic action programs form more meaningful relationships with youth and adults that occur in other types of youth programs.

Formation of an identity and life goals. A central task of development

adolescents and early adults is finding one's place in the world by determining one's identity (see Erikson 1968). This includes choosing one's values, developing a worldview, and deciding what one desires to do with one's life. Establishing an identity in turn allows individuals to begin committing to the steps that are necessary to achieve those outcomes. Research suggests that youth activism programs are particularly rich contexts for young people to explore and work on identity issues. We saw this happening at Generation Y, partly as a product of some of the changes we have already described.

Since Generation Y's campaigns dealt largely with improving education, it is not surprising that many youth involved with the program became more committed to academic pursuits than they were before beginning the program. Rosa, mentioned above, reported a newfound desire to become a lawyer and was beginning to take classes that would help her on that path. Another member said, "I really wasn't into school, and now since I'm talking to people in Generation Y, they got me more interested in school, and now it's just like, it's really changed me a lot... I used to really want a car, and now it's like, 'Bleah, screw that, I could use that [money] for school!' It's made me really focus on school."

In several of our interviews, members of Generation Y told us the program helped them find what it was that they wanted to do in the future and to commit to these life goals.

Research by McAdam (1988) documents how youth activism can affect a person's identity well into their adult lives. He followed eighty college-aged applicants to the Freedom Summer program of 1964, a highly influential program in which young people assisted with the registration of black voters in Mississippi as part of the civil rights movement. Half of these college applicants ended up participating, while the other half did not. Twenty years later, the group that went to Mississippi was clearly distinguishable from the applicants

who did not participate in the program. Several Freedom Summer volunteers had moved on to become key figures in the women's movement, the free-speech movement, and the antiwar movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. It is also interesting to note that many of the activists from this period delayed establishing families and careers, and some never did fit themselves into these traditional roles. They carved out unique life trajectories that did not always conform to the accepted societal paths. Although some endured strain and bore personal costs from these decisions, the important point is that their youth activism experiences clearly had an impact on their development of identity and life goals.

Ingredients for Positive Development

What is it about youth activism programs that foster these different types of human development? As we said, positive development is a process in which people are agents of transformations in themselves. They do not develop these qualities simply by showing up. Youth learn from engaging in social change, becoming invested, and from an active process of learning from their experiences. What is important about youth activism programs (and perhaps activist pursuits more generally) is that they provide ingredients that support this process.

Community and culture of change. First, youth activism programs bring you into contact with people and a way of doing things that facilitate development. They provide a community of social and personal change. You start spending time with peers and adults who genuinely care about broader social issues. The teens at Generation Y reported that their friends outside the program were not focused on the future. "They are just living for today," said one young woman. By becoming involved with this program, members encountered others who shared their concern with problems in the community and were working to change them. These new friends became collaborators and sources of support. They

learned together and reinforced each other's political and personal growth.

This community also shared a culture of change—a way of thinking and acting—that supported development. People at Generation Y were conversant with other social-change movements and the struggles of the individuals who participated in those movements. They talked about Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and others, and they internalized lessons from their lives. Their culture included encouragement of self-expression, for example, through reciting poetry at rallies. It also included the practice of self-examination, such as thinking about how one's own behavior toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) people might resemble acts of discrimination they had experienced as a Latino, Latina, or African American (Watkins, Larson, and Sullivan 2005). A powerful aspect of being a member of a community is that one comes to understand and internalize the norms of thinking and acting that make the group function. The culture of Generation Y, then, provided models and norms, which youth absorbed.

Adult scaffolding. Another important ingredient of youth activism programs is the participation of adults who are committed to facilitating young people's development. At Generation Y, Jason was committed to supporting members' growth. One thing he did was to periodically organize educational sessions for the youth on different political movements and techniques of social action. In these sessions, he did not try to impose his own ideas onto the youth but rather encouraged student-centered learning. These educational sessions often involved hands-on learning experiences or discussions in which youth were supported for developing their own ideas. He said, "I think that the first most important thing is giving them the opportunity and, like, pushing them out of their safety zone, and they can test out their skills and see, 'Oh, this wasn't that hard,' or 'This is what I have a problem with.'" He was providing

that the cycle was completed. It was the practice at Generation Y, as in other youth activism programs (Sullivan 2000), to always debrief after the culmination of an action or campaign. They asked: What had gone right? What could have been done better? How did events and constraints influence what happened? Development for the young people in Generation Y appeared to have occurred through their engagement in these cycles of acting and learning.

Much more research is needed to understand these processes, but the important message we want to impart is that human development (or "youth development") and effective activism are not two separate things. They are closely interrelated with each other. Working to promote change in the community often results in changes that are positive both for oneself and the community.

See also Civil Society and Positive Youth Development; Positive Psychology; Positive Youth Development, Programs Promoting; Prosocial Behaviors.

Recommended Reading

- Fendrich, J. (1993). *Ideal Citizens: The Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Chenwright, S., and James, T. (Winter 2002). "From Assets to Agents of Change." *New Directions for Youth Development*, 96: 27–46.
- Larson, R. (2000). "Toward a Psychology of Positive Youth Development." *American Psychologist*, 55: 170–183.
- Larson, R., Jarrett, R., Hansen, D., Pearce, N., Sullivan, P., Walker, K., Watkins, N., and Wood, D. (In Press). "Youth Programs as Contexts of Positive Development." In *International Handbook of Positive Psychology in Practice: From Research to Application*, edited by A. Linley and S. Joseph. New York: Wiley.
- McAdam, D. (1988). *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pittman, K., Irby, M., and Ferber, T. (2000). "Unfinished Business: Further Reflections on a Decade of Promoting Youth Development." In *Youth Development: Issues, Challenges, and Directions*, edited by Public/Private Ventures. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.
- Sullivan, L. (2000). *An Emerging Model for Working with Youth: Community Organizing + Youth = Youth Organizing*. Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. See <http://www.fcyo.org>.

Watkins, N., Larson, R., and Sullivan, P. (Submitted). "Bridging Intergroup Differences in a Community Youth Program."

Wheeler, W. (2003). *Lessons in Leadership: How Young People Change Their Communities and Themselves*. Takoma Park, MD: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.

Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A., and Yates, M. (1997). "What We Know about Engendering Civic Identity." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40 (5): 620–631.

Yu, H. C., and Lewis-Charp, H. (2003). "Sneak Peek on Research: Intersection of Civic Activism and Youth Development." *Insight*, 5 (1): 7–8.

Reed Larson and Dustin Wood

Positive Psychology. *Positive psychology* is an umbrella term introduced by Martin Seligman as one of his initiatives as 1998 president of the American Psychological Association (Seligman 2002). The trigger for positive psychology was a desire to counter the fact that psychology since World War II has directed much of its efforts toward human problems and how to remedy them.

In the past fifty years psychologists have focused on psychopathology: conceptualizing, treating, and preventing psychological disorders in order to improve the human condition. However, these approaches embrace a disease model where well-being is viewed only as the absence of disorder or distress. Positive psychology challenges this assumption. Although a pathology-focused psychology has yielded much, it has neglected what makes life most worth living and what can go right with people. Thus, calls have been made for balanced attention to be given to the positive aspects of human life.

The emerging field of positive psychology focuses as much on strength as on weakness, has as much interest in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst, and attends as much to fulfilling the lives of healthy people as to healing the wounds of the distressed (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Positive psychology tries to study scientifically how people flourish and thrive, not just how they survive distress and tragedy. The *Handbook of*